

Top 50 U.S. Think Tanks Receive over \$1Billion from US Government and Defense Contractors

The military-industrial complex greases supposedly neutral US think tanks to the tune of over \$1 billion a year

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The top 50 think tanks in America, as [ranked](#) by the University of Pennsylvania's Go To Think Tank Index, received over \$1 billion from U.S. government and defense contractors. The top recipients of this funding were the RAND Corporation, the Center for a New American Security, and the New America Foundation, [according](#) to analysis by the Center for International Policy.

Donations to these think tanks came from 68 different U.S. government and defense contractor sources, under at least 600 separate donations. The top five defense contractor donors to U.S. think tanks were Northrop Grumman, Raytheon, Boeing, Lockheed Martina and Air Bus.

The Top 10 Think Tanks by Amount Received from U.S. Government and Defense Contractors

RAND Corporation	\$1,029,100,000
Center for a New American Security (CNAS)	\$8,956,000
Atlantic Council	\$8,697,000
New America Foundation	\$7,283,828
German Marshall Fund of the United States	\$6,599,999
CSIS	\$5,040,000
Council on Foreign Relations	\$2,590,000
Brookings Institution	\$2,485,000
Heritage Foundation	\$1,375,000
Stimson Center	\$1,343,753

Top think tank funders from within the U.S. government include the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Air Force, the Army, the Department of Homeland Security, and the State Department. The defense contractors that forked over the most to think tanks were Northrop Grumman, Raytheon, Boeing, Lockheed Martin and Airbus.

The RAND Corporation alone received over \$1 billion between 2014-2019, accounting for approximately 95 percent of its funding that the report tracked. Nearly all the money came from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (\$110 million,) the U.S. Army (over \$245 million,) and the U.S. Air Force (over (\$281 million.)

CNAS, the second highest recipient, received \$9 million from U.S. government and defense contractors, including Northrop Grumman, Boeing and the Department of Defense.

The third highest receiver of U.S. government and defense contractor funding, the Atlantic Council, received nearly \$8.7 million from defense contractors like Saab, Airbus, Raytheon, Lockheed Martin, and United Technologies.

The amounts estimated are conservative, due to the fact that most think tanks do not disclose funders or the amount of funding received, or that the amounts are listed in wide ranged (such as \$25,000 to \$100,000.) Therefore the amounts listed in the report are a

floor, not a ceiling, for the amount of money that the top 50 think tanks received from U.S. government and defense contractors. The report also relies on investigative reporting, as well as publicly available information from the think tanks, and their funders.

“Think tanks should be required, by law, to publicly disclose their funders,” said **Ben Freeman**. “There were widely varying levels of transparency about funding sources at America’s top think tanks, ranging from full disclosure of all funders and exact amounts donated, to think tanks that disclose absolutely no information about funders.”

The Top 5 U.S. Government Donors to U.S. Think Tanks

Security of Defense (and other national security agencies)	\$391,720,000
U.S. Air Force	\$281,400,000
U.S. Army	\$246,321,000
Department of Homeland Security	\$111,192,255
Department of State	\$9,090,478

“Think tank experts testify before Congress and, in some cases, literally write laws. The very least they can do is be fully transparent about who is funding them,” said Ben Freeman in an interview with The American Conservative. “Taxpayers have a right to know if that expert they hear advocating for more Pentagon spending is being paid by the Pentagon. If the funding isn’t influencing their work, then they should have no problem disclosing their funders.”

Disclosure matters because journalists rely on think tanks to provide supposedly non-biased experts to weigh in on complicated policy matters. These think tank experts are frequently hosted on TV panels on CNN or Fox News, or are seen penning op-eds in newspapers or heard on the airwaves of National Public Radio (NPR.)

Think tank experts also frequently appear and give testimony in Congressional hearings, a setting where transparency is of primary importance.

Think tanks contribute to the Washington ecosystem in a variety of ways: while their writers and influence-peddlers appear as experts on news shows and pen op-eds, they also conduct in-depth research on policy, help draft legislation, and write talking points, memos and Congressional scorecards. Think tanks provide a home for legislative experts when their party or views are out of favor, allowing them to cool their heels and collect a paycheck until an administration of another color regains power. Think tanks are also homes for former and

future government officials: they employ former senators, representatives, executive branch officials, and their staff. The Brookings Institution is headed by retired four-star General John Allen and they employ two former Chairs of the Federal Reserve, Janet Yellen and Ben Bernanke, among over 300 experts.

Think tanks play an outsized role in shaping U.S. public policy, and have done so since at least the 1980s, when the Heritage Foundation sent president-elect Ronald Reagan over 1,000 pages of policy recommendations. By the end of his presidency, [the think tank boasted that Reagan had adopted or attempted to adopt fully two-thirds of Heritage's recommendations.](#)

After serving as Chief of Staff to Bill Clinton, John Podesta founded possibly the most prominent liberal think tank in Washington, D.C., the Center for American Progress (CAP.) CAP works closely with Democratic members of Congress and presidential candidates, and previously with the Obama administration, and plays many of the same roles as the Heritage Foundation does for the right. Podesta even served as Chairman of Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign.

Opaque think tank funding damages the neutrality of U.S. news reporting and the expert analysis lawmakers lean on for policy and legislative advice. Think tank experts are often held up as paragons of non-biased, expert analysis. Imagine how your perspective as a reader would change if you knew that the writer or panelist advocating for increased military security aid to Turkey was receiving their salary from a think tank that receives several million dollars from multiple defense contractors that sell weapons to Turkey.

As I [pointed out in my previous article for TAC](#), think-tanker **Brenda Shaffer** now [writes on the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict](#) for the think tank Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, without disclosing that she had been an adviser to Azerbaijan's state-run oil company. Shaffer is FDD's senior advisor for energy, so the public should know who's paying her bills.

While think tanks protest that their work is independent of the funding they receive, that view is "naive, to say the least," writes Freeman. "Most funding comes with explicit strings attached, like writing research reports or hosting public events about specific topics. While the public may or may not agree with funders' objectives, these funders nevertheless place explicit or implicit constraints on what a think tank can and cannot do."

One way this works is that an organization that promotes beliefs at odds with a prominent funder will quickly lose that donor's funding.

"Funders directing what think tanks do is an obvious form of influence, but funders can also wield considerable power by paying for what think tanks don't do," writes Freeman. "In fact, one of the most valuable commodities funders buy is a think tank's silence."

There's an easy fix Congress could implement that would end this problem, exposing think tanks and their experts' conflicts of interest. The government should require that think tanks publicly disclose their funding, say the study's authors. It's not a difficult fix to implement, since many think tanks already disclose some of their funding, and all report donor data to the IRS.

“If think tanks are truly maintaining their intellectual independence from funding sources as many told us they were, they’ll be able to prove it when there is full transparency of their funding sources,” writes Freeman.

“When people talk about ‘the Blob’ it’s important to remember that it’s a self-sustaining ecosystem—the Pentagon and contractors dole out millions of dollars to think tanks every year, and those think tanks in turn make the case for more Pentagon funding. Rinse and repeat year after year after year,” said Freeman to TAC.

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