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BY RACHEL TABACHNICK

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## Right Moves

### Historian Jason Stahl Opens a New Era of Scholarship on Conservative Think Tanks

The role of conservative think tanks in the modern resurgence of the Political Right has been a topic of interest to progressive activists for decades. However, academia had failed to produce a full-length historical study of conservative think tanks, according to author Jason Stahl. Stahl, a historian in the Department of Organizational Leadership, Policy, and Development at the University of Minnesota, corrected this oversight with his new book, *Right Moves: The Conservative Think Tank in American Political Culture Since 1945*.

Stahl argues that there were three stages since 1945 in the “development of the think tank as a site of conservative political and cultural power.” First was the stretch between the end of World War I to the 1960s, when the American Enterprise Institute, founded in 1938, struggled to be relevant in a liberal-leaning technocratic environment. Second was the late ‘60s through the ‘70s, when AEI and newly emerging think tanks like the Heritage Foundation sought funding from wealthy conservative and libertarian donors for the purpose of countering what they viewed as a monopoly on public policy ideas by “liberal academia” and the Brookings Institution. Stahl describes the result as a “marketplace of ideas” in which public policy was promoted to legislators and the public on the grounds of ideological appeal as opposed to its academic rigor. The third stage began in the ‘80s with the success of conservative think tanks in effecting ideology and policy making on a wide scale.

Although *Right Moves* was written prior to Donald Trump’s emergence as a presidential contender, Stahl views the president’s rise as the logical endpoint of a decades-long reorientation of what



Jason Stahl is an author and historian in the Department of Organizational Leadership, Policy, and Development at the University of Minnesota. Photo: Pamela Butler.

constitutes valid policy debate.

Notably, Stahl also pays attention to how historically liberal-leaning think tanks have also reacted to the success of conservative institutions like the Heritage Foundation by moving rightward. The chief example of this is the book’s examination of the Democratic Leadership Council’s think tank, Progressive Policy Institute, and its role in helping to “shift the parameters of the debate even more to the right in the 1990s.”

This November, on the eve of the election, Stahl spoke with PRA.

#### What led you to this particular topic?

This was first a dissertation and then a book, so it was roughly a decade-long project. As any historian will tell you, we are often influenced by the events around us and trying to historicize the present. For me that meant the Iraq war and certain foreign policy decisions that

I did not agree with, but I was struggling to understand.

I would see names mentioned, different monikers of these different institutions that were supporting the war. For example, George W. Bush spoke at the American Enterprise Institute in early 2003, giving this very high profile speech covered by all the major networks. I could find no coherent histories of these think tanks so that was the genesis of my efforts to learn more about them and to understand why they seem to wield so much pull in policy debates.

#### There has been previous research and writing on the impact of conservative think tanks, including in this publication, but very little published in academia.<sup>1</sup> Why is that, and what are the challenges of doing this research?

Number one, I think at the time when I started writing my dissertation, to

the extent that historians were writing about conservatives and the Right Wing, they were writing about grassroots conservative movements. These were historians who had come out of the '60s and '70s social history orientation, trained to study and trained by people who studied social movements. Elite conservative organizing was not really the center of what historians were looking at. That's really changed since in the past five or six years, and now you could argue that my book is part of a reorientation of the field.

The second reason I wasn't finding much in academia is that there is an archive problem. Historians are trained to go to the archives and dig through them as a sort of font of truth. And when you think about the type of people and organizations I'm studying, the archives just aren't there as they are for social movements, for instance. Social movements would be much more interested in celebrating what they did and wanting to have open accessible archives. This is not the case with think tanks. I can't go to the archive of the American Enterprise Institute because there is not one. I can't go to the archive of the Heritage Foundation because there is not one.

Historians are immediately suspicious if your work does not include the traditional route of accessing archives and this was challenging, but there are ways to study these think tanks and other sources that can be used.<sup>2</sup>

**Your thesis is centered on the idea that the 1980s and '90s growth of conservative think tanks changed the way that policy, domestic and foreign, is developed—from a more technocratic approach to the marketing of policy to both politicians and the public.**

If there is a singular guiding argument of the book, it's that. Without hearkening back to some golden age of think tanks, I posit that there was a time not too long ago, when there was a certain kind of rigorousness in policy making and policy debate, and that is no lon-

ger the case. That's not to say that this rigorousness—which I and other historians talk about as a liberal technocratic ideal—didn't have problems. It did. But what I argue in the book is that conservatives, and particularly conservative think tanks, were integral in creating this shift in focus from technocratic analysis to a focus on having an open "marketplace of ideas." As I try to say in the conclusion of the book, this market-



Right Moves: The Conservative Think Tank in American Political Culture Since 1945 was published by The University of North Carolina Press in 2016.

place could have been a good thing. A range of voices could have allowed for a more fruitful policy debate, but I argue that's not what happened. The marketplace became about balancing existing liberal ideas with conservative ideas, regardless of analytical rigor. I focus on supply side economics as a key early example of this: an idea that had little research foundation but was nevertheless enormously influential in changing tax policy.

**You warn readers at the opening of Chapter Four that you are about to make an abrupt shift. And you do. You shift away from your focus on self-described conservative and libertarian think tanks like Heritage Foundation, AEI, and Cato Institute to the response of some of the think tanks on the other side of the political spectrum.**

So what I try to do in this chapter is focus on institutions that were affiliated more with what we would think of as American liberalism: those like the Brookings Institution and the Democratic Leadership Council's (DLC) Progressive Policy Institute (PPI). One might have expected them to take the liberal pole and debate these growing right-wing institutions in this new marketplace of ideas. I argue that they did not do that. Instead, they said, You're right and now what we need to do is to make sure we are internally balancing our own institutions. We need to be policing ourselves against being overly liberal.

**So this helps to explain the historical convergence that moved the parameters of policy rightward, as you describe it?**

Yes. The DLC and the PPI, in their role of making this dynamic happen within the Democratic Party, effectively used a think tank structure to move the Democratic Party rightward, both rhetorically and on matters of policy. I think that this is in direct response to the formation and growth of powerful conservative institutions. It's part and parcel of the key important dynamic in the late '80s and 1990s.

**PPI repeatedly used the phrase "liberal fundamentalists" in their media to marginalize and disassociate themselves from both "new" social movements and "old" labor-based social movements.**

The corrosive part of DLC and PPI was a denigration of movement-based politics, a suspicion of grassroots, movement-based politics. They accepted the pernicious framing of liberal/Left so-

cial movements that the Right had been forwarding for years, that these rabble-rousing movements were out of touch and un-American. PPI used this moniker—liberal fundamentalism—suggesting that liberalism is more akin to a kind of unthinking religious orientation and that this is the real problem of the Democratic Party. When you go down that road of denigrating movement politics, you are going down a disastrous electoral path, in my mind, regardless of your politics.

I think the Democratic Party is largely still torn about this very central question. How do people actualize politics? Not just policies, but what does it mean to be a political being in the world, in a nation state? Is politics a secluded realm in which you cast your vote and then go back home and live your private life? The Democratic Party is still struggling with this. It's what we saw in the primary. I think Hillary Clinton moved in a much more liberal policy direction than her husband, for sure, but she did not move away from the suspicion of social movements that the DLC and PPI bred within the Democratic Party.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, Bernie Sanders was the counter pole to that, obviously saying we need movement politics and here's what movements can do. I thought that this was the big missed point in the primary: the debate wasn't all about policy, it was also about the nature of what it means to be a politically-engaged citizen. Are mass movements necessary to a vibrant political life, and vibrant Democratic Party, or not? That's a question that is going to continue for Democrats regardless of what happens in the presidential election.

**You quote a scholar from the Economic Policy Institute as saying, "For years the so-called New Democrats have been skewering the left for alienating Bubba by taking up elitist social positions. Now when push comes to shove they are willing to trade Bubba for elitist economic positions." How did the "Mainstream Democrats" become the "New Democrats"?**

In the beginning there was the pretense, obviously with Bill Clinton's run

in 1992 and even before that in the 1980s, that the DLC was going to somehow speak for a forgotten White working class—to speak for Bubba. At that time you still have this core constituency of White Southern Democrats. Figures like Sam Nunn, Chuck Robb, and others at the time latched onto DLC as representing the mainstream of American life, one that is equated with whiteness and counterposed to Jesse Jackson and his movement politics of the time.

Later there was a change in moniker from Mainstream Democrats to the New Democrats. That is where you have the shift to the anti-social movement writ large. The New Democrats are to be a future-oriented party that is going to focus on professionals—a new economy and the new actors in this economy. The New Democrats are not just against new social movements, but embrace policies like NAFTA that are against the old labor-based social movements and working class interests.

**One of the reactions to your book has been a reexamination of the role of Jesse Jackson and his political marginalization by DLC/PPI. Was this unexpected?**<sup>4</sup>

People forget how important Jesse Jackson was—that post-1968 and all the way through the 1990s he is a central figure in American politics. For some reason, unless you lived through it and remember, people largely don't get that.

Jesse Jackson figures prominently in Chapter Four and I think that throws people a bit. At least the first half of the whole chapter is about race and the centrality of race in American politics and the centrality of debates over race in the Democratic Party. Jackson, as a Black political figure of a certain sort, is part of what the DLC wants to chop off of the Democratic Party in order to create this vision of the New Democrat. And so Jesse Jackson is this person who is always held out by them as the personification of the old Democrat, as the personification of the movement politics that they want to be done with, this whole Rainbow Coalition.

**What is one thing that reviewers or readers are getting wrong about your**

**book?**

Some have argued that the book is about a Republican Party and conservatism that no longer exists, or even that the book is now moot because of Donald Trump. I would say exactly the opposite.

The marketplace of ideas, as I describe it, is the belief that what you need in the debate is a conservative view, regardless of the rigor of that view. How can we not see Donald Trump as the logical endpoint to that? If you say policy and policy details, policy rigor don't matter, you are going to get a figure like Donald Trump, who says, okay, they don't matter. I can get up on stage and just babble and not even be forced to confront details. It's just accepted that he's not going to do it. That doesn't mean that if he was elected president, he wouldn't find people to write his policies. But in terms of actually being forced to debate and confront the details, or supposed details of his policies, it's taken as a given that it's not going to happen. And I think that is because of where the institutions that I write about have taken the policy debates in this country.

Trump is the natural endpoint of what I talk about in my book, the reorientation in thinking about and debating politics. ☺

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## Author Q&amp;A, p. 17

1. See: Frederick Clarkson, "Takin' It to the States: The Rise of Conservative State-Level Think Tanks," *The Public Eye*, Summer/Fall 1999, [www.politicalresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2013/02/PE-Summer-Fall-1999.pdf](http://www.politicalresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2013/02/PE-Summer-Fall-1999.pdf), and the update to that article, "EXPOSED: How the Right's State-Based Think Tanks Are Transforming U.S. Politics," Political Research Associates, November 25, 2013, <http://www.politicalresearch.org/2013/11/25/exposed-how-the-rights-state-based-think-tanks-are-transforming-u-s-politics/>. Other previously published works on conservative think tanks include: James Allen Smith, *The Idea Brokers: Think Tanks and the Rise of the New Policy Elite* (University of Michigan: The Free Press, 1991); Tom Medvetz, *Think Tanks in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012); David Ricci, *The Transformation of American Politics* (Yale University Press, 1994); and Andrew Rich, *Think Tanks, Public Policy, and the Politics of Expertise* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).
2. For example, Stahl extensively used the William J. Baroody papers at the Library of Congress. See Stahl's 2009 speech as a Jameson Fellow of the Library of Congress: [https://www.loc.gov/today/cyberlc/feature\\_wdesc.php?rec=4737](https://www.loc.gov/today/cyberlc/feature_wdesc.php?rec=4737).
3. The Democratic Leadership Council, a 501(c)(4) ceased operating in 2011, but the Progressive Policy Institute, its 501(c)(3) affiliate, is still active.
4. For example, see this four-part series of posts by Tim Lacy at the U.S. Intellectual History Blog: <http://s-usih.org/2016/08/reconsidering-jesse-jackson-the-caricature-the-person-the-politician-part-1.html>.