

# AFJ Report

**Peter Roff talks about America No.2**

## ***Comments on the Role of Policy Intellectuals in U.S. Politics***

**By**

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With the polls showing billionaire American real estate developer Donald J. Trump leading the race for the 2016 Republican presidential nomination it is both expected and forgiven should anyone believe that policy intellectuals have no place whatsoever in the U.S. political process.

Matters are not made much better by the fact that the competitors most likely to give Trump a run for his considerable money are former Hewlett-Packard CEO Carly Fiorina and from Johns Hopkins University hospital neo-natal neurosurgeon Dr. Benjamin Carson, neither of whom exactly is well-schooled in the intricacies of government.

Looking across the aisle one finds precious little reinforcement for the notion that ideas matter. Former first lady and Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton is trying to husband what was once a formidable lead by mounting a campaign largely devoid of ideas while the person closest to her from among the announced candidates, Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders, draws most of his positions from a philosophy first articulated by a now moldy corpse lying on London's Highgate Cemetery that have been put in to practice throughout Europe for more than 100 years with little if any signs of improvement.

In fact in American politics ideas matter very much. A candidate for public office devoid of an agenda worth voting will likely be unable to assemble a coalition of voters willing to carry him to victory no matter how awful, venal, or corrupt his or her opponent is known by them to be.

Anyone with even a passing familiarity with U.S. history knows the American voter to be a notorious complainer yet even the crankiest member of the electorate would rather vote for something or someone than against it.

These ideas have to come from somewhere – which is where policy intellectuals come in. Given the democratic nature of American society it should come as no surprise that they are no longer confined to being members of a brain trust such as those who advised President Franklin Roosevelt and brought from the New Deal.

Former New York State Gov. Nelson Rockefeller, a perennial presidential candidate himself, was likewise famous for the study groups and commissions created at his initiative. Their function, to pull new ideas and solutions from persons largely from business and academia who were at the

time considered the best and brightest in their fields for the purpose of influencing government policy became the prototype for what other politicians did well in to the 1980s.

Over time, however, the field of ideas in America has become democratized. It is no longer the exclusive province of the Ph.D. or the tenured academic to issue pronouncements about how “Industry A” should be run or how “Market B” should grow. There are plenty of people and organizations, some of which are staffed by people who earned their policy credentials working in government itself, that are – on the right and the left – the source of many robust new proposals. The most famous of these is probably The Heritage Foundation – started in the late 1970s by several former congressional staffers who felt the growing conservative movement needed to find ways to present its public policy proposals better to those who would actually have a role in bringing them to life.

Rather than produce voluminous studies that would take days to consume and therefore would probably never be read, the leadership at Heritage pioneered the practice of reducing issue discussions down to short briefing documents – sometimes no longer than one page – that congressional staff could easily read, remember and, if the opportunity came, recite.

It was an effective tactic, one that made Heritage perhaps the most influential source of ideas for governance in the Reagan Administration. It was so successful in fact that groups like it have proliferated throughout Washington and in state capitals across America – one the left as well as the right. The Center for American Progress for example, is a liberal organization that was created expressly on the Heritage model as now finds itself at the center of the Clinton presidential effort.

It remains common for the government itself to rely on blue chip academics to craft proposals when trying to undertake major reforms of existing programs or to implement significant new initiatives like the Affordable Care Act. Their influence though probably pales in comparison to the information being promulgated directly to voters by the dozens of think tanks and “do tanks” – groups which have an operational arm charged with taking its proposals to policymakers and helping to see them enacted as legislation or official policy.

Technology has helped changed things considerably in this arena as well. The specialization that was once found only at universities and at very special institutions has gone toward the main stream thanks to the worldwide web. Facts and figures, previous studies, and the means to talk to one another without having to attend conferences half a world away have made specialists out of any interested party who cares to put it in the time and the work. Call it the democratization of the idea factory – open to everyone who has a better idea of how something can be done.

- Peter Roff is a visiting research fellow at Asian Forum Japan. A longtime American political operative who formerly worked for House Speaker Newt Gingrich's GOPAC Mr. Roff is now a writer and commentator.