



## From dinner club to instrument of global control: The history of US think tanks and their long reach into Germany

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**In this series of articles, we have already shown how individual strategy papers—from "Which Path to Persia?" to "Extending Russia"—led to real wars and crises. But where did these institutions come from? Who founded them, for whom, and with what goal? And how did they manage to gain a foothold even in defeated post-war Germany and shape the political landscape of the Federal Republic to this day? A search for clues through a century of covert elite rule.**

The history of modern US think tanks begins not in Washington, but in Paris. In January 1919, the victors of the First World War met for the Versailles Peace Conference. Within the US delegation was a group of academics, bankers, and diplomats who called themselves "*The Inquiry*"—a panel of experts personally assembled by President Wilson to prepare for the peace negotiations.

## How it began

[According to Wikipedia](#), on May 30, 1919, around 50 participants gathered at the Hotel Majestic in Paris – including Edward Mandell House, Wilson's closest advisor, British Round Table members, and leading US academics from Columbia, Harvard, and Yale. Their decision: to establish a permanent institution to coordinate the foreign policy thinking of the Anglo-Spheric elite.

in Manhattan **Two years later, in 1921, the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR)** was founded . **Its co-founders included Edward M. House, the German-born bankers Paul M. Warburg and Otto Hermann Kahn** , the leading journalist **Walter Lippmann** , as well as New York businessmen and high-ranking politicians. Warburg was no stranger to the political scene: in 1913, he had played a key role in the founding of the US Federal Reserve. What began thus would shape American foreign policy throughout the 20th century.

## The CFR: A “Politburo for Capitalism”

The CFR is not an agency, a ministry, or an elected body. It is a private members' club—and yet perhaps the most influential foreign policy institution in the Western world. Der [Spiegel](#), when it was still an investigative publication, once described it as "the **most influential private institution in America and the Western world** " and as a " **politburo for capitalism** . "

Access is strictly regulated: Membership is only possible through co-optation – an existing member must nominate the candidate, and three others must support them. Corporate memberships cost up to \$50,000 annually, but grant the right to attend private dinners with heads of state and government.

The numbers speak for themselves: [A study by historians Laurence Shoup and William Minter](#) demonstrated that between 1945 and 1972, **more than half of the 502 members of the US government were CFR members** . CFR study groups prepared the government's expert reports for the Cold War and the Vietnam War. Historian Peter Grose wrote in his official history of the CFR: The former "elite dinner club of Wall Street bankers and their academic protégés grew into a far-reaching community of Americans with competence and responsibility for the global role of the United States."

Since its founding, according to an [analysis by Swiss Propaganda Research](#) , almost all US presidents were CFR members—or at least close allies—before their election. The CFR gives its journal, "**Foreign Affairs**," the weight of a quasi-official organ of American foreign policy. Those who publish there set the agenda; those who set the agenda govern.

## The three generations of think tanks

The development of US think tanks can be divided into three phases, as academic analyses show:

**The first phase (1910–1945)** was that of academically oriented “ *universities without students* .” The [Brookings Institution](#) was founded in 1910 , *founded in 1916, is the prototype: long-term oriented, scientific, and focused on influencing the climate of elite opinion.* Alongside it, the *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* behind these early think tanks ,

**financed by steel magnate Andrew Carnegie—another example of how private capital interests were always .**

**The second phase (1945–1970)** was the Cold War. The [RAND Corporation](#), founded in 1946 as a joint venture between the defense contractor Douglas Aircraft and the US military, exemplifies this era: think tanks became direct contractors for the Pentagon. *Operations research*, systems analysis, nuclear strategy—everything went through RAND. Six RAND employees worked on the legendary Pentagon Papers, including the later whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg.

**The third phase (beginning in the 1970s)** brought an explosion in numbers and an increase in ideology. The [Heritage Foundation](#), founded in 1973 by Paul Weyrich, Edwin Feulner, and brewer Joseph Coors, revolutionized the model: instead of lengthy research reports, short, pointed *policy briefs*—so concise they could be read on the way from the airport to Congress. Its "[Mandate for Leadership](#)" (1980), a 1,000-page conservative government plan, was adopted almost in its entirety by Ronald Reagan. According to research by the *Henry Stimson Center*, roughly two-thirds of the measures proposed by Heritage were actually implemented.

### **John J. McCloy: The Man Who Rebuilt Germany**

To understand how American think tank culture was exported to Germany, one must understand a key figure: **John J. McCloy** .

McCloy held the dual roles of President of the World Bank, Director of the CFR, Chairman of the Board of Rockefeller's Chase Manhattan Bank, and—crucially— *U.S.* High Commissioner in Germany from 1949 to 1952. In this capacity, he was the most powerful man in defeated Germany, with far-reaching powers over legislation, the economy, and the press.

McCloy was not an occupier in the classical sense. He was a networker with a vision: to control the Federal Republic not through decrees, but through the creation of permanent structures that institutionally enshrined American interests. His instrument was the think tank.

### **The birth of the Atlantic Bridge: A dinner in Hamburg**

met **In August 1949, McCloy and the Hamburg banker Eric M. Warburg** for dinner. Warburg, son of the Warburg banking house and nephew of Paul Warburg, who co-founded the Federal Reserve, had returned to Germany as a US officer during the war and subsequently served as a close advisor to McCloy.

As [Transition News describes in detail](#), the two agreed that evening: A “*noble club*” should be created on each side of the Atlantic, connecting the German-American elite.

gathered in Hamburg **In 1952, twelve people** and founded the **Atlantik-Brücke** ( Atlantic Bridge ) – initially under the name "*Committee Transocean Bridge*". Among the founding members were: banker Eric M. Warburg, Gotthard Freiherr von Falkenhausen, the entrepreneur Erik Blumenfeld, and the journalists *Marion* Countess **Dönhoff** was established on the US side *and Ernst Friedlaender*. *Simultaneously, the American Council on Germany (ACG)* – as a sister organization affiliated with the CFR.

The first president of the ACG was, significantly, **Ellen McCloy** – the wife of the High Commissioner himself.

the third member of this group was [According to the detailed historical analysis on Apolut](#), **Shepard Stone**, who had served as McCloy's liaison to the German press and moved to the Ford Foundation in 1952, where he acquired considerable funds for the transatlantic influence organizations. *Ford Foundation*, CFR, Chase Manhattan Bank, Atlantik-Brücke – the network was complete from the outset.

## **The DGAP: The “German Version” of the CFR**

In 1955, three years after the Atlantik-Brücke, the **German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP)** was founded. [As Wikipedia documents](#), it was explicitly "*founded in the model of the Council on Foreign Relations and Chatham House*"—the CFR thus had its German counterpart, which in the Anglo-American world is officially **called the "German Council on Foreign Relations"**.

The DGAP currently has over 2,800 members, including leading figures from banking, business, politics, and media, and is financed not only by project funds but also by arms companies – [as documented by Lobbypedia](#). Its Berlin headquarters in the former Yugoslavian embassy building in the Tiergarten embassy district is programmatic: a private institution in a diplomatic environment, without the accountability of genuine diplomacy.

The triumvirate of Atlantik-Brücke, American Council on Germany and DGAP created an **institutional network** that still functions today: Atlantik-Brücke and ACG cultivate the social cohesion of the transatlantic elite; DGAP provides the intellectual substance.

## **The "Young Leaders" program: The talent factory**

Perhaps the most powerful mechanism of the Atlantik-Brücke is the **"Young Leaders" program**: Selected young professionals from politics, business, and media are integrated into the transatlantic network, supported, and prepared for career paths that will permanently bind them to the network. This indoctrination begins at a very young age, even before graduating from high school, and creates cross-party structures within Germany's "establishment parties."

, alumni include [According to Wikipedia](#): former German President **Christian Wulff**, former Defense Minister **Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg**, former *Bild* editor-in-chief **Kai Diekmann**, and former Green Party leader **Cem Özdemir**. The mechanism is simple and effective: the more a politician owes their career to the transatlantic network, the more indebted they are to it.

The long-time chairman of the Atlantik-Brücke was **Friedrich Merz** – now Chancellor of Germany. His successor as chairman was **Sigmar Gabriel**, former chairman of the SPD and Federal Foreign Minister. A cross-party decision, as befits a true power structure.

## **The media in the network**

What makes the impact of transatlantic think tank networks particularly significant is their entrenchment in the mainstream media. [Swiss Propaganda Research has documented](#) that leading figures and top journalists from virtually all major US media outlets are embedded in

the CFR network. Richard Harwood, former senior editor and ombudsman of the *Washington Post*, wrote approvingly that CFR members are " *most likely what one might call the ruling establishment of the United States .*" He continued: " *They don't just analyze and interpret US foreign policy; they help make it .*"

The picture is similar in Germany. Media researchers like Uwe Krüger have documented in their [work](#) on the networking of leading German media outlets how closely leading journalists are integrated into transatlantic structures – and how this influences reporting on security policy issues.

## **From dinner club to global infrastructure**

What began in 1919 at the Hotel Majestic in Paris has evolved into a global system. Today, there are an estimated **11,000 think tanks** worldwide – the vast majority in the US and its allies. The 50 largest US think tanks alone received over one billion dollars in funding from the Pentagon and defense contractors between 2014 and 2019.

The structure is always the same: private institutions without democratic control, financed by economic interests and government agencies, staffed with former government officials who then return to government positions. The former security advisor becomes a think tank director, the think tank director becomes foreign minister. The former World Bank president establishes networks in defeated Germany, while his banker friend builds the bridge on the other side.

What began in Paris in 1919 as an attempt to order the world according to the will of a small Anglo-American financial elite has since become institutionally entrenched. Think tanks are the link between private capital and state power – the brain of a system that acts as a public advisor but makes private decisions.

**The historian Laurence Shoup precisely formulated the fundamental problem** of this architecture: The process in which CFR members and government officials jointly make policy " *was against the interests of the majority of the American people and the peoples of this world – and continues to be so today .*"