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Abstract

This paper applies the rational decision-making model to the inception, rise, and influence of the neoconservative foreign policy movement, as propounded by staff at the American Enterprise Institute. The author analyzes the AEI's administration, staff, and scholarship to show how the AEI defined the U.S. foreign policy and defense problem, generated a variety of possible solutions, and selected the best solution—neoconservatism. Quantitative evidence shows that the AEI's neoconservative viewpoint dominates neoliberal and realist viewpoints whenever the U.S. contemplates war. The article describes how the AEI implemented the chosen decision as would a typical think tank. Although most AEI scholars pushed for the invasion of Iraq, now most have criticized the execution of the war and have since distanced themselves from neoconservatism. The paper concludes that the rational decision-making model appropriately applies to the AEI in terms of the evaluation and modification stages of neoconservatism, but the model applies poorly to actual implantation of public policy. This is partly due to the competition of ideas and diversity of opinions at the institute.

Introduction

The American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research is, at its heart, a refuge for economists. Its founders christened the organization as the American Enterprise Association and dedicated it to repealing the wartime economic regulations of the Roosevelt and Truman administrations. Only much later did AEI expand into areas such as defense policy, cultural studies, and political analysis. One distinctive word in its name—"Enterprise"—denotes an economic focus, particularly the kind labeled as capitalistic, entrepreneurial, and risk tolerant. The institute's economics-based history and etymology run concomitantly with its presidents. All three have been economists by trade.

Thus, given the affinity of AEI's administration, staff, and scholarship for the quantifiable, the practicable, and the utilitarian, I submit that the organization's behavior as a whole is best modeled by the rational decision-making model, hereafter referred to as the rational model (Robbins 1997; Frank 1995; Pounds 1969; March 1994). The model's systematic description of group behavior fits well with the psychology of its managers: in all aspects of their work, they lay out a target, then work to reach it.

In particular, this paper examines how the rational model describes the inception, rise, and influence of the neoconservative foreign policy movement as it has been propounded by AEI staff and scholars. While "neocon" is a pejorative term in many academic and political circles today, the movement of the same name has had a remarkable influence on current foreign policy. Its sudden and full-hearted adoption by the Bush administration is worth an explanation and fair analysis.

The Rational Decision-Making Model

The rational decision-making model, once novel, has blossomed to the point that today it alone may be considered a sub-discipline of organizational behavior (Klein 1998; Hardy-Vallée 2007). The model has a massive body of scholarship girding it. However, at its center are seven essentially sacrosanct steps that organizations must follow to make rational decisions (Pounds 1969; Harrison 1995, 75–85; Robbins and Judge 2007, 156–158). The steps are as follows:

1. Define the problem.
2. Generate all possible solutions.
3. Generate objective assessment criteria.
4. Choose the best solution.
5. Implement the chosen decision.
6. Evaluate the success of the chosen alternative.
7. Modify the decisions and actions taken based on evaluation.

While entire books have been written on each of these seven steps, their essence is simple. The sentences above should suffice for a basic understanding of the rational decision-making process.

Like any other rational choice-based model, the rational decision-making model requires certain assumptions. These include the following: that decision makers can define objective assessment criteria, that those criteria are measurable, that every potential solution to a problem may be identified and properly evaluated, that decision makers have the prescience to correctly identify the true consequences of different solutions, and that the outside world is predictable. Only under these assumptions can the rational model work perfectly.

Given these limitations, most organizations use the more realistic, bounded rational decision-making model (Zur 1997, 326–328; Loizos 1994). The bounded model takes into account the fact that decision makers are unlikely to generate every possible solution to a problem, and, thus, are unlikely to find the categorically perfect solution to a problem. The bounded model also acknowledges that decision makers are imperfect in their ability to grasp the complexity and the contingences of the problem at hand and that the environment with which the problem interacts is predictable and rational. With these restrictions on perfect

rationality in mind, then, the bounded model defines decision making as optimal when it is "good enough." That is, the decision maker makes the best choice among available alternatives when the search for more alternatives becomes more costly than continued inaction. A good example of this phenomenon occurs in hospital emergency rooms. A doctor must choose quickly among treatments for a critically injured patient, even if the available treatments' efficacy is unknown, because the alternative is for the patient to worsen or die.

The rational model is widely applicable. For the purposes of this paper, it is applied to the conception and rise of the neoconservative foreign policy movement. Using the simple outline, the process may be described thus:

1. Define the problem: How does the U.S., first, conceptualize the post-Soviet world order, and, second, promote its interests in that world order?

2. Generate all possible solutions: Should the U.S. pursue a policy based on realism (Morgenthau 1948; Waltz 1979), neoliberalism (Nye 2004), civilizations theory (Huntington 1996), neoconservatism (Fukuyama 1992; Kristol 1995), or something else?

3. Generate objective assessment criteria: Which theory best keeps the U.S. safe, its interests and allies safe, and allows the U.S. to further advance its interests?

4. Choose the best solution: "The policy of the United States [is] to seek and support the growth of democratic movements . . . with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world" (Office of the Press Secretary 2005).

5. Implement the chosen decision: Enforce regime change in Afghanistan and Iraq from dictatorship to democracy, as advocated by AEI scholars.

6. Evaluate the success of the chosen alternative: A large body of scholarship from the American Enterprise Institute discusses what has and has not worked in Iraq.

7. Modify the decisions and actions taken based on evaluation: The recalibration of both neoconservative thought and AEI's relationship with it.

The Autobiography of an Idea

AEI prides itself as a place of ideas, and of the many debated there, chief among them is what constitutes "vigilant and effective foreign and defense policies" (AEI 2007a). For the purposes of this paper, this is the problem defined: What foreign and defense policy *is* most vigilant and effective? While the neoconservative outlook is the institute's prevailing—though not the only—answer to the question, that has not always been the case. A close examination of AEI's deliberations from the 1980s until now demonstrates how the movement rose to prominence among the many potential solutions to the problem of an effective foreign policy.

During the 1980s, there was no clear consensus at AEI as to which direction U.S. foreign policy should take. AEI resident scholar Joshua Muravchik was one of the first at the institute to promote the neoconservative viewpoint. His initial foray into the area, 1986's the *Uncertain Crusade: Jimmy Carter and the Dilemmas of Human Rights Policy*, rebuked Carter for his administration's perceived selectivity in promoting human rights and condemning abuses. His next work, however, was the ambitious *Exporting Democracy* (1991), which advocated an idealistic foreign policy backed by the force of arms. While one review of the book characterizes Muravchik's work as a framework for the post-Cold War world (Abbajay 1991),

work on the book began much, much earlier. Over a week-long search for certain documents in AEI's dusty basement archives (complete with oversized video cassettes from the 1970s), I came across a box filled with Muravchik's notes, conference papers, and correspondence from the 1980s. One common theme ran through them: democracy promotion is the key to promoting U.S. interest, whether that promotion occurs in China, the Soviet Union, the countries of Yugoslavia (all of which were prescient preoccupations for Muravchik, according to the contents of the box), or anywhere else. Muravchik conceived his ideas far earlier than we might otherwise suspect.

A different strain of foreign policy thinking came from AEI's Jeane Kirkpatrick. She joined the institute in 1985, after finishing four years as U.S. ambassador to the UN. She described her own vein of thinking in the *United States and the World: Setting Limits* (1986). The book argued, as the title suggests, that the U.S. must curtail its expectations for democracy in other nations and make due with its ideologically imperfect allies and potential allies. The "Kirkpatrick Doctrine," as this vein of thought became known, advocated alliances with any nation, whether democratic or dictatorial, so long as it was anti-Communist.

Finally, a realist strand of deliberation came from, surprisingly, Richard Perle. His first work for AEI, *Reshaping Western Security* (1991), contained several scholars' views on a framework for a post-Cold War Europe. Perle, the book's editor and most prominent essayist, argued that Western nations needed to orient their alliances and policies toward the Middle East to ensure the region remained stable and that NATO did not collapse. Perle's book and earlier work within the Reagan administration advocated the importance of stability, geopolitical positioning, and other realist themes.

We may view these competing theories of foreign policy thought as step two of the rational decision-making model: generating all possible solutions. While AEI probably rejected neoliberal ideas prima facie, there was vigorous debate within the institute among the ideas that were suggested. Through the debate, which benefited tremendously from the hindsight of the Cold War and was shaped by the events of Bosnia and Somalia, a set of evaluation criteria emerged: what foreign policy best ensures the security of the U.S. and the promotion of its interests abroad, in the long term? As Vaclav Havel penned for AEI, "The real threats today are those such as local conflicts fueled by aggressive nationalism, terrorism, and the potential misuse of nuclear arms and other weapons of mass destruction" (1997). This was the reality of the post-Soviet world, and U.S. foreign policy had to meet its challenges.

In this battle of ideas, neoconservatism came out on top. Using an index of AEI's publications, I coded the institute's scholarly output on foreign policy, and the results show in part how this occurred. This coding is admittedly less rigorous than I would have liked, but it does adhere to certain principles. First, I included only those articles that discussed foreign policy in relation to what the U.S. should or should not do (or should not have done). Second, I excluded articles discussing foreign policy as it relates to trade, finance, or technology with no interrogation of the political ramifications. Third, I categorized each article as primarily neoconservative, realist, or neoliberal in its outlook. True, only about half of the articles fit tidily into one school of thought over another. For the more difficult cases, I simply did my best to identify themes distinctive to each category. For neoconservatism, this included the promotion of democratization, human rights, and the embrace of American exceptionalism.

For realism, this included geopolitics, mistrust of international institutions, the balance of power, and similar concepts. For neoliberalism, this included diplomacy, culture, sanctions, and other kinds of soft power.

The results of this investigation are shown below:

Table 1: Foreign Policy Ideologies of AEI Publications			
Year	Neoconservative	Realist	Neoliberal
1996	6	4	2
1997	3	3	3
1998	7	1	2
1999	8	7	2
2000	4	2	4
2001	5	2	0
2002	5	3	1
2003	10	1	4
2004	10	2	1
2005	7	3	2
2006	6	7	3
2007-	2	2	1

Here are the same results in figure form:

Figure 1. Ideologies at AEI
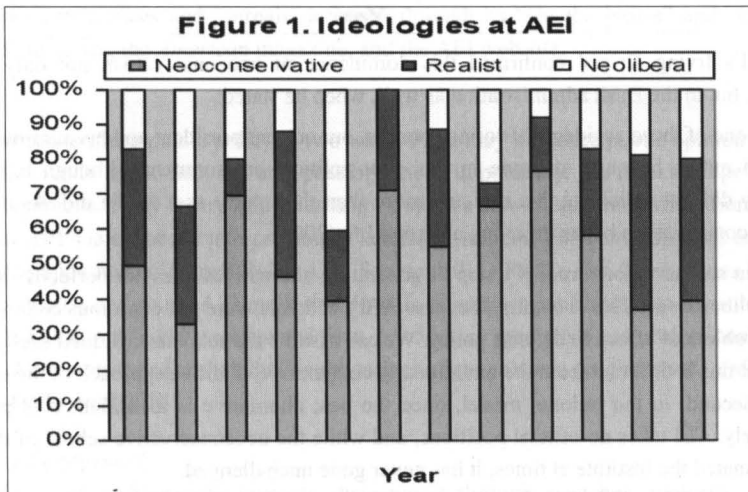
The data demonstrates one fact: whenever the U.S. contemplates war, the neoconservative viewpoint becomes dominant. There are three spikes of neoconservative activity on the graph: 1998, 2001, and 2003–2004. Not coincidentally (since most of the articles addressed the subject), each of these years had significant debate about the use of U.S. force abroad. In 1998, this was Kosovo; in 2001, Afghanistan; and in 2003–2004, Iraq. While many of the articles over this time period discuss other trouble spots for U.S. security, such as China, North Korea, Iran, and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, most focus on the pressing conflict of the time.

Viewing these results through rational decision-making theory, we can safely say that, at least during times of war, neoconservatism has been AEI's proposed solution to the problem

of U.S. security. This is especially true regarding the Iraq war. If we remove the neoliberal "noise" from the data (most of the neoliberal scholarship has revolved around diplomacy and trade with China and North Korea), we easily see the strength of neoconservatism at AEI:

Figure 2. Ideological Balance at AEI
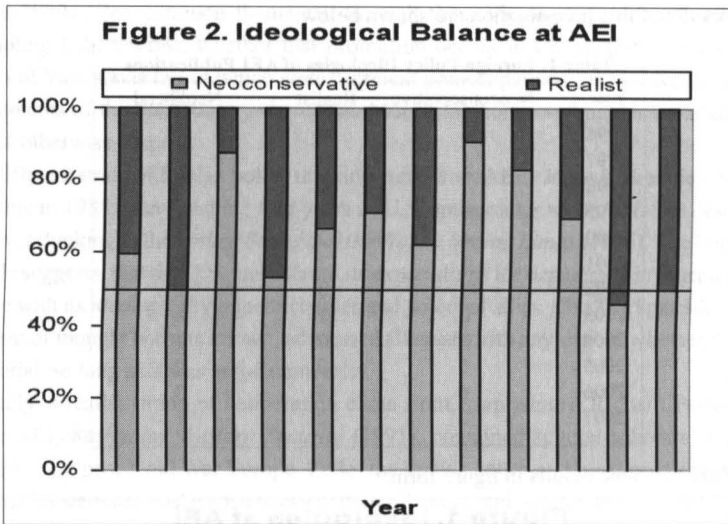
AEI's Irving Kristol confirmed this dominance of neoconservatism not only at the institute, but in the Bush administration as well, when he stated:

> By one of those accidents historians ponder, our current president and his administration turn out to be quite at home in this new political environment, although it is clear they did not anticipate this role any more than their party as a whole did. As a result, neoconservatism began enjoying a second life (2003).

Even so, the rational model's step of generating alternatives does not perfectly describe AEI's deliberations. This is so, first, because AEI's scholars were not conscious collaborators on the problem of effective defense policy. We can assume the scholars critiqued each others' work, but this is different from the intentionally cooperative, additive approach of the rational model. Second, in the rational model, once the best alternative is identified, it is pursued exclusively. AEI takes no official positions, and while the neoconservative school of thought has dominated the institute at times, it has never gone unchallenged.

The rational model does, however, provide a good framework for understanding how AEI's work has been translated into policy. Thus we may ask, how much influence have AEI's ideas had on the current administration, and how have those ideas transferred from the twelfth floor of 1150 17th Street to the West Wing and the State Department?

The Dark Side of the Force?

A portion of the blogosphere refers to the American Enterprise Institute as the "death star" (*e.g.*, Encho 2007), but AEI's actual influence on public policy is far from all-powerful. Columnist David Brooks best described the reality of the relationship between the "neocon cabal" and government when he stated:

In truth, the people labeled neocons (con is short for "conservative" and neo is short for "Jewish") travel in widely different circles and don't actually have much contact with one another. The ones outside government have almost no contact with President Bush. There have been hundreds of references, for example, to Richard Perle's insidious power over administration policy, but I've been told by senior administration officials that he has had no significant meetings with Bush or Cheney since they assumed office. If he's shaping their decisions, he must be microwaving his ideas into their fillings (2004, 23A).

I did see General Peter Pace, chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, at lunch with AEI's Fred Kagan, but that was the extent of direct communication between government and think tank that I observed.

The much sleepier reality is that AEI executes step five of the rational decision-making model, "implementing the chosen decision," using the typical think tank tools of literature, speaking engagements, and conferences. The institute has used all three to promote neoconservative foreign policy since the end of the Cold War, and has done so particularly since September 11.

Literature

AEI disseminates its work several ways: through books and op-eds, articles for newspapers, magazines and journals, in-house through its "On the Issues" and "Outlook" publications series, the *American* magazine, and the AEI web site.

Books

The books shape public policy in two ways. First, they influence public opinion because the public reads them. Second, and possibly more importantly, the books shape opinion leaders' opinions. Early in my AEI internship, I spent a few afternoons stuffing hundreds of copies of AEI's latest books into previously labeled envelopes. Each envelope was addressed to a key opinion maker: Jospeh Biden, U.S. Senate; Bill O'Reilly, *Fox News*; James F. Hoge, *Foreign Affairs*; and so on. AEI mails and e-mails its smaller publications to the subscribing public, but also to a "highly customized lists . . . of policy specialists and professionals" (AEI 2007b). As demonstrated earlier, these publications often took on a neoconservative slant from the late 1990s until 2006.

Speaking Engagements

AEI scholars frequently promote their views through speeches, typically given at universities, at sponsored lecture series and forums, and at professional group meetings. The six international relations scholars who have been at the institute continuously from the year 2000 until the present (Thomas Donnelly, Joshua Muravchik, Reuel Mar Gerecht, Michael Ledeen, Richard Perle, and Michael Rubin), have given ten speeches and testified before Congress eleven times. Using the same coding instrument as earlier, I found that the policy recommendations of those speaking engagements were neoliberal twice, realist five times, and neoconservative fourteen times (see appendix A). Most notably, each speech advocated a regime change in Iraq, Iran, or both, or after March 2003, the continued presence of U.S. troops in Iraq.

Conferences

Since the year 2000, AEI has sponsored 1,549 conferences. Of those, 509 have been devoted to foreign and defense policy, 601 to economics, and 439 to social and domestic policy studies (AEI 2007). However, the amount of attention devoted to each area of study has changed from year to year, as demonstrated here:

Figure 2. AEI Conferences
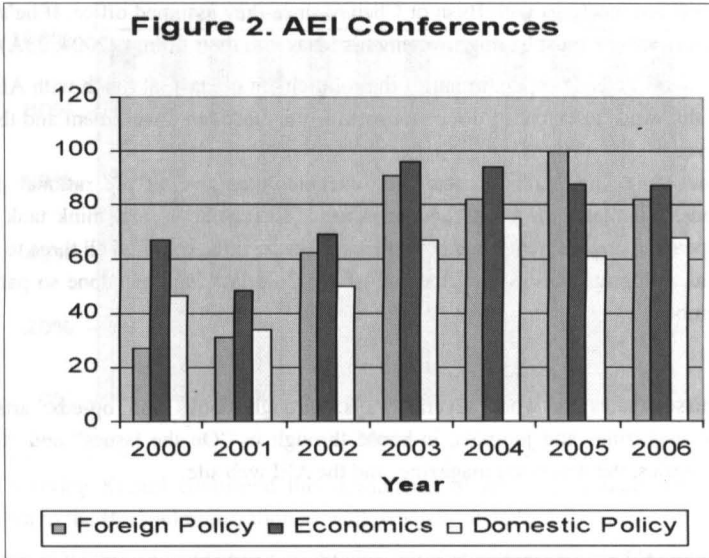
While the number of total conferences held has consistently risen since 2001, they have risen most quickly in the foreign and defense policy, with the category overtaking economics and domestic policy in 2005. The rise of foreign and defense policy at AEI conferences is more easily seen when we present the numbers of conferences relative to each other:

Figure 3. AEI Conferences by Percentage
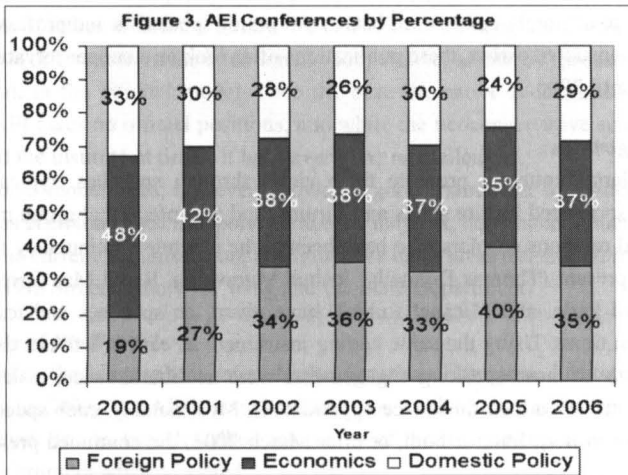
AEI has consistently devoted more of its resources to foreign and defense studies over time at the expense of both its economic and domestic studies programs. It is a surprising turn, given the organization's economic raison d'être.

On this subject, rational decision making is a useful model, in so much as it is accommodated to the realities of think tanks. Unlike a business or executive department, a think tank cannot simply implement a new idea from beginning to end. Rather, it can only persuade—but, oh, how persuasive AEI has been! Its scholars and administration participate in the policy formation process through disseminating information effectively, which is as much as may be expected from a think tank in the rational model.

Evaluation and Readjustment

While AEI's scholars almost unanimously pushed for the invasion of Iraq, some as far back as 1997 (Muravchik 1997), and this push was dominated by the neoconservative viewpoint, the aftermath of the war has seen something different. Continuing with the rational decision-making model, its final steps are the evaluation of the chosen alternative and consequent modifications to it. In terms of evaluation of the Iraq war, it has not gone well. Nearly every article AEI scholars pen on the subject begins with a concessionary "Iraq is a mess." AEI's scholars have also been extremely critical of the Bush administration's execution of the war.

In terms of modification, two measures are worth noting. First, as shown earlier in this paper, AEI is beginning to distance itself from neoconservatism. From a high of about 75 percent of defense studies scholarship in 2003, neoconservative work makes up less than half of AEI's defense studies output today. Second, AEI's neoconservatives are distancing themselves from the unpopular Bush administration. Muravchik, for example, wrote an op-ed for the *Washington Post* in the aftermath of the 2006 election, which stated:

Is neoconservatism dead? Far from it. . . . It is the war in Iraq that has made "neocon" a dirty word, either because Bush's team woefully mismanaged the war or because the war (which neocons supported) was misconceived (2006, B03).

Richard Perle summed the current thinking of neoconservatives when he stated:

Huge mistakes were made, and I want to be very clear on this: They were not made by neoconservatives, who had almost no voice in what happened, and certainly almost no voice in what happened after the downfall of the regime in Baghdad. I'm getting damn tired of being described as an architect of the war (Rose 2006, 3).

The future will tell what direction AEI will take regarding its defense policies. If current trends continue, however, the neoconservative experiment may be over. While not affiliated with AEI, Kenneth Adelman suggested as much when he said that neoconservative ideas, after Iraq, are "not going to sell . . . you just have to put them in the drawer marked CAN'T DO" (Rose 2006, 2).

Here, rational decision theory stumbles. Unlike a unitary organization that corrects its course with one rudder, AEI is similar to a dozen little ships—each with an extremely opinionated captain. Thus, while most of the institute's scholars acknowledge things have gone poorly in Iraq, the reasons why and the remedies for them are diverse and sometimes

contradictory. Just as there is no one simple solution to the problems of current U.S. foreign policy, there is no one correction advocated by AEI.

Critiquing Rational Theory and the "Advocacy Tanks"

Is the rational choice decision-making theory the best way to describe AEI's behavior as an organization? Probably not. I sincerely doubt that AEI's administrators ever lay out policy alternatives and perform cost-benefit analysis so clinically as a business' executives would. I believe they do evaluate stringently the areas more germane to their role as administrators, such as fund-raising, personnel recruitment, and marketing, but they are somewhat disinterested (though not uninterested) in the actual content of their scholars' work.

I base this assertion on two facts. First, my own internship at AEI and my discussions with the scholars there show me this is the case. I was never constrained in my research to find the "right" answer to a question. While my work was often vetted for quality, it was never subject to an ideological litmus test. The same is true of the scholars there, many of whom have told me they enjoy the hands-off environment at AEI. When I asked one employee about the organization's hierarchical structure, she laughed, saying, "Well, there's everyone who works here, and maybe, I guess, Newt [Gingrich] about a half layer up" (anonymous, personal interview, 2007). Second, AEI prides itself as being an old-guard, "university-without-students"-model think tank. Brookings is another example of this kind of think tank. The work of these policy institutes is typically organic and inductive, without the predefined solution to a problem yet to emerge, as is the case with advocacy model think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation (the solution is conservatism), the Cato Institute (the solution is less government), or the Center for American Progress (the solution is more government). Thus, AEI is adept at presenting many alternative solutions but lacks the ability to execute any one of them so cleanly as the rational decision-making model would suggest.

The one part of the model that does dovetail nicely with AEI as an organization is in the evaluation and modification stages. Administratively, AEI's managers cannot constrain their scholars to produce research in a certain direction. I view the relationship between the two as similar to that of presidents and Supreme Court nominations: a scholar's past record is reviewed, he or she is appointed based on that record, and the managers hope the scholar continues in that same vein. But, like the Supreme Court, sometimes the appointers get a Clarence Thomas, and sometimes they get a David Souter. Nonetheless, the manager's influence *is* important.

AEI's university-style model also lends itself well on this point. Unlike the advocacy tanks, whose solutions are fixed in stone, the AEI scholars may change their viewpoints or admit they were flat-out wrong. Further, the institute encourages a competition of ideas within its walls, and debate serves as an excellent tool for frank evaluation and as pressure for adaptation—a pressure that is missing from the advocacy tanks. The diversity of opinions means a less cohesive message from the institution as a whole, true, but at least it guarantees many messages that have seen critical examination.

The rational decision-making model, again, is not a perfect, or even a good, descriptor of AEI's behavior. Despite the conspiracy theories of many leftists, it is extremely doubtful that the institute's scholars gathered in a basement on 11 September 2001 to decide how to best

convince government to take out Saddam Hussein. Instead, it is likely that the neoconservative outlook grew gradually and organically, both at AEI and elsewhere. While we may safely assume that AEI's administrators rationally determine the avenues for growing their organization's coffers and influence, it is doubtful they try to push policy in any one direction so forcefully as the rational decision-making model suggests.

APPENDIX A: Speaking Engagements of AEI Defense Scholars

Name	Speeches	Testimony
Joshua Muravchik	0	0
Thomas Donnelly	0	3
Reuel Mar Gerecht	2	0
Michael Ledeen	1	2
Richard Perle	1	5
Michael Ruben	6	1

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