The Relationship Between US Decision-Making Mechanisms and Think Tanks: Reflections on Drawing Lessons from the "Revolving Door" System (Postprint)

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] The relationship between the U.S. national decision-making mechanism and think tanks holds certain reference value for China's rapidly developing think tank industry, and whether its distinctive "revolving door" system is suitable for adoption in China constitutes a highly controversial issue. [Method/Process] Starting from the power boundaries and procedural characteristics involved in U.S. decision-making, this paper respectively examines the core mechanisms of U.S. domestic and foreign policy decision-making, further investigates the relationship between the decision-making echelon and think tanks, and ultimately elaborates on the symbiotic and coexisting relationship between the "spoils system" and the "revolving door." [Results/Conclusions] The political ecology of the United States has objectively greatly prospered its think tank industry, while the personnel exchange mechanism featuring the "revolving door" has enabled think tanks to embed themselves into the U.S. national decision-making mechanism in an extremely advantageous position. However, it is necessary to recognize that the "revolving door" is enabled by the "spoils system," and there remains a considerable gap between adopting it and China's actual circumstances.

Full Text

Preamble

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] The relationship between the U.S. national decision-making mechanism and think tanks holds certain reference value for China' s rapidly developing think tank industry, while the distinctive "revolving door" system remains a controversial topic regarding its suitability for transplantation to China. [Method/Process] Beginning with the power boundaries and procedural characteristics involved in U.S. decision-making, this paper systematically reviews the country' s decision-making mechanisms on both domestic and foreign policies, explores the relationship between the decision-making core and think tanks, and ultimately expounds on the symbiotic coexistence between the "spoils system" and the "revolving door." [Result/Conclusion] The political ecology of the United States has objectively contributed to the great prosperity of its think tank industry, and the personnel exchange mechanism featuring the "revolving door" has enabled think tanks to embed themselves into the national decision-making mechanism in an extremely advantageous manner. However, it is necessary to recognize that the "revolving door" is enabled by the "spoils system," making its transplantation significantly distant from China' s actual circumstances.

Keywords: U.S. think tanks; decision-making mechanism; spoils system; revolving door; Secretary of State; National Security Advisor
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Although the growth momentum of U.S. think tanks has weakened in recent years, the United States still firmly holds the leading position globally in the think tank industry. The country possesses a longer history of think tank development than other regions, accumulating substantial advantages that cannot be comprehensively surpassed by other areas in the foreseeable future. These advantages encompass many aspects, such as the stability of the overall political environment, the rigor of research fields, the adequacy of funding supply, and so forth, making an exhaustive enumeration difficult. However, one point that cannot be overlooked is that U.S. think tanks have developed a set of operational rules adapted to the decision-making mechanisms of their service objects.

"Adaptation to decision-making mechanisms" versus "being shaped by decision-making mechanisms" likely represents two sides of the same coin for think tanks, and the distinction between active and passive roles could serve as a novel perspective in relevant discussions, though this topic is not the focus of this paper. This article primarily emphasizes the functional connection between think tanks and their service objects. For think tanks'advisory functions to exert greater influence, they must rely on better adaptation to the decision-making mechanisms of their service objects. As China's think tank industry increasingly overcomes constraints in institutional numbers and funding supply, the soft power construction of "adapting to decision-making mechanisms" becomes even more prominent in its reference value.

2. The Shaping of U.S. Domestic Decision-Making Mechanisms by Separation of Powers and Electoral Politics

The separation of powers and electoral politics provide substantial space for think tank activities in the United States, a principle that is not difficult to understand. As one of the fundamental principles of the U.S. constitutional system, the separation of powers framework endows each branch—legislative, executive, and judicial—with institutional tools to check and balance any other branch, thereby theoretically preventing any single branch from monopolizing state power. However, simultaneously, the introduction of any government measure inevitably relies on extensive persuasion efforts.

Regarding domestic affairs, policy proposals from the administration can hardly bypass congressional review; otherwise, they would not qualify as government decisions (decision by the U.S. government) but merely decisions by the administration [**?**]. Consequently, protracted debates often unfold within Congress, a problem that becomes particularly pronounced when the President' s party does not hold a majority in Congress (divided government). To render "fair" decisions, Congress may also initiate hearing mechanisms requiring cooperation from administrative agencies for review. Even after Congress passes a resolution, the Supreme Court may still rule it unconstitutional, causing the effort to ultimately fail.

This situation naturally grants lobby groups vast room for maneuver. Except for the prohibition against directly lobbying the courts, every other stage of the process becomes their arena to display their capabilities. However, U.S. electoral politics thoroughly exposes lobby groups' obvious positional biases and intricate entanglements of interests (attempting to invoke "national interest"would instead appear excessively hypocritical), thereby revealing their limitations. First, even lobby groups need to find favorable evidence from the research outcomes of neutral third-party research institutions. Second, practice has demonstrated that lobby groups are particularly powerless in certain extremely significant events. Therefore, in terms of necessity, interest groups oriented toward political positions and interest calculations, along with their representative lobby groups, remain essential components of the pluralistic political ecology of the United States.

Nevertheless, when interest groups and lobby groups search for evidence supporting their positions, they inevitably turn their attention to the intellectual sector (including think tanks, universities, law firms, consulting companies, etc.). Consequently, their existence has not suppressed the role of think tanks but rather highlighted the latter' s important position.

However, a question remains: many countries practice separation of powers and electoral politics, so why do think tanks in those countries, at least in general impression, not appear as numerous and active as in the United States? To address this question, it is first necessary to recognize that the United States' global leadership in think tank numbers is directly related to its national size

and comprehensive national power; none of the United Kingdom, France, Germany, or Japan could individually compare with the United States. In terms of relative numbers, however, U.S. think tanks do not particularly stand out among developed capitalist countries practicing separation of powers and electoral politics but instead present a situation matching their level of economic development. According to World Bank statistics, the estimated U.S. economic output in 2015 was $17.94 trillion, slightly higher than the EU' s $16.22 trillion (2015 data not yet finalized; 2014 figures were $17.42 and $18.46 respectively), but overall, the two can be regarded as developed economies of comparable scale. Meanwhile, the *2015 Global Think Tank Report* listed 1,835 think tanks in the United States and 1,507 in the EU, also demonstrating a pattern of "having a gap but remaining in the same category."

More than promoting quantitative growth, the shaping of U.S. domestic decision-making mechanisms by separation of powers and electoral politics is reflected in the activity level of American think tanks. Along with the early practice of electoral politics in the United States, the "spoils system" developed into an important characteristic of the country's political ecology, inevitably influencing the survival and development of the U.S. think tank industry. The mechanism behind this will be specifically discussed in Section 5 of this paper; this section only provides a brief analysis at the phenomenological level. In fact, regardless of one' s evaluation of the "spoils system," this institution objectively provides "direct access to the heavens"opportunities for many elites through the "revolving door" between think tanks and the White House. The repeated implementation of this process naturally creates excellent "exposure" effects for think tanks. Coupled with think tanks' more distinct "outside-the-system" characteristics in the United States (not directly subordinate to government departments), their activity level becomes more visible to the public, leading to the widespread perception that American think tanks are exceptionally active.

Additionally, as a reflection on the British constitutional system' s emphasis on legislative power, the U.S. Constitution' s design for the separation of powers architecture is more balanced. Over time, we can observe a characteristic of U.S. domestic decision-making: the judiciary may intervene in politics at critical moments, and even political disputes involving fundamental national institutions (such as whether presidential elections can be recounted) are often resolved by judicial organs (the Supreme Court). Lobby groups' horizontal alliances ultimately have boundaries (prohibited from lobbying judges), whereas the purely professional opinions of intellectual elites, detached from political position constraints, are more likely to play a role in neutral venues like courts. The value of intellectual elites does not need (and preferably should not) to be premised on any political position—this is an important prerequisite for the prosperity of the intellectual sector, including think tanks, in the United States, and also a point worthy of China' s reference.

3. The Shaping of U.S. Foreign Decision-Making Mechanisms by Presidential Executive Power and Bureaucratic Systems

In foreign affairs, the U.S. decision-making mechanism differs significantly from that of domestic policy. Although the overall framework of separation of powers remains unshaken, under the combined influence of historical factors and practical considerations [**?**], executive power—more precisely, presidential executive power—does have opportunities to "act unilaterally" by bypassing other powers on certain matters. In the foreign policy domain, America' s founders intentionally or unintentionally established a dual-track system: one track grants the president full freedom, even almost complete autonomy, in formulating foreign policy through a series of power provisions and precedents; the other track requires open dialogue and cooperation between the executive and legislative systems in foreign policy formulation, where Congress evaluates the President' s foreign policy proposals despite the President' s leading role in policy development [**?**].

Frankly, the power "temptation" of the first design is simply too great. Historical experience demonstrates that, when circumstances permit, executive power clearly prefers the first track [**?**]. However, this raises two critical questions: first, to what extent can political leaders wielding such absolute power act purely according to their personal will; second, if their decisions are significantly influenced by other factors (such as interest groups, bureaucratic systems, presidential advisors, or think tank institutions), who among these is the key player?

Answering the first question from a theoretical perspective of institutional design requires acknowledging that the U.S. President' s decision-making on most foreign affairs falls within internal executive power matters and does not directly involve the separation of powers checks and balances. For those who believe in internal checks and balances, the U.S. President not only cannot act purely according to personal will but must also balance opinion differences between bureaucratic agencies (the President' s Cabinet) [**?**] and advisory bodies (such as the National Security Council) [**?**] to make relatively moderate decisions. For those less trusting of internal checks and balances, "the real system of foreign policy decision-making depends more on personality and skill than on structure and procedure" [**?**], and the President' s personal preferences can completely transform into White House decisions.

Theoretical disputes over this question are difficult to resolve, but fortunately, historical experience provides an answer: the President' s personal will is largely dissolved by the entire administrative structure. For instance, to escape Senate constraints, Presidents more often seek to conclude executive agreements with foreign nations rather than treaties (according to Supreme Court rulings, the President has the authority to conclude executive agreements with foreign countries without Senate approval, which carry the same legal force as treaties). This practice objectively makes almost every executive agreement bear traces

of participation from the President' s Cabinet and/or advisory team, with the roles played by the Secretary of State and National Security Advisor being particularly crucial [**?**].

The most familiar example to Chinese audiences is Dr. Kissinger' s secret diplomacy through Premier Zhou Enlai, which resulted in the issuance of the *Joint Communiqué of the United States of America and the People' s Republic of China* (the "Shanghai Communiqué") in Shanghai on February 28, 1972 [**?**], marking the beginning of normalization in Sino-U.S. relations.

Since presidential foreign policy decisions are influenced by factors including the Secretary of State and National Security Advisor, the discussion shifts to addressing the second question: who is the key player among these? Whether interest groups, seemingly omnipresent in the U.S. political ecosystem, play a role in presidential decision-making, and if so, how significant that role is, requires clarification first. According to the pluralist political vision of American founders like James Jefferson, the development of interest groups enables different social groups with various demands to have opportunities to express their expectations to political decision-makers. Interest groups exert pressure on the government through lobbying to make government decisions favorable to them. Regarding foreign policy decision-making, interest groups can indeed exert consistent pressure on decision-makers, thereby indirectly influencing individual decisions. For example, the failure of the 1961 Bay of Pigs incident stemmed from Kennedy' s crisis management decision-making errors under the influence of interest groups supporting Cuban exiles [**?**]. However, this returns to the pattern discussed in the previous section regarding interest groups' influence on domestic affairs: interest groups also need to draw on research conclusions from neutral third-party research institutions to add legitimacy to their appeals. Thus, in foreign affairs, the existence of interest groups objectively creates opportunities for think tanks to play a role.

Another important point is that if we specifically examine the crisis management decision-making mechanism in foreign affairs, its characteristics of short decision-making processes, small numbers of decision-makers, and confidentiality make it less susceptible to interest group influence than other long-term administrative mechanisms. This is especially true when the Secretary of State or National Security Advisor is professionally competent, adopts a strong posture, and maintains close personal relationships with the President, leaving fewer gaps for interest groups to insert themselves into the Oval Office. For instance, Nixon' s informal decision-making mechanism was extremely simple, with the main decision-makers being just him and Kissinger [**?**].

These two specific analyses demonstrate that in foreign affairs decision-making mechanisms, interest group influence is either significantly constrained or needs to be exerted through think tanks. They also indicate that the focus should always be on government bureaucrats represented by the Secretary of State and presidential advisors (non-bureaucrats) represented by the National Security Advisor. What remains to be clarified is the relationship between these two types

of roles and think tanks. This question involves personnel composition and appointment systems in U.S. decision-making mechanisms and is more suitable for detailed discussion in the next section. However, we can first hypothesize that if government bureaucrats represented by the Secretary of State and presidential advisors (non-bureaucrats) represented by the National Security Advisor have significant connections with think tanks, it would demonstrate that think tanks in the United States have indeed found a development path "adapted to the decision-making mechanism."

4. The Relationship Between the U.S. Supreme Decision-Making Level and Think Tanks

This section addresses the personnel composition of the core components of the U.S. decision-making mechanism, requiring layered and categorical analysis of the institutional details behind it, which is rather intricate. Therefore, the author first presents the analytical conclusions here to maintain necessary coherence. The main conclusions include two points: first, confirming that the "Presidential Cabinet + White House Staff"(or "Senior Political Appointees + Senior Personal Advisors") constitutes the core decision-making team; second, the hypothesis from the previous section holds true—government bureaucrats represented by the Secretary of State and presidential advisors (non-bureaucrats) represented by the National Security Advisor do indeed have significant connections with think tanks, and the "revolving door"system serves as the institutional linkage point for this connection.

The previous section mentioned two basic roles in U.S. foreign policy decision-making: government bureaucrats represented by the Secretary of State and presidential advisors (non-bureaucrats) represented by the National Security Advisor. However, when examining institutional roles rather than individual roles, bureaucratic institutions and advisory institutions differ in nature but overlap in personnel. Therefore, conducting some necessary analysis of them will help grasp the human factor in the U.S. decision-making system. Particularly, if we can confirm that these key decision-makers generally have some degree of connection with think tanks (such as relying on think tank research conclusions or joining think tanks before and after holding government positions), it will verify the important hypothesis above and prove that the United States has adaptation between think tanks and the national decision-making system.

First, in the government bureaucratic system, the highest-level federal executive departments (the United States Federal Executive Departments) constitute the United States Cabinet (Cabinet of the United States), commonly referred to as the President' s Cabinet or simply the Cabinet, including the President, Vice President, Secretary of State, and various department heads. Although, apart from the President and Vice President, the Secretary of State as the administrative head of the Department of State ranks first and is primarily responsible for foreign affairs (among other authorities), the Cabinet overall addresses both domestic and foreign affairs.

Second, there is the non-bureaucratic advisory team. The presidential advisory team is also known as the "White House Staff," formally named the Executive Office of the President in U.S. government institutions. This body consists of a collection of senior advisory agencies directly appointed by the President, without requiring approval from any other institution, to assist the President in fulfilling his duties. Its constituent units are mainly divided into two parts: the White House Office and various committees and offices. The former includes the White House Chief of Staff, Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, Press Secretary, and all other presidential personal assistants bearing titles such as Presidential Assistant, Special Assistant, Presidential Counselor, and Special Counselor. The latter includes advisory bodies such as the National Security Council, Council of Economic Advisers, Office of Management and Budget, and Domestic Policy Council. Since these agencies are appointed by the President, their composition varies across different presidential administrations [**?**].

Special attention must be paid to the fact that members of advisory bodies like the National Security Council and Council of Economic Advisers are not always primarily advisors (non-bureaucrats). The Council of Economic Advisers (CEA), which mainly consists of three economists appointed by the President, represents only one form of expert think tank primarily composed of advisors. Taking the most critical committee, the National Security Council (NSC), as an example, the situation differs. NSC members attend meetings in the capacity of presidential advisors (rather than government bureaucrats), but its standing members include the President, Vice President, Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, Secretary of the Treasury, National Security Advisor, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Director of Central Intelligence [**?**], among whom only the National Security Advisor is a non-bureaucrat.

However, the National Security Advisor is the President' s personal advisor and therefore possesses advantages that other bureaucrats lack. As the primary responsible person of the NSC, the National Security Advisor shoulders the task of gathering information and conveying cabinet members' opinions to the President. In fact, this position (as during Kissinger' s tenure) may also chair almost all important interdepartmental committees of the NSC, thereby directly controlling relevant cabinet departments through control of interdepartmental committees [**?**]. Additionally, the National Security Advisor may hold dual positions, simultaneously serving as Secretary of State (e.g., Kissinger in the late Nixon and early Ford administrations); or transition from National Security Advisor to Secretary of State (Kissinger, Rice), truly becoming part of the government bureaucratic system; or be directly granted cabinet-level status by the President (Brzezinski during the Carter administration) [**?**].

Therefore, in terms of depth of involvement in the supreme decision-making process, first, there is no inherent advantage of bureaucratic institutions over advisory institutions, because members of some advisory institutions may highly overlap with bureaucratic institutions or may highly "penetrate" the Presiden-

tial Cabinet in practice, thus becoming highly bureaucratized non-bureaucratic institutions. Second, there is not necessarily an advantage of one over the other between bureaucrats and advisors. Although in general trends, the White House does witness power fluctuations between presidential cabinet members and advisors [**?**], in specific presidential administrations, cases where the Secretary of State and National Security Advisor fail to effectively cooperate and present "bureaucrat-advisor" conflicts are not uncommon. Nevertheless, these facts clearly present the basic pattern that the "Presidential Cabinet + White House Staff" (or "Senior Political Appointees + Senior Personal Advisors") constitutes the core decision-making team.

Further analysis of the institutional connotation of "Presidential Cabinet + White House Staff" reveals that this is essentially a team built according to the President' s personal will. Focusing first on the Presidential Cabinet, cabinet members, although belonging to the bureaucratic system, are neither elected nor ordinary civil servants [**?**]. The Secretary of State and department heads are nominated by the elected President and appointed by the President after Senate confirmation. Since Senators are elected, the electoral process theoretically can still exert indirect influence on the President. However, for "White House Staff" advisory positions, they are completely unaffected by elections. Although these positions organizationally belong to the White House, their fundamental nature is that of the President' s "personal advisors." Appointments require no congressional approval, and actions are not subject to congressional oversight, allowing the President to "privately bestow" them completely.

Again, for the pluralistic political ecology of the United States, including this personnel mechanism, there can certainly be different evaluations. However, specifically regarding the think tank issue discussed in this paper, it must be objectively recognized that it is precisely because the system allows the President such great autonomy in selecting political appointees and advisory positions that the "revolving door" can function as an institutional linkage between government and think tanks (and other intellectual sectors), thereby leaving tremendous opportunities for professionals in the intellectual sector, including think tanks. The examples of Kissinger, Brzezinski, and Rice can well substantiate this viewpoint. Kissinger and Rice have served as both National Security Advisor and Secretary of State; Brzezinski was directly granted cabinet-level status by the President. These three individuals can be considered outstanding examples of crossing boundaries between the U.S. "senior political appointee" system and "senior personal advisor" system. A brief review of their career intersections with think tanks and other intellectual institutions through Table 1 reveals the intent and effectiveness of the "revolving door" institutional design.

Table 1 The "Revolving Door" Experience of Kissinger, Brzezinski, and Rice

Name	Government Positions	Intersections with Think Tanks, Universities, Consulting Firms, and Other Intellectual Institutions
Henry Alfred Kissinger	National Security Advisor; Secretary of State	1957-1969: Lecturer, Associate Professor, and Professor at Harvard University; simultaneously served as Director of the Special Studies Project at the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, member of the Center for International Affairs, consultant to the NSC and RAND Corporation, etc. After leaving government: Visiting Professor at Georgetown University, consultant to NBC, Chairman of the International Advisory Committee of Chase Manhattan Bank, Senior Fellow at the Aspen Institute, etc.; founded Kissinger Associates in 1982 and served as Chairman.
Zbigniew Kazimierz Brzezinski	National Security Advisor	Before joining government: Co-founded the U.S.-Europe-Japan "Trilateral Commission" with Chase Manhattan Bank Chairman David Rockefeller and served as Director. After leaving government: Professor of Political Science at Columbia University, Senior Advisor at Georgetown University's Center for Strategic and International Studies, Vice Chairman of the U.S.-China Relations Committee, Trustee of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), and Professor at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS).
Condoleezza Rice	National Security Advisor; Secretary of State	1981-1987: Assistant Professor at Stanford University; 1987-1993: Associate Professor at Stanford University. 1988: Director of Soviet Affairs at the U.S. National Security Council. After Clinton replaced Bush Sr. in 1991, Rice returned to Stanford. In 1993, appointed Provost, second only to the President, becoming the youngest Provost in the university's history and its first African American Provost. 1998: Left Stanford again to serve as Bush Jr.'s personal advisor; 2001: National Security Advisor; January 2005: Secretary of State, becoming the second female Secretary of State in U.S. history after Madeleine Albright in the Clinton administration. After the Bush administration ended in 2009, worked at the think tank Council on Foreign Relations (CFR).

From a relatively intuitive perspective, several observations emerge: First, if we conduct a dichotomous analysis of Kissinger, Brzezinski, and Rice's experiences into "government positions" and "non-government positions," we find that "government positions" represent only a segment of their careers; before and after these roles, they either came from think tanks or returned to them. Thus,

National Security Advisors (advisors) and Secretaries of State (bureaucrats) are fundamentally "think tank people." Second, considering that U.S. think tanks legally lack concepts like the British "Royal Institute," French "Government (Department) Institute," or Korean "National Research Council for Social Sciences (NRCS)" —i.e., "public think tanks" —it is normal and inevitable for a "think tank person" entering or leaving the White House through the "revolving door" to be influenced by private institutions to varying degrees in their conceptual framework and behavioral choices. Third, since most U.S. think tanks currently do not prohibit accepting government project commissions in their charters, this ensures continuity between the national decision-making mechanism and think tank operations.

From a more indirect perspective: the three scholar-type National Security Advisors differ from senior advisors born from the bureaucratic system. Achieving academic success is their first step in persuading top leadership, followed by entering the policy consultation world to prove their capabilities, and only after gaining the President' s appreciation can they squeeze into the highly competitive supreme decision-making circle. Unable to rely on inherited wealth or the economic capital of bankers and lawyers, nor possessing the network connections and administrative resources accumulated by bureaucrats over years in the administrative system, these advisors characterized primarily as intellectual elites often face particularly great resistance when seeking to improve decision-making processes from a professional perspective or support policy proposals they deem beneficial to the nation [**?**]. However, people from outside the system also mean fresh blood input for the entire bureaucratic system. The resumes of Kissinger, Brzezinski, and Rice illustrate from one side that the U.S. political circle deeply understands the essence of external pluralist political philosophy. The three individuals are of German (Jewish), Polish, and African American descent respectively (the first two not born in the United States), and their ascent to the highest levels of power in the United States primarily through outstanding scholarship proves this country' s affirmation of intellectual elites. The "revolving door" that enabled these three individuals was not a temporary whim of a few presidents but a highly institutionalized power design. The "revolving door" opens to all outstanding intellectual elites, and think tank practitioners naturally share opportunities and compete equally in this market. Think tanks do not need to fight for special attention; they only need to adapt to this ecology to achieve great prosperity.

5. The "Revolving Door" Established by the "Spoils System" and Its Transplantation Potential to China

For U.S. think tanks, the "revolving door" is undoubtedly a good system. Many domestic opinions consider this model worth emulating for Chinese think tanks and government. However, what foundational system the U.S. "revolving door" system is built upon is often glossed over. Fundamentally, the "revolving door" is actually enabled by the "spoils system," warranting considerable caution.

The U.S. decision-making system' s allowance for the President to hold the "revolving door" power to appoint "one administration' s officials" is closely related to the "spoils system" tradition in American politics. The spoils system (also known as a patronage system) refers to the practice where the winning political party distributes administrative positions to party campaign stalwarts, personal confidants, and major interest exchange partners [**?**]. The spoils system emerged in the United States for historical reasons, but its drawbacks are self-evident. Early U.S. presidential candidates' practice of extensively privatizing state power upon election victory caused various social problems, including corruption. Consequently, corrections to the party spoils system have never ceased in American political circles. Beginning with the fifteenth President, Ulysses S. Grant, reforms of the spoils system were continuously carried out. In 1865, Thomas Jenckes proposed the first civil service reform law aimed at replacing the "spoils system" with a permanent civil service system centered on the "merit system." In 1883, the Civil Service Act, known as the Pendleton Act, proposed by Republican Congressman Pendleton based on British civil service system experience, was unanimously passed by Congress [**?**]. Although this act did not fundamentally abolish the "spoils system," it has since been confined to a very limited scope.

The crucial point is that the "senior political appointees" and "senior personal advisors" constituting the President' s core decision-making team fall precisely within the limited scope covered by the "spoils system." Their positions are basically or entirely determined by the President, and they vacate their positions when the President' s term ends— "two-way opening" is the working principle and basic requirement of the "revolving door" system. It must be particularly emphasized that decisions made by the aforementioned "Presidential Cabinet + White House Staff" cannot take effect for administrative departments unless signed by the President through executive orders; therefore, the President himself remains at the absolute core of power. Combining these two points, each U.S. President wields nearly "imperial" power during his term. In terms of power concentration at the supreme administrative decision-making level, it even surpasses China' s current "collective decision-making" mechanism. However, this is also time-limited power; once the presidential term' s "pumpkin carriage" expires, the advisors' "glass slippers" also vanish into dust.

Therefore, while U.S. think tank experience, including the "revolving door," indeed offers much for China to learn from, some elements may not be suitable for direct transplantation. The "revolving door" can open both ways in the United States primarily because it is based on American electoral politics. Kissinger wielded enormous power during Nixon's presidency but also had to retreat when the President left office. Without a civil service system that separates political appointees from career civil servants, there would only be one-way flow of think tank talent into government. That is, if the positions of National Security Advisor and Secretary of State could not be distinguished from career civil servants, it would not preclude the possibility of Kissinger holding onto the NSC until his retirement. Without reform of China' s civil service system, where "leading

cadres" and ordinary civil servants remain in the same evaluation and promotion sequence without corresponding exit mechanisms, the "two-way opening" of the "revolving door" in China can only be an exception rather than the rule.

6. Conclusion

The United States' peak moment may have passed, but it remains the strongest. This judgment certainly applies equally to the U.S. think tank industry. For think tanks in other countries, there is far more to learn from the United States than to challenge. As the birthplace of the modern think tank industry, the United States has long formed a set of think tank operational rules adapted to its typical external pluralist political ecology. While different evaluations of the U.S. political ecology are certainly possible, it is difficult to deny that this ecology objectively creates substantial space for the growth of its think tank industry. The personnel exchange mechanism featuring the "revolving door" as its most prominent characteristic has enabled think tanks to embed themselves into the national decision-making mechanism in an extremely advantageous manner. It can be said that the "spoils system" laid the foundation for the "revolving door," while the "revolving door" opens opportunities to the American intellectual sector, including think tanks.

U.S. think tanks have achieved substantial development precisely by adapting to the U.S. decision-making mechanism with its "spoils system" tradition. Admittedly, the expression "adapting to the decision-making mechanism" carries connotations of accommodation, somewhat weakening the actual status of think tanks before their service objects and failing to highlight the guidance and shaping that think tanks, as high-end intellectual suppliers, may exert on their service objects. After all, the more powerful an entity is, the more likely it is to influence the environment rather than merely be influenced by it. However, if we can view "adapting to the decision-making mechanism" as a result of the interaction between U.S. think tanks and their service objects, it remains a constructively meaningful understanding.

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Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.