

# Tenure Track to Think Tank and Back: An Unreproducible Path to Success

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As my career heads toward closure 40 years after earning a doctorate in political science, my most gratifying activity remains assisting and advising younger people. On the matter of career advancement, however, I am regularly cautious with aspiring and newly minted academics, painfully aware that one of the most helpful insights I must convey is that they cannot expect to succeed the way I did. However hardworking and deserving they might be, fortune will not favor them as it did me, partly because vital network effects are neither predictable nor controllable and partly because some opportunities from which I benefited no longer exist. I simply came along in an era that would prove supportive and somewhat forgiving—at least for someone like me.

I was not especially strategic or gifted, just sensible and rather lucky. Emerging from a college preparatory high school at the end of the 1960s, having grown up in a residential milieu where many people got into trouble, it seemed “strategic” enough merely to stay away from people and places where trouble was happening and to go to the best college I could get into. That is what I did. So far, so good.

At this point, a certain lengthy inertia set in. Interested in politics since high school—my first national “publication” was a letter to *Time Magazine* drafted as I watched the first Nixon inauguration—I majored in political science (or “concentrated in Government,” as my college nomenclature had it). An early reflexive identity as a “pre-law” student (the default stance for many college-bound students of that era who did not aspire to medical school) gave way to thoughts of journalism. I joined the college newspaper, which led to summer internships with a national news magazine. A much stronger writer than scholar, I stayed in the same institution for a decade after high school, pursuing the standard series of degrees and supported by a combination of university employment and foundation largesse. I am African American and was judged “promising” enough by a couple of professors to be thought worth encouraging at a time when supporting promising black students through doctoral programs at elite universities was a priority for some people with the money to do that. I took some courses on black and African politics but ultimately settled on a dissertation topic in a rather obscure area of regulatory policy. (I would counsel anyone to consider carefully the many potential benefits and pitfalls of fusing a research agenda to one’s identity—too many to elaborate usefully here.)

I was comfortable, cosseted even, as a university student and in no hurry. After a decade, however, I needed to move on. But to what? I was engaged to be married but had no

strong idea or plan, only this broad intuition: Baltimore was home, Washington was nearby, and with a doctorate in politics, I might go where politics was happening and find a job. It did not have to be an academic job and, indeed, the first opportunity that came my way in 1980 was a staff position on a presidential commission, part of a team generating a series of reports projecting all manner of national policy trends and reforms. My own piece of the project (in tandem with a pesticide lawyer on loan from the Environmental Protection Agency) dealt with regulatory policy. I got that nine-month gig in a manner almost absurdly traditional: my new spouse ran into a mutual acquaintance from the university who said that her cousin had a staff job at a place that was still looking for people. In short, my network worked.

That year, 1980, would prove pivotal in a range of ways: a first job, the death of a long-estranged father, dissertation completion and defense, and then the offer of an assistant professorship. However, the results of the presidential election that fall foreclosed, for the time being, any further federal employment.

When you do not quite know your preferences, options, or chances, the reasonable strategy may be simply to start pushing buttons and see what the machine spits out. My one-page C.V. said simply the three things that any academic employer seemed likely to want to know: where I had done my degree, with whom I had worked, and what my dissertation was about. When I came to DC, my thesis not yet completed, that underwhelming C.V. was pretty much all I had.

But, of course, one does not need multiple “hits.” One will do. The political science department at my home-state university interviewed and hired me.

Yes, you read that correctly. It was just about that straightforward, or so it seemed at the time. I had not risen to the top in any sort of multicandidate search, at least none of which I am aware. That would not happen today. The job market is too competitive and formal search procedures are more thoroughly institutionalized.

Now came a period of, well, not much. I taught classes, pretty effectively, and was reasonably well liked by students and colleagues. Despite having earned a PhD, I turned out to have been astonishingly naïve about academia, probably in part because I had spent my entire graduate career residing in dormitories supervising college freshmen. I had been attracted to political science largely because of an interest in politics and policy, not theory. Having focused on books, general-audience essays, and the kinds of professors who wrote them, I discovered the enormous weight accorded articles in

peer-reviewed journals. Moreover, my dissertation left prospective publishers cold: its theory was (of course) underdeveloped, its application and potential audience too small. Moreover, I had earned a prestigious degree while approaching graduate school entirely too casually for my own good, even in the rather less Darwinian conditions I faced back

omitting a fitful five-year saga of research, false starts, lousy drafts, and countless revisions—was a manuscript that the foundation was, at last, willing to send out to reviewers and thereafter to publishers. Two accepted the manuscript and the foundation then accepted the offer of the far more prestigious one (Foreman 1988). (Another caveat is essential here,

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then. I had become, in some ways, seduced by an institution and blinded by the approaches and worldviews of the scholars that I encountered within it. Political science was becoming increasingly, as Gabriel Almond wrote in this very journal 30 years ago, a domain of “separate tables”; and, as a young academic, I simply had no idea how challenging it might be to “table-hop” (Almond 1988).

Still, the dissertation was what I had and I managed to mine it for one modest think-tank magazine article (Foreman 1982). No one in political science would care, but one economist—at my university’s policy school (the one to which I would return after many years elsewhere)—saw it and thought I might be appropriate to participate in a project on the Reagan administration “regulatory-relief” effort. My contribution was longer than before but, again, exceedingly modest. Yet, at least I was again “writing something” (Foreman 1984). More important, I was defining my interests and finding my voice.

I learned how pivotal it might be to be in the right place, not only to make a connection but also to catch an inspiration. For in a tiny and long-forgotten 1983 meeting of authors for that project, one of the principal editors had opined: “We really need to know more about the impact of congressional oversight on these agencies.” Immediately, I saw an opening that might allow me to take the next step from the vague intuition that had brought me to Washington. I knew that I had severe deficiencies as a “political scientist”—I employ the quotes, just this once, in brief ironic acknowledgment of my then-emerging core identity as a “writer with degrees” in that subject who has never perceived himself as any sort of true “scientist”—but I already knew that I had two critical advantages over most members of the tribe: I wrote better (or at least more easily) than most others and I was in Washington.

However, an idea without resources to fulfill it—like a seed without water—does nothing. OK, so here is where fortune descends again (meaning that my network kicked in). In the fall of 1983, I received a phone call from a foundation program officer. One of my former presidential-commission colleagues, under contract to produce a book for the foundation, had suggested my name. Might I have any ideas worth supporting? Yes, I replied—I do indeed! The result—and here I am

in line with my general theme: Although the foundation in question is still very much in business, it no longer outsources book-length projects to academics. Foundation staff produce the material, relatively little of it in book form.)

And so my career was reborn. In 1987, I had resigned my tenure-track assistant professorship to become a stay-at-home dad while finishing the manuscript. Going up for tenure makes little sense when denial is certain unless one has no choice. Fortunately, with a working spouse, I had a choice. The emergence of a book had allowed me a fresh start, which I made at a profoundly hospitable Washington-area university. I had taken two bites of the tenure-track apple.

Things then progressed, after years of stasis, almost too quickly. The Brookings Institution had announced the availability of some research positions and I had been developing another proposal—one that I thought would yield the kind of book Brookings would like—at the time that my initial assistant professorship ended. I had sent off the proposal and Brookings had almost immediately replied with a polite form letter declining interest.

But then, astonishingly, my network kicked in again at the end of 1988. My book turned up in a bookstore (now long closed, of course) just off Dupont Circle. A graduate-school classmate, an inveterate browser of bookstores and himself the holder of a Brookings position, spotted my book on the shelf. He brought it to the attention of his boss, a Brookings program director, and reminded him of the proposal they had turned down; it turns out that it had been shelved rather than discarded. The program director then acquired the book, read it, and decided that I could be hired after all.

So, at the beginning of 1988, I had no job. By the end of that year, I had two. Unlike universities, think tanks can hire quickly but tenure is unavailable in such places.

That book took longer than it should have but eventually appeared (Foreman 1994). Stimulated by the think-tank environment, it proved (for quite a while anyway) rather easy to come up with ideas to pursue. Because at Brookings I was a fish in a pond where journalists and others came regularly to feed, I got press calls and offers to write beyond Brookings. Success became self-reinforcing.

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When I was approaching the end of work on the book that had brought me to Brookings, I learned that President Bill Clinton was about to issue an executive order on something called “environmental justice.” I had never before heard the term. Yet, far more than anything I have done or ever will do,

of projects that Brookings scholars mostly did. In retrospect, readers will understandably judge my behavior to have been more than a little foolish and certainly not “strategic.”

So, although faculty at the University of Maryland School of Public Affairs—a renaming under the public-policy rubric

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that topic would define my professional life, yielding fully half of all my Google Scholar citations to date (Foreman 1998).

However, the ground was shifting around me. In 1989, I had enlisted for service in a “university without students”—what my late friend Harold Seidman dubbed a “book factory.” For several years, no one—to my recollection—ever uttered the magic words “fund raising” within my earshot. By the late 1990s, however, those words were echoing throughout the building and I was, like everyone else, feeling the pressure. The think-tank world had become vastly more competitive, and a combination of leadership turnover and financial deficits had powerfully affected the organization. Every tub would now rest on its own bottom; you would eat only what you killed. (Students and younger scholars everywhere who aspire to work at Brookings, or at a policy-research organization of similar stature, should be warned that whereas the buildings may externally appear the same as they did a generation ago, the institutions are now vastly more focused on short, timely, accessible, and promotable products conjured at the behest of paying clients.)

Yet my network activated once more, this time to deliver me from the far more “business-like” Brookings that had evolved around me. A phone call from the university I had long ago departed as a “failure” (but this time from the same policy school where I had gotten that early and critical publishing traction) inquired whether I might be, as they say, “movable.” Well, yes, I might be.

But now a major downside of the think-tank research culture became starkly apparent and threatened to bring my career to a crashing halt. I had published a fair amount, to be sure, but from a research-university perspective, not quite correctly. To be blunt: I was not in the peer-reviewed journals.

would occur some years later—were enthusiastic about my coming to campus, others beyond the school were decidedly underwhelmed. In this respect, of course, a large research university was simply behaving as such places do. (Here, I discreetly omit some extremely improbable details and cut to the end of the story.) As I was strolling on Capitol Hill on a September day in 2000, my cell phone rang. I was to come to the university without delay. The president had signed my appointment papers and I must sign my contract—right away! (Do not expect anything like this to happen to you. It will not.)

In August 2020, I will retire, having concluded precisely 20 years in a small, ambitious, and hugely promising but chronically underfunded policy school, gratified to have been able to contribute nearly every day to helping students and solving institutional problems. At Brookings, I had been successful and happy but decidedly a minor player. In my current job, I am vastly more consequential institutionally but “outside the Beltway” and pretty much ignored within it.

What have I learned that might be useful to others? It pays to know what type of scholar you are as soon as you can and to place yourself in proximity to the people and places most likely to be hospitable to that type. Be warned that think tanks offer exciting opportunities for policy relevance but at a potential cost. It is generally much easier to move from a university milieu to a think tank than the other way around because—single-author books aside—most think-tank products have little appeal to those responsible for research-university appointments and promotions. I was exceedingly fortunate, along with a few others, to have emerged from a university department defined by a style of intellectual pursuit that both suited me and harmonized with the culture of a major Washington research organization.

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I had done “only” books, book chapters, and other projects largely spun from books. Had I been more cautiously wise, I would have broken out a few pieces for separate journal publication but, to be honest, I simply had never bothered. Insulated by Brookings, I had given myself over to the sorts

None of this could happen this way today, not even for someone exactly like me. The relevant doors are closed. Hence, my closing advice must be both modest and general. Be yourself. If you do not know what button to push, push as many as you reasonably can, responding as energetically and

rationally as you can to whatever pops up. Keep your eyes and ears open for opportunities beyond political science departments. Policy schools offer interdisciplinary stimulation although probably not anything like a critical mass of people more or less like yourself; you will likely need to forge your research relationships beyond the institution. However, such schools are indeed excellent places to do meaningful work, especially in creating opportunities for others who need the insights of political science to become capable policy professionals and whose hard work cannot guarantee their success. Those people will need a network, which means that they will need you. ■

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