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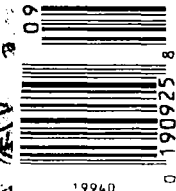
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THE THOUGHT BROKERS

Boston's Think Tanks Are Bastions of Ideas and Profit



19940

The Thought Brokers

Boston's Think Tanks

Concoct Everything From
Lead Balloons to Solutions
to the Arms Race

BY STEVE NADIS

To most commuters on Route 2 through Cambridge, the clump of buildings and courtyards just before the Alewife MBTA station looks like one of the hundreds of colleges in the Boston area. Except that

the people streaming in and out of these buildings appear to be older and more formally dressed than the typical collegian. They tend to carry briefcases more often than frisbees. And, odds are, they're not discussing Proust or Nietzsche.

Here at Arthur D. Little, as well as in its 21 branch offices worldwide, 1300 consultants spend their days on projects ranging from upgrading national telecommunications systems to Bloody Mary mixes and imitation bacon. Quite simply, they are paid to think. They think for Quaker Oats. They think for NASA. They even think for the Department of Defense, though the city of Cambridge put a stop to nerve gas research three years ago. In

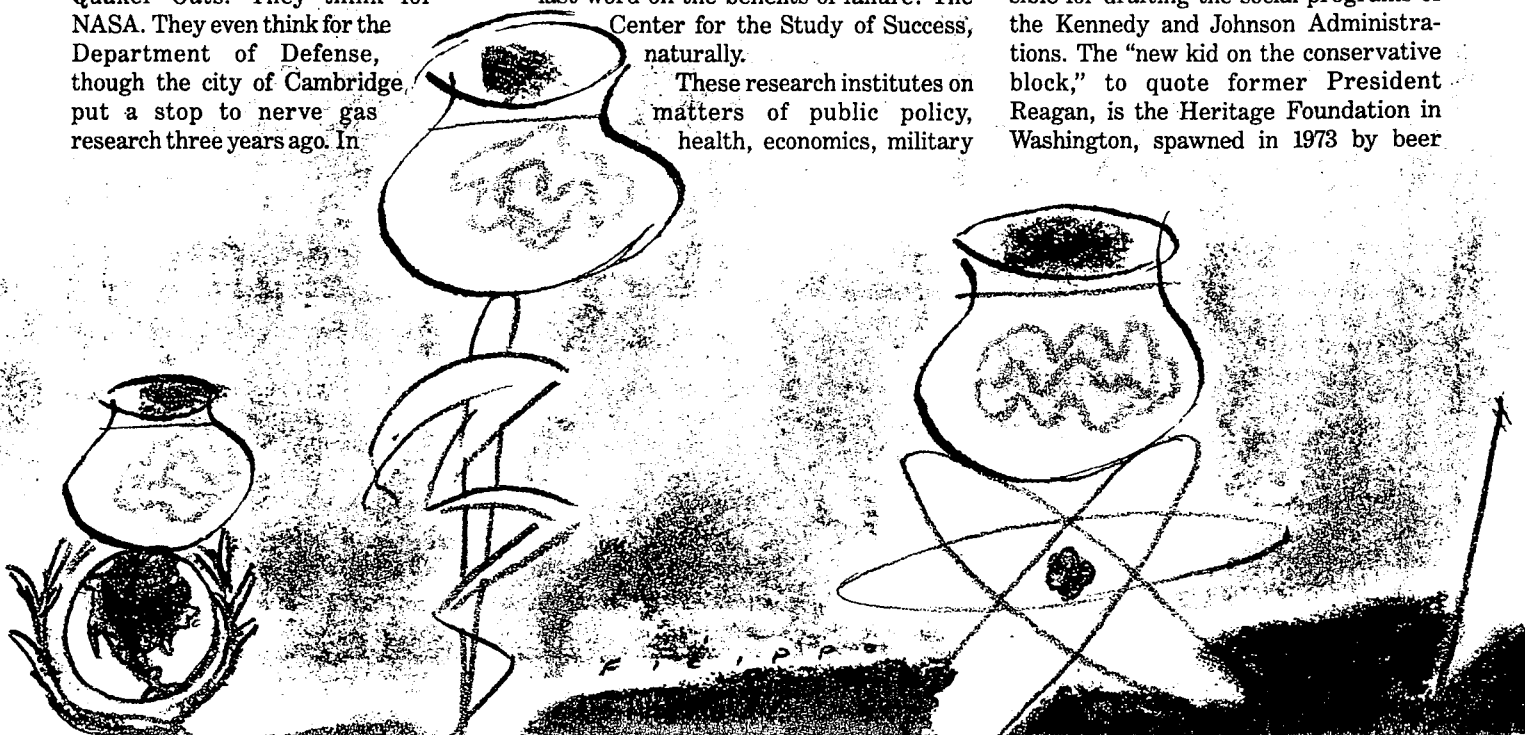
all, their minds are worth \$300 million annually.

But ADL is not the only idea bank in town. In the bastion of higher learning that is Boston, there are countless centers of scholarly pursuit, independent of colleges and universities, where people are paid to think—mostly not for profit. Where else, for example, might one learn how to best apply the teachings of Martin Heidegger to dream analysis? The Cambridge-based Center for Existential Studies and Human Services, of course. What about the latest in oil-spill clean-up technology? The Center for Short-Lived Phenomena, also in Cambridge. If you want to employ family therapy techniques as a way to alleviate tensions between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, whom would you consult? Why not the Center for Psychological Studies in the Nuclear Age? And where can you get the last word on the benefits of failure? The Center for the Study of Success, naturally.

These research institutes on matters of public policy, health, economics, military

strategy and the like are called "think tanks." They should not be confused with the dark, brine-filled isolation tank in which William Hurt pondered evolution in the movie *Altered States*. The term think tank is generally a nonprofit group seeking to shape policy by indirect means. Its goal may be to educate the public or enlighten the nation's leaders, but it is not supposed to engage directly in political campaigning or lobbying.

National think tanks, including the mammoth Rand Corporation, are the best known. Rand, which has been nicknamed "The Titan of Tankdom," was created in 1948 as a research branch of the Air Force. Its analysts defined the basic principles of nuclear deterrence in the 1950s and 60s. The Washington-based Brookings Institution, founded in 1927, is the oldest and one of the most respected in the land. Brookings is largely responsible for drafting the social programs of the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations. The "new kid on the conservative block," to quote former President Reagan, is the Heritage Foundation in Washington, spawned in 1973 by beer





mogul Adolph Coors. Heritage did for the Reagan Administration what Brookings did for the Great Society and New Frontier, drafting policies on tax reform, the domestic budget and the Strategic Defense Initiative.

In Boston, away from the high-profile think tanks of Washington's Beltway, these tanks are harder to identify, partly because there is no commonly accepted definition of a think tank. Two obvious candidates, however, are the Cambridge-based research and consulting giants ADL and Abt Associates. Yet both companies are *for-profit* institutions, thus violating a basic tenet of tankdom. The nonprofit Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) also based in Cambridge is a coalition of scientists conducting research on nuclear power safety, the arms race and energy policy. But in addition to its

demically-inclined individuals who prefer working one step closer to the world of public policy and commerce. Many think tanks function, therefore, as a kind of half-way house between universities and government and industry. "There is a certain academic nature to our research," explains Ron Levy, an ADL vice president. "We do some unusual, esoteric projects that can be on the frontiers of science." But unlike academia, "we don't do pure research just for the sake of research."

Think tanks may be a one-person show operating out of a garage or basement, or in the case of ADL, a \$300 million a year enterprise. Public interest researchers may accept subsistence salaries just for the "luxury" of being able to work full-time on issues close to their hearts. Analysts at ADL or Abt, on the other hand,

ADL's projects have ranged from feasibility studies of an English Channel tunnel to developing weather forecasting and computer programs for NASA or devising health and safety standards for Antarctic research workers. More off-beat projects have included beer tasting and developing a bread coating for chicken that will stay crisp for 27 days.

Like many American success stories, ADL started small — in an eight-by-12-foot office and an equally cramped laboratory in downtown Boston. The year was 1886. One hundred and three years later, the chemical engineering consulting company Arthur Little and his partner Roger Griffin founded (then called Griffin & Little) the oldest consulting firm in the country.

ADL is, after all, the company that invented or developed the first instant breakfast, the first fiber-optic cable TV system, Instant Cream of Wheat, anti-knock gasoline, charcoal briquettes, buffered aspirin, synthetic penicillin and the plastic pencil. "Hardly anything is none of our business," goes the company slogan. (One exception is weapons research — a field that is considered taboo at Abt as well.)

Despite their emphasis on client-sponsored research, a few of ADL's most notorious exploits were not produced for clients. In 1921, for example, a team of ADL chemists showed that you really could make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. And in 1977 ADL scientists lofted not one, but three lead balloons.

The freedom to choose interesting projects to work on is one of the reasons people stay at ADL, Levy says. "If you come up with a good idea, you can get internal funding to pursue it." Consultants get invited to join projects by their colleagues. Research teams are formed on a non-hierarchical basis: "I often work for people who are not vice presidents," Vice President Ron Levy says. "And my boss may work for me."

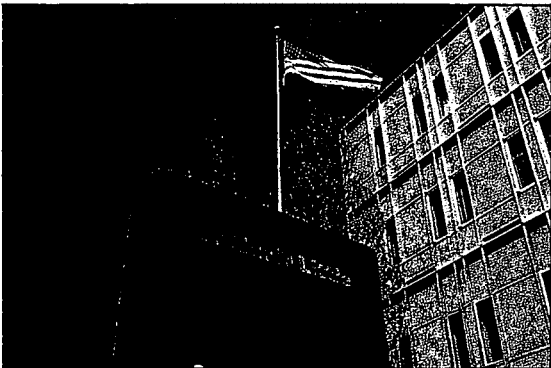
Most researchers juggle several projects at once. "People develop the ability to switch gears rapidly if they're going to survive," explains Stephen Rudolph, vice president of product technology. "You may work intensely on one thing in the morning, another in the afternoon and then leave that evening on a flight for another project. Someone in my position may have to switch gears every five minutes."

In some cases, ADL is asked to develop a new product. For example, about 15 years ago the Empire Pencil Company asked ADL to find a less labor-intensive way of manufacturing pencils. "We said,

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research and educational efforts, UCS engages in lobbying.

Think tanks are as diverse as the branches on the tree of human knowledge. Yet many agree at least on this: a dislike of the term "think tank." "We consider ourselves a *do* tank, not a think tank," one ADL analyst explains. "We don't have a lot of people sitting around contemplating their navels," another ADLer says.

"I find the term 'think tank' a bit grandiose for what I do," says former State Representative Tom Gallagher, director and sole full-time employee of the New England Equity Institute. He considers it more of a 'think bowl.' "Tanks have a lot of fish in them; a bowl only has one. And I'm the only fish here."

Think tanks attract idea people, aca-

may pursue exciting research in science or social science, spurred on by the potential for earning higher salaries than would be possible in a traditional academic setting. (The money involved can be considerable: ADL recently landed a \$70 million EPA contract for assistance in cleaning up Superfund hazardous waste sites.)

Given the vagaries of definition and variety of candidates to choose among, identifying think tanks is an inexact science. You can't just pick up the Yellow Pages and look under "think." What follows, therefore, are glimpses of some of the centers in the Boston area that qualify:

ARTHUR D. LITTLE

Specialists in science and technology,

'Let's try plastics,'" Rudolph explains. "That way, you can make a pencil continuously, turn it out by the mile." Plastic pencils are now sold around the world.

Rudolph emphasizes the difference between inventing a product and solving the technical problems involved before it can be marketed. Inventing the product is just the first step. In the case of the plastic pencil, he says, "that was our idea. But even if we didn't have the idea, we still would have had to do about 99 percent of the work."

In other cases, Rudolph adds, "clients come to us with products like new polymers and ask whether there's some application they don't know about. We make it clear that we'll deliver the conclusions *we* reach, not necessarily the answer our clients want to hear. They hire us knowing that and perhaps for that reason."

Rudolph stresses that their work does not always lead to commercial products: "Sometime the concept we're asked to work on is not very good. New ideas can be good or bad, just like old ones."

ABT ASSOCIATES

Abt Associates, the nation's largest, for-profit social science research firm, has had a hard time competing with ADL for attention. This is not surprising. How can research on fair housing and hospital cost-containment programs — even flawless research — hope to compete with the likes of Cap'n Crunch and the plastic pencil?

Still, Abt has managed to carve out a niche for itself. And despite a rocky road, the company has enjoyed dramatic growth. In 1965, at the end of its first year of operation, Abt had 24 employees and \$200,000 in revenues. The company now has a staff of 500, with more than \$30 million in annual revenues.

"We tend to think of ourselves as a public and private policy research firm," says Steve Kennedy, chief social scientist. Public policy work includes AIDS education, testing and treatment programs; agricultural assistance for developing countries; drug abuse programs; environmental policy; food and nutrition assistance; and research on health and aging. "Our private policy work deals with similar issues, only we do it for companies instead of the federal government."

Through 1980 almost all of Abt's work was for the federal government. But in 1981 the Reagan Administration canceled many contracts. Abt's revenues plummeted and the staff shrank from about 1200 employees to only 300. Private work, which comprises about one-third of Abt's total, is growing rapidly. "We don't want

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to go through 1981 again," says Bob Schmitz, senior analyst.

Yet almost all of Schmitz's work in the fields of health, labor and the environment is for the federal government, which suits him fine. "When private contractors have something they want to know, it's often more important to have it today, than to have it done right," he says. "The Feds are more anxious to have things done right," which provides researchers more time to explore interesting issues.

Kennedy agrees that "long-term federal projects allow you to think in a more sustained way," but he considers private contracts fun too. "In private work, we're looking at data that no one has tried to analyze before. You often can learn a lot quickly. In federal programs, most of these things have been studied before, so you're looking for a very small effect."

As an example he recalls a job he did for a cable TV firm that had collected "mountains" of data on cable systems across the country. "They didn't know how to analyze it or what to do with the information after they analyzed it. In a few weeks, we were able to take their database, clean it up and find some patterns that helped with their marketing."

Analysts at Abt, as at ADL, work on a range of projects. "In the last four years, I've looked at housing, criminal justice, health care and labor costs," Kennedy says. "Of course, economists tend to believe they can analyze anything."

Abt once had the reputation of being a "pressure cooker." To counter that image the company built an outdoor swimming pool and health club years ago. Now Abt researchers often use the term "collegiality" to describe the environment. "It's probably the most striking aspect of the place," Schmitz says. "It's an academic sort of environment — as academic as you can be and still be in the business of trying to sell your work."

UNION OF CONCERNED SCIENTISTS

"We used to joke that most people go on talk shows to sell their books; we write books to get on talk shows," says Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) research director Peter Clausen.

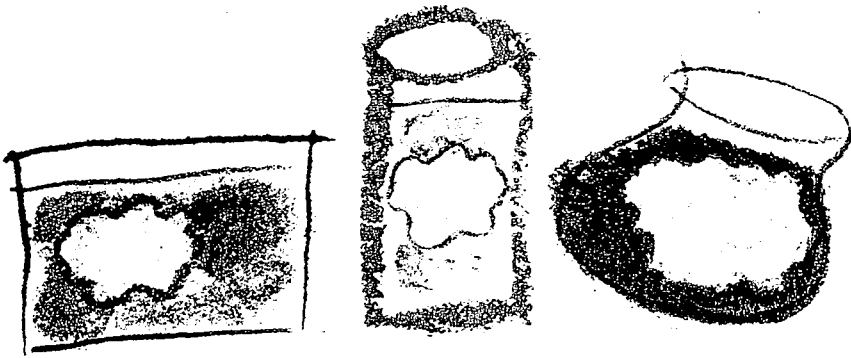
For two decades, UCS has tried to inform public debate on a number of energy and defense issues. The group coalesced in the late 1960s as local scientists rallied against the proposed anti-ballistic missile program. The scientists won the first round of the skirmish, but the ABM reappeared in 1983 with a new name, the Strategic Defense Initiative or SDI (known to the rest of the world as "Star Wars.") Once again, UCS has been a leader in the battle against SDI — a multi-group effort that has wounded the program, if not killed it outright.

Largely owing to its success in the nuclear power safety arena, UCS is now a \$3.5 million a year non-profit operation with a full-time staff of 30 in Cambridge and Washington supported by about 100,000 public sponsors.

Although UCS conducts original research and analysis, it is not strictly a think tank, since research and writing account for just one part of the budget. Other activities include lobbying, public education and conferences.

The group differs from more conventional think tanks in other ways, Senior Arms Analyst Allan Krass says. "No one expects UCS to be objective. We definitely have an agenda."

"Once we pick an issue, we try to do solid, objective analysis," says UCS research director Peter Clausen. "We don't intentionally skew the data to make a better case." Clausen acknowledges that the line between a research group and an activist group is often blurry. "Some of our work is for the specialist community; some is for the general public. We establish



Academic Think Tanks

More Than Ivory Tower Research

Unlike traditional think tanks, academic centers and institutes pursue ideas in the name of pure research. In Boston such institutes and centers are plentiful. And leading the way are Boston University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University each with dozens of centers examining everything from biotechnology to economic development, construction materials and computer science.

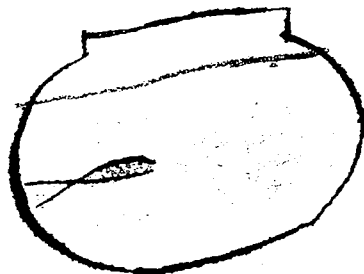
Boston University, for example, is home to more than 60 academic centers and institutes. One of the newest is the Institute for the Study of Economic Culture created and headed by the internationally recognized sociologist Peter L. Berger. Known for its original research in "managerial ideology" and market mechanisms in socialist countries, the Institute sponsors research on relations between economic development and social change.

While the Institute's projects span the globe, Berger is readying programs closer to home such as a monthly colloquium on economic culture proposed for the Boston University campus. "This kind of research is not terribly esoteric," says Berger, "however, the relation of economics to culture has been largely neglected. Economists don't want to recognize the complexities of incorporating social science, and social scientists do not like to deal with the influences of economics."

At M.I.T., The Center for Construction Research and Education, headed by Professor Fred Moavenzadeh, acts as a liaison between the construction industry and researchers. "People in the U.S. have tremendous familiarity with construction," says Moavenzadeh about the \$400 billion domestic industry. To develop greater productivity and maintain U.S. competitiveness in the international construction market, Moavenzadeh and M.I.T. founded the Center, pooling MIT funds with government grants. "Frankly, we did not

want to see the Japanese doing the same in construction as they did in cars," says Moavenzadeh.

Also in Cambridge, the Harvard Institute for International Development (HIID), directed by Professor Dwight Perkins, has for nearly three decades helped Third World countries create and analyze government policy. With research fellows and staff numbering nearly 100 in Cambridge and overseas research projects in 18 developing nations, HIID is an important link between scholars, development agencies and government officials in developing nations.



Former executive director and current institute fellow Michael Roemer says, "HIID acts as a window on the Third World." Along these lines, the Institute trains foreign officials and scholars through intensive workshops like The Public Enterprise Workshop, begun in 1974, and the Educational Policy Analysis and Planning workshop, established in 1987. In addition, HIID works with the Kennedy School of Government to sponsoring the Mason Program for mid-career officials that leads to a Master's of Public Administration degree.

Scholars like Berger, Moavenzadeh and the multitudes at HIID bridge the gap between esoteric academic topics and real life concerns. One would hope the policy makers in industry and government would draw upon their research and realize the value of their thoughts. —IAN SPRINGSTEEL

our credentials by doing analysis that is deemed 'respectable' by the technical community. On the other hand, we won't do a study that has no policy implications."

In recent years, UCS has focused on Star Wars while also analyzing most major strategic weapons — the stealth bomber, modernization of intercontinental ballistic missiles and anti-satellite warfare systems. "Star Wars was made to order for us — it was high profile with a strong scientific component," says Clausen. "But there's no systematic process for making the right choices. In general, an issue we select has to have some technical element. It has to be prominent or potentially prominent. The public has to be alarmed."

Working day and night against the threat of nuclear war might take its toll, but Krass (who's spent decades in the field of arms control) isn't worried about Armageddon. "This stuff used to be a lot more frightening than it is now," Krass says. "Instead of being caught up in war fears, we need people calmly thinking about the steps ahead."

Throughout the Boston area, a number of people are doing just that — calmly thinking about the steps ahead. The direction of their thinking can vary wildly, from stopping the nuclear arms race to getting an "aviophobic" relaxed enough to enter an airplane.

Perhaps the greatest clustering of groups occurs in the peace business. Former UCS staffer Paul Walker, for example, co-founded the Institute for Peace and International Security to promote his vision of common security. "The basic idea is that no nation can provide for its own security at the expense of another's," Walker says. Getting the message out, however, is a struggle for such a fledgling operation. "If you're not Henry Kissinger or Zbigniew Brzezinski, often the press won't listen to you," he says. "I've never had an op-ed piece in *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal* or *Washington Post*. But our stories do pop up in places like the *Des Moines Register* and the *Casper (Wyoming) Star*."

Another UCS alumnus, Gordon Thompson, started his own tanklet, the Institute for Resource and Security Studies, which operates out of a converted garage in Cambridge. Thompson has solved the P.R. problem by working with higher-profile organizations like Greenpeace — a group not above invading the Soviet Union as a publicity stunt. IRSS does research on nuclear power, the environment and the greenhouse effect. Eventually, Thompson hopes to get into broader issues of "planetary management."

The scale of human activities has reached the point where you have to treat the entire planet the way you treat your garden," he says, sounding a bit like Chance, in Jerzy Kozinski's *Being There*. "You let nature do its thing, while ensuring that all the different elements have what they need to thrive."

Just around the corner, Thompson's wife, Paula Gutlove, runs the *Center for Psychological Studies in the Nuclear Age*. "We want to get to the psychological roots fueling the arms race," Gutlove says. The Center has pioneered the use of family therapy techniques as a means of improving communication between nations with differing ideologies. The method was employed last year in a meeting of U.S. and Soviet physicians in Moscow. "The approach is non-threatening, non-accusatory," Gutlove explains. "You don't say

is getting them to set foot on an airplane. Forgione is director of the Institute for the Psychology of Air Travel, a research and education group he started in 1973. He's also a clinical professor of psychology at Tufts University School of Dental Medicine. Forgione joined Tufts in 1972 and proposed a "Fear of Dentistry" program. But first he had to demonstrate that his techniques actually worked. "I put an ad in the *Globe* about fear of flying; the next day I had 500 people," he says. "Before you knew it, I was in the fear of flying business."

Kathleen Lusk Brooke, on the other hand, is in the success business, which involves a lot of time studying failure and its relation to success. Brooke, director of The Center for the Study of Success, says, "Society has paid so much attention to success we tend to ignore failure. But

from 1980 to 1986, Gallagher figures he already had an "integrated view" on how business interests shape the state's political agenda. He hopes to offset that influence by writing a series of studies exposing infringements on workers' rights, tax inequities and other economic injustices. His main problem is that it takes money to fight money. "If you want to put together a think tank that says the rich don't get enough money, you'll get lots of support," he says. "If you want to put together a think tank that says the rich get too much, you're not going to get any money."

In the face of considerable odds, independent thinkers like Gallagher, Thompson of IRSS and Walker of IPIS keep at it, trying to promote their goals of social justice, environmental health and world peace. Their motives are partly altruistic; they'd like to make the world a better place. And they're lucky enough to have jobs that allow them to pursue issues they care about.

"When government departments and big universities begin to carry out the kind of broad global analyses that are required," Thompson says, "they won't need the likes of me. Then I'll retire and become a sheep farmer. And be quite happy."

It's doubtful he will have that luxury. Just as the biggest breakthroughs in the computer field have come from individuals like Steven Jobs, Bill Gates and Mitch Kapor; just as the bulk of innovation in American industry comes from small companies; the odds are that the biggest leaps in policy analysis will come from small groups or individuals working outside the establishment.

As Thompson acknowledges: "Large organizations have difficulty dealing with broad, fundamental issues. Look at Draper Labs. They're not going to question the nation's nuclear weapons policy because their entire existence depends on the modernization of those weapons."

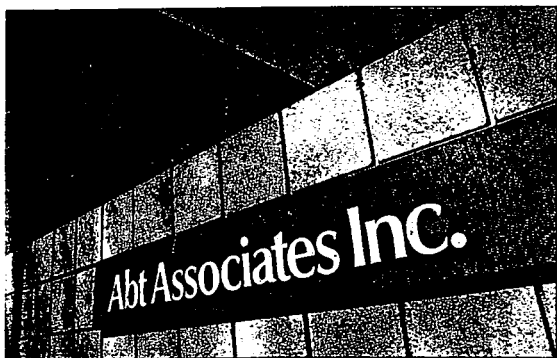
Kenneth Adelman, former director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, agrees. Large think tanks, he says, "are good at controlled studies of specific questions. But the really big ideas, the breakthroughs, come from outside the system. They pop up in journals written by someone you've never heard of who had no outside help."

Which means the "little guys" — like Gallagher, Walker and Thompson — will have to, in Thompson's words, "keep plugging away, thinking you have something to say, hoping it makes a difference."

Steve Nadis is a free-lance writer based in Cambridge.

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that one person is the problem; you say the whole system is leading to problems."

Another Cambridge-based organization is tackling a separate problem in international psychology — trying to transplant European-born ideas on existential therapy to this side of the Atlantic. "We're not missionaries," says Dr. Charles McArthur, director of the Center for Existential Studies and Human Services, "we're scholars." Perhaps the hardest thing about existential therapy is understanding what it's all about. "We deal with experience as a person experiences it, without trying to interpret it or explain it away," McArthur explains. "We talk with the patient about where he can go from here, rather than where he's been."

Al Forgione also talks with patients about where they can go. The hard part

if you look at successful people you find that how well they deal with failure is often a measure of their success."

The Institute for the Study of Human Knowledge has a more basic mission, thinking about thinking itself. The Institute believes that a range of global problems — pollution, overpopulation, the threat of nuclear war — stem from inadequacies of knowledge. "We tend to break knowledge down artificially into little boxes," says Tom Malone, a member of the Institute's board. "The Institute hopes to unify knowledge and develop a more integrated view of the problems faced by society."

Tom Gallagher, founder of the New England Equity Institute, prefers a more practical approach. After representing Allston in the Massachusetts State House