

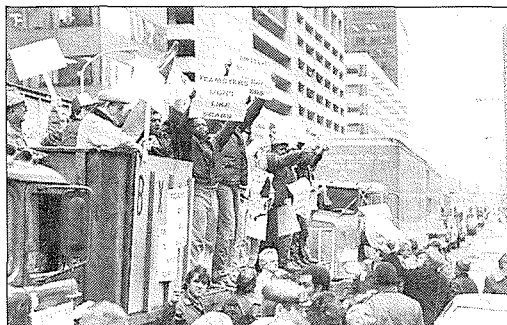
vatives have made the best use of think tanks. Eighty years ago, when Wilson was deploring "experts," business leaders like Robert S. Brookings realized that corporate interests required more than moralistic hymns to *laissez faire*; they needed to have a direct impact on specific government policies. Many think tanks of the 1920s, like the National Bureau of Economic Research, attempted to give "fact-based" economic guidance to the pro-business Coolidge and Hoover administrations. Despite the experts, the economy crashed.

After its eclipse during the New Deal era, this form of conservative advocacy was revived in the 1950s when William J. Baroody, Sr., took over Washington's American Enterprise Institute (AEI). "One of the shrewdest and most energetic men ever to preside over a Washington research institute," as Smith describes him, Baroody tirelessly sought to combat what he called "the liberal intellectual monopoly." A generation later AEI and other conservative think tanks supplied the ideas and the personnel for the Reagan Revolution.

But is this the "government of experts" that Woodrow Wilson feared? Wilson worried that experts would use their supposed status as "scientists" to foreclose debate and exclude the ordinary citizen. Something like that nearly happened in the 1950s when the Air Force employed its think tank, the Rand Corporation, to confine nuclear policy questions to approved "experts." But, Smith concludes, the mass entry of the idea brokers into the public "marketplace of ideas" has in fact demystified expertise and has thus, if anything, intensified public policy debate.

WHICH SIDE ARE YOU ON? Trying to Be for Labor When It's Flat on Its Back. *By Thomas Geoghegan. Farrar, Straus. 267 pp. \$19.95*

Thomas Geoghegan loves the rousing Labor Day parades; he loves the St. Joseph's Day feasts when the rank-and-file reaffirm their solidarity; he loves winning legal battles for what he calls America's "real counterculture." In short, he loves being a labor lawyer. That, however, does not mean he *likes* the modern American labor movement.



Since entering the fold some 20 years ago, Geoghegan has witnessed a steady decline of union vigor. Union membership today, he reports, accounts for only 16 percent of the American workforce, down from 20 to 25 percent a mere decade ago. In Chicago, where Geoghegan practices, the steelworkers' union alone lost 50,000 members during the 1980s. Geoghegan's prediction for organized labor is hardly sanguine. "A dumb, stupid mastodon of a thing" it is, he says, a beast well on its way to extinction.

Who does Geoghegan fault for labor's demise? Everyone. Industry, the unions themselves, and the government all come in for blame. American industry's obsession with immediate profits instead of investment in the future has proven disastrous for workers. Japan's Nippon Steel alone spends more on research and development than all U.S. steel companies combined. In the 1980s, many unprofitable mills closed and thousands of union members lost their jobs. Even more union members were on the street as industries, ranging from steel to automaking, began busting unions in order to maximize profits. The practice of firing union employees (usually illegally) and replacing them with "scabs" saves, according to one study Geoghegan cites, 20 percent on the nation's wage bills annually.

As shortsighted as industry is, Geoghegan thinks union members may be even more so. "Boy, were they dumb," is his comment on their always taking the immediate buck instead of demanding, or even wanting, company stock or assuming control over company pension funds. Those few unions that acquired stock in lieu of salary raises, such as the machinists and the pilots, are in a relatively powerful position today.

Of the culprits behind labor's downfall, none has been more influential, Geoghegan argues, than the federal government. In 1947, for example, the Republican-controlled Congress passed the Taft-Hartley Act outlawing the tactics—mass picketing, sit-downs, and secondary strikes—that had made union-building so successful. Yet it was Ronald Reagan, Geoghegan says, who dealt labor its worst blows. Thanks to Reaganomics, America in the 1980s lost one out of three jobs in heavy industry, creating “a pool of scabs as big as Lake Michigan.” And Reagan's decision in 1981 that the air traffic controllers' strike was unlawful signaled that the strike as a bargaining tool was dead. In 1972 organized labor called 443 strikes nationwide; in 1989, only 43.

Geoghegan tries hard “to be for labor when it's flat on its back,” but perhaps the surest sign of the times is that he, too, seems as befuddled by the events of the past decade as the rank-and-file he represents. He would like comprehensive labor-law reform, for Congress to change the Taft-Hartley and Wagner Acts, and for union members to be able to strike effectively, but he has no practical suggestions for bringing such things about. Organized labor may be thriving in Canada and Japan and Sweden, but in America—or so Geoghegan claims—one can only watch as “labor shambles around like Frankenstein [with] half its brain gone.”

Science & Technology

TOO HOT TO HANDLE: *The Race for Cold Fusion.* By Frank Close. Princeton. 376 pp. \$24.95

On March 23, 1989, Martin Fleischmann and Stanley Pons, two chemists at the University of Utah, announced an astonishing discovery: They had uncovered the secret of cold fusion.

During fusion, the nuclei of two atoms are melded together, freeing substantial new energy. This is what the sun does on a massive scale at a temperature of 100 million degrees Celsius. Pons and Fleischmann, however, announced they had achieved it with a battery, palladium metal, and water at room temperature (hence the name *cold* fusion). Through

cold fusion, Pons and Fleischmann reported, a glass of water could power a car for 19 years. The chemists made their announcement at a press conference one day after the Exxon Valdez disaster in Alaska, when the world was more than receptive to news of a clean, safe, limitless energy source. Newspapers from London's *Financial Times* to the *Wall Street Journal* gave front-page coverage to the miracle.

If their experiment had proved valid, Fleischmann and Pons's achievement would rank somewhere near the invention of the wheel. But, according to Frank Close, a prominent physicist and science writer, there were three things wrong with the picture. First, it was unlikely that chemists would find the key to a problem in nuclear physics. Second, they announced their findings to the public before they could be reviewed by other scientists. And last and most important, their claim was incorrect. Pons and Fleischmann had misread a small element in the data. What had occurred in the test tube was a simple chemical reaction, not a nuclear one.

Ordinarily the mistake would have been detected because ordinarily scientific discoveries are announced through scientific journals, where the material can be mulled over and tested by peers. Why did the Utah scientists break protocol? Initially, they feared being scooped by competitors. After they got swept up by the enthusiasm for their findings, they and the University of Utah did not have the courage to turn back. For “the most bizarre 500 days in the history of modern science,” dozens of laboratories and hundreds of scientists attempted to repeat Pons and Fleischmann's experiment—but to no avail. Instead of acknowledging their error, the Utah chemists questioned the calibration of the equipment other experimenters used.

Research on fusion, however, remains a high priority among physicists. “Pollution from the dregs of an ever increasing energy consumption threatens to poison everyone in their own waste,” Close writes. “The only real hope for mankind in the long term appears to be fusion.” On four continents scientists have consumed billions of dollars trying to produce utilizable fusion. Likely there will be no overnight, miracle discovery; the Pons and Fleischmann fairy tale, alas, will never come true.