A
bout eight years ago, Board Vice Chairman Hank Greenberg, Council President Les
Gelb, the other Board members, and I faced a challenge. How could the Council
increase its impact on the real world, which by its nature involves making specific
policy recommendations, without violating the Council’s tradition of not taking
institutional positions on policy matters? A hallmark of the Council is that we have
always been an incubator of ideas across the spectrum of policy thought, free from
the grinding of an ideological ax.

One solution: The Council would periodically create and convene independent
task forces on the top foreign policy issues of the day. Each independent task force,
comprising current and former policymakers, academics, and leaders from the pri-
vate sector of varied backgrounds and political persuasions, would meet over the
course of several months to forge policy proposals that would help resolve or man-
age international problems on a nonpartisan basis.

Today, the real-world impact of the independent task forces has exceeded our
most fervent hopes. Imagine my satisfaction during a Council-sponsored trip to
Cuba this year when virtually every member of our delegation and every senior
Cuban official we met cited proposals in the two reports of the Council-sponsored
Independent Task Force on Cuba. Not that the Cubans were positive: Just before our
visit, state television devoted much of its prime-time schedule on three consecutive
nights to criticism of the task force’s work. And in our meetings, President Fidel
Castro and other top Cuban officials pulled no punches in confronting our group
with their objections to many of the task force’s recommendations.

But the point of the task force’s work was never for Havana to like it. The objec-
tive was to prompt new thinking, in Washington, in Miami, and on the island itself.
The task force did just that. At private moments during the trip, we also learned that
the task force had produced the most practical and helpful suggestions to date to
break the U.S.-Cuba impasse. Indeed, here in the United States, the task force’s two
reports would become the basis for bipartisan legislation in Congress and for con-
crete policy action.

After the first report, the Clinton administration announced a series of measures
toward Cuba that, though more limited in scope than those the task force had urged,
were consistent with the spirit of its recommendations. In the case of expanding peo-
pel-to-people exchanges between the United States and Cuba, the administration
explicitly adopted certain of the task force’s recommendations. And at the official level,
the two governments began modest cooperation in counternarcotics efforts. Proposals
to begin agricultural and pharmaceutical sales to Cuba, as both task force reports rec-
commended, have made their way directly into new legislation in the 107th Congress,
introduced with strong bipartisan sponsorship.
Korea provides another example of the impact of our independent task forces. Few institutions have been as effective as the Council’s Independent Task Force on North Korea in being a harbinger of change between the United States and North Korea. Through numerous meetings, reports, and letters to the president over the past few years, the task force has relentlessly encouraged Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush to engage North Korea. Most recently, within hours of President Bush’s announcement that he would continue talks with North Korea, the task force reinforced him with a letter proposing the next steps, encouraging the president to support fully South Korea’s efforts at reconciliation with the North.

Back in our own hemisphere again, the Council’s Independent Task Force on Brazil has had resonance of major proportions. The task force recommended that the United States create a focal point to its policy in South America, and that Brazil, the world’s third-largest democracy, become that focal point. The task force advised President Bush to move swiftly to establish a standing high-level dialogue with Brazil on key issues from drugs to trade to democratization to combating terrorism and international crime—stressing that this can and should be done without diminishing U.S. ties to other Latin American nations.

The task force report received immediate and sweeping coverage in Brazil and in virtually every other South American country as well, not to mention Mexico and Europe. Brazil’s foreign minister immediately requested a meeting at the Council with task force members. When the president of Brazil visited Washington shortly after the report was released, its findings were a focus of his trip.

Some task force reports, of course, examine issues a bit closer to home. The Independent Task Force on State Department Reform diagnosed the U.S. State Department as being plagued by labor shortages, antiquated equipment, and dilapidated and insecure facilities, and suggested a “resources-for-reform” strategy of specific steps to rectify the department’s shortcomings. Frank Carlucci, chair of this task force, and Les Gelb were asked to meet with Secretary of State Colin Powell to discuss its recommendations. The secretary spoke about the problems in his inaugural speech to department employees and vowed to take action. It is too early to tell whether change will happen, but the secretary at least has a road map.

The Council’s independent task forces, in fact, have gained a widespread reputation in government. President Clinton and Secretary of the Treasury Robert E. Rubin, while at a meeting a couple of years ago in which the president delivered a public address to the Council, suggested we form a task force to address whether global financial institutions were sufficiently equipped to deal with financial crises such as the one that occurred in Asia. Carla A. Hills, the former U.S. trade representative, and I were honored to co-chair the blue-ribbon task force that emerged. We were pleased that the task force’s recommendations were the subject of much debate and mostly praise within the press corps and the financial community.

And any time the most senior officials of the United States suggest we form an independent task force to help them solve a problem, that’s a sign that our task forces—like the Council itself—are making a genuine difference.

Peter G. Peterson
Chairman of the Board