

The Formation of the Trilateral Commission

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On July 23, 1972, a group of influential citizens from the U.S., Europe and Japan met at the Rockefeller family estate in Pocantico Hills, half an hour's drive north of New York City. They were welcomed by David Rockefeller, grandson of the oil tycoon John D. Rockefeller and chairman of Chase Manhattan Bank. David Rockefeller had summoned the group to express his concern that the advanced industrialized states were drifting “aimlessly into a situation in which they may inflict harm upon each other and other states.” According to David Rockefeller, the “impact of growing economic competitiveness and the accelerating pace of technological and social change on policy-making in major industrialized states” had made it imperative that governments transcended the “issues of the moment” and devoted themselves to the strategic problems of the future. “Now,” he declared, “is a propitious time for persons from the private sector to make a valuable contribution to public policy.”¹

No sooner said than done.

This small circle of men agreed to form the Trilateral Commission (TRICOM). The Commission would, eventually, gather highly influential people in business, politics and academia—from the “trilateral” regions of North America, Western Europe and Japan. Furthermore, it was soon to be perceived, by many, as an extremely powerful “rich man’s club,” influencing even the outcome of presidential elections in the U.S. Except how exactly was the

preparatory work to form the Commission carried out? How did the Commission take shape? This is an issue that has neither been investigated in depth, nor in detail, in academia so far, since until recently the Trilateral Commission (North America) Records were closed for research. In the spring of 2011, I was the first researcher ever to be granted access to the collection. I would like to extend my special thanks to the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) for this opportunity, and for providing me with a grant to make it possible to realize the time-consuming and substantial research necessary to produce a Ph.D. dissertation on the subject of the Commission's history. I expect to deliver the dissertation in the summer 2013, and this report draws only on a small amount of the sources I have collected, which are rather descriptive, dealing with simply a few facets of the Commission's initial history. Several of the RAC's other collections are also relevant to this chapter on the Commission's history, namely the Rockefeller Family and Associates General Files, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund Archives (RBF) and the David Rockefeller Papers.

The TRICOM has been the subject of only one and "a half" academic works published so far. Stephen Gill's *American Hegemony and the Trilateral Commission* is a very valuable study of the Commission, based on published sources and an impressive number of interviews with members of the TRICOM. Applying a Gramscian theoretical approach, Gill interprets the TRICOM as an organic expression of a new transnational alliance—or "historic block"—between capitalist elites and states and as contributing to a restructuring of a U.S.-led hegemonic world order. Gill, who is a political scientist, has studied the TRICOM with the aim of contributing to the development of a historical materialist theory of international relations. Because of his focus, I suspect, and because of his lack of access to unpublished sources from the Commission, Gill doesn't make a detailed analysis of the genesis and formation of the

Commission, although he touches upon it.² *Trilateralism: The Trilateral Commission and Elite Planning for World Management*, edited by Holly Sklar, is an anthology composed of a mixed variety of contributions from scholars, graduate students, journalists and activists, hence my characterization of it as "half" an academic work. It is written mostly in a Marxist terminology and applies theories of imperialism to interpret the Commission. Many of its contributions have, in my opinion, flaws with respect to methodological consistency and analytical sustainability, but at the same time, the book has a wealth of information on the TRICOM, including some on its foundation.³

Defining and Negotiating the Commission

In the spring of 1972, Zbigniew Brzezinski, David Rockefeller, Henry Owen and Robert R. Bowie met and discussed the common idea of forming a private elite organization that could include Americans, Western Europeans, and Japanese. On behalf of the group, Rockefeller asked George Franklin—a college roommate of Rockefeller's at Harvard, who served as Executive Director of the Council on Foreign Relations from 1953-1971—to tour Europe to explore the precise degree of interest in the organization and possible participants in it. In Europe, Franklin found fertile ground, and the same was the case when he and Rockefeller visited Japan later in June (where Rockefeller spoke at the American Chamber of Commerce). Before going to Japan, Franklin had taken charge of a temporary office at Rockefeller Plaza to advance the cause, and during May, a small group of Americans and Europeans met to discuss the organization. In the summer and fall, Rockefeller and a core group of people from the trilateral regions met several times to further advance their visions.⁴

- July 23-24: The first meeting of "The Trilateral Commission's Planning Group," included representatives from all trilateral regions, at Pocantico Hills. They "strongly" agreed to go ahead with the project and Rockefeller agreed to act as Organizing Chairman.

- September 5 and October 11: In September Rockefeller and three other Americans gathered to discuss the formation, and in October the core group of the American members present at the Pocantico Meeting met again.
- November 25: The Japanese representative had to cancel his participation; instead a meeting of a few Americans and Europeans took place, postponing important decisions until later.⁵

At these meetings, ideas and guidelines on the organization were presented, discussed and refined. As a shared understanding and agreement developed, basic decisions were made as well. This led to the formulation of a formal proposal for the Commission in March 1973, the formation of the Commission a few months later, and the official inauguration in October of the same year, in Tokyo. Throughout this process, possible donors for the Commission were consulted and briefed, and they also played a part in establishing the TRICOM through offering advice, expressing reservations, etc.

Name

The Commission for Peace and Prosperity was still used as the organization's designation in a memo from May 1972. However, in June, the organization was now, in a letter, called "the Tripartite Commission." The next month, Joseph Nolan listed different alternative names in a letter to Rockefeller. Among them were "International Commission for Human Advancement," "World Council on Common Problems and Priorities," (Rockefeller deleted "World Council" and replaced it with "Commission" in handwriting), "Global Alliance on Human Goals," and "Multinational Council on Mutual Concern." Although at the Pocantico meeting, the organizers chose to designate the enterprise The Trilateral Commission.⁶

Purpose and Character

In a document dealing with the formation of the TRICOM, central ideas of the private sector contributing to public policy were sharpened. According to Rockefeller, it was the

“inability of governments to analyze, plan and deal with major range economic and political problems” that had prompted him to take the initiative to form the Commission.⁷

At the May meeting the purpose of the Commission had been described as “to strengthen cooperation among the advanced industrial nations.” More specifically, that meant to:

- 1) Advance thinking on common approaches to major problems.
- 2) Deepen the understanding of the influential men and women involved in the Commission and its proposed sub-Commissions.
- 3) Sell the ideas developed to the public and governments of the various nations.⁸

When it came to seeking justification and legitimation for the commission, Rockefeller stated at the Pocantico meeting that “a successful attempt to induce the governments of the three democratic, industrialized regions concerned to pursue common or parallel policies in the face of powerful disintegrative trends would amply justify the effort entailed in forming such a (‘trilateral’) commission.”⁹

At the same meeting, Max Kohnstamm, the principal organizer in Western Europe, talked about the need for a new “conception” of the international order. He also suggested learning from how Keynes seized the moment after WW II, and how Monnet’s Action Committee had accomplished, in a world of “growing inter-regional dependencies,” to implement the new conception in Europe. MacGeorge Bundy, President of the Ford Foundation, posed the question what if “the underlying community of interest in preventing political conflict” between the trilateral regions did not, itself, provide the necessary conception for the commission? Moreover, Kinhide Mushakoji observed that the commission should “reduce the walls dividing power and economic blocks from one another.”¹⁰

Size, Scope and Membership

In the spring of 1972, it had been stressed as “obvious,” that the commission would need both men and women. Discussing the more precise personal criteria for membership, inspiration

from the RBF's panel was mentioned as relevant. It was composed of persons with a combination of:

- 1) General wisdom
- 2) Expert knowledge in particular fields and
- 3) The standing necessary to enable them to contribute importantly to acceptance of reports in desired quarters

At the same meeting, Al Neal mentioned that the power structure in Western Europe and Japan was much less diffused than in the U.S., therefore, he stated, it was important to include “leaders of the various power centers.”¹¹

At the Pocantico meeting, Rockefeller suggested that individuals from academic communities, labor and religious groups, and businesses in the trilateral regions, were to populate the Commission. Earlier on, the suggestion of defining the criteria of membership as belonging to the “developed non-Communist nations” had been discussed. MacGeorge Bundy thought that this criterion should be replaced by the concept of “large advanced economies,” so as to open up for future USSR inclusion—although he added that he doubted the Soviets would participate in a non-governmental group. This was in line with Brzezinski's thinking in his influential book *Between Two Ages*.¹² In it, he had ventilated the idea that the advanced socialist countries could eventually be drawn to the community of developed nations that he envisioned, and that such a step could open the prospect of even including the USSR. “The Soviet Union,” wrote Brzezinski, “may come to participate in such a larger framework of cooperation because of the inherent attraction of the West for the Eastern Europeans—whom the Soviet Union would have to follow lest it lose them altogether ...” Progress in this direction, Brzezinski noted, “would help to terminate the civil war” that had “dominated international politics among the developed nations for the last hundred and fifty years.”¹³

The organizers also discussed participation in the Commission of people from less developed nations. Brzezinski had already covered this topic in *Between Two Ages*, where he concluded that the Third World might have some sort of institutional expression, but that it was “premature” at the moment. The organizers concluded at the outset that the members should be drawn only from the three trilateral regions, and that others might be invited as observers, so that no one would feel excluded.¹⁴

When it came to the size of the Commission, Rockefeller suggested a number of thirty to forty “leading private citizens.” He preferred a rather small commission because it would be conducive to better discussions. However, the negative aspect of limiting the number of members was the problem of representativeness, i.e. ensuring that different “power centers,” political views, professions, etc. be present in the Commission.¹⁵

Leadership

How should authority and decision-making be distributed in the new commission? At the September meeting the participants discussed Kohnstamm’s suggestion that all three regions should each have its own regional chairman, but “with one designated as the leader of the enterprise” who would be responsible for directing the staff and the general directions of the Commission. A decision on this issue was postponed until later. In view of the difficulty of finding a suitable European Co-Chairman, who could “speak for all of the EEC countries,” Kohnstamm had suggested that the position could rotate “among men from the major countries,” but this proposal was rejected.¹⁶

In the October meeting, the participants decided that Rockefeller should invite Gerard Smith (diplomat and chief US delegate to the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks, SALT, in 1969, and Rockefeller’s in-law) to become U.S. Co-Chairman of the Commission (Canada was not yet

included). Also, Rockefeller should indicate to Smith that this position was possibly the leading one among the Co-Chairmen in the Commission.¹⁷ However, at the November meeting, Rockefeller had abandoned the idea of a leading Co-Chairman. Nevertheless, the center of the new enterprise would still be in the U.S. Rockefeller referred to how both European and Japanese representatives had agreed on that in Pocantico. Instead of a leading Co-Chairman, Rockefeller proposed a Director of the Commission, who should assume the leadership of the staff and day-to-day business. The new director, Rockefeller suggested, should be Brzezinski, both “because of his personal qualities and his great interest in Japan,” and because, after two years, the directorship should be assumed by another region. There was “a great enthusiasm” for this at the meeting, and therefore it was decided, provided both the Europeans and the Japanese agreed.¹⁸

Also, during the fall, the Europeans and the Japanese involved in the preparations designated their future Co-Chairmen of the Commission, respectively Max Kohnstamm and Takeshi Watanabe.¹⁹

Output, Consensus and Impact

The organizers of the TRICOM also discussed the future output of the commission. The dominant opinion was that the TRICOM should not undertake original research, but draw on the work by others. The Commission should not aim at producing books, like some of the Council on Foreign Relations projects had done, but on “agreed reports and recommendations.” Yet again, the RBF was highlighted as an example. Fifteen years earlier its panel had conducted some similar study projects.²⁰

At the Pocantico meeting, the first reports to be issued by the TRICOM were discussed. Brzezinski and Kohnstamm agreed that it was important that the Commission achieved

“visibility quickly and in a manner which would merit the attention of governments and the enthusiasm of influential private citizens.”²¹ The question of impact was a recurrent theme for the organizers. In October, Franklin wrote in a letter that the Commission should not only make “concrete recommendations with respect to policy, but also press for adoption of the recommendations by governments and others.”²²

In November 1972, Henry Owen consulted several influential members of Congress, high-ranking people in the White House and in the American media. Owen asked each of them if the Commission, under preparation “would exert much influence” on the Executive branch, the Congress, and the press in the U.S. Their answers were, according to Owen, “remarkably similar:” It would depend primarily, they told him, on who served in the Commission, and secondly, how impact was sought. With respect to the former, the members of the TRICOM had to have some “eminence” or an “entree to the White House” or be “respected on the Hill,” and not be persons discounted because of a “known and perennial attachment to internationalism and Atlanticism.” With respect to the latter, they needed to be devoted and able to use a fair amount of time to discuss their work with members of Congress, executive branch officials, and members of the press. “If these two conditions were fulfilled,” Owen was assured, “the Commission could be very influential, indeed.”

Owen received suggestions that the Commission should either have regular briefings for leading Congress members or informal dinners with selected members of Congress. In any case, personal meetings between Commission and Congressional members “would be essential,” whereas “mere documents” would not have much effect. Also, Owen was encouraged to include Congressional members in the Commission, because that would enhance impact.²³

The TRICOM

The TRICOM was thus launched with high ambitions. The organization was rather unique. For the first time Asians were included into the unofficial, private engine room of international order making. Also, the TRICOM was combining different aspects of existing private councils, mixing a closed forum for debate and policy shaping of the elite (such as Bilderberg) with public press conferences, developing reports and issuing bulletins (such as known and influential think tanks). As mentioned, David Rockefeller had noticed that the justification of the TRICOM would be “a successful attempt to induce the governments of the three democratic, industrialized regions concerned to pursue common or parallel policies in the face of powerful disintegrative trends, which would amply justify the effort entailed in forming such a (‘trilateral’) commission.”²⁴ The question was, what would justify the TRICOM in case this ambition was not fulfilled in the coming years?

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The ideas and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and are not intended to represent the Rockefeller Archive Center.

ENDNOTES:

- ¹ Meeting on Proposed Trilateral Commission, Pocantico, New York, July 23-24, 1972, Folder "Origines de la Commission, 1972," Box "Origins Trilateral 1973-1974," Archive of The Trilateral Commission, European Headquarters (Paris).
- ² Stephen Gill, *American Hegemony and the Trilateral Commission*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 137, ff. concerning the preparation of the TRICOM.
- ³ Holly Sklar, editor, *Trilateralism: The Trilateral Commission and Elite Planning for World Management*. Boston, Massachusetts: South End Press, 1980.
- ⁴ Franklin to McWilliams, August 18, 1977, Folder 3201, Box 326, The Trilateral Commission (North America) Records, Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC).
- ⁵ Informal Meeting, Geneva, Switzerland, November 25, 1972, Folder 6062, Box 997, The Rockefeller Brothers Fund Archives (RBF), RAC, p. 1.
- ⁶ Memo Franklin to Bowie et al., May 11, 1972, Folder 6062, Box 997, RBF, RAC; Nolan to Rockefeller, July 5, 1972, Folder 1, Box 1, The Trilateral Commission (North America) Records, RAC; Duchene to Franklin, June 27, 1972, Folder "Origines de la Commission, 1972," Box "Origins Trilateral 1973-1974," Archive of The Trilateral Commission, European Headquarters (Paris).
- ⁷ DR and RES marginal notes, The Trilateral Commission, Folder "David Rockefeller Project—Trilateral Commission Pamphlets," Box 487, General Files, David Rockefeller Papers, RAC.
- ⁸ Re: Meeting of May 9, 1972, Memo Franklin to Bowie et al., p. 2, Folder 6062, Box 997, RBF, RAC.
- ⁹ Meeting on Proposed Trilateral Commission, Pocantico, New York, July 23-24, 1972, Folder "Origines de la Commission, 1972," Box "Origins Trilateral 1973-1974," Archive of The Trilateral Commission, European Headquarters (Paris).
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Re: Meeting of May 9, 1972, Memo Franklin to Bowie et al., p. 4, Folder 6062, Box 997, RBF, RAC.
- ¹² Brzezinski, *Between Two Ages*, New York: Viking Press, 1970.
- ¹³ Meeting on Proposed Trilateral Commission, Pocantico, New York, July 23-24, 1972, Folder "Origines de la Commission, 1972," Box "Origins Trilateral 1973-1974," Archive of The Trilateral Commission, European Headquarters (Paris); Brzezinski, *Between Two Ages*, New York: Viking Press, 1970, pp. 141 and 295.
- ¹⁴ Meeting on Proposed Trilateral Commission, Pocantico, New York, July 23-24, 1972, Folder "Origines de la Commission, 1972," Box "Origins Trilateral 1973-1974," Archive of The Trilateral Commission, European Headquarters (Paris); Brzezinski, *Between Two Ages*, New York: Viking Press, 1970, p. 295ff.
- ¹⁵ Re: Meeting of May 9, 1972, Memo Franklin to Bowie et al., p. 4, Folder 6062, Box 997, RBF, RAC.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Meeting of October 11, 1972, Folder 6062, Box 997, RBF, RAC.
- ¹⁸ Informal Meeting, Geneva, Switzerland, November 25, 1972, Folder 6062, Box 997, RBF, RAC.
- ¹⁹ Progress of Organization, Folder 4096, Box 308m, The Trilateral Commission (North America) Records, RAC.
- ²⁰ Re: Meeting of May 9, 1972, Memo Franklin to Bowie et al., p. 5, Folder 6062, Box 997, RBF, RAC.
- ²¹ Meeting on Proposed Trilateral Commission, Pocantico, New York, July 23-24, 1972, Folder "Origines de la Commission, 1972," Box "Origins Trilateral 1973-1974," Archive of The Trilateral Commission, European Headquarters (Paris).
- ²² Franklin to Cooper, October 9, 1972, Folder 3237, Box 330, The Trilateral Commission (North America) Records, RAC.
- ²³ Trilateral Commission, Memo Owen, November 30, 1972, Gerard Smith Chronological File 05.11.72-02.28.73, Box 1, Trilateral Commission File, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Jimmy Carter Library.
- ²⁴ Re: Meeting of May 9, 1972, Memo Franklin to Bowie et al., p. 5, Folder 6062, Box 997, RBF, RAC.