



What a Koch Takeover of Cato Would Mean for the Foreign Policy Debate

By Justin Logan | March 6, 2012

Many bytes have already been spilled over the [effort by Charles and David Koch to take over the Cato Institute](#), but I am writing this for the information of those who have particular interest, favorable or otherwise, in Cato's output on foreign policy issues. I am also writing to register my own views on the issue. For those who are not familiar with the details, I will give a brief recap. March 1, Charles and David Koch sued to enforce their interpretation of Cato's shareholder agreement. That interpretation would give them control of the Institute. They have made two main arguments supporting their move: first, that the law is the law and they are merely trying to enforce their rights under the law. Not being a lawyer, I don't have much to contribute to the discussion of what, to my untrained eye, looks like [an incoherent set of legal documents](#). But they have gone beyond that claim. [They also argue](#) that they are acting because they want to ensure that Cato stays true to its fundamental principles of individual liberty, free markets, and peace into the future, and that it not be subject to the personal preferences of individual officers or directors.

This is telling, because it implies that Charles and David Koch see some danger that Cato, under the continued leadership of Ed Crane, will stray from its fundamental principles. They have made clear their desire to depose Crane. That, combined with what we know about [the individuals they have tried to force onto Cato's board](#), leads to the inference that they believe a dilution of the libertarian character of Cato and the insertion of a number of Republican political operatives is a better way to fulfill Cato's mission. Since they are arguing publicly that there is a danger posed to Cato's mission under Crane, they ought to make clear what, exactly, is the threat posed by these "personal preferences."

Speaking from my understanding of [Cato's mission](#) under the status quo, the effort is "to increase the understanding of public policies based on the principles of limited government, free markets, individual liberty, and peace." The same document makes clear that "Cato is not associated with any political organization or party — Republican, Democrat, Libertarian, or other." There is reason to believe that this would change under a new leadership. As my colleague Jerry Taylor noted, the idea seems to be to use their board majority to remove Ed Crane from Cato and transform our Institute into an intellectual ammo-shop for American for Prosperity and other allied (presumably, Koch-controlled) organizations. That statement of intent is certainly consistent with what we've been hearing from both [Koch-installed board members] Kevin Gentry and Nancy Pfofenauer. They've frequently complained during their short time on our board that Cato wasn't doing enough to defeat President Obama in November and that we weren't working closely enough with grass roots activists like those at AFP.

There is an irony here. The Koch brothers' decision to initiate a move to gut Cato and transform it into a shop that does spec work for activist groups like AFP has created a massive distraction inside the Institute and threatens to do the same in the coalition of people who should be sympathetic to their goal of electing a Republican president. Many people who support Cato and Crane and also wish to be rid of President Obama are outraged by the Kochs' efforts to transform Cato. Starting this war now needlessly creates dissension and ill-will inside this group. Cato under Crane has always valued independent, principled analysis and rejected politics and partisanship. As a 9-year Cato employee, I feel confident saying that under Crane Cato always

will reject such a role. I do not believe, and I know of no colleagues who believe, that the same could be said of a Koch-controlled Cato Institute.

So what does all of this mean for foreign policy? The implications seem clear. Given the Koch brothers' stated desire to turn Cato into a research arm of Americans for Prosperity, Cato's foreign policy would in the best case be abolished and in the worst case would be influenced by people like [John Hinderaker](#), who was nominated to Cato's board despite calling himself a "neocon" and describing George W. Bush as "a man of extraordinary vision and brilliance approaching to genius." Other neoconservative Republican partisans like Charles Krauthammer have served as keynote speakers at recent Koch confabs. To the extent Cato had foreign policy output at all, it would be used to ratify the foreign-policy decisions made by the Republican political elite. The quality of those decisions in recent decades has been terrible, and I, for one, could not act in such a role.

The Cato Institute is the only think tank in Washington whose foreign policy and defense studies are dedicated to the promotion of a restrained foreign policy for the United States. We fight an uphill battle every day. [Liberal imperialists and neoconservatives](#) staff the foreign policy arms of every other think tank in town.

Under a new regime, output like the December 2001 article [warning against expanding the war on terror to Iraq](#) would be gone. Gone would be the tragically [prescient warnings](#) about expanding the mission in Afghanistan to include counterinsurgency and nation building. Gone would be the [terrific, aisle-crossing work](#) to cut America's profligate military spending.

Sadly, the future of Cato is at stake at a time when its influence has never been greater. If you value the independence and integrity of Cato, and you wish to keep a realist voice in the Washington think tank community, there is a Facebook page set up to [save the Cato Institute](#). It is my sincere hope that Charles and David Koch will see that there is still merit in Cato's mission; that Crane has done an excellent job despite long odds; and that there is value in the "long game" as well in short-term political processes. Cato, in its present form, should be at the center of that long game. A 2002 Washington Post article describes how, [when Cato moved to Washington in 1981](#).

[t]he move met with ferocious opposition from some key Cato supporters and staff. "Washington is an evil city," recalls Milton Friedman, 90[.] "People who move to Washington tend to get corrupted by Washington. Cato will be ruined if it moves to Washington."

It wasn't, Friedman later cheerfully acknowledged. Instead, Cato flourished.

It continues to flourish. Like a well-tended vineyard, the seeds planted with the assistance of the Koch brothers decades ago bear better fruit each year. I hope that Charles and David Koch come to see these truths, and reconsider their efforts to uproot the Institute and replant.

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