



The Free-Market Sainthood of the Koch Brothers

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BILL BERKOWITZ FOR BUZZFLASH AT TRUTHOUT

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Nothing explains what's the matter with Kansas better than a Kansas editor's essay elevating the Koch Brothers to free market Sainthood. A recent op-ed piece in the Lawrence Journal World of Lawrence, Kansas, was headlined "Koch Industries and Koch brothers are assets to state." While the bullying anti-democratic actions of the Koch brothers are being called into question all across the country, why are they are still being held in such high esteem by at least one high-profile newspaper editor in perhaps the most liberal city in their home state?

In the 1890s, William Allen White, the revered Kansas newspaper editor whose name is attached to the University of Kansas' School of Journalism, blasted the growing Populist movement in an essay titled "What's the Matter with Kansas?" Some forty years later, White was considerably more charitable in his assessment of that movement, writing that the Populists had tried "to use government as an agency of human welfare[,] ... to establish economic as well as political equality, to help the underdog, to cut down some of the privileges that wealth carried by reason of its size and inherent power."

Now, more than one hundred years after Allen's initial blistering critique of the Populists, the Lawrence Journal-World's Dolph Simons is railing against critics of the wealthy and powerful Koch brothers. And, It is doubtful he'll be changing his tune anytime soon.

Kansas homeboys, David H. Koch and Charles G. Koch, aka, the Koch Brothers, epitomize the disdain of the super rich for democratic institutions, the environment, and the economic straits of their fellow Kansans.

Eighty-two year-old Dolph C. Simons, Jr., the editor of the paper and chairman of the World Company, began his piece with a rhetorical question: "What is it, or why is it, that the name Koch, particularly here in Lawrence and Kansas, seems to trigger such angry, passionate and negative responses from a certain segment of the community, particularly among some at Kansas University?"

Simons blamed the "angry, passionate and negative responses" on the "liberal, anti-conservative forces in the country" and "liberal-leaning faculty members and administrators at KU."

Recognizing that "the Kochs are conservatives, some would say 'ultra conservatives,'" Simons pointed out that the brothers "support organizations such as the Cato Institute, Citizens for a Sound Economy, Americans for Prosperity and Freedom Works." He argued that "Their critics have been quick to try to fault them for supposedly funneling money to the tea party movement. Some say the brothers have given more than \$100 million to these conservative organizations."

Then Simons flips into reverential mode: "The sad, phony or hard-to-understand part of this situation is that the two Koch brothers attribute the success of their family-owned business to the guiding principles espoused by their market-based management philosophy." Not to mention the fact that they inherited a chunk of their wealth from their father Fred Koch and later, as Business Week reported, they took control of "the bulk of the company after elbowing out their other brothers," William and Frederick ... in 1983.

"These principles are: integrity, confidence, value creation, principled entrepreneurship, customer focus, knowledge, change, humility, respect and fulfillment. They are pretty good principles to live by and to use when owning and operating a business - also pretty good principles for teachers and school administrators to keep in mind."

Simons makes no apologies for the Koch brothers' politics; after all, they are just trying to even the playing field, fighting back against "organized labor, ultra-liberal environmentalists, teachers unions, the American Medical Association, the Chamber of Commerce, Obama forces, George Soros and others [that] are spending millions upon millions supporting their own causes," in opposition to the Kochs.

Newspapering in Lawrence, Kansas

Simons' Lawrence Journal-World, published in what is probably the most progressive city in the state, has often been the editorial voice of conservatism and reaction.

In the 1960s and 70s, there were three major media outlets in Lawrence: the Lawrence Journal-World, the University Daily Kansan, and KLWN radio.

The University Daily Kansan, although editorially and financially independent, struggled to find its voice during those turbulent times.

KLWN Radio, founded by Arden Booth, was always the staid voice expressive of the town part of the town and gown divide. Back in the day, when hippies/activists were a rare breed in town, Booth invited me to his studio for an interview, and before the questioning began, spent ten minutes describing what I was wearing; being particularly drawn to my sandals.

A former Journal-World reporter told me in an email that while "the newspaper's editorial page has always been moderate-to-conservative Republican... [he] wouldn't say that about the newsroom." He pointed out that during his time at the paper he was "never told what to write -- and I did a lot of stories that most would

characterize as left-of-center." He added, while he "scan[s] the editorial page, [he doesn't] read it ... [and he didn't] know many reporters who do."

A longtime Lawrence resident and media observer told me that while "The ideological bent of the newspaper isn't easy to describe, a number of years ago, a study showed that the newspaper was more conservative than the public reading it, and given that two of three Douglas County voters in the past two elections went for Kerry and Obama," that study appears about right.

Simons' free-market champions run into trouble

Simons concluded his Lawrence Journal-World piece claiming that the Koch brothers "have championed limited government, economic freedom and personal liberty and they have challenged excessive government spending. Their financial giving efforts - political and charitable, both personal and through their company and foundations - all have been lawful.

"This being the case, it would seem KU officials, as well as other state officials, should be trying to work with Koch Industries, Charles and David Koch and their foundations on ways to benefit the university and the state. They should be trying to embrace the Kochs rather than acting as if they were pariahs.

"The Kochs are a tremendous asset for the state!"

Interestingly, Simons' piece, dated March 31, came on the heels of what AlterNet's Adele Stan described as one of the Koch Brothers' worst weeks ever. There was: "a new documentary about their political activity and corporate negligence [that] was making a splash -- on the same day a story broke announcing an FBI investigation of two Wisconsin groups tied to Americans for Prosperity, the political ground organization they founded and fund.

"Things got even worse the next day, Friday, March 30, when the billionaire brothers learned that a federal court handed down a decision that may ultimately require certain non-profit groups, such as Americans for Prosperity, to reveal their full donor list, and the New Yorker's Jane Mayer, who wrote a devastating profile of the brothers last year, reported on the Kochs' involvement in a barrage of anti-Obama ads sponsored by a tax-exempt non-profit called the American Energy Alliance, which may also now be required to reveal its donor list.

"On the very same day," Stan reported, "another federal court struck down portions of Wisconsin's controversial law that stripped collective bargaining rights from most of the state's public employees -- a law championed by Americans for Prosperity, and rammed through the state legislature a year ago by the AFP-supported Gov. Scott Walker."

To the credit of LJW readers, Simons' column elicited a flood of responses that provided sources for a little deeper digging. (There were also several pro-Koch responses as well.) The first commenter linked to six separate stories detailing flaws in the Koch's principled entrepreneurialism.

Several astute readers focused on the Koch's relationship with the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), a semi-secretive, Koch-funded organization

that brings together right-wing legislators with corporate interests and pressure groups to craft model legislation aimed at cutting tax rates for corporations and wealthy individuals, privatization, de-regulation, and weakening, if not eliminating unions. ALEC recently received a heap of negative publicity for its sponsoring of "stand Your Ground" laws, which resulted in the killing of Trayvon Martin in Florida in late February.

Simons not only defended the Kochs, but also got in potshots at the University of Kansas. The longtime observers pointed out that "The potshots at the university are part of a longstanding tradition. He loves some university folks and hates others. He's also been taking potshots at the Medical School recently. He's had a love-hate relationship with KU for a long time."

The former LJW reporter admitted that he had "no idea why Simons felt compelled to run the Koch Brothers piece, [as] It seemed a bit unnecessary/pointless to me. I mean, do we really think the Kochs need some love?" His "animus toward KU is a bit of a mystery."

A responder to the article with the handle "dowser" laid it out pretty succinctly: "Yes the Koch brothers are an asset to Kansas, along with the [Topeka's Fred] Phelps clan, our former State board of Education [which promoted creationism], the current governor ... and some other wingnuts of the political right."

If Simons were not so ideologically driven, he might have done his readers a service by answering this question: "With so many fact-based investigative pieces written about the excessive and egregious conduct of the Koch brothers, why do they seem so determined to subvert democracy?"