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More on the Ames/Koch/TSA Mess, or the Reductio Ad Funderam Still Fails

Brian Doherty | November 29, 2010

A few more thoughts, on top of Radley Balko's very thorough parsing of the lameness of Katrina vanden Heuvel's apology for the Ames/Levine nonsense in *The Nation* about how anti-TSA ideas and feelings are astroturf planted by evil oil billionaires just out to make a quick buck.

*The Big Lie does work--in their comeback to Glenn Greenwald, Ames and Levine double down on one of their assertions for which they had no evidence, that "McLain's ties to the Koch brothers are well-documented in our piece—and Greenwald, for reasons unclear, studiously avoids rebutting any of our evidence." (Even strong critics of the article continued to believe that part of the story.)

Greenwald undoubtedly didn't have the time or really care enough to look into the matter--and why should he, since Ames and Levine didn't either--but McLain (never contacted by Ames or Levine, despite their hypocritical whining that Greenwald never contacted *them*) explains herself, and her utter lack of connection to the Kochs (beyond being personal friends with someone who once worked for organizations the Kochs gave money to). And here is Pete Eyre's, the friend in question, take. (And here serious journalists Ames and Levine make fun of Eyre's tattoos.)

*Ames and Levine insist, and even many who attacked the article in general seemed to believe, that a video proves McClain's account is a lie. Watch it yourself, if you really care, but to this viewer this soundless faraway video neither confirms nor debunks McClain's story. And consult McClain herself again for the gap between her own story and the exaggerated versions of what was supposedly her story.

*To his credit, *Reason* Contributing Editor and former staffer David Weigel at *Slate* is one of the only mainstream journalists who knew better than to believe Ames and Levine's made-up claims about McClain and Eyre, and explains why they are bogus. However, in explaining how pretty much every detail of their story is wrong or irrelevant, Weigel for some reason hat tips them for doing "valuable work by naming and tracing the libertarian organizations that had been trying unsuccessfully to stoke a rebellion against the TSA."

It seems to me only valuable if it actually explains something about why the TSA/scanner story became such a sensation, and I don't see how it does. Here's why I think the story caught fire: Dozens if not hundreds of people in a position to make decisions about what was newsworthy and interesting thought that a story involving travel and privacy and dignity and the war on terror was newsworthy and interesting. And I think they were dead right: Nearly everyone I knew, even people who would never in a gajillion years read a libertarian publication, were chattering about

TSA and scanners in person and on social networking sites over the weekend.

The conspiratorial string-pulling version of how ideas spread in this culture is simply not true. "Interests" beyond the U.S. government whose every action and utterance are by definition news, cannot make news gatekeepers or consumers interested in anything by talking about it or hyping it with any reliability. I'm pretty sure both Weigel and Ames and Levine know this. The story spread because people cared about it, not because the Kochs wanted to make it happen. And given that the only purpose of the Ames/Levine story was to make all right-thinking people *reject* the notion that civil liberties and dignity have any meaning when it comes to the TSA by blaming the idea on evil oil billionaires who they assume their readers hate, I have a hard time seeing why it was "valuable" even if largely not true.

*While I can forgive a literal or figurative basement dweller for having a basic conspiratorial worldview, anyone who moves in the real world of media or power should be aware that the spread of ideas and action in the world is more complicated than "evil stringpullers make a plan and execute it, using the efforts of dozens or hundreds of *seemingly* free-acting folk." It's a naiveté all the more insidiously misleading because it masquerades as dark worldly wisdom--surely you don't think anyone in public discourse is making any decisions that aren't really made by the higher-ups?

Yes, my own experience in, among, and near both media and government lead me to believe that that's true all the time; that a small set of conspiratorial higher-ups are not in fact string-pulling everything said and done in the world according to pre-set plans. By hyping the "valuable"ness of Ames and Levine's shoddy work, and that he "like[s] that Ames is writing these articles" (again, by his own admission, articles full of errors, and dedicated to a purpose that anyone who gives a fuck about civil liberties would have to admit is positively evil) Weigel makes a casual insider-y sounding assertion that doesn't hold up--"Libertarians don't like admitting how much of what they do is made possible not by the ghost of Adam Smith, but by self-interested grants."

First of all, I can't think of any instance in which any libertarian non-profit hides or elides or runs from the fact that they, are, well, non-profits, run largely by grant money. *Reason* for one example publicly thanks all its \$1,000 and more donors in a page in the magazine yearly, and if Weigel has any evidence that libertarian groups "don't like admitting" that they get grants, or that a significant number of such grants for an ideology as outre as libertarianism are "self-interested," that's a point worth a deeper investigation.

Any actual knowledge of the history of the Kochs' libertarian giving and involvement, from Robert LeFevre through the Institute for Humane Studies through the Libertarian Party and Cato Institute would reveal that there is a deep and sincere actual interest in libertarian ideas at play in their ideological giving, not mere sinister self-serving. (See my book *Radicals for Capitalism*, in which both Koch brothers speak about their ideological giving.) It is true that the Kochs themselves don't seek out press about their ideological giving--and gosh, looking at the way their names have been used since the *New Yorker* "expose" on them, most especially in this very Ames/Levine story, we surely can't imagine any non-sinister explanation for *that*. (Any actual link between such ideological giving and actual pecuniary benefit for the donors when it comes to libertarianism seem tenuous indeed to me, especially when you realize that "giving money to spread an idea" is a very, very long way from "real world policy change.")

The meta question that's important is what difference it makes that pushers of outre ideas get

money to keep their work going, and what the specific sources of that money are. Since Weigel speaks to his *Slate* audience on these matters as one with supposed insider savvy about the way this world works, I ask Weigel: When and how did he feel the desires and interests of the Koch brothers ever affected what he wrote about and how he wrote about it at *Reason*? Accepting the general principle that there is something journalistically significant about harping on funding links and connections implies that there is something to the top-down conspiratorial view of how ideas spread based on funder intentions. Lacking such insider details from Weigel, it's hard to imagine why it is a "good thing" that Ames and Levine wrote something whose only purpose was to take an issue that the authors themselves hypocritically claim to believe is important and make their audience run screaming from it by implying that bad oil billionaires who they all hate are making the whole thing up to line their own pockets.

*Ames and Levine are the Eddie Haskell of shitty journalism--at the *Nation* they are all "Gee Mr. and Mrs. Nation, we don't know why our good friend Glenn Greenwald so totally misunderstood the very narrow and sensible things we were trying to say in our stern defense of civil liberties"; at their own site, they mock him and implicitly discount anything he has to say on the subject by calling him "Glenn Greenwald of the Cato Institute" since he once wrote an article for one of their publications.

*While I think there is very little to accusations of "astroturf"'s significance in the larger public conversation--I think ideas like the TSA being violative of our integrity succeeded because lots of different people making decisions about what was newsworthy on a big travel weekend thought that a story about travel and dignity would be interesting and resonate, and they were absolutely right to think so--one of the most successful ideas of the season that came from nowhere to everywhere is the very "fear the Koch" one that hit the big time with Jane Mayer's *New Yorker* article and is here piled on to by Ames (who is probably pretty pissed that his own earlier takes on the matter didn't ignite). It jumped from obscurity to something that every liberal, prog, and lefty knows, making the Koch name as popular as the Bilderbergers among the conspiracy minded. Why did that idea succeed? Because of a top-down anti-Koch conspiracy, spreading from the Putin administration to Conde Nast to every company whose ads appear alongside the article? No, it succeeded for pretty much the same reason the TSA one did, and the Tea Party, and every other idea that takes public fire: because it fit the needs and suppositions and prejudices and worldviews of a large enough audience that they felt the yen to talk about it and repeat it and sometimes to act on it. That is actually how the real world of ideas works, despite the conspiracy-mongering that I'm pretty sure even Ames and Levine are too smart and experienced to believe.

*George Donnelly of "We Won't Fly" explains his own lack of connection to the Kochs. Despite Weigel's assertion, it was not absent further evidence or research a "great discovery" of Ames and Levine to note that a constant civil libertarian agitator happened to get on the TSA bandwagon a little ahead of *The Nation*'s curve.