

# Koch brothers and their money make America more dangerous: Opinion

By Linda Stamato

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They aren't elected; they don't even run for office. But their influence rivals any significant group of public officials: That's the billionaire Koch brothers, David and Charles.

Koch Industries, the second-largest privately held company in the United States, has oil, timber, chemical and other energy interests. The empire is expanding, moreover, into vital industries including food, water and personal technology.

The Koch family's "other activities" focus on remaking America into a land of unfettered, unregulated capitalism. Not coincidentally, their well-funded political pursuits align with their own economic interests.

They do their best to keep their cover, creating one organization after another to advance their causes. They provide huge cash infusions to organizations and individuals who measure up to their demands for Koch-style orthodoxy.

The brothers have a supply of money that is as unlimited for this purpose as their ideology is rigid. Their playbook is followed by their ultra-rich colleagues and by tea partiers, among others, including the folks they've secured in Congress.

The extent of the Koch reach is at least partially revealed in tax filings. Its clearinghouse for money and message strategy, Freedom Partners, functions as a trade or business association, a 501(c)(6), in order to keep secret the donors who, along with the Koch brothers themselves, fund their organizations of choice. Donors, called members, can make contributions that in many cases are tax deductible as "business expenses." In 2012, some 200 or so donors managed to cough up \$250 million for the effort.

We may not get to know who gave the money, but we do know — thanks to Politico — **who got the money.**

Members are drawn from the Koch brothers' semiannual conferences, a decade-old tradition that includes conservative activists, donors and top politicians — including, last August, House Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-Va.) and House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan (R-Wis.). U.S. Supreme Court Justices Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas attended as well.

Any effort to make sense of the success of right-wing politics can't be understood without paying attention to the sources of financial support: business people who support an unflinching brand of libertarian conservatism. Some lobby against environmental regulation, or seek to undermine public perception of the threat of climate change; others battle taxes, trade unions and President Obama's health care reforms.

The Koch brothers are not only affecting elections and thwarting governance; they are hurting human beings by seeking to deprive them of unemployment benefits, a fair wage, collective bargaining rights, food stamps and insurance coverage — not to mention by compromising the safety and health of their environment.

Efforts on both state and national levels to resist regulation and to lobby against funds for regulatory agency oversight, including monitoring and inspection, may well have led to the actual loss of lives.

## **DISASTERS WAITING TO HAPPEN**

The massive wealth of the Kochs and the political infrastructure they have created are clearly evident in their efforts to limit regulation. The free market philosophy they espouse, moreover, has had significant consequences, including a number of domestic disasters.

- Take West, a small town in Texas, for example. With the explosion of a fertilizer plant, West experienced the fall-out from the "economic freedoms" so beloved by the Koch brothers: 14 dead, 180 injured and the destruction of a major part of the town where the fertilizer plant that held a stockpile of ammonium nitrate exploded, a fertilizer so volatile it's been used by terrorists to build truck bombs — Timothy McVeigh, in Oklahoma City, among them.

Dozens of tons of ammonium nitrate were stored in flammable wooden containers. There was no sprinkler system and no fence around the property to keep out intruders. Effective regulations and mandatory inspections might have made the difference, saving lives.

- A series of train accidents involving crude oil, particularly one in North Dakota, has led political leaders to seek improved railroad safety regulations, with some urging a slowdown in drilling until safety solutions are found. Imagine how well that sits with the oil industry.
- With thousands lacking safe water for days in West Virginia after 5,000 gallons of an industrial chemical used in coal processing seeped into the water system, people are beginning to wonder whether they are sufficiently protected by state and federal regulations. Federal officials banned drinking tap water, cooking with it and bathing in it. Schools were closed, restaurants locked their doors and hotels refused reservations.

The site, newly acquired by Freedom Industries, was last inspected in 1991. The state requires inspection only for processing plants, not for storage plants. Why so lax? Evidently, the coal and chemical industries that drive much of West Virginia's economy are the powerful forces in that state's politics and they resist regulation.

## **PLENTY OF OPPOSITION**

With so many accidents and the potential for more, the prospect of increased regulation looms on the national horizon. The Toxic Substances Control Act has not been substantially updated since it was passed in 1976. It may be now. Last November, the Congressional Research Service identified 2,560 facilities that could each put more than 10,000 people at risk in the event of an accident. Last year, 1,270 people died in more than 30,000 chemical spills and accidents alone.

While a push to toughen existing regulations and create new ones is anticipated, so is industry push-back. On the scene will be the Koch brothers with a variety of means at the ready. They underwrite a huge network of foundations, think tanks and political front groups, including their own political action committee, Americans for Prosperity, and their brothers-in-arms at the Club for Growth, the Heritage Foundation and the Cato Institute.

Then there are also organizations, such as Freedom Partners, through which they funnel their aid. And, besides running interference for unregulated petroleum, they invest in attacks on public education, social programs, worker salaries, business regulations and the environment.

As with many federal agencies charged with safeguarding the health and safety of the public, the Koch brothers and their followers in Congress have been successful at hamstringing the effectiveness of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration by severely limiting its budget and, therefore, its ability to inspect for and enforce safety regulations.

The OSHA worker safety regulations that applied to the Texas fertilizer plant, for example, are some of those "job-killing regulations" conservatives refer to. Of course, the failure to adequately regulate the plant had a very real and tragic "people-killing" outcome.

## **ANTI-GOVERNMENT MENTALITY**

In another political world, maybe guidelines would be all we'd need, but not in this one, not here, not now, not by a long shot. Not only does capitalism require regulation, but the combination of special interests, money and politicians-for-sale requires no less than an active, regulating government acting assertively in the interests of its citizens.

The Koch brothers and their network stand firmly against that proposition and, with access to a significant trough of money, they work to thwart these protections and fuel anti-government bias. The Koch brothers pledge strict allegiance to the view of their hero, former President Ronald Reagan, that "government is not the solution to our problems; government is the problem."

But Obama is not listening. His executive order on improving safety and security at chemical plants was issued in August. While anticipating resistance to effective rules for implementing the order goes without saying, the reaction to the past year's tragedies and environmental threats may produce a surge in will to get something done. It's smart government taking measured, intelligent steps to protect and secure even while weighing economic needs and political realities in the near and long term.

To ensure clean air, water and a poison-free environment, society needs rules, based on science, that call for uniform standards, enforced by more aggressive state regulation and by the appropriate agencies of the federal government, notably OSHA and the Environmental Protection Agency. No amount of falsehoods or rhetoric from industry-serving, so-called "grassroots" enterprises can hide the basic facts at issue here. Chemicals can pose hazards; we need to know what they are and be prepared to handle them safely.

We can't detach ourselves from industrial and environmental hazards by distancing ourselves, by ideology, by a misplaced faith in unfettered free enterprise, or by lack of interest or information. We need appropriate, effective government regulation to safeguard our present and future. That simple, that safe, that sane.