

## The Secrets of Charles Koch's Political Ascent

**Two new documents reveal the political blueprint the billionaire developed 40 years ago, heavily influenced by the ultraconservative John Birch Society**

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In a recent round of interviews, Charles Koch, the billionaire industrialist and political patron, has been stressing that he only recently became involved in politics. As he put it in an interview with Megyn Kelly on October 15, “I’ve never been that fond of politics and only got dragged into it recently kicking and screaming.” But according to what appear to be two never-before-seen documents—a paper Charles wrote in 1976 and an unpublished history of Charles’ political evolution—Charles began planning his ambitious remaking of American politics 40 years ago, transitioning from libertarian ideologue to conservative power broker. For his new movement, which aimed to empower ultraconservatives like himself and radically change the way the U.S. government worked, he analyzed and then copied what he saw as the strengths of the John Birch Society, the extreme, right-wing anti-communist group to which he, his brother David and their father, Fred Koch, had belonged. Charles Koch might claim that his entry into politics is new, but from its secrecy to its methods of courting donors and recruiting students, the blueprint for the vast and powerful Koch donor network that we see today was drafted four decades ago.

By the 1970s, Charles had broken from an early political influence—the John Birch Society (of which his father had been a founding member)—over his opposition to the Vietnam War. Charles had also been skeptical of the group’s more far-fetched conspiracy theories, which included a belief that many prominent Americans, including President Dwight D. Eisenhower, were communist agents.

In contrast, Charles had been drawn to a radical libertarian thinker with a checkered past named Robert LeFevre, who opened what he called the Freedom School in Colorado Springs, Colorado, offering immersion courses in “the philosophy of freedom and free-enterprise.” The school had numerous ties to the John Birch Society, but its preoccupations were slightly different. LeFevre, who called himself an “autarchist” because he didn’t like the label “anarchist,” was almost as adamantly opposed to the modern American government as he was to communism. Charles Koch was a major funder and trustee of the school by 1966. Brian Doherty, who chronicled the rise of American libertarianism in his book *Radicals for Capitalism*, described the school as “a tiny world of people who thought the New Deal was a horrible mistake.” The school taught a revisionist version of American history in which the robber barons were heroes, the Gilded Age actually was the country’s golden age and the Civil War shouldn’t have been fought. In 1965, the *New York Times* described the school as so implacably opposed to the U.S. government, it

was proposing that the Constitution be scrapped in favor of one that limited the government's authority to impose "compulsory taxation."

Eventually, as his fortune grew, Charles began to move beyond funding schools and other intellectual endeavors to launching a political movement. Charles' aim, according to Doherty, who interviewed Charles for his book, was to tear the government out "at the root."

The early years of Charles and David Koch's political planning are described in *Stealth*, a 300-page unpublished and private history commissioned by their estranged brother, Bill Koch, and written by Clayton A. Coppin, a researcher who taught history at George Mason University. Coppin had unusual insight. He had previously been hired by Koch Industries to write the company's history. The earlier project had given Coppin access to many of the family's private letters and papers, as well as license to interview the Kochs and their intimates as few outsiders could.

Having delved deeply into the family, Coppin saw Charles Koch's strong political views in the context of his upbringing. In *Stealth*, written in 2003, Coppin suggests that Charles harbored a hatred of the government so intense it could only be truly understood as an extension of his childhood conflicts with authority.

From his earliest years, Coppin writes, Charles' goal was to achieve total control. "He did not escape his father's authority until his father died," he notes. After that, Charles went to great lengths to ensure that neither his brothers nor anyone else could challenge his personal control of the family company. Later clashes with unionized workers at the Pine Bend Refinery and with the expanding regulatory state strengthened his resolve. "Only the governments and the courts remained as sources of authority," Coppin writes, and, if enacted, Charles' "libertarian policies would eliminate these."

Had Charles wanted merely to promote free-market economic theories, he could have supported several established organizations, but instead he was attracted to fringe groups that bordered on anarchism. Coppin suggests, "He was driven by some deeper urge to smash the one thing left in the world that could discipline him: the government."

Drawing on a cache of private documents, some of which remain in the possession of Bill Koch, Coppin was able to trace Charles' political evolution as he moved away from the intellectual fringe of his old mentor, LeFevre, in favor of gaining hands-on power. In response to libertarian thinkers who argued that ideas, not practical politics, were the best instruments of change, Charles wrote a revealing 1978 article in the *Libertarian Review*, arguing that outsiders like themselves needed to organize. "Ideas do not spread by themselves; they spread only through people. Which means we need a *movement*," he wrote. His language was militant, demanding that "our movement must destroy the prevalent statist paradigm."

In Coppin's view, it was already clear by this point, at the end of the 1970s, that Charles "was not going to be satisfied with being the Engels or even the Marx of the libertarian revolution. He wanted to be the Lenin."

Around the same time, an obscure conference subsidized by Charles Koch laid out much of the road map for the Kochs' future attempted takeover of American politics. In 1976, with a

contribution of some \$65,000 from Charles Koch, the Center for Libertarian Studies in New York City was launched and soon held a conference featuring several leading lights of the libertarian movement. Among those delivering papers on how the fringe movement could obtain genuine power was Charles Koch. The papers are striking in their radicalism, their disdain for the public and their belief in the necessity of political subterfuge. Speakers proposed that libertarians hide their true antigovernment extremism by banishing the word “anarchism,” because it reminded too many people of “terrorists.” To attract a bigger following, some suggested, they needed to organize synthetic “grassroots” groups and issue meaningless titles to volunteers, without yielding any real control.

Charles Koch’s contribution was a paper that methodically analyzed the strengths and weaknesses of a group he knew intimately, the John Birch Society, as a model for his budding movement’s future enterprise. His assessment was clear-eyed and businesslike. He pointed out that despite the fringe group’s shortcomings, it boasted 90,000 members, 240 paid staffers and a \$7 million annual budget. While these numbers were impressive, he faulted the John Birch Society’s obsession with conspiracies, as well as the unchecked cult of personality that the society’s founder Robert Welch had built up. He noted that Welch’s ownership of the organization’s stock had centralized control in his hands, making him impervious to constructive criticism. (Interestingly, Charles would go on to issue stock in his own nonprofit think tank, the Cato Institute, in much the same way.) But he also found much to admire. In particular, he argued in favor of copying the John Birch Society’s secrecy.

“In order to avoid undesirable criticism, how the organization is controlled and directed should not be widely advertised,” Charles wrote, arguing for stealth in his future plans to influence American politics.

He also wrote that to fund their future political enterprise, the organization’s leaders should, like the John Birch Society, make use of “all modern sales and motivational techniques to raise money and attract donors ... including meeting in a home or other place the prospect enjoys being.” The Kochs’ donor summits would follow this marketing approach, transforming fund-raising into exclusive, invitation-only social events held in luxurious settings.

Charles cautioned his fellow radicals that to win, they would need to cultivate credible leaders and a positive image, unlike the John Birch Society, requiring them to “work with, rather than combat, the people in the media and arts.” The brothers followed this plan too. David became a lavish supporter of the arts in New York and appeared regularly in the society pages. Charles, meanwhile, kept a lower profile but assiduously invited sympathetic members of the media to his donor summits, such as the talk radio host Glenn Beck, the *Washington Post* columnist Charles Krauthammer and the *National Review* columnist Ramesh Ponnuru. Two of the top donors in the Koch network owned their own news outlets. The oil tycoon Philip Anschutz owned the *Washington Examiner* and the *Weekly Standard*, and the mutual fund magnate Foster Friess was the largest shareholder of the *Daily Caller*. The Kochs seriously considered buying the Tribune Company in 2013, too.

As for gaining adherents, Charles suggested, their best bet was to focus on “attracting youth” because “this is the only group that is open to a radically different social philosophy.” He would act on this belief in years to come by funneling millions of dollars into educational

indoctrination, with free-market curricula and even video games promoting his ideology pitched to prospects as young as grade school.

In support of building their own youth movement, another speaker, the libertarian historian Leonard Liggio, cited the success of the Nazi model. In his paper titled “National Socialist Political Strategy: Social Change in a Modern Industrial Society with an Authoritarian Tradition,” Liggio, who was affiliated with the Koch-funded Institute for Humane Studies from 1974 until 1998, described the Nazis’ successful creation of a youth movement as key to their capture of the state. Like the Nazis, he suggested, libertarians should organize university students to create group identity.

George Pearson, a former member of the John Birch Society in Wichita, Kansas, who served as Charles Koch’s political lieutenant during these years, expanded on this strategy in his own eye-opening paper. He suggested that libertarians needed to mobilize youthful cadres by influencing academia in new ways. Traditional gifts to universities, he warned, didn’t guarantee enough ideological control. Instead, he advocated funding private institutes within prestigious universities, where donors could exert influence over hiring decisions and other academic matters while hiding the radicalism of their aims.

As Coppin summarized Pearson’s arguments, “It would be necessary to use ambiguous and misleading names, obscure the true agenda, and conceal the means of control. This is the method that Charles Koch would soon practice in his charitable giving, and later in his political actions.”

Reading the papers from 40 years ago, it’s not hard to recognize the Koch political movement we see today—a vast and complex network of donors, think tanks and academic programs largely cloaked in secrecy and presented as philanthropy, leaving almost no money trail that the public can trace. And it’s these techniques Charles first championed decades ago that helped build his political faction—one so powerful that it turned fringe ideas William F. Buckley once dismissed as “Anarcho-Totalitarianism” into a private political machine that grew to rival the Republican Party itself.