

DAILY MINER

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National Columns: Billionaires are trying to buy privatization

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Billionaires are different from you and me, for obvious reasons, including the fact that they buy much pricier baubles than we do.

A sleek car costing \$100,000? Why, for them, that's just an easy impulse purchase. A few million bucks for a Matisse original? Go ahead - it'll liven up the hallway. How about throwing a fat wad of cash at a university to get an academic chair named for you? Sure, it's all part of the fun of living in BillionaireLand.

Then there is the top crust of the upper-crust - such megalomaniacal mega-billionaires as the Koch brothers. Using money from their industrial conglomerate, their foundation and their personal fortunes, these two far-out, laissez-faire extremists are literally buying public policy. Their purchases of everything from politicians to the tea party help them push the privatization of all things public and the elimination of pesky regulations and taxes that crimp their style.

To advance their plutocratic privatization cause, brother Charles has even gone on a shopping spree for an invaluable bauble that most of us didn't even know was for sale: academic freedom. And it's surprisingly cheap!

For only \$1.5 million, Koch bought a big chunk of the economics department of Florida State University a couple of years ago. His donation gives him control of a new "academic" program at this public institution to indoctrinate students in his self-serving political theories.

The billionaire gets to screen all applicants, veto any he deems insufficiently ideological, and sign off on all new hires. Also, the department head must submit yearly reports to Koch about the faculty's speeches, publications and classes, and he evaluates the faculty based on "objectives" that he sets.

Charles has made similar purchases of academic freedom at two other state universities, Clemson and West Virginia. Also, in a May 20 piece at Alternet.org, investigative researcher Lee Fang reveals that Koch has paid \$419,000 to buy into Brown University's "political theory project," \$3.6 million to establish Troy University's "center for political economy" and \$700,000 for a piece of Utah State's Huntsman School of Business, which now has the "Charles G. Koch Professor of Political Economy."

Imagine the screams of outrage we'd hear from the Kochs if a labor union were doing this.

A recent article in The Onion, the satirical newsweekly, printed a downsize-big-government spoof that Charles and David would love to turn into reality. The parody disclosed that President Obama had come up with a surefire plan to balance the federal budget: Rob Fort Knox! "I've got the blueprints," Obama is quoted as saying, "and I think I found a way out through a drainage pipe."

Unfortunately, with today's political climate dominated by howling winds from the far-right fringe, there's no longer any room in American culture for satire. Sure enough, some laissez-faire extremists at such Koch-funded corporate fronts as Cato Institute and Heritage Foundation are presently howling

for the government to sell all of America's gold stored in Fort Knox. Noting that we have billions worth of bullion in the vaults, a fellow from Heritage made this keen observation: "It's just sort of sitting there."

Uh, yeah, professor. Like Mount Rushmore, the Grand Canyon, the Lincoln Memorial and other national assets - being there is the point.

Yet these ivory tower ideologues are using the current brouhaha over the budget deficit as an opening to push their loopy fantasies of selling off all of America's public properties, facilities, systems and treasures to create a no-government, plutocratic paradise. Just spread our public goods out on tables, like a flea market from hell, and invite the global rich to buy it all.

For example, a fellow from another Koch-funded front, the American Enterprise Institute, observes that the government could raise billions of dollars to retire that pesky deficit simply by selling our interstate highway system. Americans would then have to pay tolls forever to the corporate owners, but hey, he exclaims, remember that tolls "work for the River Styx, why not the Beltway?"

What a perfect metaphor for privatization! In ancient mythology, dead souls must pay a toll to be ferried across the River Styx and enter the depths of hell.

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