



The Cato Institute Switches Out Captains

By David Weigel

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The libertarian Cato Institute, a think tank started in 1974 by the money of Charles Koch, is parting with its president and CEO of just two and a half years. John Allison, the former BB&T banker who took over Cato in a much-watched power struggle between donors and scholars, will retire, the think tank said Monday; Peter Goettler, a former managing director at Barclays Capital, will replace him.

Think-tank job maneuverings are not typically a cause for much media attention or existential dread. The 2012 fight to run Cato was an exception. David and Charles Koch had taken a hands-off approach to Cato in the decade previous. When William Niskanen, one of four shareholders, passed away, the Kochs surprised libertarians by suing for his shares to be handed back to the board. Ed Crane, who'd run Cato since the beginning, blew up at the news.

“I want to save Cato,” he said at the time. “I’ll step down if it ends this thing. It can’t be a wholly owned subsidiary of Koch Industries. Who the hell is going to take a think tank seriously that’s controlled by billionaire oil guys? It’s just nuts!”

Crane wasn't the only libertarian at Cato who threatened to quit if the Kochs replaced the president with someone they viewed as a hack. The unexpected media furor only ended after a deal that ended the contentious shareholder system, calmed the waters, and installed the affable Allison. It didn't end the outflow of libertarian scholars at Cato, as some left to found an eponymous Niskanen center, others for existing think tanks. But it brought Cato to normalcy during a couple of political years when the Kochs got more involved than ever before in electoral politics. Goettler, who doesn't have a long paper trail, just joined the Cato board six months ago; he has been on the board of the Atlas Network, a less politically riven think tank that promotes libertarian movements around the world.

“Journalists now talk about a ‘libertarian moment’ in American politics, reflecting both the failure of excessive government and the effective work of Cato and other libertarian organizations,” Goettler said in a statement. “In one policy area after another, Cato’s scholarship

has highlighted the ill effects of state intervention on both freedom and economic growth. In the process, Cato's work has helped to limit government and protect our liberty.”