

August 23, 2010

## The Koch money

Jane Mayer, in [a long New Yorker piece](#), traces the philosophy and influence of Charles and David Koch, who quietly run a major oil company and conglomerate that gives them money to burn.

The Kochs have long operated behind the scenes, though it was no secret that they underwrite much of the libertarian movement, from *Reason* to the Cato Institute to the Insitute for Justice.

One dramatic claim:

Charles Lewis, the founder of the Center for Public Integrity, a nonpartisan watchdog group, said, "The Kochs are on a whole different level. There's no one else who has spent this much money. The sheer dimension of it is what sets them apart. They have a pattern of lawbreaking, political manipulation and obfuscation. I've been in Washington since Watergate, and I've never seen anything like it. They are the Standard Oil of our times."

The story is full of interesting detail about the low-profile Kochs, including the repeated claim that Charles is intensely personally involved in running the ideological outfits, and sniping at him from unnamed Cato staffers. And the story also shows the overlap between their corporate agenda — the EPA is a Koch Industries irritant — and their giving.

The rough thesis is that "by giving money to 'educate,' fund and organize Tea Party protesters, they have helped turn their private agenda into a mass movement."

This is all right, and the piece is well worth a read. A couple of caveats: First, I'm not sure it makes sense (nor does Mayer try) to attribute their vast giving solely to practical business motive. Underwriting the early blogging of Dave Weigel, for instance, was probably not the single most efficient way to neuter the EPA.

Second, what's interesting about the Kochs is both the scale and continuity of their contribution. The headline number is \$100 million — but that represents the sum they've contributed over a decade, much of it to libertarian outfits that remain well on the fringe. The obvious counter-factual is whether the current conservative grass-roots revival would have been born, if in marginally different form, without the Kochs, and I see no evidence that it wouldn't.