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The Mystery of the Kochs

Posted Monday, August 23, 2010 10:04 AM | By [David Weigel](#)

As a former reporter for Reason magazine, I've spent years poking around for information about the Koch family -- especially since the Kochs' big grassroots project Americans for Prosperity became a driving force behind the tea parties. This information is tough to get. The Kochs protect their image and it's a fool's errand to try for interviews with Charles, who's on the board of the Cato Institute, and David, who tops AFP. But in the last few months, I heard that at least four magazines were reporting out Koch profiles. The [New Yorker's profile](#), by Jane Mayer, dropped this weekend. Here's how she dealt with the stonewall:

The Kochs and their political operatives declined requests for interviews. Instead, a prominent New York public-relations executive who is close with the Kochs put forward two friends: George Pataki, the former governor of New York, and Mortimer Zuckerman, the publisher and real-estate magnate. Pataki, a Republican who received campaign donations from David Koch, called him "a patriot who cares deeply about his country." Zuckerman praised David's "gentle decency" and the "range of his public interests."

Go ahead and read the whole article. It's useful and usable history. But there's no "scoop" here. The Kochs prevent that. As Mayer says:

The Kochs have long depended on the public's not knowing all the details about them. They have been content to operate what David Koch has called "the largest company that you've never heard of." But with the growing prominence of the Tea Party, and with increased awareness of the Kochs' ties to the movement, the brothers may find it harder to deflect scrutiny.

Not so far! I've wondered for two years whether liberals could succeed in turning the Kochs, who run easily-demonized companies, into controversial figures the way that George Soros is a controversial figure. That's not up to the media; that's up to the Kochs. In 2004, Soros poured money into Democratic party groups and started to draw attention from conservatives. Confusingly, Soros added to this by writing a flimsy book and conducting a national speaking tour, apparently under the impression that Americans wanted to hear a thickly-accented billionaire tell them how to vote. The Kochs choose to avoid that; the only indulgence they make to publicity are occasional speeches by David at AFP conferences. So I don't know how liberals bring the ire on against them.

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