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David Koch: His name, his legacy

By Roy Wenzl

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On a wall of David Koch's office at 667 Madison Avenue hangs a photo he likes to show people, a framed image of him at the White House.

In the photo, Koch's tall frame towers over Barbara and George H.W. Bush.

She's staring at him in bewilderment. President Bush looks bemused.

"I got to the front of the line," Koch says. "And I said, 'Mr. President, you may remember that I ran against you for vice president of the United States.'"

"Look at their shocked looks," Koch says.

He relishes this: A Koch brother, at the White House, kidding around.

But now, no one thinks the Koch brothers kid around.

Since 1980, when Koch appeared as the vice presidential candidate on the Libertarian ticket, David Koch and his brother Charles have made enemies and redefined American politics.

Since January, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid has repeatedly defined the Koch Brothers with dark names: Oil barons. Oligarchs. Kochtopus. Un-American.

"Most of the portrayals, by the way, are just 'the Koch brothers,' that's the entirety of it," David has said. "As though you are some sort of two-headed thing."

Overlooked, David Koch says, is how he's given more than \$1.2 billion to charity. That number dwarfs his political spending, he says.

He helps cancer victims. Mothers needing day care. He's enriched some of the most cherished cultural arts centers in America.

He wants to be remembered as a good man.

‘Politics ... a brutal battle’

Charles and David are each worth about \$40 billion. Koch Industries, which David helps Charles run, is a Wichita-based company. It makes everything from jet fuel to Brawny paper towels, and earns more than \$115 billion annually. They own it privately and don't have to make the company's finances public.

They are not conservative Republicans; they are Libertarians, believing in as little government as possible. David supports gay marriage, believes in evolution and has no stated position on gun control.

Critics, including President Obama, have accused the Kochs of engineering a corporate takeover of democracy, of spending millions on negative campaign ads without fully disclosing their actions.

The Kochs tried and failed to help defeat Obama in 2012. The organization they helped create, Americans for Prosperity, is spending more than \$125 million to influence the mid-term elections in November, Politico reported, citing an internal AFP memo.

The Kochs never say how much they've spent on politics.

“The world of politics, it's a brutal battle,” David Koch said. “You're essentially at war, almost. People really want to say negative things about you, apparently.

“Negative publicity is far more effective than positive publicity.

“People who are expert in the field tell me that.”

His legacy

In New York, where Koch has lived for 47 years, workers are ripping up prime Manhattan real estate, installing what he hopes will be his real legacy.

Along the banks of the East River: the \$100 million, 15-story David H. Koch Center, a new ambulatory care center being built alongside New York Presbyterian Hospital.

Along Fifth Avenue: \$65 million worth of fountains, stonework and shade trees of the David H. Koch Plaza stretching for five blocks outside the Metropolitan Museum of Art. That is a fraction of his giving, he said.

There's the \$66.7 million for cancer research at Memorial Sloan-Kettering. Another \$185 million to MIT near Boston, including the David H. Koch Institute for Integrative Cancer Research.

Koch said he sits on 22 boards of museums or hospitals or other groups.

Cultural officials say he contributed ideas that benefit more than the wealthy. At the American Museum of Natural History, he spent \$20 million to install the David H. Koch Dinosaur Wing, visited by millions of adults and hundreds of thousands of children every year. Tickets to the New York City Ballet at the Lincoln Center's David H. Koch Theater start at \$29. He gave \$100 million to renovate the theater.

He's an evolution science nerd who talks about what a "fantastic scientist" Charles Darwin was. In his office are forensic re-creations of hominid skulls with big brow ridges and low foreheads from 2 million years ago. Koch gave \$15 million to the David H. Koch Hall of Human Origins at the Smithsonian in Washington, and funded Donald Johanson, the anthropologist who discovered the missing link "Lucy" skeleton in Ethiopia in 1974. The anthropologists, Koch said, stopped a dig in Africa years ago to give him time to fly to Tanzania. "They left the bones in the ground until I got there, and then let me pull the bones out of the ground."

Tyler Jacks, a cancer scientist who runs the David H. Koch Center at MIT, said Koch struck up a conversation one day with a researcher at the center and heard that she and other female researchers were having problems finding day care. "He said this is a problem we need to fix," Jacks recalled. Koch donated \$20 million to build the David H. Koch Childcare center with room for 125 children.

Museum officials say he does more than write checks.

Jed Bernstein, the new president of the Lincoln Center in New York, said he's quickly realized Koch could help him substantially beyond the \$100 million Koch donated to renovate the theater.

"He's such a smart, wise businessman that in running a \$138 million operation, I'm comfortable turning to him for advice," Bernstein said. Koch, at his request, counseled him about operations and real estate challenges – and turns up regularly to watch ballet.

Tom Campbell is the CEO of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the largest art museum in the U.S. Until recently, Campbell said, the space in front along Fifth Avenue "was rotting out, like an old prison yard." Koch got involved, first to help brainstorm, and then to pay for an entire new plaza with fountains, stonework and trees.

"It will be one of the largest public spaces in New York, other than Central Park."

It was designed by Koch and other committee members as an "egalitarian space," for everyone. Before Koch got involved, Campbell said, there was no space for kids to eat lunch on a field trip. The Plaza will have tables under shade trees, space for 250,000 children to eat picnic lunches annually "in what will now be perhaps the most beautiful spot in New York."

After he finished a committee meeting at the Met last month, Koch began explaining micro-details about the Plaza fountains, the stonework and trees.

As he talked, he pulled from his suit pocket a small notebook, densely packed with penciled committee notes. “I got it right here, it is called the Littleleaf Linden tree.” They picked that one, he said, because the the canopy will form an aerial hedge, shading people in a city where one of the fun things people can do for free is walk along Fifth Avenue, alongside Central Park.

“The trees that were there were all old, broken and ugly,” he said “And the illumination of the facade overlooking Fifth Avenue was carried out by searchlights, harsh blue searchlights. It reminded me of when I went by a penitentiary once, at night, the purpose of the searchlights being to catch prisoners escaping.”

“I suggested the whole project,” he said of the Met’s plaza. “It took about two years of working with the final architect to come up with all these different designs. I suggested a number of things, too ... and at the end of months and months of work ... the chairman of the building committee said: ‘We’ve got this fantastic project, and the big question is, how do we pay for it?’

“And so I raised my hand, and said, ‘I’ve got a good idea. Why don’t I pay for everything, including all the extras?’

“And he said, ‘What did you say?’ And I repeated it.

“And he said, ‘My God, David is serious about this.’ ”

Charitable giving

For the past six years, opponents have speculated about how many millions Charles and David Koch have spent to influence elections, an amount the Kochs refuse to discuss.

David Koch will only say that his charitable giving – now \$1.235 billion – dwarfs his political spending.

Melissa Cohlma, the spokeswoman for Koch Industries, gave this breakdown: \$686 million went to medical/cancer, \$282 million to arts/culture and \$148 million to educational institutions, including the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where Koch received a master’s degree in chemical engineering, and Deerfield Academy, a private boarding school in Massachusetts, where he and Charles studied.

Another \$61 million went to many smaller and non-political gifts, such as to friends and family who lost a loved one.

And \$58 million has gone to nonprofit public policy organizations, which Cohlma said could include groups like Americans for Prosperity, the CATO Institute and the Heritage Foundation, which advocate for smaller government with fewer regulations.

Politics

Hours after David Brat defeated House Majority Leader Eric Cantor in a Republican primary in Virginia, Koch looked upset.

“God, I’m just thunderstruck. The reason he lost, I’m certain, is that the turnout was really light.”

Cantor “was so busy with his responsibilities as majority leader that I’m sure he didn’t spend nearly as much time with his constituents as other representatives were able to do,” Koch said.

Cantor, whom Koch has contributed money to, lost to a tea party candidate, and critics say the Kochs created the tea party.

“We didn’t create the tea party,” he said. “That’s a grassroots uprising. Like 1776 was.”

AFP, however, has worked with the tea party.

“The tea party is quite a mix of people you know, (from) very fine responsible people who have succeeded in life, to people on the far right who can be extreme and are quite different than those that are more in the middle.

“Most of the people that I think would constitute the tea party movement are responsible. I mean, people way on the right, I mean, I’m critical of that category of people too, I think that isn’t a very positive way for them to conduct themselves.”

He has no favorite for president in 2016 – too early, he said.

Hillary Clinton?

“It’s tax and spend on the Democratic side, if she’s the nominee.”

Ted Cruz?

“I don’t know enough about him to understand whether he could be a successful candidate to get the nomination.”

Rand Paul?

“Rand’s got good ideas.”

“All this is so premature.”

The focus is on the midterm elections in November.

“We are working to do well in the Senate races, maybe increase Republican control in the House.

And elect a few more Republican governors to statehouses.”

AFP

AFP, an organization of activists vilified by Koch critics, and designed to coax politicians into enacting conservative ideas, is one of the more visible groups the Kochs are involved in. David and Charles founded it with two others and David serves as the AFP foundation’s chair.

The group is spending \$125 million on the November elections, including producing ads critical of Obama’s signature health care law.

“These ads are very well done in my opinion,” David Koch said. “AFP finds individuals who have lost their health insurance and who have a serious medical problem such as they have cancer, and they have to take very expensive cancer medication. They describe the situation they are in. The fact that they’ve lost their insurance. They don’t have the money to pay for these expensive cancer medications, and they appeal to the incumbent senator, and in all these cases is a Democrat, and they are saying, I’m going to die, please help me get insurance that allows me to purchase the medications I need so I can continue to live. I have watched a number of these ads God, these are real people who have real medical problems.”

“I don’t have really any input in the content of these ads, these ads are worked on by the team in Americans for Prosperity, and they conceive of these ads jointly with political ad producers. And I stand back and just applaud what they are doing, you know? Because it’s really quite informative and it’s quite true. I have a lot of friends who used to have individual insurance policies for their family. And essentially all of them have lost their insurance policies — they’ve been canceled. And they’re now uninsured. And that to me is tragic.”

One result of his activism are attacks on the Kochs. He’s tried to explain that to his children.

“I’ve been explaining what I think the reasons are, these political opponents are so nasty. It helps them win elections. So we have to be very active and more effective than our opponents in supporting the candidates that we think should be elected to high office.”

Plane crash in 1991

His preoccupation with his life legacy, along with his biggest donations, began to come together after a 1991 airplane crash, Koch said.

“It was an absolute miracle that I survived in 1991. And everybody around me died.”

US Air Flight 1493 from Columbus, Ohio, was landing in Los Angeles when it collided with a commuter jet and skidded off the runway, dragging the smaller plane underneath. The cabin lights went out, passengers screamed, and Koch, sitting in first class, unable to find his shoes, crawled toward the rear. People fought, blocking the aisle. He walked back to first class, flames on one side, black smoke on the other and thought about death. Then he realized that if smoke

was entering the cabin, there must be an opening. He felt along the wall, choking on smoke, until he found a crack by the galley door.

“I got out within a few moments of being overcome with asphyxiation from all this intense smoke that filled the airplane. And I managed to get the galley door open, and jump out.” He spent two days in intensive care.

“My feeling was, God almighty, everyone around me died, and I survived, and the good Lord must be sitting on my shoulder looking after me. He obviously has the feeling that I’m a person worth saving. He thinks that I can do a lot of good for the world if I stay alive.

“You become somewhat spiritual when you go through an extraordinary experience ... There was a point there where I was trapped in the front of the plane, I was breathing the smoke, I couldn’t figure out how to get out of the plane, and I said to myself, God, this is fascinating, I’ve always wondered what it was like to die, and I’m about to go through with that. This is fascinating.

“And then my brain separated from my body, and went up towards this white light, and I remember my brain looking back, at this poor body that was dying, and the brain very confidently was escaping, and that lasted for quite a few moments, and all of a sudden my brain snapped back into my body.

“The really big gifts started, you know, after I had that terrible accident.”

On the wall of his office are two magazine articles he wrote about the crash – one for Cabin Crew Safety. He also framed two uncashed checks alongside the articles. “I wanted to prove to doubting Thomases that I was once actually paid for something I wrote,” he said. “Engineers are not any good at writing, you know?”

The article he wrote for Cabin Crew Safety noted that some recommendations Koch offered about passenger safety were adopted into federal aviation regulations.

A year after the crash, in 1992, Koch was diagnosed with advanced prostate cancer and began contributing to medical organizations.

Harry Reid on the Kochs

Harry Reid this year has denounced the Koch brothers so many times in Senate speeches that somebody made a video from C-Span clips, mashing together 134 of Reid’s Koch references over several months. Most of it is just “Koch.” “Koch” “Koch” with a number ticking off all the “Koch” references, and with only Reid’s necktie color changing.

“Cleverly done,” Koch said of the video. “He sounded like a broken record.”

“I’m sure (Reid) knows all the good things we do, how we built this great company,” he said. “And he just won’t say anything positive about us, even though we do phenomenal things

philanthropically.

“We all like to be complimented and thought well of. When someone is as powerful and important as Reid is, when you get criticized by him relentlessly, why, it’s not pleasant. But he’s across the line, he’s way overdone it, just week after week after week, I think some of senators of his own party feel that he has gone too far.

“Harry Reid, he knows my background and what I do. And he’s deliberately saying these dishonest things, in my opinion. Because he wants to raise, to stimulate his base, to contribute money for various Democratic campaigns.

“And I understand that.”

Leaving a legacy

David Koch stands 6 feet 5. The basketball scoring record he set while playing for MIT lasted 40 years. He loved that, but makes fun of himself, too. “I like to say that being the best athlete at MIT is like being taller than Mickey Rooney.”

He walks fast and moves nimbly through New York crowds. He looks thin and fit, but suffers.

“Two artificial knees. Artificial left shoulder. My right shoulder is arthritic, it needs a replacement.” He also has undergone years of chemotherapy for cancer.

Charles Koch loves to talk about how their father made him and David scoop poop out of horse stables as boys, but David prefers New York.

“The living here is like trying to get a drink out of a fire hose,” David said. “Which I like.”

He has drivers for his cars, but can bristle at the notion that he’s always a back seat rider. Cristyne Nicholas, a consultant who helps with charity work, said she was with him in Palm Beach one night for a gala honoring his donation to the M.D. Anderson Center in Houston.

Koch motioned for her to get into a tiny blue sports car. She fumbled with the seat, trying to get into the back.

“What are you doing?” she said Koch demanded.

“Trying to get to the back seat.”

“Just get in the car. In front. I’m driving.”

“What? You know how to drive?”

“Of course I know how to drive! I can drive tractors!”

In his Manhattan apartment on Park Avenue, he's a husband and 74-year-old father of three. Nicholas said she's been at his apartment with Koch's wife, Julia, when Koch comes home. It's quite a sight, she said: dogs barking and wagging their tails as he walks in, kids hollering and Johnny, the youngest, jumping on his tall father and turning him into a jungle gym.

They have three children, two boys and a girl, ranging in age from 8 to 15.

Johnny is a science nerd, like his dad, fond of dinosaurs. Koch goes home and curls up with Johnny and watches "NOVA," the PBS science program Koch funds.

His brother Charles has described how uncomfortable publicity makes him. He donated \$6 million to rebuild Wichita State University's basketball arena, but seeing "Charles Koch Arena" in big letters when he drives by embarrasses him and "makes me feel insecure," Charles has said.

David, in contrast, puts "David H. Koch" on everything he pays for.

He wants people to know he tries hard to do good, he said. He wants his children to do the same.

"I think each one of my children is a fine, honest person with a great interest in being kind and considerate to others. And I'm sure that when they get older, they will become philanthropic – because I am providing the resources for them to contribute to worthy causes generously."

He knows, he said, that some historians might not be kind to the Kochs, which is why he has literally carved his name in stone on some of New York's finest buildings.

"I hope one of my legacies will be that David Koch made the world a better place."