



A new biography reveals the Koch brothers' very early role in creating organized climate denial

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The Koch brothers are quite an enigma: on the one hand, they owe their vast fortune to extremely long-range planning: Charles Koch is famously contemptuous of entrepreneurs who take their companies public, believing that the public markets insist on such short timescales that they undermine real growth; and he grew his father's hydrocarbon empire by investing heavily in automation systems with extremely long amortization schedules.

But cutting against this commitment to a hyper-rationalist, long-range thinking is the brothers' slavish devotion to neoliberal orthodoxy and a reflexive, irrational phobia of state intervention, despite that fact that states are often an important long-range counterforce to the short-termism of the markets.

Where these two forces collide, the results are bizarre: the application of the Kochs' long-term thinking to heading off any kind of long-term planning by states.

Nowhere is this more manifest than in the Kochs' overt and covert campaign against climate science, whose rationalist, empirical conclusion is that urgent, coordinated, non-market action is a hard requirement to avert a catastrophe that could result in the extinction of the human species (which would also result in significant falls in the Kochs' fortunes). There is no rational version of long-range thinking that says that climate denial will produce a good outcome; the majority of climate denial is centered around the kind of short-termism that Koch deplores, where the returns to capital over a couple quarters are more important than the long-term ruination of firms, enterprises (and civilizations).

In [Kochland: The Secret History of Koch Industries and Corporate Power in America](#), veteran investigative business journalist Christopher Leonard delivers a deep (700+ page) look at the Kochs, revealing newly unearthed evidence of the Kochs' involvement in the very earliest stirrings of organized, corporate climate denial campaigns, providing the black money for the first climate denial events and publications.

Leonard reveals that the Kochs began funding climate denial in 1991, in response to George HW Bush's support for a treaty limiting emissions after the first IPCC report. The GOP of the 1990s accepted the scientific consensus on climate, and the Kochs' funding of a Cato Institute climate denial conference was the first step in the long road to turning the GOP into the human extinction/climate-denial party.

The Kochs' involvement in climate denial is a marvellous (and terrifying) case study in how smart people do dumb things, and why the idea of unfettered corporate power (one dollar, one vote) is a recipe for disaster. Though it was diversified, the Kochs' business empire was still built on a foundation of hydrocarbon extraction and incineration. The science on climate ran directly

contrary to the Kochs' short-term profits (even if the Kochs' long-term interests depended on the planet continuing to be habitable by human beings), and "It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends on his not understanding it."

The Kochs' capacity for motivated reasoning is precisely why we have regulation: even "rational actors" are prone to irrational, self-interested superstitions, and if markets are the only arbiters of what is and is not permitted, then billionaires' cherished delusions and pecadillos become the law of the land, which everyone else must live under.

The Kochs' were the canaries in neoliberalism's coalmines. As governments have been starved and deprived of their ability to gather facts and reason about them, the billionaire class has turned its preferences into our laws, reinventing the neofeudal corporate doctrines of Ford and his ilk.

Pluralism has many benefits, but chief among them is guarding against individual follies. It's the logic behind the scientific method and the key to the enlightenment: the rule of law, rather than the rule of man, depends on the freedom to undertake impartial evaluations of factual questions, like "is climate change being caused by the Kochs' business?" The Kochs, for obvious reasons, are not qualified to answer that question.

Leonard, nonetheless, manages to dig up valuable new material, including evidence of the Kochs' role in perhaps the earliest known organized conference of climate-change deniers, which gathered just as the scientific consensus on the issue was beginning to gel. The meeting, in 1991, was sponsored by the Cato Institute, a Washington-based libertarian think tank, which the Kochs founded and heavily funded for years. As Leonard describes it, Charles Koch and other fossil-fuel magnates sprang into action that year, after President George H. W. Bush announced that he would support a treaty limiting carbon emissions, a move that posed a potentially devastating threat to the profits of Koch Industries. At the time, Bush was not an outlier in the Republican Party. Like the Democrats, the Republicans largely accepted the scientific consensus on climate change, reflected in the findings of expert groups such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which had formed in 1988, under the auspices of the United Nations.