



How Decades Of Paranoid Attacks On The Koch Brothers Turned Into Mainstream Leftist Tactics

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The spectacle of left-wing pundits dancing on the grave of David Koch last week was appalling, perhaps none more so than from Bill Maher, who quipped, “I’m glad he’s dead and I hope the end was painful.”

The justifications for this macabre glee—that Koch was a climate change “denier” who opposed environmental regulations and funded shadowy nonprofit groups—were also a jarring reminder of the paranoia that gripped the left during the Bush and Obama presidencies, and in some ways presaged the conspiracy-addled era of Trump.

Perhaps more than any other figures, the billionaire industrialist brothers Charles and David Koch are, to the left, capitalist evil incarnate. What makes them special objects of ire, though, is the supposedly clandestine nature of their influence—the “dark money” they funnel to libertarian think tanks and nonprofits.

The network of organizations the Kochs have supported over the years—groups like Americans for Prosperity, Reason Magazine, and the Cato Institute—are known to much of the mainstream media as the “Kochtopus,” a nefarious network that is somehow invisibly directing the course of American politics at the behest of the Koch brothers, for whom political advocacy is about all about boosting their bottom line.

In Which Jane Mayer Exposed The ‘Kochtopus’

The definitive account of this conspiratorial view is Jane Mayer’s 2010 “investigative” profile of the Koch brothers in The New Yorker. “The Kochs have given millions of dollars to nonprofit groups that criticize environmental regulation and support lower taxes for industry,” writes Mayer, as if industrialists whose combined net worth is more than \$100 billion need the Cato Institute and Reason to help them rake in profits.

Americans for Prosperity, a modest network of state-based nonprofits that advocate for limited government, comes in for special scrutiny from Mayer, who dubs them “seemingly independent organizations,” because they receive funding from the Kochs. She attends a AFP gathering in Austin, Texas, attended by some 500 Tea Party activists, whom she portrays as rubes afraid of a government takeover of the economy, and ignorant of the conference’s “corporate backers.”

Mayer concludes that practically the entire Tea Party movement was orchestrated by the Kochs. It certainly couldn’t just be ordinary Americans upset about high taxes and onerous government regulations. It couldn’t be that the Obama administration was overreaching, or that significant

numbers of Americans weren't on board with the auto bailout, the stimulus, or health care reform.

No, it had to be orchestrated by the Kochs. "The anti-government fervor infusing the 2010 elections represents a political triumph for the Kochs," writes Mayer. "By giving money to 'educate,' fund, and organize Tea Party protesters, they have helped turn their private agenda into a mass movement."

It's apparently impossible for reporters like Mayer to imagine there are actually people out there who really do agree with the Kochs and share their libertarian policy goals, or that things might happen in the world that align with the Kochs' ideology without having been secretly directed by them. Hence her explanation of a 1999 court case, in which two judges on the District of Columbia Circuit Court found that the Environmental Protection Agency had overstepped its authority in calibrating standards for ozone emissions, is that they only ruled as they did because they had once attended a legal junket arranged by a group funded by the Kochs. *See the connection?*

'It Can Happen Here'

Of course, the paranoid style on the American left predates the media's fixation on the Koch brothers. During the presidency of George W. Bush, the White House was the object of endless conspiracy theories and alarmist outrage from erstwhile respectable media outlets.

Who can forget Naomi Wolf's long-winded warning in *The Guardian* of a fascist America "in ten easy steps"? Soon, she said, America would be more or less indistinguishable from fascist Germany and Italy in the 1930s. Guantanamo Bay would house not just terrorists, but "labour activists, clergy and journalists." There would be a new "thug caste," like the Italian Blackshirts and Nazi Brownshirts, "paramilitary groups of scary young men out to terrorise citizens."

And who might these thugs be? We had already seen them: "Groups of angry young Republican men, dressed in identical shirts and trousers, menaced poll workers counting the votes in Florida in 2000." The only possible conclusion was that "beneath our very noses, George Bush and his administration are using time-tested tactics to close down an open society. It is time for us to be willing to think the unthinkable... that it can happen here."

"It Can Happen Here" was also the title of 2007 book by journalist Joe Conason, the book's title a play on Sinclair Lewis' 1935 novel about a homegrown fascist takeover in America. For Conason, Lewis' novel was coming to life before our very eyes: Bush and Karl Rove were in cahoots with Fox News, weaponizing fear to trample the Constitution and usher in unchecked executive power.

This kind of paranoia wasn't fringe. In 2004, Democrats and Hollywood stars literally rolled out the red carpet for Michael Moore's "Fahrenheit 9/11," a film that argued Bush was conspiring with an international capitalist cabal to steal Mideast oil and destroy democracy—a line of argument, by the way, that really can be traced back to Nazi Germany.

The Paranoid Style Is the New Normal

To be fair, conspiracy-mongering is today rather bipartisan. After all, Trump, who seems to like conspiracy theories, waded into national politics by repeating birther conspiracies about Obama.

And in the Trump era, acolytes of the viral fusion conspiracy QAnon seem to be growing even as we confront the specter of conspiracy-addled gunman like the Pittsburgh synagogue shooter.

Yet it still seems the lion's share of popular conspiracy theories today belongs to the mainstream media and the progressive left. What else would you call the sustained media narrative that Trump colluded with Moscow to steal the 2016 election from Hillary Clinton and then tried to cover it up? Perhaps no conspiracy theory has been so widely repeated by so many otherwise respectable media outlets and elected Democrats than has Russiagate, with its outlandish claims of prostitutes, "kompromat," Russian spies, computer hacking, and secret, treasonous meetings

The purveyors of Russiagate were of course quick to turn the tables and charge Trump supporters with conspiracy-mongering when this conspiracy narrative began to unravel earlier this year. Back in April, MSNBC's Chuck Todd accused Attorney General William Barr of spreading a "factless conspiracy theory" for acknowledging that the FBI spied on the Trump campaign, which was not a conspiracy theory but a plain old fact, albeit one that didn't fit with the Russia collusion storyline Todd and his network had been peddling for two years.

As for the Kochs, the left isn't done with them. As recently as June, The New York Times ran a breathless piece explaining how "the Koch brothers are fueling a fight against public transit, an offshoot of their longstanding national crusade for lower taxes and smaller government." Why would the Kochs oppose public transit? Because "One of the mainstay companies of Koch Industries, the Kochs' conglomerate, is a major producer of gasoline and asphalt, and also makes seat belts, tires and other automotive parts." *See the connection?*

Americans for Prosperity, that shadowy Koch-funded cabal, was implicated in the Times' coverage of a failed \$5.4 billion transit plan in Nashville. In an effort to educate voters on the cost of this transit boondoggle, AFP went knocking on doors and making phone calls, as grassroots groups are wont to do. But as Kyle Smith noted, AFP only spent a measly \$10,000—a fraction of the \$1.2 million spent by all opponents of the plan, which was far less than the its \$2.9 million its proponents spent. In the end, Nashville voters overwhelmingly rejected the plan, 64 to 36 percent.

Could it be that the voters of Nashville simply agreed with AFP that a huge tax hike and dubious transit plan in name of combating climate change wasn't in the city's best interests?

Likewise, could it be that over the past two decades more Americans have become suspicious of big government programs and the political elites who run them, and that this, not some ridiculous conspiracy theory, is what accounts for the Koch brothers' success in promoting free market ideas? Could it be that Trump tapped into that suspicion and discontent, and that he won in 2016 not because he was colluding with Russia but because his message resonated with a broad swath of the electorate?

I know, it sounds crazy.