

Sun Journal

Heritage Policy Center needs to take another look at its "grassroots"

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You have to hand it to the Maine Heritage Policy Center. It's got chutzpah.

In a classic example of the pot calling the kettle black, on June 14, the Sun Journal published a letter to the editor by Heritage Center's director of communications, Krysta Lilly, characterizing as "disgusting" former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg's financial contribution to Mainers for Responsible Gun Ownership's campaign in favor of an upcoming Maine initiative ballot. The initiative seeks to require firearm purchasers to undergo background checks before a gun can be transferred between people who are not licensed firearm dealers.

Although Mainers for Responsible Gun Ownership gathered over 85,000 signatures on its initiative petition, Lilly dismissed it as an "Astroturf" rather than a "grassroots" organization, suggesting it was the ersatz creation of an out-of-state rich guy lacking any real local support.

Ironically "Astroturf" is a perfect label to describe the Heritage Center, which is all about doing the bidding of its big backers. Unfortunately, we can't know exactly who these backers are, since the Center refuses to publicly disclose their identities.

The Heritage Center, according to its mission statement, is "a research and educational organization whose mission is to formulate and promote conservative public policies based on the principles of free enterprise; limited, constitutional government; individual freedom and traditional American values."

Its namesake, The Heritage Foundation, a Washington, D.C. think-tank, has an almost identical mission statement. That's no coincidence. The Heritage Center is a clone of the Heritage Foundation and likely financed by many of the same sources.

The story of The Heritage Foundation and its ilk is told in graphic and chilling detail in the recently published book, "Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires of the Radical Right," by Jane Mayer.

In this brilliant piece of investigative journalism, Mayer chronicles the rise of a vast, secretive network of nonprofit think-tanks and advocacy organizations, created and funded by super-

wealthy right wingers, which began in the 1970s and moved into hyper-drive after the Citizens United Supreme Court decision of 2010.

These organizations have received hundreds of millions of dollars to spread disinformation, sway elections in favor of pliable candidates at every level of government, pass or block legislation, and generate test court cases in a concerted campaign to cut taxes on the rich, reduce public assistance to the poor and disabled, gut collective bargaining rights, and weaken or eliminate regulatory laws protecting the environment, public health and stable financial markets.

Their donors have exploited loopholes in the very federal tax law they've sought to undermine. Using 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) tax-exempt organizations as shock troops, they've been able to amass war chests of tax-deductible donations while shielding their own identities from public scrutiny.

I'm not a big fan of conspiracy theories, but this one's the real deal.

The most generous, energetic and determined organizers in this network have been Charles and David Koch, multi-billionaire owners of energy, chemical and other businesses, whose companies have profited mightily from the political changes they've put into motion. Their "donor network," several hundred members who meet annually at lavish resorts to plot strategy and raise money, has been aptly dubbed the "Kochtopus."

The Heritage Foundation, started in 1973, was originally bankrolled by the late Richard Mellon Scaife (principal heir to the Pittsburgh Mellon banking, oil and aluminum fortune) and the late Joseph Coors (grandson of Adolph Coors and president of Coors Brewing Company). It later became the beneficiary of millions from the Kochs along with large sums from other wealthy people and corporations.

The Kochs, Scaife and Coors all came from similar backgrounds. They inherited fortunes and were raised in a bubble where they never had to mingle with the "hoi polloi" or experience material deprivation. Yet they illogically considered themselves self-made men, viewed the laissez-faire era of the late 19th century "robber barons" as the golden age of capitalism, and harbored a pathological hatred of income taxes, government regulation, labor unions and welfare programs.

Through The Heritage Foundation and similar think-tanks (such as the Cato Institute, Mercatus Center, American Enterprise Institute and Federalist Society), the Kochs and their associates created a way of mainstreaming right-wing propaganda, formerly limited to "fringe" groups like the John Birch Society, by disguising it as legitimate scholarship. Through an endless flow of ideologically inspired, result-oriented books, papers, seminars, conferences, media releases and "talking head" appearances, these organizations have taken on the aura of venerable think-tanks like the Rockefeller Foundation, Ford Foundation and Brookings Institution without, alas, adopting the latter's rigorous scientific research methods.

So if you see any pronouncement, paper or release coming out of the Maine Heritage Policy Center regarding the firearms background check initiative or any other political issue, beware! It may look like green grass but you can't mow it.