



This billionaire's 'attack philanthropy' secretly funded climate denialism and conservative causes

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In the mid-2000s, Barre Seid had begun thinking about how to leave a legacy. Riding the personal computer boom, the Chicago-based electronics magnate was on his way to becoming a billionaire. Seid, who considers himself a libertarian, now had the means to pursue a bold project: “attack philanthropy.”

To Seid, that meant looking for ways to place financial bets that had the potential to make epochal change. With little public notice, Seid became one of the most important donors to conservative causes during an era that saw American politics and society shift sharply to the right.

New reporting by ProPublica and The Lever, based on emails and interviews with people who know Seid, sheds light on one of the country’s least-known megadonors, revealing how an intensely private billionaire has secretly used his wealth to try to influence the lives of millions.

Seid has funded climate denialism as well as a national network of state-level think tanks that promote business deregulation and fight Medicaid expansion. He’s also supported efforts to remake the higher education system in a conservative mold, including to turn one of the nation’s most politically influential law schools into a training ground for future generations of right-wing judges and justices.

Last month, [The Lever](#) and [ProPublica](#) as well as [The New York Times](#) detailed how Seid secretly handed a \$1.6 billion fortune to a key architect of the Supreme Court’s conservative supermajority that recently eliminated federal protections for abortion rights.

Steven Baer, a longtime friend and former adviser to Seid, said the businessman has long been “the major patron” for the Heartland Institute, a small Chicago-area think tank which for decades has attacked mainstream climate science. A top executive at Seid’s former company, Tripp Lite, served as the chairman of the group. Among the [recent claims](#) on the institute’s website: “US

Temperature Readings Are Junk, Negating Climate Science” and “96% of U.S. Climate Data Is Corrupted.”

“Barre did not need the quick win,” explained Baer in a recent interview. “He believes that if you take the long-odds shot and it pays off, it’s huge.” Baer said that Seid summed up his approach as “attack philanthropy.”

Seid, who turned 90 in April, is exceedingly secretive. In one email obtained by ProPublica and The Lever, he described himself as prone to “anonymity paranoia.”

Seid was so insistent on remaining in the shadows that he sometimes went by a pseudonym, variously given as Ebert or Elbert Howell. He and his staff at Tripp Lite would give the Howell name as the CEO of the company to outside salesmen and in business information registries, according to testimony Seid gave in a federal lawsuit.

“I get harassed a lot by telephone calls from security salesmen and the like and the source of it is mailing lists,” Seid said in the testimony, adding: “It’s a way of deflecting salesmen.” Seid did not respond to requests for comment for this story.

It’s impossible to know the full extent and details of Seid’s giving over the years because the law allows many nonprofits to keep their sponsors secret. But tax records previously obtained by ProPublica show that between 1996 and 2018, he made at least \$775 million in donations to nonprofit groups. Almost all of that money was given anonymously.

As Seid got older, he knew that he needed a plan for what to do with his vast wealth, according to Baer. Seid, who has no children, knew that donating his billion-plus fortune could have a generational impact if put in the right hands.

“The question was,” Baer said, “how does he try to steer history?”

“He Did Not Want to See and Be Seen”

Forty years ago, Seid was a little-known business executive based in Chicago who was scarcely on the radar of major political operatives and party committees. His electronics company, Tripp Lite, sold surge protectors and other gear from a cramped space in Chicago’s River North area.

As the company flourished at the dawn of the personal computing era, Seid had started to write a few checks to political groups such as the Republican National Committee. He also began donating to a local Republican group that, under Baer’s leadership, had restyled itself as a force to purge the GOP of its more moderate elements.

Baer had never heard of Seid but decided to introduce himself after he noticed the businessman’s donations to his group. Baer brought a copy of Chris Matthews’ memoir “Hardball” to an early meeting. He recalled that Seid kept the book in his office for many years afterward, taking inspiration not from an ideological perspective but as a useful primer on bare-knuckle politics.

Baer described Seid as “this quirky fellow who has a very good sense of humor and is very self-effacing.” But when he’s running his company, Baer added, “he can be terrifying to his subordinates. Not because he’s a bad person or a mean person, but because his mind works so

whip-fast smart, you can be hit with a bunch of quick logic and questions, and you might be left stammering.”

According to Baer, Seid took great pains to monitor all aspects of Tripp Lite’s business. Seid would even go line by line through the company’s vast list of products, pen in hand, changing the prices of individual items. “He did not delegate that to anybody,” Baer said.

When it comes to ideology, Baer said the businessman was “a William F. Buckley, National Review, capital-C conservative but with a little tilt toward Cato Institute libertarianism.” Seid himself has referred to the “basic libertarianism” at the core of his politics, according to an email obtained by ProPublica and The Lever.

Even after he had become known in conservative circles as a major donor and an extremely wealthy man, he expressed intense aversion to attending political events.

“Barre would say, ‘I will *pay* you so I don’t have to go to your black-tie dinner,’ Baer recalled. “He did not want to see and be seen. He was not that type of donor.”

Financing Climate Denial

Soon after the turn of the century, Seid began to take an intense interest in combating what he labeled “junk science,” according to Baer.

Baer, who worked as a contractor for Tripp Lite for several years, said Seid funded research and activism against the ban on the chemical insecticide DDT instituted by President Richard Nixon, which critics claimed had led to the death of millions because of the spread of malaria-carrying mosquitoes.

Seid also became convinced that leading practitioners of climate science are wrong when they blame global warming on the carbon emissions of human beings. Baer said he had already introduced Seid to Joseph Bast, then the head of the Heartland Institute, which challenged the scientific consensus on human-caused climate change. Seid became “the major patron” of the organization, according to Baer.

Some donations by Seid to Heartland two decades ago were previously known, but the extent of his ties to the group have not been reported.

About a decade ago, Seid asked his close friend, Tripp Lite chief financial officer Chuck Lang, to join the Heartland Institute’s board of directors, Lang’s wife, Susan, said in an interview. Lang was elevated to chairman of the board shortly before he died in 2018.

“Barre Seid deserves his privacy, but I can say this: He is a very intelligent and generous man,” said Tim Huelskamp, a former U.S. representative from Kansas who served as the Heartland Institute’s president from 2017 to 2019.

The Heartland Institute did not respond to a request for comment.

Seid has also funded the State Policy Network, a group of influential state-level think tanks that push for deregulation and tax cuts, according to an email written by a friend of Seid’s. The head

of the group once compared it to IKEA, The New Yorker reported, offering state think tanks a “catalogue” of successful projects, including opposing health care subsidies and imposing new voting restrictions. The network has also opposed efforts to expand Medicaid coverage.

A spokesperson for the State Policy Network declined to comment on the organization’s donors.

Seid, who was raised by Russian Jewish immigrants, has also been a donor to pro-Israel causes. A glimpse of those efforts came in 2010 when Bar-Ilan University in Israel awarded him an honorary degree, citing his “fervent commitment to setting forward a strong case for the State of Israel” and “support for programs which help develop the ability of Israel’s future leaders to persuasively communicate Israel’s positions and concerns.”

Bar-Ilan University also gave Seid’s wife, Barbara, an honorary degree the following year.

While Seid has long funded causes aligned with Republican orthodoxy, his company broke with the Trump administration over its trade war with China. Whether motivated by Seid’s deep libertarianism or simply Tripp Lite’s concern for its bottom line, the company sued the Trump administration in September 2020 after being hit with tariffs on electronic components it imported from China.

The sharply worded complaint attacked the administration for its “prosecution of an unprecedented, unbounded, and unlimited trade war impacting over \$500 billion in imports from the People’s Republic of China.” Tripp Lite’s lawyer on the case, Ted Murphy of the firm Sidley Austin, declined to comment. The case is still pending.

At the time of the lawsuit, Seid’s business empire was in flux: He was working to convert his sole ownership of the company in Tripp Lite into what would be the biggest one-time political advocacy donation in U.S. history. He transferred the company to a dark money group created in April 2020 and run by conservative operative Leonard Leo, before it was sold for \$1.6 billion in March 2021, as The Lever and ProPublica reported. The structure of the transaction allowed Seid to avoid as much as \$400 million in taxes, according to tax experts.

Seid views himself as a libertarian, but he has entrusted his legacy to Leo, a staunch social conservative committed to curtailing reproductive rights. Leo, a longtime executive at the conservative legal group the Federalist Society, helped select five of the six Supreme Court justices who recently struck down federal protections for abortion rights.

Asked about Seid’s decision to give his business empire to Leo, Seid’s friend Baer explained that Seid, like the billionaire donor Charles Koch, understands the need to unite the conservative movement to change the direction of the country.

“A Full-Ride at Scalia Law”

As part of his long-term project, Seid has shown a particular interest in shaping colleges and universities.

Seid has funded Hillsdale College, a small Christian liberal arts school in Michigan, according to Susan Lang, the widow of Seid’s friend and Tripp Lite executive. Hillsdale is known both for its

great books curriculum, which is centered on reading the classics of the Western canon, and also for being a feeder of staffers and ideas factory for the Trump administration.

He has forged a particularly close relationship with George Mason University, helping turn the school into an incubator for conservative legal scholars, lawyers and judges.

Activists have long suspected that Seid was the anonymous donor who gave \$20 million in 2016 to rename GMU's law school after the late Justice Antonin Scalia. The donation was brokered by Leo, the Federalist Society executive.

Six Supreme Court justices attended the renaming ceremony, and several have taught courses there in recent years, including Clarence Thomas, Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh.

The new emails, obtained through a public records request by ProPublica and The Lever, appear to confirm that Seid made the donation. The then-dean of the law school, Henry Butler, emailed Seid in 2019 with a personal update "on progress that we made at Scalia Law since the naming gift," explaining that it had inspired another, larger donation. "Thank you for your generous support," Butler added. (Butler and a spokesperson for GMU did not respond to requests for comment.)

In response, Seid said he would "discuss this with Leonard shortly," apparently a reference to Leonard Leo. He then asked the dean for a personal favor: helping his nephew get into law school.

"Separately, do you still have useful connections at Northwestern Law? I have Nepot with LSAT 167," Seid wrote, using an archaic term for nephew.

"Happy to try to help at Northwestern. I have several good friends on the faculty at Northwestern," Butler wrote, then added: "Please tell him that he has a full-ride at Scalia Law where he can take courses from Justices Thomas, Gorsuch and Kavanaugh [sic]. Onward and Upward!"

At GMU's law school, one of Seid's longtime influences is Frank Buckley, a law professor and conservative columnist, and the two have a long-running breezy email correspondence. In August 2020, Seid wrote to Buckley: "You need to keep being a public intellectual for the U.S."

This year, Buckley had to take a step back from the public realm, deleting his Twitter account after he referred to Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor as a "stupid Latina." (Buckley later apologized, writing, "I regret that my foolish remarks have caused great sadness.")

Buckley did not respond to a request for comment.

Buckley, who had written Donald Trump Jr.'s 2016 Republican convention speech, confided to Seid in an August 2020 email: "Btw just between us girls I'm writing Don Jr's convention speech again." That speech, delivered in the wake of the George Floyd protests, claimed: "Small businesses across America — many of them minority owned — are being torched by mobs."

In a November 2021 email to Buckley and others, Seid expressed interest in the University of Austin, the education project started by former Times opinion writer Bari Weiss.

Seid wrote a stream-of-consciousness take comparing the new effort to his alma mater, the University of Chicago, and referencing his longtime interest in great books curricula.

“Not U of C, Not enough \$\$\$, High profile names, President from great books,” Seid wrote.
“Can it succeed, and make a difference???”