

When Bad Money Supports Good Foreign Policy

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The anti-war movement needs money, and the Koch brothers have it. But it comes with strings attached.

In November, the Charles Koch Foundation announced that it would provide nearly \$4 million in grants to Harvard University and MIT to train the next generation of foreign policy professionals. It's part of the foundation's effort to steer US foreign policy away from its emphasis on military intervention and big Pentagon budgets.

Yes, that's right: Charles Koch.

He's the same fellow profiled in Jane Mayer's devastating critique of how right-wing billionaires have injected their anti-government toxins into the American bloodstream. In *Dark Money*, Mayer describes how Charles and his brother David have funded organizations that have promoted tax cuts for the wealthy, an anti-regulatory agenda that trashes the environment in favor of energy companies (like Koch Industries) and Tea Party formations that want to shrink government to the point of non-existence.

The Kochs subscribe to a radical, right-wing version of libertarianism according to which nothing should stand in the way of free enterprise. No surprise that the Kochs' philosophy helps their own bottom line. They spent nearly a million dollars in support of George W. Bush and other Republicans in 2000, and then benefited hugely from the Bush administration's preferential treatment of energy companies (not to mention the tens of millions of dollars in government contracts they secured since 2000). Even during the Obama years, their efforts at the federal and state level to "get government off their backs" helped to double their fortune, from \$19 billion each in 2008 to \$41 billion each in 2016.

MAINSTREAM CREDIBILITY

The Kochs are disgusting in many ways. But they can't be faulted for being inconsistent in their hatred of government, all government. Most right-wing deficit hawks employ a national-security exception when they try to defund all parts of the government except the Pentagon. But the Kochs at least treat defense spending like all other government spending. In this case, it even goes against their pecuniary interests. The Kochs made around \$170 million between 1996 and

2011 from defense contracts. In the grand scheme of things, of course, \$10 million a year is a rounding error for billionaires.

Their anti-war and anti-intervention philosophy has meant that the Cato Institute, the libertarian think tank started and funded by the Kochs, has taken consistently good positions on foreign policy over the years. But the Cato Institute, even with its huge budget and swank downtown headquarters, has always been a little off to the side in the Washington policy community. The Kochs crave mainstream credibility.

So that's why the Charles Koch Foundation is providing money to Harvard and MIT — the very definition of mainstream credibility — to encourage anti-interventionist thinking in academia. The two people who will administer the program are thoughtful critics of US militarism: Harvard's Steven Walt and MIT's Barry Posen. Walt and John Mearsheimer wrote a perceptive essay in *Foreign Affairs* in 2016 laying out the argument for "offshore balancing," a grand strategy of scaling back US military commitments overseas that Posen also supports.

I have a lot of respect for Walt and Posen. I have also worked with folks at Cato on various foreign policy initiatives. But in the current political climate, when the Trump administration is launching an all-out assault on federal programs and a Koch-supported tax bill is on its way to becoming law, should progressives welcome the few crumbs that the Kochs are throwing in the direction of anti-war initiatives?

THE KOCHS AND TRUMP

As a candidate for president, Donald Trump made some noises about opposing military interventions and reducing the Pentagon's footprint overseas. Thanks largely to his senior advisor Steve Bannon, Trump also came to embrace the radical anti-government positions that right-wing libertarians favor.

But Charles and David Koch actively disliked Trump; a third brother, Bill, supported the Republican nominee. As the 2016 campaign heated up, rumors circulated of a Koch-funded anti-Trump campaign and of Charles Koch even supporting Hillary Clinton. Those turned out to be false. The Kochs didn't activate their network to support Trump, but they also didn't rule out cooperation.

Indeed, a number of Koch-friendly politicians and operatives were embedded in the campaign, from Mike Pence (Trump's running mate) to Corey Lewandowski (Trump's campaign manager, fired in June 2016). Marc Short, Pence's communications advisor and then Trump's legislative director, once headed up Freedom Partners, a Koch-funded organization. "The vacuum in Trump not having his own network is filled by people who've been cultivated for years by the Koch network," Richard L. Hasen, a UC Irvine law professor told the *Los Angeles Times*.

It wasn't long after the administration took office that the Koch brothers began to investigate how the Trump team could advance their agenda. They welcomed Trump's pullout from the Paris Climate Agreement, the various environmental regulations that the administration rolled back and the congressional effort to kill the Affordable Care Act.

By May, the brothers identified Trump's tax plan as something they could get behind — in a big way. As the fight intensified in Congress, the Koch network was going all out. Tim Phillips, president of the Koch-affiliated Americans for Prosperity, told *The Boston Globe*: “It's the most significant federal effort we've ever taken on.” The Koch network has pooled \$400 million for the next two years of political work, and it's applying a good chunk of that to getting the tax bill passed. It's been a full-court press with op-eds and \$8 million in attack ads.

So, let's dispense with the notion that the Kochs can be relied on to fund a big-tent effort against Trump. They don't like his positions on immigration, marijuana or criminal justice reform. But they're eager to exploit Trump as a “useful idiot” in their campaign to pillage the commonwealth.

AGAINST THE GLOBALISTS

It's easy for me to take a principled stand against taking money from the Kochs. They haven't offered me any. But here are some reasons why others might think twice about taking their anti-war resources.

The ideological reason: A progressive anti-war position is part of a larger internationalist program that supports global peacekeeping and post-conflict reconstruction, robust environmental programs, transnational anti-poverty efforts and human rights mechanisms that hold countries and individuals accountable. The Kochs aren't interested in any of that. All of the prescriptive elements of the progressive internationalist agenda require strong states. The Kochs believe that the invisible hand of the free market will solve all problems, without any state guidance or interference. In the same way that Margaret Thatcher didn't believe in society, only individuals, the Kochs don't really believe in the international community. The only transnational force that has any import for them are transnational corporations. Their anti-war funding thus comes with some serious (if often hidden) ideological strings attached.

The monetary reason: So far, the Charles Koch Foundation has shelled out less than \$15 million to support programs at educational institutions to look at a less militaristic foreign policy. That's a pittance compared to what it's spending on efforts to unravel Obamacare or get Trump's tax plan passed. It's also about what the Kochs make every year off the US military. Perhaps if Koch Enterprises announced that it was divesting from all military-related activities, their charitable giving would have more impact.

The educational reason: As Jane Mayer points out in *Dark Money*, the Kochs have funded programs at universities to shift academic discourse away from liberal and progressive thinking. Their funding of programs on “law and economics,” for instance, has helped to shift the legal profession toward more laissez-faire thinking. And it's not as if the Kochs have been particularly transparent about their methods. Jane Mayer quotes a Koch advisor, George Pearson: “Traditional gifts to universities, he warned, didn't guarantee enough ideological control. Instead, he advocated funding private institutes within prestigious universities, where influence over hiring decisions and other forms of control could be exerted by donors while hiding the radicalism of their aims.”

The legitimacy reason: The Kochs have been trying to give the appearance of being transpartisan. They have collaborated with progressives on sentencing reform, though as Mayer points out they're probably more interested in getting reduced sentences for corporations than for the poor. They work with the Negro College Fund, but the money goes toward demonstrating how "principled entrepreneurship, economics, and innovation contribute to well-being for individuals, communities, and society."

The term "well-being," as Mayer details, was something the Kochs came up with to put a smiley face on funding that otherwise destroys communities, social welfare programs and the environment. Even if their new foreign policy funding doesn't come with such strings, it still helps with the image makeover of the Kochs.

So, even though Walt and Posen, not Charles Koch, will be administering the funds at Harvard and MIT, the program could well be the thin edge of the wedge. If the Kochs decide to pour money into foreign policy, they could successfully untether the anti-war position from its internationalist foundations.

If such arguments prove successful, the United States will scale back its military presence, but the world won't become any safer as a result. Overall global military spending might increase to compensate for US retrenchment. US allies — South Korea, Japan — might decide to acquire their own nuclear weapons programs if the US nuclear umbrella becomes frayed. Absent a strong international security framework, other countries will inevitably fight each other for the mantle of US hegemonic authority.

The Kochs don't care. They welcome global anarchy because they think they'll be able to profit by it. Perhaps Walt and Posen believe that they are successfully using Charles Koch toward their own end of constructing a more realist US foreign policy. But the Kochs, with billions of dollars at their disposal, are more likely to be the ones manipulating, not being manipulated.