

NEW YORK

David Koch's Monstrous Legacy

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August 23, 2019

By the time he died on Friday at the age of 79, David Koch was worth \$42.4 billion. He will be remembered for what he did with it. Some people will probably praise his charitable spirit, perhaps even his support for criminal-justice reform, or his skepticism of military intervention. “The vast bulk of Koch’s philanthropy was not political,” Brian Doherty noted in an obit for *Reason* magazine. “It included hundreds of millions of dollars for cancer research (he was diagnosed with prostate cancer in 1992) and major arts and sciences institutions, museums, schools, and public television, with much of his institutional philanthropy centered in New York City, his home for decades.”

But Koch’s largesse wasn’t free. We are paying for it now, and have been paying for it for decades. Koch’s legacy is a testament to the power of weaponized philanthropy. For Koch did not restrict himself to supporting artists and scientists. He, along with his brother Charles, who survives him, committed their vast family fortune to the construction of a powerful conservative network. We live in the world that he helped build, and it is on fire.

Koch, who ran for office on the Libertarian Party ticket in 1980, helped funnel billions into climate-change-denying organizations for decades. His motivation wasn’t a mystery: He did it because he was greedy. Political action to arrest climate change threatened Koch’s business interests. His family originally made its money in oil and gas, and Koch Industries, as Tim Dickinson laid out in a 2014 piece for *Rolling Stone*, is one of the biggest polluters in the U.S. “Thanks in part to its 2005 purchase of paper-mill giant Georgia-Pacific, Koch Industries dumps more pollutants into the nation’s waterways than General Electric and International Paper combined,” he wrote.

The legacy of David Koch cannot be extricated from the work he undertook with his brother. As Jane Mayer reported for *The New Yorker* in 2010, the brothers were ideologically sympatico, bound together by their disbelief in climate science and their opposition to industry regulation. Their work had massive reach, though their use of shell trusts and foundations can make their money difficult to trace. Mayer, however, has reported much of it out over the years, in pieces for *The New Yorker* and in her 2016 book, *Dark Money*. Through the Cato Institute — which was co-founded by Charles Koch, and where David Koch once sat on the board of directors — the Kochs funded analysts and researchers who denied the extent of man-made climate change for years. They donated copiously to the Heritage Foundation, which wraps climate

change denial into a broader conservative platform that opposes LGBT rights and legal abortion. They helped establish the anti-regulatory Mercatus Center at George Mason University, and that came with certain privileges; in 2018, *Inside Higher Ed* reported that the university had given the Kochs a say in faculty hiring. Similar funding agreements also existed at Florida State University and Utah State University. Koch money bankrolled right-to-work groups that have worked for decades to reduce union membership — a goal that has, according to most experts, contributed significantly to America’s increasing wealth inequality.

But what’s bad for workers tends to be good for the Kochs. Unions cut into a corporation’s bottom line; they make it slightly more difficult for lowly businessmen to purchase Park Avenue penthouses worth millions. The same principle of self-interest applies to one of David’s pet projects. Through the Americans for Prosperity Foundation, which he founded, the family fortune helped mobilize the tea party movement. The id they unleashed — the naked white nationalism, the anti-big government hysteria, all those conspiracy theories — helped seed the ground for Donald Trump. David and his brother refused to donate to Trump, but he is in many ways the culmination of their work.

The consequences of the groundwork laid by the Koch brothers will shape American politics beyond Trump. David helped his brother build an infrastructure to train a generation of lawyers, scholars, and politicians who would carry the Koch mission into the future. And in a memo reported by CNBC in June, APF’s CEO said the group would now consider backing Democrats. But this shift was hardly proof that the Kochs, or the organizations they helped found and fund, had liberalized. Instead, APF wanted to keep the Democratic Party from moving left by protecting incumbents “who lead by uniting with others to pass principled policy and get good things done.” In other words, conservatives who might find themselves targeted by the next Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and would support the family’s in oil and gas interests from the Green New Deal.

David Koch died before he could reap the full bounty of his works. We will not be so lucky. His legacy is poisoned water and dirty air, decimated unions, and Donald Trump. No amount of arts patronage can purify that stain. It is likely not coincidental that the small government the Kochs desire would leave artists and scientists at the mercy of billionaires’ largesse. It’s as if he and his brother wanted to pitch us all on their vision for the world: If we let their companies gobble as much as they could, they would throw us a scrap or two. Never enough to live on; just enough to hold us until the next handout. They would allow us a glimpse of beauty, a mirage of progress, so that we would readily accept a cage.

Protected from consequences by death as his money protected him in life, David Koch is dead.