

Paste

The Mercer Family, Ultra-Rich Steve Bannon Backers, Accused of Racist Comments

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A wealthy family, the Mercers, backs the alt-right and Donald Trump. So Joshua Green claimed in his book *Devil's Bargain*. This came as news to those of us outside of Washington: who were the Mercers? The funding angle checks out, but much of the family remains a mystery. There's been an opalescent fog where the Mercers should be. Who are they? And what do they believe?

Regarding who they are: Robert Mercer is a computer scientist, and the operator of the highly successful and lucrative Renaissance Technologies, a hedge fund. As to what they believe—that's the more interesting question. Robert and his wife Rebekah have been roving up and down the political heart of darkness for a while now: they are the heart of the funding alliance behind Breitbart, Trump's campaign, and the Brexit movement.

Mercer has been called one of the most influential billionaires in politics; he's put his unspeakable shoulder to the reactionary wheel a dozen times. He helped the Citizens United ruling, he backs the Cato Institute, the Heritage Foundation, the gold standard, and a dozen zany fringe political beliefs and establishments. According to a report by Jane Meyer in the *New Yorker*, Robert Mercer has never given an interview explaining his political beliefs:

... Trevor Potter, the president of the Campaign Legal Center, a nonpartisan watchdog group, who formerly served as the chairman of the Federal Election Commission, said, "I have no idea what his political views are—they're unknown, not just to the public but also to most people who've been active in politics for the past thirty years."

On Monday, *Esquire's* Charles Pierce published a column where he unrolled the whole sordid story. Apparently, Mercer is being sued by a former Renaissance partner, a gent who goes by the handle of David Magerman. Pierce cited *Vanity Fair* documents, which do not paint the Mercers in a flattering light:

In court papers filed on Friday, Magerman argues that following a pair of phone conversations in which Mercer expressed arguably racist opinions, Magerman felt obliged to inform the press about his boss's viewpoints—and that he received verbal assurance by Renaissance C.O.O. Mark Silber that the statements he intended to make were "permissible under company policy." Those racist opinions, according to Magerman, included comments such as: a) The United States began to go in the wrong direction after the passage of the Civil Rights Act in the 1960s; b) African Americans were doing fine in the late-1950s and early-1960s before the Civil Rights Act; c) The Civil Rights Act "infantilized" African Americas by making them dependent on government and removing any incentive to work; d) The only racist people remaining in the United States are

black; and e) White people have no racial animus toward African Americans anymore, and if there is any, is it not something that the government should be concerned with.

The *New Yorker* told the same story, but from a different angle. The Mayer feature elaborated that Mercer “for his part, has argued that the Civil Rights Act, in 1964, was a major mistake ... Mercer has asserted repeatedly that African-Americans were better off economically before the civil-rights movement. ... He has also said that the problem of racism in America is exaggerated. The source said that, not long ago, he heard Mercer proclaim that there are no white racists in America today, only black racists.” Mayer said that Magerman told her that “Bob believes human beings have no inherent value other than how much money they make ... if someone is on welfare they have negative value.”

What is unique in the Magerman case is that these statements are now matters *in a court of law*, and will be played out in public. *Vanity Fair* again:

The best part of the filing, at least to us, was that when Magerman “point[ed] out that society was segregated before the Civil Rights Act and African Americans were required to use separate and inferior schools, water fountains, and other everyday services and items,” Mercer allegedly responded that “those issues were not important.” In a subsequent phone conversation (the “white supremacist” one), Magerman claimed Mercer initially “disputed that he had said such things, although he did not actually deny saying them” and “in the course of rehashing the conversation . . . repeated many of these same views, and even cited research that allegedly supported his opinion that the Civil Rights Act harmed African Americans economically.” (A spokesman for Renaissance declined to comment.)

As Pierce points out, “American politics long has been afflicted with wingnut plutocrats,” dating back to the reactionary, race-baiting John Birch Society that the Koch Brothers’ father, Fred, helped start. According to Magerman and these documents, the Mercers are one more in an extensive line of the long shadows cast by great fortunes.