



## Oilman David Koch set the world on fire, then died and left us to face the rising flames

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David Koch led a remarkable life in which he and his brother Charles — the legendary or notorious, depending upon your politics, Koch brothers — turned their right-wing oilman daddy's fortune into untold billions. They made so much money that David could give some away to pet causes like the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) while electing the ultraconservatives who wished to destroy it. But when he died Friday at age 79, David Koch had only lived to see the early stages of his greatest creation.

The destruction of the planet.

We'll never know if Koch — who'd been reportedly ill these last few years and had retired from energy giant Koch Industries, one of the world's largest private companies — was aware that his final days on an increasingly endangered planet Earth included the hottest recorded month since humans invented thermometers, Greenland's biggest known ice melt, insane summer temperatures in Europe's capitals, with the world enveloped in flames from Alaska to Siberia to finally, and most alarmingly, the Amazon rain forests of Brazil, the so-called "world's lungs" now suffering from emphysema.

We do know this, however: David Koch — like his entire generation of greedy oil and coal barons and all the shortsighted politicians who grabbed for their white envelopes of cash at gin-soaked fund-raisers — almost certainly knew he would die before his three late-in-life kids, as well as my children and yours, would have to face the flooding, the rising seas, the droughts and all the mass migrations and violence that come with that, as well as a great extinction of species. Instead of using their billions to fix it, they purchased the gaslight of denial to convince the masses it wasn't happening.

Harry Truman said famously, asked for a comment on the passing of a longtime political nemesis, that "it's a damn shame when anyone dies." And so it was a damn shame when David Koch finally passed — and my sympathies to his family and the people who knew him. He was certainly a complicated figure, who claimed that surviving a 1991 airline runway crash (35 people died) changed his life and did give away billions to popular nonpolitical causes, most notably cancer research.

But 99.9 percent of us didn't know David Koch; we've only had to deal with the vast public influence of a man whose greatest impact was his belief that freedom was just another word for a

completely unfettered brand of capitalism where there were no environmental protections for the world whose resources Koch Industries so rapaciously extracted, and no pity for a dying middle class. There should be no waiting period to discuss David Koch and his legacy, not when the thick smoke from the burning Amazon is blotting out the Sao Paulo skyline.

The Koch brothers inherited their free-market-on-Viagra politics from their dad, Fred Koch, who not only founded Wichita-based Koch Industries but helped launch the notorious right-wing-extremist John Birch Society, which believed that Communists were fluoridating your water and that Dwight Eisenhower was a secret agent of Moscow. His sons put a barely kinder-and-gentler face on such radicalism, with David Koch running for vice president on the Libertarian Party ticket in 1980 because apparently Ronald Reagan was too liberal for them.

Multiple books and articles — including the seminal work of The New Yorker’s Jane Mayer — have been written about the political influence of the Koch brothers. But the newest — *Kochland*, by Christopher Leonard — sheds important fresh light on the issue at hand: Denial of the science of global warming. Leonard revealed how the Koch brothers sprung into action in 1991, when a Republican president, George H.W. Bush, seemed likely to win passage of a so-called cap-and-trade program that would have curbed greenhouse gas pollution as well as Koch Industries profits.

While today’s climate crisis almost certainly requires more radical measures than cap and trade, such a move would have at least put the GOP on record in acknowledging man-made global warming and that Washington has a role to play in reducing it. The Koch brothers — with an estimated net worth of \$120 billion built on aggressive oil exploitation, even if it meant allegedly sucking up oil unlawfully from under Native American reservations — weren’t going to let that happen.

David Koch, chairman of the board of Americans for Prosperity, speaks at the Defending the American Dream summit hosted by Americans for Prosperity at the Greater Columbus Convention Center in Columbus, Ohio, in August 2015.

The same year, the Cato Institute — a libertarian think tank heavily funded by and reflecting the views of the Koch brothers — sponsored an event called “Global Environmental Crisis: Science or Politics?” that laid the foundations of climate-crisis denial and brought in key skeptics of the increasingly established science such as MIT meteorologist Richard Lindzen. The successful killing of the cap-and-trade proposal was also the launching of their decades-long war against science.

The power and notoriety of David and Charles Koch peaked in the late 2000s and early 2010s, when the election of Barack Obama as president, a sliver of remaining moderate Republicans who believed in climate action, and more indisputable evidence of a warming planet again posed a perceived threat to the brothers and their fossil-fuel regime. In those years, the Kochs spent hundreds of millions of dollars either on campaign contributions to climate deniers and their fellow travelers or to fund the “grassroots” Americans for Prosperity, which whipped up the frenzy that was the Tea Party.

Interestingly, the Koch brothers largely didn’t support Donald Trump, but the monsters they created had already escaped from the lab. The foundations of radical free-market politics — fostering distrust of educated elites to convince the masses to reject science, turning to religious

fundamentalism to get working-class folks to vote against their economic interests — morphed into the angry, other-hating far-right populism that gave us Trump.

The same kind of politics that gave us Brazil's new right-wing president, Jair Bolsonaro.

Bolsonaro took office in January — after running a hate-filled campaign that tripled down on homophobia as well as his affinity for the legacy of his homeland's history of authoritarian coups — with a pro-development agenda that not only mocked environmental protection but gutted the regulatory agencies tasked with enforcing it. That sounds crazy radical but honestly it's little different from the governing principles of the Koch-funded Republican Party that has controlled at least one branch of U.S. government for 16 of the last 18 years and dominates our courts.

Like Trump, Bolsonaro is the bastard child of free-market Kochism run amok. As [Vox noted in a recent analysis](#), climate denial — with its distrust of scientific elites and global cooperation such as the Paris climate accords — goes hand-in-glove with far-right nationalism. In Brazil, the effects have been rapid and catastrophic. Experts say that wildfires primarily in the Amazon and adjacent rain forests have nearly doubled so far in 2019, and the pro-land-clearing green light from the autocrat in Brasilia that some have dubbed "Captain Chainsaw" seems to be the primary cause.

Climate change activist Greta Thunberg arrives to board the Malizia II boat in Plymouth, England earlier this month. The 16-year-old who has inspired student protests around the world will leave Plymouth, England, bound for New York in a high-tech but low-comfort sailboat.

The Amazon forests have [performed a valuable task](#) for humankind: Absorbing excess carbon from the atmosphere and storing it. Not only are the growing wildfires reducing that ability, but the flames are releasing millions of tons of this stored carbon (and other pollutants) back into the atmosphere. At a time when Earth just experienced its hottest month in July and when Arctic ice melting is decades ahead of earlier dire predictions, it's impossible to overstate the threat to civilization of this rapid downward spiral — all triggered by the awful authoritarian politics of Bolsonaro's Brazil.

Bolsonaro (64), Trump (73), Charles Koch (83) and the recently departed David Koch are part of the most cynical generational ploy in the history of civilization. If a majority of the world's climate scientists are right and we're fast running out of time to prevent the loss of biodiversity and the human hardships that will be triggered by fire, flood and drought, none of them will be alive to see what they've wrought. To them, the certainty of the massive profits from exploiting fossil fuels, or winning an election, was worth the accelerating risks, even to their own grandchildren.

Already, the generation of those grandkids is desperately trying to save the world from the mess that the Koch brothers and their ilk have made. It's teenagers and even "tweens" like [Sweden's Greta Thunberg](#) and the [Americans Alexandria Villaseñor and Isaac Harte](#) who've taken the lead on organizing a badly needed [global climate strike](#) on September 20. They've joined with others in supporting the Green New Deal, a radical plan for ending carbon pollution that probably would have been less radical if the world had acted in 1991 instead of falling again and again for the lazy downhill politics of denial.

Now, today's young generation is trying to save a house that's already on fire. I'd say that it's fitting that David Koch shuffled off this mortal coil in the exact same week that the Amazon

finally caught on fire uncontrollably — but it's more than just fitting. It seems this was the plan all along.