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David Koch helped build a libertarian empire. It turned out to be a paper tiger.

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The passing of David Koch, one of the legendary Koch brothers, puts a spotlight on their important political legacy. Their support for a largely uncompromising libertarian philosophy and politics helped to create the modern Republican Party — and therefore indirectly lay the groundwork for the triumph of Trumpism.

David Koch was a kind, generous and principled man. His philanthropic endeavors in areas such as cancer research and support of the arts have enriched or saved the lives of millions. But in politics, his legacy is quite different.

The Koch brothers first entered politics as the financiers of the nascent Libertarian Party in the 1970s. That party was formed as part of the libertarian response to Barry Goldwater's 1964 defeat. As mainstream movement conservatism veered from its original unrepentant opposition to the New Deal and the modern state, the true believers split off from the movement to create their own church: libertarianism.

The libertarian creed is a warped vision of the American founding. It takes the founders' essential insights — human liberty is essential to human happiness, and democratic self-government is essential to the preservation of human liberty — and takes the second part out of the equation. This is a bit problematic in 21st-century America, to say the least.

Libertarianism's highest ideal can be found in the concluding portion of their "New Testament," Ayn Rand's "Atlas Shrugged." As the hardy band of industrialists led by John Galt returns to save America from the socialist "looters" and "moochers" — shades of "makers vs. takers" — they use their newly granted unlimited power to rewrite the Constitution. Their first clause: "Congress shall make no law abridging the freedom of production and trade."

Most readers likely find this line of thinking loopy and bizarre. But the Kochs' Libertarian Party platform of 1972 was merely an elaboration on this theme. And David Koch put his own name and fortune behind these ideas when he was nominated as vice president on the 1980 Libertarian Party ticket in opposition to that well-known socialist, Ronald Reagan.

Reagan's smashing political success pushed libertarianism in new directions. The Kochs themselves stopped funding Libertarian Party activity and instead channeled their resources into ideas. They bankrolled the Cato Institute and the Institute for Humane Studies, among other libertarian entities. The movement's political wing instead tried to subvert Reaganism from within by adopting the great man as their own. The result of the twin-track approach was wildly successful.

By the mid-2000s, most members of the conservative intelligentsia were libertarians in all but name. They largely agreed in principle with the aims of the hardcore libertarian movement, disagreeing with them only on matters of timing, prudence and social mores. Time and again, these core principles were revealed in political debate as movement conservatives, at least initially, opposed President George W. Bush's Medicare prescription drug plan or any government bailout of firms during the 2008 financial crash. The Koch brothers' reentry into national politics after 2008 with a more incrementalist version of their libertarianism was thus met with open arms by millions of Republicans.

The Koch conquest was made manifest on a debate stage in 2011. In response to a question from journalist Byron York, every Republican presidential nominee pledged to oppose a budget deal that included even \$1 in tax hikes in exchange for \$10 in spending cuts.

Reagan would have been appalled. He always backed a strong social safety net and believed in raising taxes when necessary. He decried the conservatives — whom he called “ultras” — who preferred the purity of defeat rather than striking a deal that gave you part of a loaf and let you come back to fight for more later. But none of that mattered by the mid-2010s. The Koch-influenced conservative intelligentsia had largely convinced Republican officeholders that implicit opposition to the modern state was a political winner.

Except that wasn't correct. Polls always showed that even large numbers of Republicans liked entitlement spending, backed public subsidies for education and supported hiking taxes on the rich. Conservative intellectuals, blinkered by their ideological blinders, saw none of this.

It took Donald Trump to show that the libertarian emperor had no clothes. He had never been active in movement circles, and hence did not know that one had to bow before the verities the Koch brothers had created. His ideas were crudely put but were essentially the antithesis of their views — a clarion call for government action in trade, immigration, infrastructure and preserving entitlement spending. Trump exploited the gap between GOP elite thinking and GOP voter preferences and wiped out the entire field. Koch-ism had been shown to be a paper tiger.

None of this has sunk in yet on the Koch-educated acolytes. Reagan wrote in response to the 1964 Goldwater debacle that “human nature resists change and goes over backward to avoid radical change.” So it is with the coterie of Never Trump libertarians. They, like Republicans who hated Franklin D. Roosevelt and Democrats who yearned for Reagan's demise, await the day when “that man” is gone and they can resume their rightful places in the GOP hierarchy. Like their intellectual ancestors, though, they are sadly mistaken.