

READER

Will two too many Kochs spoil the *Tribune*?

By: Michael Miner – May 1, 2013

The Koch brothers, David and Charles, aren't particularly identified with Chicago yet except as archenemies of our favorite son, Barack Obama. That might change. They may soon take over one of our local institutions, the *Tribune*.

Those who fear the worst are fearing it increasingly noisily. The Newspaper Guild and its parent Communication Workers of America just issued a statement calling on the Tribune Company to publicly pledge that "they'll only sell to a buyer that will protect the objectivity of the news product." Said the unions: "Recently you've seen many petitions asking that the Koch brothers not be allowed to buy the Tribune Company's newspapers. We understand why the Kochs breed this distrust. They are active political proponents of harsh right-wing positions. We're also not certain that Tribune will listen to anything but money when the final decision is made."

And the Huffington Post posted a story describing a dramatic moment at another Tribune Company daily, the *Los Angeles Times*. At an awards ceremony, columnist Steve Lopez asked for a show of hands.

"Raise your hand if you would quit if the paper was bought by Rupert Murdoch," he said. A few hands went up. Then he said, "Raise your hand if you would quit if the paper was bought by the Koch brothers." And according to HuffPo, about half the staff put their hands up.

The Koch brothers passed from anonymity to notoriety among rank-and-file liberals three years ago, when the *New Yorker's* Jane Mayer published a story the magazine called "Covert Operations: the billionaire brothers who are waging a war against Obama." Mayer introduced the Kochs as among the very richest men in America, with a combined worth of \$35 billion, as "longtime libertarians who believe in drastically lower personal and corporate taxes, minimal social services for the needy, and much less oversight of industry," and as opponents of the Obama administration on so many fronts "that, in political circles, their ideological network is known as the Kochtopus."

Key scary passage:

In 1958, Fred Koch [their father] became one of the original members of the John Birch Society, the arch-conservative group known, in part, for a highly skeptical view of governance and for spreading fears of a Communist takeover. Members considered President Dwight D. Eisenhower to be a Communist agent. In a self-published broadside, Koch claimed that "the Communists have infiltrated both the Democrat and Republican Parties." He wrote admiringly of Benito Mussolini's suppression of Communists in Italy, and disparagingly of the American civil-rights movement. "The colored man looms large in the

Communist plan to take over America," he warned. Welfare was a secret plot to attract rural blacks to cities, where they would foment "a vicious race war." In a 1963 speech that prefigures the Tea Party's talk of a secret socialist plot, Koch predicted that Communists would "infiltrate the highest offices of government in the U.S. until the President is a Communist, unknown to the rest of us."

David and Charles have vastly expanded the family enterprise (Koch Industries, in Wichita), according to Mayer, and maybe there's a comforting principle taught in business schools that says an ambitious son must choose between the old man's business and the old man's crackpot philosophy, because he can't afford to take up both. Mayer presented David and Charles as altogether more rational than their father. Even so, she described two minds fixed on the task at hand: underwriting a procorporate, libertarian movement in America while obstructing Obama at every turn.

Charles sounded a bit like his father when he warned in the company newsletter in early 2008 that America "could be facing the greatest loss of liberty and prosperity since the 1930s." A year later he wrote that this prediction was "coming true." This year he wrote that "when someone asks me what last November's election results mean for our country, my answer is simple: They are part of a trend that, if not reversed, will destroy the American dream." In the same message he shared his suspicion that "it is because we have spoken out so strongly in favor of economic freedom and innovation, and against cronyism and fiscal irresponsibility, that we have been the target of so many political and media attacks."

If you have more billions than you know what to do with, an important message to get out, and endless media attacks to endure, a solution to this predicament doesn't have to scream to be noticed: Buy your own media! The Tribune Company just came out of bankruptcy and is looking to sell its eight newspapers—piecemeal or, preferably, in one fell swoop. The Kochs are highly interested. They'd be buying the *Tribune* in Chicago, the *Times* in LA, and six other titles. Not a bad megaphone for whatever the brothers want to get off their chest.

And speaking of media attacks, there was a dandy Tuesday in the *LA Times*. David Horsey is a two-barreled *Times* opinionator—he's both cartoonist and columnist—and he let the Kochs have it with both barrels. His cartoon radiated the contempt that's been a familiar part of the *Times* ethos since the Tribune Company bought the *Times* in 2000 and made it answer to Chicago. The column that accompanied the cartoon traced the corporation's sorry recent history and explained that the banks and hedge funds that now control it want to unload the papers for about \$1 billion.

"A buyer would need cash to burn and a motivation other than making an easy profit," Horsey went on. "That is where David and Charles Koch come in. . . . Having fallen short of their objective of crushing Democrats and liberalism, they now apparently believe a necessary component in their strategy is ownership of a few major newspapers. It is doubtful they want to merely have a voice on the editorial pages, as has always been a publisher's prerogative. It is far more likely they hope to create print versions of Fox News.

"Is that what citizens in L.A., Chicago, Baltimore, Orlando, Ft. Lauderdale, Hartford, Hampton Roads and Allentown want? Do they know what is about to happen? And, most of all, do they care enough to start making a big stink?"

I have a more immediate question. What do the people at the *Tribune* want? The *Times* has always had the more insurrectionary staff, with colonization topping their list of grievances. But at the *Tribune*, who'd quit if the Kochs take over? That's what *Sun-Times* staffers did by the dozens when Rupert Murdoch took over that paper in 1984. But it was a different time. Not long ago Murdoch was rumored to be in the market for the *Tribune* and *LA Times*, and I asked a few people at the *Trib* what kind of a reception he'd get there.

After Sam Zell, and bankruptcy, and rule by JPMorgan Chase—Murdoch didn't look all that bad to the *Tribune's* newsroom, just as he apparently doesn't look all that bad to the *Times's*.

"I'm not filled with despair," said one *Tribune* writer. "Hey, at least he's a newspaper guy," said Mary Schmich. "He has a good eye for what works for different markets. I like his version of the *Wall Street Journal*. Things could be way worse than Rupert Murdoch, at least theoretically."

But the Kochs aren't newspaper guys.

The reading on the Kochs from inside the Tower that I'm most curious about is what op-ed columnist Steve Chapman thinks of them. Chapman's a libertarian. He wrote about the Kochs¹⁴ months ago in connection with their campaign to take over control of the libertarian Cato Institute and oust its president, Ed Crane. Chapman wasn't pleased. An admirer of Crane's, he wrote: "Crane says their goal is to turn it into 'yet another political arm of their vast empire.' If so, they will be turning gold into straw. Cato's value is precisely that it's not a political entity but an idea factory, where the goal is sound research and intelligent advocacy on important issues. It's hard for me to imagine that getting rid of Crane, who has steadfastly upheld its mission, will be for the good. The Kochs should keep something in mind: It took decades to establish Cato's reputation. Wrecking it wouldn't take nearly so long."

Three months later, Crane was out.

I asked Chapman if he had the same sort of qualms about the Kochs and the Tribune Company. He replied that he'll keep his thoughts to himself for the time being and when he expresses them, it'll be in his own column. Fair enough.

I also asked *Tribune* columnist Rick Kogan. Kogan was part of the '84 *Sun-Times* exodus, and I knew he didn't expect history to repeat itself if Murdoch took over the *Tribune*. But again, what about the Kochs? Kogan's the subject of my column in the print *Reader* this week, and when we talked the other day the brothers came up.

"Half the people don't know who they are," said Kogan, who admitted he doesn't know a lot about them himself. But he knew the *Tribune* had seen worse. "There are very few people around who remember what a strange owner and imperial owner Robert R. McCormick was," he told me. "And what his politics were, which would probably fly in the face of 95 or 99 percent of everybody who works at the *Tribune*."

As for the Kochs, "the thing they may not realize if they want to make a sea change is that there's a shitload of work involved. There are editors at all these papers, editorial pages at all these papers. Basically, you'd have to go out and hire a bunch of like minds to run

them." And if and when the Kochs did that, maybe some people would start resigning; and then the papers would be compromised, their names cheapened.

But unless matters reach that point, "Frankly, I can't see anybody in these perilous times walking out of here no matter who buys the place," said Kogan. "I don't know if anybody has the ideological balls to quit. Murdoch was a different scene back in '84. There were other newspapers, other jobs, many of us were quite young and didn't have families. It was a different environment. Some guy here who's 37 years old and has a wife and three kids—you can always excuse it [the sale] with a 'let's wait and see' attitude.

"There's nobody I know who'd go, 'Oh, it's the Koch brothers. I quit.' *Nobody* I know. Everybody would be in a wait-and-see attitude."

Including Kogan?

"Absolutely," he said.