



Will the CATO Institute lose its soul?

Posted By [Stephen M. Walt](#) ■ Friday, April 13, 2012 - 12:14 PM ■



In one of my [earliest posts](#) on this blog, I argued that America's penchant for counterproductive global interventionism was driven by not one but two imbalances of power. The first was the imbalance of power between the United States and the rest of the world, which made it possible for Washington to throw its weight around without worrying very much about the short-term consequences. If you're a lot stronger than anyone else, it's hard to imagine you could lose to anyone and you're more likely to do something stupid like invading Iraq.

The second imbalance was the disproportionate influence of pro-intervention forces within the U.S. foreign policy establishment. As I put it back in 2009:

"America's rise to global primacy was accompanied by the creation of a well-developed set of institutions whose stated purpose was to overcome isolationist sentiments and to promote greater international activism on the part of the United States. American liberal internationalism didn't just arise spontaneously as America's relative power grew, it was actively encouraged by groups like the Council on Foreign Relations (founded in 1921), and a whole array of other groups and organizations. These institutions don't always agree on what specific actions the United States ought to take, and they aren't the sort of clandestine capitalist conspiracy depicted by Lyndon Larouche and other fringe groups. But together they stack the deck in favor of doing more rather than less."

I went on to describe the DC think tank world (i.e., groups like AEI, Heritage, Brookings, Carnegie, etc.) and the numerous special interest groups that lobby for their own particular causes. And then I noted that:

"By contrast, there are at most a handful of institutions whose core mission is to get the United States to take a slightly smaller role on the world stage. There is the CATO Institute. . . and maybe a few people at the Center for American Progress and the New America Foundation. And there are plenty of peace groups out there with an anti-interventionist agenda. But these groups are hardly a match for the array of forces on the other side."

I mention all this because there seems to be a concerted effort underway to turn one of those organizations -- the CATO Institute -- into another member of the pro-intervention choir. In particular, right-wing industrialists Charles and David Koch (who are long-time CATO supporters) have recently sought to place several new members on CATO's board of directors, and have filed a lawsuit challenging its current governance structure. You can read about this power struggle [here](#) and [here](#).

Why does this matter for foreign policy? Because, as CATO Vice-President for Foreign Policy Studies Christopher Preble lays out in this [blog post](#), the individuals the Kochs are seeking to appoint hold views that are decidedly antithetical to the libertarian, mostly realist,

and generally peace-oriented foreign policy perspective that has been CATO's trademark, and which is an increasingly rare perspective in post-Cold War, post 9/11 Washington. Preble also notes that the Koch Foundation helped sponsor an invitation-only seminar series at the American Enterprise Institute last year, whose lineup consisted of a "who's who" of hawkish neo-conservatives (Eliot Cohen, Walter Russell Mead, Eric Edelman, Niall Ferguson, etc.). Each of the speakers was a strong supporter of the Iraq War, which tells you something about where the Kochs are coming from.

It's a free country where just about everything is potentially up for sale, and the Kochs are free to use their money to try to shape public discourse as they see fit. Needless to say, they haven't been exactly shy about **doing that**, though a commitment to truth doesn't seem to be a high priority of theirs. But if their efforts to transform CATO succeed, we will lose one of the few influential institutions in Washington that consistently calls for a more sensible and restrained foreign and defense policy. I'm not a libertarian and I don't agree with all of CATO's positions on these matters, but a further narrowing of public discourse on foreign policy is not what the country needs right now. So I hope CATO's current management wins this fight, and that the institution remains true to its original vision. We'll be better off as a country if it does.