



Save the Cato Institute, Save the World?

My libertarian think tank is fighting off a hostile takeover by strongly partisan donors. Here's why it matters.

BY JUSTIN LOGAN | APRIL 12, 2012

Why do think tanks exist? Are they really, as the common phrase goes, "**universities without students**?" Are they just places where aspiring government officials can do the spadework for their next run at being appointed deputy secretary of something or other? Or perhaps they've stepped into the void created by what some have termed the "**cult of irrelevance**" in the academy, which used to be a source of advice about public policy but has become too abstruse and method-intensive to be of much use to harried policymakers?

I've had ample reason to ponder the subject, considering that the think tank at which I work, the Cato Institute, is currently **defending itself** from a hostile takeover attempt by Charles and David Koch, two billionaire industrialists who are **intensely involved in partisan politics**. (For those who don't know, Cato's mission is to "increase the understanding of public policies based on the principles of limited government, free markets, individual liberty, and peace." This libertarian orientation frequently puts us at odds with both political parties.)

Here's the quick and dirty on what's happening. The Kochs are suing Cato to obtain total control of the institute. They recently began forcing out Cato's libertarian board members and **replacing them with Koch operatives** who are financially dependent on and/or otherwise entangled with the Kochs. Two of the people they tried but failed to force onto our board were John Hinderaker, a **self-described "neocon"** who writes for the hawkish and partisan Powerline blog, and **Tony Woodlief**, who declared that libertarian foreign-policy scholars "sound like absolute fools" or, alternatively, like "naive sophomores," and went on to egregiously mischaracterize some of the things libertarians

have said about foreign policy in recent decades. He's within his rights to do so, but those stated views make him an odd pick to sit on Cato's board.

Beyond their hawkish, anti-libertarian board nominees, the Kochs recently funded a project that could fairly be labeled Neoconpalooza, as my colleague Chris Preble documents [here](#). (Quick summary: The Charles G. Koch Foundation gave money to AEI to host a seminar series featuring six speakers, all of whom were strong supporters of the foreign policy of the George W. Bush administration.)

More broadly, they've made clear that they want Cato to be **more responsive to research requests from their partisan activist groups like Americans for Prosperity**. Do those groups really want to hear detached scholarship arguing that **security threats are overblown**, that **immigration is a net plus for the country**, that the war on drugs **has pointlessly killed tens of thousands of Mexicans**, and that the United States should **dramatically scale back its global military ambitions**? Probably not.

We are fighting back for one reason: to preserve our independence. Cato presently has a broad base of supporters who like the cut of our intellectual jib, and its current leadership has shown a willingness to support its scholars, even when it costs the institute money. After Cato scholars opposed the first Gulf War, former Treasury Secretary William Simon, who was then running the Olin Foundation, pulled Olin's money out of Cato in protest. A number of donors didn't much like our opposition to the 2003 Iraq War, either, and some pulled out money. In both cases, management watched the money go rather than buckle to pressure. These decisions to bleed money in defense of our scholars proved that we were doing work for principle, not for sale.

Back to the opening question, then: What are think tanks for? They really aren't universities without students. Each think tank has a particular ideological orientation, whether neoconservative (AEI, FPI, CAF), liberal (CAP), libertarian (Cato) or establishmentarian (Brookings, CEIP, CFR). Each of those places hires people of a particular persuasion; it would be much stranger to see someone who worked on foreign policy at Cato move to AEI than it would be to see a professor move from the University of Chicago to Harvard. Think tanks come from a particular point of view, and as long as everyone is up front about his or her point of view, there's nothing wrong with that.

What about the quality of the work that comes out of think tanks? Tevi Troy of the Hudson Institute has argued -- mostly persuasively -- that **the work of think tanks has been "devalued"** by politicization and partisanship. He **went on to write** that "the struggle over Cato's leadership threatens to drag it down to the partisan place occupied by too many other think tanks." He's right.

It's important to note, however, that this politicization has been in the works for a long time. In **a 1984 book**, Mac Destler, Les Gelb, and Tony Lake noted that AEI's transformation from a dustier, more academic place into a more mainstream (and more politically relevant) outfit was based on its new president, William Baroody, realizing

that "Washingtonians were not great readers. What they really wanted were facts and arguments to buttress their political predilections."

In other words, thinking is hard, so in the current setup, a policymaker has the luxury of just going with his gut and shopping around for a friendly think tank to give his instinct the imprimatur of scholarly credibility. That's not a good model. On too many foreign-policy issues, the breadth of disagreement inside the Beltway lies between the seven- and nine-yard lines at one end of the field. Haven't there been enough recent failures in U.S. foreign policy that we ought to broaden the scope of discussion?

Although it is no doubt partly a function of having foreign-policy ideas that are unpopular in Washington, Cato's foreign-policy department prides itself on including a broad range of opinions in its events. Michael O'Hanlon, a strong supporter of the Afghanistan war based at Brookings, graciously accepted [our invitation to debate Joshua Rovner of the U.S. Naval War College on the merits and demerits of the war](#). Similarly, we recently hosted [a debate on bombing Iran](#) that featured, on the one hand, Jamie Fly of the Foreign Policy Initiative and Matt Kroenig of Georgetown (both pro-war) and Nuno Monteiro of Yale and Rovner (both anti-war). When you come to a Cato foreign-policy event, we hope you flash back to your grad-school seminars where people really mixed it up.

It bears noting that **Foreign Policy** has done a service by hosting academics like [Dan Drezner](#) and [Steve Walt](#), both of whom are willing to call BS on Washington when it veers too far into Crazytown. But we need more of this, not less. The more stultified and insular Beltway foreign-policy debates become, the freer hand elected officials will have in conducting foreign policy. Given the quality of policymakers' gut instincts in recent decades, this is a prospect we should fear. Big, dumb decisions like Iraq could easily have been avoided [if policymakers had listened to the experts](#).

The Irish-American polemicist Finley Peter Dunne wrote in the early twentieth century that a good newspaper, among other things, "comforts th' afflicted, afflicts th' comfortable, buries th' dead an' roasts thim aftherward."

In a better world, more foreign-policy think tanks would see that as their mission. Under its current leadership, Cato's foreign-policy team does. And we hope that the future will see more think tanks -- of all ideological stripes -- viewing their mission the same way. But if the Kochs succeed in their effort to gut Cato and integrate it more seamlessly into their political projects, our independence will be lost, and Washington's comfortable foreign-policy elite will have one fewer group of scholars to afflict them. That's a development everyone should want to avoid.