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## Would a Koch Takeover of Cato Make War With Iran More Likely?

The drumbeat for war in Iran is getting louder, but opposition is coming from a seemingly unlikely source: the Cato Institute. This libertarian think tank generally sides with the Right, but it has long shown an independent streak, sometimes bucking conservative orthodoxy on civil liberties, the war on drugs, and U.S. militarism.

Will that change if Charles and David Koch succeed in their efforts to take over Cato?

The group is locked in a legal battle with the billionaire brothers, who have filed a lawsuit to appoint two-thirds of Cato's board of directors. Cato chairman Bob Levy has just [released a letter](#) accusing the Kochs of trying to steer the group in a more partisan direction and compromise its independence. As detailed in Brave New Foundation's upcoming film *Koch Brothers Exposed*, the Kochs are indeed notoriously partisan, funding Republican politicians in each election cycle and now [allegedly promising](#) to devote more than \$200 million to defeating President Obama in 2012. Although they have long been financial backers of Cato -- the group was originally named the Charles Koch Foundation -- this move would put the organization entirely under their control.

That's scary. For now, several thinkers at Cato are opposing the rush to war with Iran and refusing to shy away from criticizing Republicans. Senior fellow Doug Bandow [writes](#), "The consequences of any war with Iran would be extraordinary. Probably far worse than resulted from the invasion of Iraq." He [assails](#) Republican presidential candidates for their "reflexive war-mongering against Iran" because "every additional threat to attack Iran only more clearly demonstrates to Tehran the necessity of developing nuclear weapons."

Malou Innocent, another foreign policy expert at Cato, says America should ["ignore the hawks on Iran,"](#) including those at the more reliably right-wing American Enterprise Institute. She is also calling for a [quick end](#) to the "waste of money, effort, and, most importantly, lives" resulting from the war in Afghanistan.

Independent voices like those at Cato serve a critical function in the national debate on war and peace. They show that peace is not simply the domain of progressives; it's something that Americans of any political stripe can get behind. Without such voices, progressives can more easily be marginalized and ignored.

So what happens when partisans like the Koch brothers get their hands on an institution that exhibits flashes of independence? In Cato's case, we can expect that independence to evaporate. The candidate they back for president, Mitt Romney, has been [saber-rattling](#) on Iran. And the Kochs have already tried to [pack the Cato board](#) with people like self-proclaimed neoconservative John Hinderaker, who once wrote, "It must be very strange to be President Bush. A man of extraordinary vision and brilliance approaching to genius, he can't get anyone to notice. He is like a great painter or musician who is ahead of his time, and who unveils one masterpiece after another to a reception that, when not bored, is hostile." Does anyone think guys like that are going to preserve any hint of independence at Cato?

As Alex Pareene [writes](#) at Slate, "Cato is mostly antiwar, decidedly anti-drug war, and sponsors a lot of good work on civil liberties. That ... is basically what the Kochs don't like about them, because white papers on decriminalization don't help Republicans get elected."

Little by little, our democracy is coming under the thumb of those who have more and more. The Koch brothers aren't the only big shots commandeering the public debate, but they do represent the worst of this frightening trend. That's why fights like the one between Cato and the Kochs should matter to progressives: the nation's most urgent public policy decisions, including ones involving war and peace, may hang in the balance.