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## *Take My Koch Brothers -- Please*

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Please excuse the digression but for the first time since I started blogging for the Huffington Post in December 2009 I'm going to write about something other than private military and security contractors.

Perhaps some of you are aware of the recent kerfuffle between the CATO Institute, the Washington, D.C.-based libertarian think tank, and America's most famous sibling plutocrats -- oops, I mean revered billionaire success stories, the [David H. and Charles G. Koch brothers](#). Yes, THOSE Koch brothers, the godfathers of Koch Industries.

Actually, in the interest of good vocabulary, this is more than a kerfuffle. Serious word experts agree that this could rise to the level of a row or ruckus -- possibly even an uproar. Maybe not as potentially catastrophic as, say, launching a future war of choice against a certain Persian country, but still serious -- especially for those few remaining Americans who think serious scholarship is necessary, even vital, for good policy.

In the past, the Koch brothers, in their voluntary role as the Johnny Appleseed [funders](#) (their motto: from little multimillion donation acorns mighty free market trees grow) of conservative and libertarian groups, and in more recent years, Tea Party types, have given money to such groups across America. How much money? LOTS of money; more than an estimated \$100 million. Talk about putting your money where your mouthpieces are.

Like most people in recent years I've become more aware of the Koch brothers financial support of various right-wing causes but have never been overly concerned about it. I mean this is America. I'm pretty sure that when I served in the Navy one of the constitutional rights I was protecting was the right of plutocrats -- sorry, I mean descendants of successful capitalists -- to use their über riches to manipulate public opinion however they saw fit.

But when the news came out this past week that the Koch siblings [had filed a lawsuit](#) to take control of the CATO Institute, the nation's most prominent libertarian think tank, my ears perked up. I'll explain why momentarily, but first some background.

Although it was incorporated as a non-profit group, CATO is effectively owned by a board of shareholders. Until recently, this board consisted of Cato President and Founder Ed Crane, Charles Koch, David Koch, and the late William Niskanen, who died last October, each holding equal shares in the corporation.

According to the Kochs' complaint, when Niskanen died his shares should have been returned to the corporation, giving the Kochs majority control on the board of shareholders. Instead, the shares were transferred to his widow. The Koch brothers, doing their best to imitate Simon Legree, or perhaps Gordon Gecko, [are suing](#) her over stock she inherited worth \$16.00.

The Kochs maintain their suit is simply about enforcing the shareholder agreement. *The Washington Post* quotes Charles Koch [as saying](#), "We support Cato and its work. We want to ensure that Cato stays true to its fundamental principles of individual liberty, free markets, and peace into the future, and that it not be subject to the personal preferences of individual officers or directors."

But CATO's Crane and CATO Chairman Bob Levy charge the suit is about transforming Cato into a less independent and more political (if not also more partisan) institution. You can find Cato's view [here](#).

The essence of [CATO's charges against the Kochs](#) is that they seek to take over CATO by packing the board with Koch supporters -- and they already control seven of our 16 board seats, two short of outright control -- thus transforming CATO into an intellectual ammo-shop for American for Prosperity and other allied (presumably, Koch-controlled) organizations.

By the way, given that the Koch brothers have long been the funding source that makes Republican party fundraisers go pitter-patter, am I the only one to see the irony that the brothers seem to be channeling the infamous "court-packing" scheme that Democratic President Franklin Roosevelt proposed when the Supreme Court was declaring much of his New Deal unconstitutional?

Now, the Koch brothers might be well intentioned. But as one commentator [noted](#):

*Many libertarian-leaning organizations receive money from the Kochs and their foundations and are attacked on this basis. Such attacks can be deflected, as financial support is not the same thing as control. But if the Koch brothers themselves represent the controlling majority of an organization's board, that organization is, by definition, a Koch-run enterprise. Progressive activists and journalists will have a field day with this. They will forevermore characterize the CATO Institute as "Koch-controlled" -- and, as a*

*legal matter, they will be correct. No efforts to re-establish the Institute's credibility or independence will overcome this fact...*

*Even if one assumes that the Kochs have better ideas for how Cato should direct its resources, know more about how to advance individual liberty, and are correct that the Institute is too "subject to the personal preferences of individual officers or directors," any benefit from whatever changes they could make will be outweighed to the permanent damage to Cato's reputation caused by turning it into a de facto Koch subsidiary. In short, they will have destroyed the Cato Institute to save it.*

Now, in the interest of full disclosure I have a loose but longstanding relation with CATO. Back in my student days I won first prize in their 1987 [Foreign Policy essay contest](#). Since then I've written papers for CATO on various military and foreign policy issues. In 1999 it made me one of their adjunct scholars, the equivalent of being on a farm league sports team, which mostly means they refer reporters to me when its own scholars are too busy to take their questions. Since then I've written two papers for CATO spoke at one of its policy forums, and listed my affiliation with them on the pieces I've published elsewhere.

I don't agree with all of CATO's positions but on the issues we have in common, in the military and foreign policy sphere, I have long been impressed by both its scholarship and its passion.

Let's face facts. In Washington, D.C., where the Military-Industrial-Congressional-Entertainment (MICE) complex reigns supreme, it is the only top-ranked think tank willing to speak truth to power and say that America is better off being a republic, not an empire or Globocop. The rigorous scholarship and first-rate intellectual firepower it has brought to that task long ago earned my respect.

Personally, as a veteran, I like a group that thinks American soldiers, sailors, Marines, and pilots should be used just for defending American interests, not as the 911 emergency help line for the rest of the world.

I'm also old enough to remember a time when real American conservatives understood and agreed with that. But that was way back in the 20th century and this is now.

Still, the prospect that a CATO Institute controlled by the Koch brothers might be reduced to a shop producing talking points for political front groups like those conceived by the like of Karl Rove -- such as American Crossroads -- understandably induces angst. It's the equivalent of expecting the American Enterprise Institute to serve as the bat boy for Rush Limbaugh.

Given that some of the people the Koch brothers want to put on CATO's board are firmly in the neocon camp, one doesn't have to be a rocket scientist to see that a Koch-controlled CATO Institute is one big win for unbridled militarism and one big setback for those advocating small government and individual liberty.

Note to the brothers: Other billionaire capitalists, like George Soros, seem to understand this so it can't just be your money that makes you blind on this point. Perhaps it is the fluoride in the water supply. If so, if you want to take over the American Dental Association, you have my support.

But in the meantime, to paraphrase that famous America political philosopher "[Henny Youngman](#)", I think we should just say, "Take [away] the Koch brothers -- please."