



Ed Crane Has Left the Building

June 27, 2012 By [Jeremy Lott](#)

So it looks as though the Koch v. Cato struggle is drawing to an end. Ed Crane will be out as president of the Cato Institute at the the end of September. John Allison, former president of the megabank BB&T will take over the reins then, not as interim president but as the guy who will run the show indefinitely. Here's the detailed Cato [press release](#) and here's Dave Weigel [making the case](#) that this is a win for the Crane faction against the so-called Kochtopus.

Who is John Allison? Some people are whispering that "Who is John Galt?" is the better question. I first became aware of the man when he gave a suitably impressive speech at the Competitive Enterprise Institute's annual dinner in 2009, but his main *entre* into the world of DC libertarianism was arranged by the Ayn Rand Institute.

(Though to be fair, we should also note the thing that started to catch people's attention was BB&T's heroic refusal under Allison to finance work on projects acquired through eminent domain takings.)

Allison is a dedicated Randian. When he was head of BB&T, he had his management read *Atlas Shrugged* and has donated a lot of money to Objectivist education efforts. This could present Cato with two different sets of problems.

The first set of problems has to do with foreign policy. Many Randians are intensely hawkish and Cato's foreign policy is, to put it mildly, not hawkish. In his opening remarks to Cato scholars, Allison said that he did not want Cato's foreign policy to be the Republican Party's foreign policy. That's all to the good but this bears watching because the foreign policy work Cato does is important.

During the Cold War, Cato's non-interventionism was a non-starter but it really matters now. The Republican Party has become objectively pro-war and the Democratic Party is nearly indistinguishable, except that Democratic presidents are actually perversely more likely to pursue small wars that have nothing to do with concrete American interests (see Kosovo, Lebanon).

What's needed is a whole new framework for how to think about these things. The radicalism of libertarianism thinking on foreign policy could be a great help in creating this new framework — one that's far less likely to upset the peace of nations. However, this sort of intellectual project is not easy even at a libertarian think tank. Indeed, there was a lot of debate within Cato over even Iraq.

Crane himself vacillated before finally siding with the foreign policy shop against their detractors. Will Allison do the same thing in the clutch? Right now, we don't have enough information to say.

The second set of problems almost has to do with religion. For the two years I worked at Cato, I often found myself likening the place to the Catholic Church. You had Ed Crane as the pope; Executive VP David Boaz as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith; other VPs as princes of the church; clergy in the form of its scholars; RAs as catechumens; and interns, Cato U attendees and other supporters as the ordinary faithful.

Crane wasn't the worst leader for such an institution. He made some of the right big calls. But read this [Washingtonian piece](#), I dare you, and then try to tell me that he doesn't come across a bit as one of the corrupt popes who spurred the Reformation.

In raising a flag about Allison's Objectivism, it's necessary to make some rough distinctions. Crane and Boaz are, in their own way, Randians, but they are not associated with any of the at-times cultish organizations that serve as keepers of the flame.

Allison is. If he brings a mass of Randians with him into Cato, that could pose a problem for those who do not buy all of what the famous novelist espoused, or the stridency with which she espoused it.

That said, the incoming president of Cato seems a fairly normal guy with a positive, Southern disposition. Compared to the Crane I know, he's Mary Sunshine.

In his CEI speech several years ago, Allison struck some interesting notes. The one I liked best, his chief criticism of the left, was that progressive economic beliefs amount to a kind of religious dogmatism at odds with the normal business of the American people. That he was so close to that business for so long — he started at BB&T in the early '70s and retired at the end of 2008 — seems to me only to the good.