



Koch Brothers Take On Camo-Wearing Cops

By Tim Mak
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Democrats have long loathed the conservative billionaires, but they're united on one topic, at least: militarized police. How the Kochs are working to prevent the next Ferguson.

The convergence of the progressive left and libertarian right over police demilitarization is yielding a liberal-tarian moment—and it's brought to you by the Koch brothers.

Groups on the left have been among the loudest voices condemning police actions in Ferguson, Missouri, after the fatal shooting of unarmed teenager Michael Brown this month. But the Koch brothers, boogeymen of national Democrats, have long funded libertarian groups that laid the intellectual groundwork for opposing police militarization, a phenomenon that now has been discussed and denounced much more widely.

The militarization of police in particular is an issue the Koch brothers view as necessary to tackle and which they have spent years fighting, a spokesman said.

“We need to address issues such as overcriminalization, excessive and disproportionate sentencing, inadequate indigent defense that is inconsistent with the Sixth Amendment, and the militarization of police,” Mark Holden, general counsel of Koch Industries Inc., told *The Daily Beast*. “We have deep respect for the moral dignity of each and every person and because of this, we’ve worked for decades to support those who defend the full range of individual rights.”

Radley Balko, *The Washington Post* reporter who wrote the book *Rise of the Warrior Cop: The Militarization of America's Police Forces*, stands virtually peerless as a writer on the issue. He got his start at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank originally named the Charles Koch Foundation, before moving on to *Reason* magazine, which also receives money from the Koch brothers.

“Balko has been a kind of one-man category creator on this stuff,” said *Reason* editor in chief Matt Welch. “*Reason* did police stuff before, but he really popularized it as a topic

institutionally at both *Reason* and *Cato*, and created a subgenre of what I call ‘Radley Balko libertarians.’”

Other writers, scholars, and speakers at *Reason* and *Cato* have followed in Balko’s footsteps, railing about police tactics and equipment. In short, say those funded by the Kochs, they have been sounding the alarm against the militarization of police for longer, and more persistently, than the left.

“We’ve been more consistent, on a sustained basis, hammering away and trying to draw attention to this militarization trend,” said Tim Lynch, director of the Cato Institute’s Project on Criminal Justice. “Our friends on the left have been more hit and miss on it.” The left’s interest appears to flare up, he said, only when the national conversation turns to police tactics, such as during Occupy Wall Street or in post-Ferguson unrest.

The Koch brothers have also found a urgent voice for the demilitarization of police in Rep. Justin Amash (R-MI), an outspoken libertarian member of Congress. The Kochs helped fund Amash’s competitive primary race this year.

When the House voted on the Pentagon spending bill in June, Amash was just one of a handful of Republicans to support progressive Rep. Alan Grayson’s amendment to limit the transfer of equipment from the military to local law enforcement.

“The images and reports out of #Ferguson are frightening. Is this a war zone or a U.S. city?” Amash wrote on his Facebook page in mid-August. “The government escalates tensions with its use of military equipment and tactics.”

In part due to Koch funding, there is now a moment of potential cooperation between the progressive left and the libertarian right following the unrest in Ferguson.

“It is an issue in which there is overlap between liberal and libertarian concerns, yes, a chance for coalition building as long as both sides don’t get injuriously punctilious about ‘playing with the other side,’” said Brian Doherty, a senior editor at *Reason*. “Libertarians might hope it’s a teaching moment, as you might say, about the dangers and nature of state power.”

Kara Dansky, the author of a report on the militarization of police and a senior counsel at the ACLU, also said the time is ripe for potential cooperation between libertarians and progressives.

The right and left see the militarization of police differently, she said, with libertarians focusing on Pentagon equipment and federal grants for local law enforcement, and progressives taking issue with the “militarization of policing in communities of color.”

But regardless of their different lenses, she said, “there seems to be a convergence of interests” between the two sides.

It's not the first time: After 9/11, the Kochs gave the ACLU \$20 million to fight the PATRIOT Act.

Disclosure: Five years ago, the author received a 10-week Koch Summer Fellowship.