

Thinking About the Battle for Cato

By [Jonah Goldberg](#)

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I've been asked by a bunch of readers what I think about the battle for Cato. My short answer is "I really don't know." Most of what we see in print is the version of the story offered by Ed Crane and his allies. They're probably telling it exactly as they see it. But emotions are running hot and it's entirely possible — and understandable — that some of the details, nuance, and good faith has fallen by the wayside.

My own personal view of Cato is that it is a great and good institution that does very fine work with many brilliant and honorable people aboard. But, very broadly speaking, it often has a very highly cultivated desire to be seen as not just [nonpartisan](#) but equally opposed to both Republicans and Democrats alike. That's often fine. Many libertarians do in fact have serious philosophical differences with mainstream conservatism and the Republican party. But sometimes the aloofness strikes me as a bit too contrived and self-indulgent — and ultimately counterproductive. As I've been arguing for years in the context of the now somewhat charmingly antiquated debate over "[libertarianism](#)," where libertarians have the most — one might even say *any* — significant impact is on the right and, broadly, within [the Republican](#) party. I wouldn't be overly troubled if the Cato Institute took a few steps in the direction of recognizing that fact.

If the pro-Koch version of the story is to be believed I see nothing horrifying about what they are trying to do, and much that might be beneficial. The Kochs helped create Cato and have created and nurtured other libertarian institutions as well. There's little in that history that suggests to me they do not understand the distinctions between scholarship and activism or the healthy tensions between upholding principle and seeking relevance. Then again, if the [pro-Crane version](#) is to be believed, the Kochs are simply up to no good (at least from the Cato-institutionalist perspective).

Again, there's a huge amount we — *I* — don't know about what's going on behind the scenes. And I am not enough of a libertarian Kremlinologist (Catologist?) to figure out who to believe or what to think.

Except for one thing. It's hard for me to see how a direct takeover by the Kochs wouldn't be a p.r. disaster for Cato and its intellectual wares. All of the other arguments boil down to conjecture about what the Kochs would or might do with direct control of Cato. But one thing that requires no such speculation about motives is the simple observation that the Kochs are fairly radioactive these days.

Jonathan Adler explains the problem very well. The difference between “Koch-funded” and “Koch-controlled” is big in such a hostile media environment. Personally, I hate the suggestion that right-leaning institutions should bow to that environment. The Kochs have become so unfairly maligned that's it's even more annoying to give so much weight to this argument. But it has weight nonetheless. I don't know if it's a knockout argument, though. The truth is that for the next year, Cato's work product would be received through a partisan filter no matter what, because we are in the early stages of a brutal presidential campaign against the most anti-libertarian president in our lifetimes. How a Koch-controlled Cato would be seen after 2012 is a different conversation.

If I sound absurdly ambivalent, it's only because I am. Contrary to some of my more youthful views, I actually hope for a healthier and more robust libertarian movement, not necessarily because I always agree with them. But because even when I don't, libertarian arguments make conservatives smarter and more principled.

My attitude towards this increasingly nasty fight is the reverse of the old Kissingerian quip about the Iran–Iraq war: It's a pity only one side can win.