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Cato Scholar to Kochs: ‘You Can’t Probably Fire Me, I Sorta Quit!’

By Daniel Foster

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Occasional NR contributor Julian Sanchez offers a “[pre-resignation](#)” from the [Cato Institute](#):

I don’t generally subscribe to the popular caricature of the Kochs as supervillains. For a lot of progressives, the Kochs now serve the same function as [the Liberal Media](#) does for conservatives: The shadowy elite cabal whose pernicious influence explains why your own common sense views aren’t universally embraced, as they otherwise would be by all right-thinking Americans. Obviously, I don’t buy that, and in any event, of all the ways wealthy people use money to influence politics, openly sponsoring ideological advocacy seems by far the least pernicious. So if this were ultimately just about an ego contest between the pretty-rich guy (Cato President Ed Crane) and the insanely rich guy (megabillionaire Charles Koch), I’d be content to keep my head down and scribble away without too much regard for what the nameplate on the top-floor corner office reads. Nothing personal, Ed.

[. . .]

Unfortunately, it’s fairly clear already that rather more than that is afoot. [As my colleague Jerry Taylor lays out over at Volokh Conspiracy](#), after years of benign neglect, the Kochs have suddenly decided to use their existing shares in the Institute to attempt to pack the board with loyalists, several of whom are straight-up [GOP](#) operatives.

[. . .]

I can’t imagine being able to what I do unless I’m confident my work is being judged on the quality of the arguments it makes, not its political utility—or even, ultimately, ideological purity.

[. . .]

As I said, I'm in no great hurry to leave a job I enjoy a lot—so I'm glad this will probably take a while to play out either way. But since I'm relatively young, and unencumbered by responsibility for a mortgage or kids, I figure I may as well say up front that if the Kochs win this one, I will. I'm not flattering myself that they'll especially care; I'd just be saving their appointee the trouble of canning me down the road. But I suspect I wouldn't be the only one looking for the door under the administration they seem to be envisioning, and my hope is that saying this publicly now might encourage *someone* in the Koch empire to reconsider whether they can win this particular prize without damaging it.

I respect Julian as a thinker, though I can't say I know him beyond Twitter and the occasional e-mail. And of course, his career is entirely his business. But I have to say, this has me scratching my head.

For one thing, it's bizarrely hasty. What ever happened to wait and see? The Kochs haven't made clear what changes they will or will not make to the way Cato operates should they succeed in their (at first blush, obviously justified) attempt to assert greater operational control. Admittedly, they would probably do well to say something on that score, if only to poke some rays of light through the cloud of doom that seems to follow them around. (Speaking of which, what is Sanchez here doing if not reinforcing the very “Kochs as supervillains” narrative he purports to reject?)

The Kochs *could* be seeking to turn the great libertarian think tank into an arm of the Republican Party. They could also be seeking to turn the [Republican Party](#) into an arm of the libertarian movement. Even a little bit of the latter would, of course, be a boon to Sanchez, as it would put his papers on, e.g., civil liberties into more staff offices on the Hill. By foreclosing or ignoring this possibility, he instead seems to affirm the caricature (which is, sadly, too often accurate) that the worst thing you can accuse a libertarian of is political efficaciousness. That they will fight to their dying day to remain irrelevant.