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KOCHS VS. CATO, ROUND TWO

Posted by *Jane Mayer*

It's really interesting to watch libertarians' rising sense of disbelief and outrage over the Koch brothers' attempt to take over the Cato Institute, the most prominent and respected libertarian think tank in the country. Suddenly, many former defenders of the Kochs are beginning to question the intellectual integrity and political purity of their benefactors. In one sense, it seems a petty and personal squabble within a small political faction. But from another standpoint, the stakes are much higher, putting to the test the lingering question of whether libertarianism is in fact a non-partisan intellectual movement, as its adherents insist, or just a fancy-sounding name for a subset of the Republican Party, aimed at enhancing the wealth and power of its deep-pocketed donors.

Clearly, many libertarians who have long been funded by the Kochs genuinely believe that their cause is about promoting individual liberty and peace by reducing the role of the government—in other words, lofty, laudable goals, not just some hackish partisan political agenda. Suddenly, however, they are confronted with the news that the Koch brothers, who control half the seats on Cato's board, have, as the Cato Chairman Bob Levy told the *Washington Post*, been choosing “Koch operatives,” their goal being to align the institute more closely with the Republican Party.

Indeed, several eye-opening insider accounts appeared over the weekend, suggesting that what Charles Koch, the C.E.O. of Koch Industries, essentially wants is to transform Cato into an “ammo” shop, manufacturing whatever ordnance it takes stop President Obama from getting re-elected next November. In a fascinating post appearing at the Volokh Conspiracy, Jerry Taylor, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, writes about a meeting last November between, on one side, David Koch and several Koch functionaries, and, on the other, Cato Chairman Bob Levy: They told Bob that they intended to use their board majority to remove Ed Crane from Cato and transform our Institute into an intellectual ammo-shop for Americans for Prosperity and other allied (presumably, Koch-controlled) organizations.

Americans for Prosperity, co-founded and heavily funded by David Koch, is an ostensibly non-partisan advocacy group, but, according to Taylor, the Koch faction's complaint about Cato was that he “wasn't doing enough to defeat President Obama in November and that we weren't working closely enough with grass roots activists like those at AFP.”

As proof that the Kochs are more interested in achieving Republican victory than in promoting libertarianism, Taylor goes on to examine their candidates for Cato's board, noting that the roster includes individuals who have derided libertarians, opposed gay rights, and supported former President George W. Bush and the Iraq War, in defiance of libertarian principles. In summary, Taylor declares that the Kochs' insistence that they are merely insuring that Cato hews to its principles, is, in a word, “dishonest.”

Similarly, and equally stunningly, Gene Healy, a vice president at Cato, fired off “An Open Letter to Koch Program Alumni” on Monday. In it, he notes that he owes his career to Charles Koch, but says, “On Thursday, Charles G. Koch told the press, ‘We are not acting in a partisan manner, we seek no “takeover” and this is not a hostile action.’ With all due respect, Mr. Koch, *that is not true.*” (A fuller version of Koch’s statement is included in my previous post on this subject.)

Healy describes the Kochs’ attempted takeover in the words of an unnamed friend who said it’s nothing less than “a big leap down a pernicious path that most of Washington started down long ago. It strangles one of the last places in town that doesn’t put politics first.” Healy adds, “That’s what’s at stake, and that’s why we fight.”

Also on Monday, Julian Sanchez, a research fellow at Cato, wrote what he termed a “pre-resignation” letter, effective if the Kochs’ efforts succeed.

“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,” Sanchez said. “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 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.”

And Jonathan Blanks, a researcher at Cato, wrote a critical post of his own about the situation in which he said, “Just because we support legalized prostitution doesn’t mean we want to live it.” The wake-up call to the libertarian movement concerning its benefactors’ partisan political ambitions seems a bit overdue to some of those who have been watching closely during the past few years. As Bruce Bartlett, a conservative economist who was drummed out of the National Center for Policy Analysis for criticizing President Bush, told me yesterday, “This is not all together surprising. It happened at the American Enterprise Institute to David Frum. Staying on the good side of the Republican Party was more important than maintaining its integrity. The conservative right-wing Republicans who fund all these places now see they can serve their own agenda of paying no taxes, and screwing the hell out of the poor. They’ve drunk their own Kool-Aid on Obama. They see the guillotine around the corner, and they want to do anything they can to stop it.”

As for the Kochs in particular, Bartlett suggests that after a lifetime on the fringe, “maybe they’ve tasted political power” and found that they quite like the flavor.

A spokeswoman for the Kochs has not yet responded to a request for comment.