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The Gekko Institute Comes to Washington

Posted by [Jane Mayer](#)

The right wing appears to have a bad case of Internet Envy. Ben Smith [writes in Politico](#) that a secret group of conservative funders is planning to spend millions to launch a new Washington non-profit aimed at levelling what it sees as the progressive side's competitive advantage in advancing its political agenda online. Specifically, the conservatives are intent upon countering what they see as the dominance of the Center for American Progress, a Washington-based policy research and advocacy organization founded in 2003 by John Podesta, who was once Bill Clinton's chief of staff.

Indeed, the new group more or less borrows its liberal rival's name, calling itself the Center for American Freedom—a title that underscores the extent it will, as Smith writes, be “part assault on CAP and part homage.”

The irony, for anyone familiar with recent political history, is that CAP itself resulted from an earlier similar sense of inferiority in the partisan arms race. During the nineteen-eighties and nineteen-nineties, liberals felt that they were seriously out-gunned in the Washington think-tank wars by a cluster of conservative organizations such as the American Enterprise Institute (which was originally founded under a different name in 1938), the Heritage Foundation (founded in 1973), and the Cato Institute (which was founded in 1977). Accompanying these broadly-focused advocates for social and economic conservatism were single-issue organizations like Accuracy in Media, which advanced a right-wing critique of mainstream news organizations, and a number of organizations aimed at countering mainstream judicial and legal theories, such as the Institute for Justice.

Indeed, the history of subsidized conservative idea factories stretches back at least to the New Deal, when American business leaders quietly organized a well-funded, but somewhat hidden public-relations campaign against Franklin Roosevelt. That project, chronicled in Kim Phillips-Fein's indispensable history, “Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan,” can be seen as morphing seamlessly into the current propaganda wars. Even during the zenith of what seemed like “liberal consensus” in America after the Second World War, Phillips-Fein writes, “a few prominent business leaders were outraged by the New Deal, which they saw as a

challenge to their power and place in American society. Their antagonism towards the economic order it created never truly abated.”

It’s surprising that conservatives should feel overwhelmed at this particular moment. After all, there are already a number of right-leaning online news outfits, such as the Daily Caller, that can spread the right’s message digitally.

Nonetheless, as Smith writes, some conservatives, who decline to be named, think that they need to sharpen their edge in advance of the 2012 election, and pour more money into keeping up with CAP, which has established a lively online presence. One feature of the Center for American Freedom’s communications operation will be a daily publication calling itself the Free Beacon.

At the helm of this project, according to Politico, will be Michael Goldfarb, a thirty-one-year-old former *Weekly Standard* writer. Goldfarb is now a partner in the lobbying firm Orion Strategies, where his clients include Charles and David Koch, the billionaire brothers whose political activities I’ve [written about](#) for *The New Yorker*, and whose private fortune has funded numerous other right-wing libertarian policy shops, from the Cato Institute to the Mercatus Center at George Mason University. Goldfarb declined to tell Smith whether or not the Koch brothers are involved in funding this latest political gambit. A corporate spokesman for the Kochs, however, issued a preëemptive [denial](#), asserting that “contrary to unfounded speculation by Politico and others, neither Charles Koch nor David Koch, nor any Koch company has provided funding to or has any involvement with the Center for American Freedom.”

Imitation may be the sincerest form of flattery, but John Podesta, CAP’s founder, isn’t impressed. When I e-mailed to ask him what he thought of his brand-new conservative imitator, he suggested that rather than aping his own outfit’s name, it should provide more truth in labelling. “They should call it The 1% or maybe The .01% Solution,” he wrote, “—or perhaps just The Gekko Institute.”