

Family Feud

In defense of the Cato Institute.

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Ideological snits and quarrels are the rightful province of feckless leftists. Their neverending dissensions give them something to Occupy (as it were) their time and distract them from making mischief. Sometimes these leftists are not so feckless and make the mischief of seizing power. Then they chop off each other's heads with their logic-chopping, to the general relief of their neighbors. Ideological snits and quarrels are goods upon which a high value may be placed. And I, for once, am willing to be a socialist and freely redistribute them to our enemies.

We who hold the truth to be self-evident that all men are created equal and endowed with unalienable rights to life, liberty, and no less than an 8:1 ratio of gin to vermouth in our martinis stand above such petty arguments of political doctrine. Except when we don't. And now we have in our midst a knockdown, a drag-out, a Katy-bar-the-door.

The wonderfully conservative Koch brothers are trying to take control of the magnificently libertarian Cato Institute, a spectacularly stupid thing to do. For those who savor the fulsome atmosphere of worthies savaging worthies, the whole dirt can be found behind the privy door of the nearest blog-house. But to give just a whiff:

Cato was founded in 1977 with generous funding from Charles and David Koch, though later they gave the think tank less, and, lately, nothing. In a moment of excess admiration for marketplace models, Cato, though a nonprofit, was established with individual shareholders. Half the shares are owned by the Kochs, a quarter are owned by Cato president Ed Crane, and, until his death last October, the remaining shares were owned by Cato board chairman William Niskanen. The Kochs argue that Niskanen's widow, Kathryn Washburn, cannot vote his shares and that, according to the Cato charter, she must offer to sell the shares back to the corporation, which would put Charles and David Koch in charge. Kathryn Washburn, Ed Crane, and the Cato board of directors argue the contrary.

The Koch brothers' motive seems clear, to the extent there's clarity in human motivation. They want to rid the Oval Office of a pest and Congress of the pestilence's plague-carriers. In their battle against statist disease, the Kochs seem to regard Cato's individualism as too individualistic. They want a more collective effort to cure collectivism.

Current Cato board chairman Bob Levy met with David Koch and some of Koch's political advisers last November. According to Levy, "They said that a principal goal was to defeat Barack Obama. The way David put it was, 'We would like you to provide intellectual ammunition that we can then use at Americans for Prosperity and our allied organizations.' AFP and others would apply Cato's work to advance their electoral goals."

Of course, if David Koch had bothered to read the Cato trove of books, articles, policy analysis, and research on the Obama administration's bunk and boners, he would have found six-shooter ammunition enough to burst through the swinging doors of the Electoral Goals Saloon and make every sarsaparilla-drinking tenderfoot in the Democratic party dance.

But Cato *shouldn't* be involved in partisan politics. It is a 501(c)3 organization forbidden from campaigning for or against any candidate on pain of "termination with extreme prejudice" by the most ruthless and powerful of U.S. intelligence agencies, the IRS.

And Cato *wouldn't* be involved in partisan politics. Bill Niskanen was a man of such upright libertarian principles that, as chief economist for the Ford Motor Company, he denounced Ford for embracing import quotas on Japanese cars. Ford fired him. He was acting chairman of President Reagan's Council of Economic Advisers but was kept from permanent appointment because of disagreements with Treasury Secretary Donald Regan, whom he later called "a tower of jelly." After the dust of the Reagan revolution had settled, Niskanen wrote, "In the end, there was no Reagan revolution."

Kathryn Washburn, Niskanen's wife and heir, has the same sequoia spine. As does Ed Crane. No matter how much lip service Republicans pay to individual liberty and no matter how reactionary progressive Democrats become, Ed steers Cato on a course, not between this Scylla and Charybdis, but straight at both the social conservative sea monster that pokes its heads into private life and the liberal-left whirlpool that sucks away private property.

And Cato *couldn't* be involved in partisan politics. Everyone there is a libertarian. You might as well command your cat to bring you your pajamas as tell a bunch of libertarians to get on the same political platform. I know these people. Ron Paul is a *bien-pensant* by comparison. Cato scholars prize contentious thought. Get in a debate with one and you'll find out he doesn't even agree with himself.

And because I know these people I won't pretend I don't have a dog in the fight. I've been friends with Ed Crane and Cato executive vice president David Boaz for 25 years. Cato has aided me with almost everything I've written about politics. Maybe saying so will lower the institution's prestige enough that the Koch brothers will leave it alone. If they prevail they'll

lose Cato's H.L. Mencken Research Fellow. (The position—unpaid and worth it—was conferred on me by Crane back when the insensitive language in Mencken's diary was shocking the kind of people who'd later forget to be shocked by Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky.)

More to the point, the Koch brothers will lose the think tank's impressive roster of thinkers and scholars. I haven't polled them as to who would stay and who would go under a Koch regime. But, as I said, I know libertarians. If the Kochs win the pot, they'll have to piss in it. It will be empty otherwise.

Meanwhile we neocons and paleocons and rank-and-file Republicans should understand how important Cato is. Libertarianism is of great worth even to those who consider *Atlas Shrugged* useful mainly as dead weight to keep the tarp on the above-ground pool from blowing away.