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The New Yorker's \$35-billion bogeymen

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Those Americans who put their faith in Barack Obama have difficulty admitting that he's not turned out nearly as well as they'd hoped. Which means they need someone to blame for the messes he hasn't been able to clean up. Fortunately, the Republicans, and their allies, are available for that purpose.

David Remnick -- editor of The New Yorker, and recently the author of a biography, *The Bridge: The Life and Rise of Barack Obama* -- has become one of the President's most enthusiastic apologists. His magazine's consistent opinion is that Obama is right most of the time and his critics and enemies are villains or buffoons.

This reached a new level in the Aug. 30 issue, with Jane Mayer's ambitious, close-to-interminable piece on David and Charles Koch. The pair have a family fortune of about \$35-billion, made through Koch Industries, which deals in oil and other commodities. Mayer believes they have spent perhaps \$100-million to influence opinion by creating the Cato Institute, the Americans for Prosperity Foundation, and many other organizations. She also blames them for the rise of the Tea Party movement.

Mayer is outraged at the mere existence of people who don't agree with the Obama administration on health care, taxes and environmental law. Her article is remarkably tendentious; every word is calculated to press home her thesis.

The Kochs and their colleagues declined to be interviewed by Mayer, who takes that as a licence to sprinkle anonymous sources through her argument. So we hear from "a financial expert who knows Koch Industries well" and "a longtime confidant of the Kochs" and "a top Cato Institute official." Not surprisingly, they all agree that the Kochs have too much power and use it unfairly.

Fred Koch, the father of the brothers, died 33 years ago. But he gets a prominent place in Mayer's article, anyway. He was a genuine kook, and by implication he helps to buttress her argument. He belonged to the John Birch Society, whose hyper-conservative members suspected that

President Dwight Eisenhower was a communist agent. Mayer doesn't claim that his sons simply adopted his opinions, but she conflates their ideas and in the process displays her own ignorance.

"Members of the John Birch Society," she writes, "developed an interest in a school of Austrian economists who promoted free-market ideals. Charles and David Koch were particularly influenced by the work of Friedrich von Hayek, the author of *The Road to Serfdom* (1944), which argued that centralized government planning led, inexorably, to totalitarianism."

Appearing together, those two sentences imply that the Kochs needed their father's connection with the Birch Society in order to learn about von Hayek. She seems not to know that his theories are familiar in every economics department in the world, and have been part of conservative thinking for generations. She obviously imagines him as a little-known eccentric who appeals only to fellow oddballs. She seems to find it ominous that Glenn Beck recently promoted *The Road to Serfdom* on the Fox network.

Mayer starts out to create a scandal around the Koch brothers but she goes so far, piling repetition on repetition, that her 10,000-word survey turns into a boomerang against her reputation and *The New Yorker's*.

The editors' handling of her piece was cagey. They titled the article *Covert Operations*, and she refers near the beginning to the Kochs funding "stealth attacks" on Obama. Her editors step slightly back from their headline with the caption identifying a sinister-looking photograph of David Koch. The caption says he and his brother have "quietly" given a fortune to right-wing causes. "Covert" and "stealth" differ from "quietly." The first two suggest secrecy and espionage; the third hints at modesty or routine practice.

But it is Mayer herself who deflates her article. It self-destructs under the weight of the very figures that support her case. How can we call anything "covert" when every detail of it is set down somewhere in government records, made public by law? Some of the facts may be scattered here and there but many have been helpfully assembled by the Democratic version of the Koch organization, the Open Society Institute, funded by a Democratic billionaire, George Soros.

Mayer has apparently made use of the Soros data, which has been generated for just such a purpose. Far from uncovering a scandal, she has merely reorganized already published information, making it appear fresh by wrapping it in thick layers of self-righteous indignation.

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