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The Cold, Crisp Taste of Koch

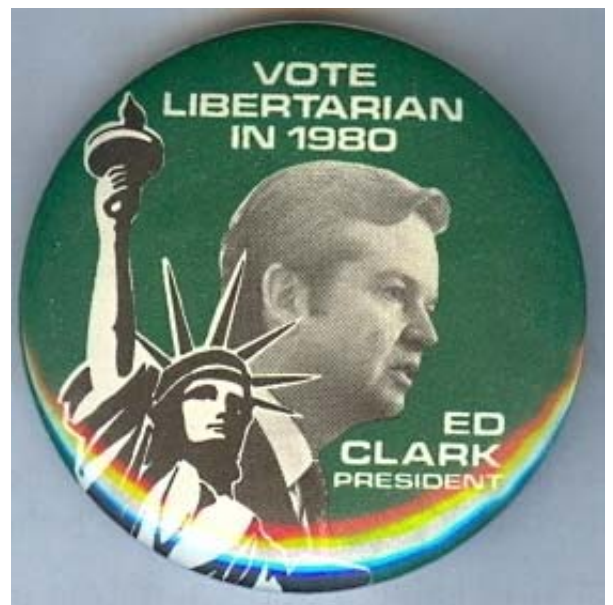
Jesse Walker | August 31, 2010

From Frank Rich's rehash of Jane Mayer's recent hit piece on the philanthropizin' oilmen Charles and David Koch:

When David Koch ran to the right of Reagan as vice president on the 1980 Libertarian ticket (it polled 1 percent), his campaign called for the abolition not just of Social Security, federal regulatory agencies and welfare but also of the F.B.I., the C.I.A., and public schools -- in other words, any government enterprise that would either inhibit his business profits or increase his taxes.

You might be wondering why the author thinks a campaign that wanted to abolish the FBI and CIA was "to the right of Reagan." It looks like Rich is just recycling Mayer's *New Yorker* story here: Mayer wrote that the Ed Clark/David Koch ticket "was running against Ronald Reagan from the right."

In fact, Clark is pretty much the sole Libertarian presidential nominee to have consciously presented himself as running *from the left*. (The only other case that even arguably comes close is Michael Badnarik, the party's standard-bearer in 2004, who played up his antiwar stances and established a friendly relationship with Green nominee David Cobb.) Clark told reporters he was a "low-tax liberal" (which, whatever else you think about it, rolls more trippingly off the tongue than "libertarian"); he issued white papers that presented a liberal-friendly, gradualist approach to shrinking the state; he got Eugene McCarthy to appear in a campaign ad and to write the intro to Clark's campaign book. (And then McCarthy turned around and endorsed Reagan, wrecking his lefty street cred. So it goes.) Frank Rich's description of what the "campaign called for" is drawn from the radical platform adopted by delegates at the Libertarian convention, not from the Clark/Koch campaign's own statements. Look at *those* and you'll find calls to reduce government spending to Kennedy-era levels, a suggestion that welfare need not be cut until unemployment is eliminated, and an education plan centered around the idea of a tax credit for "voluntary educational alternatives."



That was the Kochs' center-left side. In the Carter years, much of the brothers' libertarian largess went to projects with a far more left-wing flavor. Radical intellectuals and investigative journalists contributed to the Cato Institute's *Inquiry* magazine; Students for a Libertarian Society devoted most of its energy to opposing conscription and nuclear power. In June 1979, such activities prompted *National Review* to run its own contribution to the Koch-conspiracy oeuvre, featuring the immortal cover line "Anarchists, backed by corporate big money, infiltrate the freedom movement." Before Mayer was tracing the money trail from the Koch brothers to global warming skeptics, *NR*'s Lawrence Cott was warning conservatives that Koch funds were linked to the Campaign to Stop Government Spying, the leftist Institute for Policy Studies, and members of "the *apparat* that exposed the American agent who was murdered in Athens." To give you a sense of how excitable Cott could be, that scary-sounding line about the "apparat" was a reference to some *Inquiry* contributors who had also written for the anti-CIA magazine *CounterSpy*.

If you combine the accurate elements of the Cott and Mayer articles, you'll have the rudiments of a much more interesting story, one that may begin with the brothers' Bircher background and end with the rise of the Tea Parties but will take some unexpected detours along the way. The new narrative wouldn't be so easy to fit into a simple left/right, Red/Blue framework, let alone the pinko conspiracies of Cott's imagination or the corpo-conservative cabals of Mayer's. But the tale just might tell you a few things about the vast world to be found outside the *Crossfire* format.