

The billionaire Koch brothers: Tea Party puppetmasters?

The New Yorker makes a case that a pair of wealthy brothers is the force behind the Tea Party movement. Here, 5 key assertions from a new article

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The New Yorker's Jane Mayer has investigated the political funding networks of Charles and David Koch, two of the wealthiest people in America and generous donors to conservative political causes. In her 6,000-word story, Mayer makes a case that the billionaire brothers have funded and fostered the Tea Party movement as a well-disguised means to pursue their private political agenda. The brothers vehemently deny the claim, and Mayer's story has been written off by conservative bloggers as a "coordinated character assassination." Here are some of the key assertions in the article:

The family has a complicated relationship with communism

The family business, Koch Industries, was built up by the brothers' father, Fred, an "arch-conservative" and member of the staunchly anti-communist (some might say "paranoid") John Birch Society. But, ironically enough, the firm's financial success was built on the back of work done in collaboration with the Soviet government under Stalin in the 1930s, according to Mayer. By the 1950s and '60s, Fred Koch was raising the alarm about communists infiltrating U.S. society and government. In addition to a vast fortune, says Mayer, the Koch boys also inherited their father's "distrust of the U.S. government."

They funded a proto-Tea Party movement

The brothers' first step into the political arena came in 1980, when they were the key backers of Libertarian Party candidate Ed Clark's run for president, a campaign that "presaged the Tea Party movement." David Koch even became Clark's vice presidential nominee — though this, says Mayer, was mainly to overcome the legal limits on campaign donations. Despite the fact that David "spent more than \$2 million on the effort," the ticket received just 1 percent of the vote in the election that made Ronald Reagan president.

The Kochs promote global warming skepticism

During the 1980s and '90s, the brothers spent more than \$100 million creating the "Kochtopus" — a term coined by critics to describe their "network" of ideologically motivated organizations. In 2008, Mayer reveals, the three main Koch family foundations gave money to 34 political and policy organizations, many of which promote a skeptical view of global warming. The Kochs, for instance, funded the launch of the libertarian Cato Institute, which has been a fierce opponent of environmental reform. They also have given large sums to the Heritage Foundation and the Independent Women's Foundation, both doubters on the question of man-made climate change.

They are 'waging a war against Obama'

In 2004, David Koch helped found conservative advocacy group Americans for Prosperity, which Mayer says has been "instrumental in disrupting the Obama presidency." The Kochs' involvement, she writes, has been "intense"; one source even says it is "micromanaged" by the brothers — a charge they deny. "By giving money to 'educate,' fund, and organize Tea Party protesters, [the Kochs] have helped turn their private agenda into a mass movement," says Mayer. FrumForum's Tim Mak, a conservative, treats this with skepticism. "Try telling a [Tea Party] activist that they're an agent of the Koch family!" he says. "The Tea Party just can't be seriously controlled, only educated."

Are there Koch-funded political messages in the Smithsonian?

David Koch has become a top donor to the arts and sciences in recent years, particularly in his home city of New York. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Lincoln Center, and the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History have all benefited from his largesse. Mayer suggests that those donations might influence the recipient institutions, noting that — much to the frustration of some climate scientists — global warming exhibits in the Smithsonian's David H. Koch Hall of Human Origins "uncannily echo the Koch message." The museum dismisses these charges.