

Debate Post

David and Charles Koch, the anti-Obama billionaires

Ty Davis

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The building is massive, the windows opaque. Located on the northern outskirts of Wichita, in the middle of the Kansas plains, the building is hated by Democrats: it is the headquarters of Koch Industries, the industrial group of libertarian billionaires Charles and David Koch, who finance the Tea Party and a constellation of organizations hostile to « *socialism* » of Barack Obama.

The company is growing. According to a sign installed in the middle of the earthmoving machines, a new building is to be inaugurated in the spring of 2015. The main road will be moved. The Koch brothers, who say they receive threats regularly, wanted to expand their security perimeter.

Koch Industries is the second unlisted group in the United States, behind the multinational agribusiness Cargill. It employs 60,000 people in 60 countries, in various sectors: petroleum refining, pipelines, chemicals, fertilizers, glass, ethanol, but also diapers, toilet paper, fiber, automotive glass, financial products ... In September 2013, the Kochs have added electronics to their portfolio with the acquisition of Molex, one of the world's top three connector manufacturers.

The conglomerate achieved in 2013 a turnover of 115 billion dollars (92 billion euros), according to the magazine *Forbes*. Each of the brothers owns 42% of the capital. That is to say a fortune estimated at 34 billion dollars each. Between them, the Koch brothers represent the fifth American fortune.

Fratricidal fights

In the eyes of Democrats, « *Koch Brothers* » are the evil captains of a polluting industry – which has already earned them heavy fines. In Wichita, a locality of 400,000 inhabitants on the Arkansas River, they rule. Sculpture Garden, Wichita State University Basketball Hall: Charles Koch's name is everywhere. What the interested party, 79, finds « *a little worrying* », he told the *Wichita Eagle*. On the other hand, notes the daily, his brother, 74, who has settled in New York, likes to see “David H. Koch” on everything he finances.

In low-income neighborhoods, there are still a few dissidents. Louis Goseland, for example, of the progressive group Kansas People's Action. « *The Koch brothers are heavily invested in all aspects of the life of this community* », he denounces. On condition of anonymity, some say that it is not good to be a trade unionist or an environmentalist. A student who had organized a “green” march on campus was reminded that he was a recipient of a scholarship. He gave up.

The Kochs are considered to have a heavy hand whatever their activity. And even in the family: a twenty-year fight for control of the group has pitted Charles and David against the latter's twin, Bill, and the eldest of the family, Frederick, the only one who is not an engineer. It was only settled in court and after twisted blows worthy of the time when the father, an amateur boxer, encouraged fratricidal fights, according to the book by journalist Daniel Schulman, *Sons of Wichita* (Grand Central Publishing, untranslated), released in the spring.

“Cooking Topus”

For decades, the Kochs have been under the radar. The election of Barack Obama gave them wings. In 2010, they saw their libertarian dream come true with the Tea Party anti-tax revolt. They were able to channel the rebellion by funding the Americans for Prosperity association. Result: the “midterms” (mid-term elections) of November 2010 confirmed the ideological weight of the anti-State current on the republican movement.

Democrats then realized the extent of the network woven since the 1980s by the Koch brothers – network they have nicknamed « *Cooking topus* », an associative octopus whose tentacles include young people (the Generation Opportunity group), retirees (60 Plus Association), veterans (Concerned Veterans for America) or even climate skeptics (American Energy Alliance) ... In Washington, the libertarian brothers have relays in several think tanks (Heritage Foundation, Cato Institute).

The Kochs believe that social assistance creates “*A culture of dependence* ». They have funded more than 4,000 studies to demonstrate the benefits of removing the minimum wage for the market economy, according to filmmaker Robert Greenwald, author of a documentary (*Koch Brothers Exposed*) projected almost religiously in Democratic meetings.

Scarecrows

In 2012, American for Prosperity spent \$ 110 million, but did not prevent the re-election of Barack Obama. Not at all discouraged, the Koch brothers set out again to assault on the occasion of the midterms of Tuesday, November 4. This time without bothering with discretion: not only did American for Prosperity commit \$ 125 million to the campaign – up from \$ 40 million in 2010. But the Kochs created in June a *Super-PAC* (a political action committee), called Freedom Partners Action Fund; a first for a tandem who had always preferred the shade. This gesture allows them to fund candidates directly, but requires them to reveal the names of the donors.

According to an analysis by the Center for Public Integrity, the NGO that studies the financing of political parties, the main Koch-related pharmacies disseminated more than 43,900 election advertisements between the 1st January 2013 and August 31, 2014. That is almost a tenth of the

total volume of advertisements. “*If the Democrats lose the Senate, the Kochs can boast of having something to do with it*”, comments Professor Russell Cox of Friends University in Wichita.

As Barack Obama did in 2012, Democrats have chosen an anti-billionaire strategy and are using the Kochs as scarecrows in their fundraising. The Republican camp counted 134 references to the Koch brothers in the mouth of Democratic leader Harry Reid, in the rostrum of the Senate. Barack Obama himself accused them of preparing “*A takeover of our democracy by the business world*”.

Philantropie

Are the Kochs worried? For the first time, this fall they launched a public relations campaign to counter what they call “*Demonization*” of their empire. This is an advertisement showing the diversity of their employees, and their “*Pride*” to be part of a group too « *patriot* “ :« *We are Koch* » (“We are the Kochs”). Charles also published a column in the *Wall Street Journal* to denounce the ad hominem attacks of « *collectivistes* ». “*I am fighting to restore a society of freedom*”, he proclaims.

According to Brookings Institution political scientist Darrell West, there are 1,645 billionaires worldwide, including 492 in the United States. Some seek to advance their economic interests by “*Buying himself a senator*”. Others promote their ideological vision of the world: this is the case with the Kochs. Their political thinking borrows from that of their father, Fred, who became very anti-Communist after doing business in Stalin’s USSR. Inventor – disputed – of an oil refining process, Fred Koch was one of the founders of the John Birch Society, the far right movement of the 1950s and 1960s across the Atlantic. « *Since our teenage years, we have been very concerned to see our government evolve into a socialist and domineering type of government.* », David Koch told *Wichita Eagle*.

David Koch, like his father and brother, graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Boston. Former university basketball champion (he measures 1.95 m), he presented himself in 1980 on the libertarian ticket with Ed Clark for the vice-presidency of the United States. Since he was the only survivor of a plane crash in 1991, he has been very active in philanthropy, to the embarrassment of Democrats (1.2 billion donations in twenty years). In September, he financed – for 65 million dollars – a plaza in his name in New York, in the middle of V Avenue, in front of the Metropolitan Museum – inaugurated in the presence of the Democratic representative, all smiles, Carolyn McCarthy.

A week before the midterms, the Kochs even paid themselves the luxury of showing their music video « *We are Koch* » during the “Daily Show” of Jon Stewart, the very subversive presenter of the chain Comedy Central. Face immediately corrected by a counter-advertisement where the comedian rectifies the idyllic image of the Kansas ranches. « *We are the Kochs, sharks of capitalism influencing the democratic process since the 1980s...* ”