

## **Fran Alexander: Influence in the shadows**

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In case you, whether Democrat, Republican, Green, Libertarian or whatever, are curious how the politics in our country reached its current condition, examining a couple of drawings can explain a lot of the mystery.

Names neatly arranged in a web-like format inside the hardback edition of Jane Mayer's book, "Dark Money," depict organizations and entities that collectively have become known as the Kochtopus, and different designs can be found online as well. Visually displaying the network of the political spending of David and Charles Koch and their best billionaire buddies, these pages are a quick Who's Who reference to where the tentacles of this empire reach. The book, however, is more a story searching for, and sometimes finding, the reasons incredibly wealthy people spend hundreds of millions of dollars to gain control of the reins of this nation's government. We need look no further than these players to get a clue why so many governorships, legislatures and red states are now holding political sway.

Mayer looks back a generation to the Koch brothers' father, Fred, and his invention of an improved technique for extracting gasoline from crude oil, to suggest these brothers may have come by their deeply Libertarian views genetically, if that's possible. Distrust of government, and especially regulations on business, was instilled in these men early and started them on a decades-long process of using government to change government. Perhaps their genius lies in their patience and perseverance even more than in their accumulated wealth, jointly one of the largest piles in the world at an estimated \$96.6 billion. Protection of their business interests goes hand in glove with their political philosophies, and it's hard to separate one from the other when surveying the scope of their influence.

Cleverly using tax laws for philanthropy, the Kochs have embedded themselves and their money into places they know can shape the future of their preferred power structure. Large donations to numerous colleges and universities and the development of academic business and economic schools has surely had a heavy influence on institutions that are grooming the future leaders in those fields.

Mayer also uses the words "weaponized philanthropy" to describe how the Kochs and others have figured out how to use tax-exempt funding and non-profits to do battle against taxes and regulations, especially environmental regs. Climate change regulatory actions, as well as most environmental protections, are in direct conflict with oil, gas and coal industries' ways of doing

things. Also, the titans' corporate conflicts extend to organizing ways to keep labor unions under control and civil rights efforts in check. Their wealth, and that of their exclusive club of fellow billionaires, has spread their control across a web of political action committees, media outlets, and more organizations and institutions than even they can probably name.

The Cato Institute, which refers to itself as "a public policy research organization," and The Heritage Foundation, which has "long been the bastion of the American conservative movement," are two of the better-known think tanks founded and/or funded by wealthy business tycoons. Also, the American Legislative Exchange Council, better known as ALEC, touts that it is "comprised of nearly one-quarter of the country's state legislators and stakeholders from across the policy spectrum." For decades ALEC has organized and supported politicians who are "dedicated to the principles of limited government, free markets, and federalism." Depending on which list is consulted, there are apparently between 17 and 30 ALEC members in Arkansas' Legislature.

The Nation publication of July 18, which can be found online, had an article titled: "ALEC Is Talking About Changing the Way Senators Are Elected: A proposed resolution advocates for overturning the 17th Amendment so Republican-controlled state legislatures could pick senators." We all need to be alert to everything these powerful groups are up to. Putting pre-packaged policies in the hands of politicians that grease the wheels of business so they can be unfettered by regulations seems to be the major mission of these associations and dozens more like them.

Money became even darker thanks to the Supreme Court's one-vote majority ruling for Citizens United (a duplicitously named conservative non-profit) over the Federal Election Commission in 2010. Corporations were essentially granted personhood and accountable campaign spending became a thing of the past. A rather catchy explanation of the consequences can be seen on: <http://storyofcitizensunited.org>.

"Dark Money" should be required reading for every voting citizen in this country. It is foretelling the history of our future if we do not pay attention to the present.