

The New York Times Magazine

The Koch Foundation Is Trying to Reshape Foreign Policy. With Liberal Allies.

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September 10, 2019

Last year, the new Project on Grand Strategy, Security, and Statecraft quietly opened its doors in Cambridge, Mass. A joint venture between Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the program, thus far, has hosted only a modest level of activity, barely noticeable in the thrum of the Boston-area academic scene. Last year, the program supported two visiting scholars. This year, the number is up to four, all with specialties in some aspect of United States foreign relations.

If the program's current scale may as yet be unremarkable, the ambitions of its founding donor are not. Created with \$3.7 million in grants from the Charles Koch Foundation, the program is part of an expansive but little-noticed Koch-sponsored effort to influence American foreign policy by investing in the infrastructure of ideas: scholars, academic centers, Washington think tanks. So-called Koch money — the billions under the control of Charles and his brother David, who died in August — has already transformed countless other areas of American political life, from tax policy to environmental regulation to campaign finance, all in the service of a radically free-market vision that has made the Koch name an epithet among progressives.

When it comes to foreign policy, though, the agenda of the foundation — which supports education and research and constitutes a relatively small part of the Koch network — does not line up quite so neatly with partisan politics. In keeping with Charles Koch's libertarian shrink-the-state imperative, the foundation has set out to bring an end to America's age of endless wars and to reduce the nation's military footprint around the world — a vision shared by many progressives, some of whom count themselves among the Koch grantees.

Since 2015, the foundation has committed more than \$25 million to this effort. It has seeded academic programs at universities like Tufts, Notre Dame, the Catholic University of America, Texas A&M and the University of California, San Diego, in addition to Harvard and M.I.T. This summer, it also granted \$460,000 — about a quarter of the start-up budget — to the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, a new think tank that intends to challenge the “intellectual lethargy and dysfunction” of the foreign-policy establishment and to argue on behalf of greater military restraint. The left-leaning billionaire George Soros gave money through his foundation to the Quincy Institute as well, a strange-bedfellows arrangement much emphasized during the think tank's rollout in late June — and a sign of how seriously the Trump presidency has shaken up traditional enmities and alliances.

Within the grand scheme of Koch-affiliated spending, the foundation's foreign-policy investments are still pocket change; donors like Michael Bloomberg have given far more

to similar projects. They are a tiny fraction of the \$889 million the Koch network initially pledged for the 2016 election cycle — a sum comparable to that of the two major political parties — or the \$400 million it pledged in 2018.

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But the Koch Foundation sees great promise in its targeted investments. With growing public disillusionment toward foreign intervention and a Beltway elite in chaos, “there really is an opportunity for the United States to rethink its approach to American foreign policy,” says William Ruger, who leads the Koch network’s foreign-policy initiative. “And people are open to doing that.”

The dream that an ambitious, self-conscious coalition of foreign-policy thinkers might reshape the country’s direction is an enduring one. In the early 1920s, a group of diplomats, financiers, generals and lawyers founded the Council on Foreign Relations to develop ideas about America’s responsibilities and decision making in world affairs. It was an extraordinary success: Into the 21st century, the council functioned as the high temple of the foreign-policy establishment, providing consecration to countless White House staff members, scholars and pundits.

Unlike domestic policy, foreign policy is often highly responsive to top-down strategy: It generally involves a small group of players, concentrated in or near the executive branch, many of whom attended the same handful of schools and share the same professional language. Witness what happened in the late 1990s, when the neoconservative Project for the New American Century first laid out its expansive vision for “American global leadership.” Within a few years, its basic ideas were framing the Bush administration’s response to Sept. 11, including the drive toward war in Iraq.

Foreign policy’s tendency to follow elites’ thinking, or groupthink, has long infuriated critics on both the left and the right. The Obama adviser Ben Rhodes famously labeled that world “the Blob,” a single misshapen entity whose conventional wisdom seems to keep coming back to life no matter how many times it is discredited. President Trump, too, loves to rail against the know-nothing experts and overcredentialed busybodies of the foreign-policy establishment.

The Koch foreign-policy initiative is unapologetically un-Trumpian in its ivory-tower orientation — “I still believe in universities,” Ruger says — but it does come with its own touch of righteous populism. Unlike tax or environmental policy, where Charles Koch’s views are out of step with public-opinion polls, a sizable number of Americans appear to agree that the war in Iraq was a costly mistake and that the United States relies too heavily on its military power. This line of criticism is at least as old as Dwight Eisenhower’s 1961 warning about the “military-industrial complex.” But foreign policy has largely run in the other direction in recent decades, asserting the might and right of the United States to intervene militarily as desired.

As far back as the 1970s, Charles Koch himself made the case for investing in “ideas” — that is, universities and think tanks — as a first step toward creating large-scale change in American governance. During the early years, Koch focused on libertarian political thought and free-market economics, two realms where “conscientious, dedicated scholars,” as he put it in a 1978 essay, seemed to be in short supply. That essay mentioned the problem of “foreign adventurism

and its daughter — war” as the “*single* greatest force behind the growth of government,” but it mostly addressed the domestic preoccupations that have since driven Koch activism, including opposition to regulation and “the statist paradigm” shackling free enterprise.

One result was investment in influential think tanks like the libertarian Cato Institute, created and sustained in part with Koch money. Universities, however, proved to be more of a challenge. In its early years, the foundation concentrated most of its scholarly support in a handful of highly ideological university-based programs like the Mercatus Center at George Mason University, focused on free-market economics. But this approach produced resistance on many campuses, including George Mason, where student activists pressured the university to reveal questionable donor agreements that allowed the Koch Foundation influence on academic affairs. It also inspired the creation of the activist organization UnKoch My Campus, which now coordinates with anti-Koch groups throughout the country.

In recent years the foundation has retooled its higher-education strategy, spreading its money more widely, emphasizing transparency in its grant agreements and insisting that “faculty call the shots” (though it still declined to say exactly how much money it has invested in the foreign-policy realm). It has also begun working more closely with progressive scholars and organizations in areas where small-state libertarianism and progressive politics happen to overlap, including foreign policy and criminal-justice reform.

Ruger calls this the “Frederick Douglass approach”: “We are willing to partner with anyone to do good.” The Harvard political scientist Theda Skocpol, who has studied the Koch political networks, sees something a bit more pragmatic in the shift. When it comes to issues like academic freedom or donor control, Koch organizations are “not doing anything a lot different” from anyone else these days, according to Skocpol. At the same time, she says, they are “definitely looking for ways to soften their image.”

The foreign-policy scholars who have received Koch grants have used them not just to finance their own research but also, as at Harvard and M.I.T., to help fund campus programs and centers in the fields of “international security,” “strategic studies,” “statesmanship,” “grand strategy” and other variants of Great Power politics. (Full disclosure: I run a program in grand strategy at Yale University, which does not receive Koch Foundation funding.) They generally espouse a “realist” perspective in their work — foreign-policy speak for a basic skepticism toward do-gooder internationalism and a preference for viewing global affairs as an unromantic patchwork of competing states.

Koch grantees typically express fierce criticism of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, seeing both as case studies in mistaken ambition and imperial overreach. They advocate a foreign policy of “restraint,” in which military engagement plays a much smaller role in United States strategy and in which caution — not grandiosity — is the watchword of the day. As they frame it, that project is at once sweeping and humble, a rejection of post-Cold War triumphalism in favor of a hardheaded acceptance that even American power has its limits.

Among the most prominent exponents of this view are Stephen Walt and Barry Posen, co-directors of the new program at Harvard and M.I.T. Outside academia, Walt is perhaps best known for “The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy,” a controversial 2007 book he wrote with John Mearsheimer, a University of Chicago political scientist and fellow realist, which argued that groups devoted to advocating on behalf of Israel had come to exercise too much influence on

American politics. Within the field of international relations, however, he is most widely identified with concepts like “offshore balancing” and “balance of threat” theory, variations on restraint and realist themes. Posen, too, made his name as a restrainer. In 2015, he published a book titled simply “Restraint,” arguing that “the United States has grown incapable of moderating its ambitions in international politics” and that its chosen forms of engagement with the world have been “unnecessary, counterproductive, costly and wasteful.”

In Walt’s latest book, “The Hell of Good Intentions,” he argues that the realists’ ideas, while influential in academia, have of late failed to find an audience in Washington, where various forms of “liberal hegemony” have held sway at least since the end of the Cold War. “Absent a crushing international setback,” he writes, “the foreign-policy establishment will not embrace a strategy that would diminish its own power, status and sense of self-worth.” By that logic, “meaningful and positive change will occur only if a well-organized and politically potent reform movement emerges, one that can puncture the elite consensus behind liberal hegemony.”

According to Ruger, the Koch Foundation’s investments aim to do just that: not simply to expand the universe of available ideas but to forge “a robust restraint counterelite” capable of doing serious battle in Washington. Universities, however, are not necessarily the best launchpad for a new movement. Walt emphasizes the ecumenical nature of the new Harvard/M.I.T. program; “you didn’t have to be a card-carrying restrainer” to be selected as a fellow, he says. Then there is the old problem of campus politics. “Academia tends to skew in one direction politically, so there were a fair number of my faculty colleagues who were not thrilled with doing business through the Charles Koch Foundation,” says Michael Desch, a political scientist at the University of Notre Dame and an early recipient of a Koch foreign-policy grant — who notes that he considers himself a Koch critic on many issues.

Thus far, this sort of grumbling has not led to major campus conflicts at Notre Dame or the other schools engaged in Koch-funded foreign-policy initiatives. But national activists opposed to Koch money on campus remain skeptical about the foundation’s recent reforms. “We will not compromise,” says Jasmine Banks, executive director of UnKoch My Campus, which urges universities to reject funding from Koch-affiliated organizations. UnKoch My Campus has not focused on the foreign-policy sphere, devoting most of its attention to Koch donations in fields like economics and law. But regardless of the field, Banks argues, there is no separating the foundation’s philanthropy from its founder’s broader political agenda, which is fundamentally at odds with universities’ obligation to act “with the common good in mind.”

The think-tank model promises more immediate impact than the slow, tedious work of scholarship — hence the Koch Foundation’s support for the Quincy Institute. In the view of the institute’s founders, 2019 presents a unique moment of historical plasticity, when the old order seems to be crumbling but the new one has not yet formed. “Elite consensus within the United States has collapsed on a whole set of different issues,” says the Quincy co-founder Trita Parsi, a self-described progressive and former head of the National Iranian American Council. “And that’s because there is a greater and greater awareness and recognition that liberal hegemony has failed.” The urgent question of 2019 — and the one that Quincy hopes to answer — is what will replace it.

Quincy aims to provide a petri dish in which to grow an “alternative Blob,” Parsi says. “If you come to Washington, D.C., and you are a restrainer, you have some very stark choices to make very early on,” he explains. “Either you have to swallow your pride and your dignity and go

along with foreign-policy proposals and ideas that you actually don't agree with, but that's the only way to make ends meet. Or you leave, and you go back into academia." Quincy hopes to redirect the "pipeline that goes from academia back into academia."

Several of Quincy's founders are academics themselves. Stephen Wertheim, a left-leaning historian of foreign relations, resigned from a secure position as a lecturer at Birkbeck, University of London, last year with hopes of influencing debate in the United States. The institute's president, Andrew Bacevich, a former Army colonel whose son was killed serving in Iraq and the lone conservative on the Quincy masthead, taught at Boston University for years, while writing essays fiercely critical of the United States' turn toward "permanent war." The institute itself is named after John Quincy Adams, who declared in 1821 that the United States "goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy" — a reference point that reflects the founders' history-minded sensibilities.

The restrainers' wholesale dismissal of the Blob has rankled some competitors. "I think there's a great simplification and generalization around people who work in foreign policy, and there's a lot more nuance and difference in viewpoints than they acknowledge," says Kathleen Hicks, who runs the international security program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, an influential think tank. Quincy's challenge will be to move beyond criticism into a set of well-articulated ideas about what should happen instead. In an ideal scenario, Bacevich says, "we would say, 'Yes, the forever wars are stupid.' But we, if we're successful, will be able to say: 'And here's an alternative approach.'"

For Parsi, that means working toward a coherent set of policy ideas that can be embraced by progressives, who "do not yet have a foreign-policy doctrine." It also means creating a new cohort of trained policy professionals ready to step into positions of influence if and when the opportunity arises. Quincy aims to "make sure that perhaps five, 10 years from now, when a new administration comes in and they need to staff up on foreign policy, they don't just have think tanks that produce experts that are good at operating within primacy," Parsi says, referring to the idea that the United States, as the dominant global superpower, should set and police the rules of the international order. "There will also be experts available that can go into the administration with a completely different perspective on what U.S. foreign policy should be."

Whether or not Parsi's vision of a well-trained progressive cadre ultimately lines up with the Koch Foundation's idea of a "restraint counterelite" — or with Charles Koch's broader political agenda — is another question altogether. The Koch network has a long and well-established history of enmeshment with the Republican Party. And most Republicans reject any hint of a reduction in the country's military budget or in its willingness to use force abroad — though Dan Caldwell, who manages foreign-policy campaign strategy for the Koch network, anticipates that this, too, may shift in the years ahead. "Our network is starting to factor in foreign policy into our political engagement strategy more and more," Caldwell says, including in deciding which candidates to back.

Structurally, the Koch Foundation exists separate from the family's political operations. Even so, it is hard to see how all these pieces will ultimately fit into a single political vision — or where, exactly, progressives like Parsi will come in. Jasmine Banks, the anti-Koch activist, thinks the experiment can't possibly go well. "Gosh, I can't see that a partnership with them would ever produce anything that was generative and safe," she says. She objects to the idea of progressives' granting "legitimacy" to the Koch name by cooperating in common ventures and warns that

scholars are being used in the service of yet another long-term plan to discredit and privatize the American state.

When pressed, most participants acknowledge that a shared enemy — in this case, the Blob — may well be different from a shared political vision. Alliances — when to commit to them and when to step away — are a classic problem of international relations, after all. Nevertheless, Parsi argues, “a lot of the old alignments and structures are quite meaningless at this point. And advantage will be given to those who have the first mover’s initiative to define the new structures, the new lines, the new alliances.”