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Allan Powell: Politics the old-fashioned way

By: ALLAN POWELL - January 4, 2013

Ezra Klein is a very gifted young man who is getting deserved recognition in newspapers and on television. His abilities were on display in a Washington Post column (March 19, 2012) describing how the fabulously rich Koch brothers were hard at work in a bold attempt to take control of the Cato Institute by getting control of the board. They are said to see a need for this so that they can tailor the organization “into a party organ that would aid their effort to unseat President Obama.” If they are able to buy the shares of a deceased board member, they will have the power to effect the transformation from a staid academic purveyor of ideology to a nuts-and-bolts political servant.

The Koch brothers helped found the Cato Institute in 1977. It was committed to promoting the major themes of a libertarian ideology: free markets, small government and individual liberty. Ezra Klein has carried on a continuous comparison of Cato and the Heritage Foundation and argues that “in practice, whatever the Republican Party wants, so does Heritage.”

The question to be raised is why did the Koch brothers want to control another think tank when it already has purchased so many avenues to advance its ideology? With a fortune estimated to reach \$60 billion, is there no saturation level for wealth and power? Is not their support of \$85 million to 85 think tanks and advocacy groups adequate to promote their point of view? They pledged \$88 million for the 2012 election and the Supreme Court has awarded them carte blanche with Citizens United. It sure appears that they want to get political dominance the old-fashioned way: buy it.

This attitude that the top 1 percent deserves a special place at the table and that there are no obligations to the other 99 percent is not new. It crops up throughout history and it is easy to predict it will never go away. I have saved the following story as a reminder of this attitude. This event took place in July of 1902 during the great Pennsylvania anthracite coal strike. During the heat of the public debate, mine-owner spokesman George Baer wrote a letter expressing his view. “The rights and interests of the laboring man will be protected and cared for — not by the labor agitators, but by the Christian men to whom God in His infinite wisdom has given control of the property interests of this country.”

Baer’s arrogance again made its presence known in October when President Theodore Roosevelt requested that Baer and union president John Mitchell come to his office to negotiate a settlement. Winter was approaching and people living in cities needed coal to heat their homes. One can only imagine Roosevelt’s self control when Baer objected to “negotiating with the fomenters of anarchy.” To make matters worse, he then added, “We object to being called here to meet a criminal even by the president of the United States.”

In one sense, we have moved a step or two beyond the old-fashioned way. Business does not have Pinkerton detectives (really hired thugs) to beat laborers into submission. They are now much more sophisticated. Governors of states led by Republican-dominated legislatures are ambitiously trying to weaken the power of unions. Laborers can no longer maintain middle-class lifestyles. The goal has always been a cheap and compliant labor force.

In a larger view, the Koch brothers are simply following an established libertarian political agenda. They are using a multifaceted program ostensibly to achieve a free-market economy, minimal government and individual liberty. Actually, they are pursuing a laissez-faire ideology to build society in their way – buying it. However, did this bring home the bacon? Mitt Romney did not win the states in which he owned homes (Michigan, California and Massachusetts). Paul Ryan, his running mate, did not win his state (Wisconsin). This would indicate that even the Koch brothers, with all their money, could not sell such flawed products. Refusing to purchase flawed products is also old-fashioned.

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