



BOOK REVIEW

'Dark Money': How a conspiracy of billionaires is undermining American democracy

February 7, 2016 12:00 AM
By Glenn C. Altschuler

In the late 1980s, Richard Fink, the principal political aide of Charles Koch, laid out a blueprint for a takeover of American politics. The first phase required investments in intellectuals and think tanks to produce ideas and turn them into marketable policy initiatives. The next phase involved subsidizing “grass-roots” citizen groups that would elect politicians primed to enact the policies — and along with “special interest” lobbyists, keep the pressure on them and government agencies.

"DARK MONEY: THE HIDDEN HISTORY OF THE BILLIONAIRES BEHIND THE RISE OF THE RADICAL RIGHT"

By Jane Mayer
Doubleday (\$29.95).

Faced with serious threats to their energy businesses from environmentalists in and outside the government, Charles and David Koch (whose father was a founding member of the John Birch Society) committed hundreds of millions of dollars to this “vertically and horizontally integrated” plan to establish a libertarian, anti-tax, anti-regulation, anti-union, anti-social welfare, pro-corporate America.

In “Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right,” Jane Mayer, a staff writer for The New Yorker and the author of “The Dark Side: The Inside Story of How the War on Terror Turned into a War on American Ideals,” provides an extraordinarily well-documented account of the influential, interlocking organizations with innocuous names created by the Koch brothers.

Ms. Mayer lays out in detail the activities of the Kochs and other right wing plutocrats, including John M. Olin, Lynde and Harry Bradley, Richard DeVos, and Richard Mellon Scaife, the late publisher of the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review. According to Ms. Mayer's account, Mr. Scaife, the Pittsburgh-based heir to a vast banking and oil fortune, realized that political activities by philanthropic foundations could be written off as tax deductible "philanthropy" as long as the activities weren't the primary purpose of the institution.

Mr. Scaife became a major financial backer of the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute and the American Legislative Exchange Council, the conservative corporate "bill mill" that now drafts legislation, much of it subsequently enacted into state law. He also committed substantial resources to investigations of President Bill Clinton's marital infidelities and allegations that the Clintons ordered the "murder" of White House aide Vince Foster.

Ms. Mayer demonstrates that this small cadre of exceedingly wealthy people, empowered by the Citizens United decision of the United States Supreme Court, which allowed them to spend unlimited funds on campaigns and elections, has transformed American politics. She notes as well that their philosophical opposition to "big government," however sincere, clearly serves their financial interests.

The Kochs and their political "partners," Ms. Mayer concedes, have not captured the big prize, the White House. But a powerful, wealthy minority has succeeded in shaping the public discourse on most major issues, including climate change, entitlement spending, taxes, health care and the financing of elections. They helped fund, stir and organize the Tea Party, which presents itself as an amateur uprising of ordinary citizens. They have used the fear of "primarying" an incumbent to get virtually every Republican politician (and some Democrats) to get with the program – and helped politicians gerrymander districts to increase the likelihood that conservative Republicans will retain control of state legislatures and the U.S. House of Representatives.

The Koch network, Ms. Mayer reports, intends to spend \$889 million in the 2016 election cycle. Money does not always determine the outcome of elections, she writes, but it helps. And there is little doubt that if the American presidency is on the auction block in 2016 "the Kochs hope to make the winning bid." After all, they have already gone a long, long way toward convincing millions of Americans that government is a force for evil, not a public good. And, as David Koch admits, only half in jest, when he was asked as a child to share a treat, he would grin and say "I just want my fair share, which is all of it."

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.