

Wyoming Tribune Eagle of December 22, 2016: "Political system serves interests of super-rich"

When I ask white friends or family whether President Obama endures racism, the answer is generally, "I don't think so." Black people know he does; they experience it themselves. From the sorry "birther" spectacle to accusations that Mr. Obama is not a "true Christian" to Congress refusing to give a Supreme-Court nominee the hearing he merits: a white president would not have had to contend with these.

Civility, not to mention civil liberties, have steadily eroded. Tremendous opposition railroaded President Obama, whether he focused on Wall Street reform, immigration, health care, fair housing, or any other government responsibility. The result? Many Americans spend 80% or more of their paychecks on rent, even as the rich get richer. When the wealthy gain ways to press their political advantage, inequality perpetuates itself.

Charles Koch described Obama's election in almost hysterical terms, ending a newsletter to his 70,000 employees declaring that America suffered "the greatest loss of liberty and prosperity since the 1930s." He and Brother David are still at it, never mind that, under Obama, their fortunes nearly tripled, from \$14 billion each in March 2009 to \$41.6 billion each in March 2015, according to Forbes.

Lumping these problems under racism may be facile, yet we should examine whence the walking back of civil-rights gains. Here is a good start: Jane Mayer's "Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires behind the Rise of the Radical Right."

As Mr. Obama took office in January 2009, writes Mayer, a group of exceedingly wealthy and powerful individuals gathered at the Renaissance Esmeralda Resort, a plush hideaway near Palm Springs, California. As two Republican senators slugged it out over ideas, the billionaires were called upon to finance an agenda to resist, no matter what, any legislature the new president might pursue.

The group was convened by the Koch brothers, whose seminars persuade billionaires to become "investors" in the Kochs' determination to smash whatever is in the way of yet more profits. After all, when Obama declared that "Without a watchful eye, the market can spin out of control," and "The nation cannot prosper long when it favors only the prosperous," every Koch donor's bottom line was at stake. Charles Koch warned that "we" were headed for disaster.

"Dark Money" examines how the Kochs and "investors" have used their money not only to oppose our first black president but also to change how everyday Americans think about government. Much of this activism is cloaked in secrecy and presented as philanthropy, which leaves almost no money trail and gains tax exemptions to boot.

Given the size of their fortunes, Charles and David Koch have extraordinary influence. By joining forces with a small ideological group of like-minded wealthy allies, the Kochs have magnified their reach. No fewer than 18 billionaires have contributed. Their motto? "Our movement must destroy the prevalent statist paradigm."

They subsidize networks of seemingly unconnected think tanks and academic programs. They spawn advocacy groups to make their arguments on the national scene. Koch minions hire lobbyists to push their interests in Congress, fund operatives to create synthetic grassroots groups—think Tea Party—to give momentum to right-wing ideas. They finance legal groups to press their cases in court—"Citizens United" and "SpeechNow" were conceived by lawyers bent on eradicating any limit on political spending. The Roberts Court humored them in 2010, although polls show that large majorities of Americans, both Republicans and Democrats, favor strict

spending limits. Soon the sums pledged at the Kochs' donor summits soared from \$13 million raised in June 2009 to nearly 900 million at a single fundraiser in the years that followed.

Today the Kochs own an outsize political machine. "[Citizens United] unshackled the big money," Mayer quotes David Axelrod. "Presidents before have been under siege," but nothing like what Mr. Obama has suffered.

How did things get so extreme so fast? Simply put, the Kochs set out to change how America votes. Back in 1980, when David Koch ran for U.S. vice president on the Libertarian Party ticket, he received only 1% of the vote. At the time, conservative icon William F. Buckley Jr. dismissed the Koch view as "Anarcho-Totalitarianism."

In response, the Kochs poured millions into moving their views from the fringe into mainstream political life. By 2015, they and their handpicked wealthy conservatives had created their own private political bank.

The amount of money raised at Koch seminars is spectacular. In 1972, when insurance magnate W. Clement Stone gave \$2 million to Richard M. Nixon's 1972 campaign, it caused public outrage. It produced post-Watergate reforms of campaign financing. In contrast, for the 2016 election, the Koch's political war chest is estimated at around \$889 million, which dwarfs what was considered corrupt in 1972.

This winners-take-all attitude, comments Mike Lifgren, a staff Republican who has observed Washington politics for 30 years, constitutes a "secession of the rich" in which the super-wealthy "disconnect themselves from the civic life of the nation and from any concern about its well-being except as a place to extract loot."

Agreed, government waste must be trimmed. Social Security fraud must be rooted out. Yet these concerns fall by the wayside when a political system serves only the interests of the super-rich. Corporate subsidies, special dividends, "creative" tax arrangements and financial engineering: all maximize the profits—and influence—of the wealthy while the nation goes wanting. The vast majority of Americans no longer has much impact.