

Book Proposal:

Coors:

The Family, the Beer, and
the Money Behind Right-Wing America
by Dan Baum

COORS is the saga of an American dynasty. The story begins with a destitute, God-fearing immigrant and follows four generations of his family through alcoholism, divorce, murder, and suicide as they revolutionize the ten-billion-dollar beer industry. COORS tells how these people, possessed of a fierce Germanic conservatism, used their millions to change the course of national politics -- before being tamed by the same free-market system they profess so much to love.

Barricaded within their reclusive fortress high in the Rocky Mountains, the progeny of Adolph Coors have built a two-billion-dollar business out of a single brewery without borrowing a nickel since 1874. Adolph Coors may have been a draft dodger when he arrived here in 1870, but he was a Prussian draft dodger. What he brought instead of money, a passport, or a command of English was ferocious ambition. Not satisfied to be just another immigrant in New York, he soon left the crowded German ghetto of Yorktown for the broad canvas of the west. There, in the blazing sunlight of the Rockies, Coors envisioned a brewery worthy of his homeland. Four years after staggering off the boat, he was able to borrow \$280,000 -- the last money, he swore, his company would ever borrow. He was 26 years old.

That his great-grandsons still run the business debt-free is testament to the rigid business ethic Adolph Coors left behind. Coors believed in a stern and vengeful God, and he ruled his own dominion likewise. His workers were well paid -- and could drink free beer all day on the job -- but woe be unto any who got drunk, arrived late, or talked back.

Adolph brought something else from Germany besides ambition and a taste for beer: an unabashed hatred of Jews and anyone else not white and Christian. Throughout the first two decades of this century, Coors hosted Ku Klux Klan rallies atop Coors Mountain, a flat-top mesa overlooking Denver. Every year, white-robed Klansmen paraded the streets of Denver on their way to the mountaintop, and a gigantic burning cross lit the sky above the city.

Coors's son Adolph Jr. grew up with plenty of money on paper but little sign of it in his life. No horses, no parties, no lavish travel for the son of the millionaire Prussian brewer; he shared his father's spartan house -- a clapboard cottage in the small town of Golden, Colorado - and spent his summers sweeping the brewery floor. He never doubted his father loved him,

even through the beatings. When -- for reasons never explained -- the old man fell from a Florida hotel window during Prohibition, Adolph Jr. wept at the funeral like a child.

(Adolph's obituary in The New York Times reported simply that the "wealthy brewer expired of a heart attack while dressing for the day." In an interview with Life magazine in 1985, though, Adolph's grandsons told the story of their grandfather's fatal plunge, adding "whether it was an accident, murder, or suicide is something we'll never know.")

Adolph Jr. raised his own three sons in the spare, fundamentalist spirit of his father. Laughter at dinner was a punishable offense. The days of even the youngest toddlers were punctuated by loud and frequent prayer. Spankings were the only physical contact between parent and child. When the lanky and nearsighted Adolph III was put on the train to go east for prep school, his parents cried tears of pride and trepidation, but he and his brothers survived the rigors of prep school and the Ivy League with their staunch Coors ethic intact.

Adolph III, known as Ad, became chairman of the Adolph Coors Brewing Co. in 1957. The father of four children, he shared the family obsession for hard work and modest reward. The Coors family was by now the most powerful and prominent in Colorado, but Ad and Mary Coors wanted only privacy. They moved to a secluded ranch on the far side of Golden's beautiful Turkey Creek, from which Ad drove himself daily to the brewery.

Then another bizarre tragedy struck the family. One spring morning in 1961 Ad started for work but never arrived. His International Travelall was found idling on Turkey Creek Bridge; blood stained the bridge railing. Mary responded immediately to the typed ransom notes that arrived, but never heard from the kidnapper. Seven months later, a hiker found Coors's body; it was identified by the label -- "expressly for Mr. A. Coors III" -- on the Hickey-Freeman trousers. He'd been dead for months. A few weeks later, the FBI arrested Joseph Corbett Jr. in Vancouver, British Columbia. Corbett had an IQ of 148. But he wasn't smart enough to realize that after killing Ad Coors, he'd taken bits of the crime scene with him on the bottom of his car. The FBI linked him to the crime by microscopic traces of soil on the undercarriage of his Mercury sedan, one of the more spectacular cases of forensic geology in FBI history. Corbett was sentenced to life in prison, and now lives free on parole.

After Ad's disappearance, control of the company passed to his brothers William and Joseph, 44 and 43. The brothers, educated at Harvard and Cornell, set about transforming the Adolph Coors Brewing Co. from a regional power into a national one. When they took control in 1961, Coors was sold in only eleven western states -- today it is sold in all fifty. William and Joseph made Coors the third-biggest brewer in the nation without ever allowing themselves a private secretary or a windowed office. They lived in unassuming suburban homes and drove their own Chevies. Around the brewery, clad in workshirts and chinos, they insisted that even the lowliest janitor address them as Bill and Joe. They continued their grandfather's tradition of lavishing beer on the workers; in the company cafeteria milk cost 28 cents but beer was free.

William and Joe recognized only two authorities: the Judgment of the Lord and the will of the family. Just as Adolph the founder would sooner have died than bow to federal bureaucrats or labor leaders, the brothers gave outsiders hell. They made OSHA get search warrants before inspecting their plant and they broke the Teamsters like a twig. Nor did the brothers quail before public opinion; they defied a ten-year labor boycott without making a single meaningful concession to the AFL-CIO.

Among brewers, the Coors brothers were famous for listening to none but their own counsel, like princes in a golden tower. They could be disastrously lead-footed; they rejected the pull-top can, for example, when all their competitors were adopting it. When Anheuser-Busch and Miller were introducing catchy new labels to grab shelf space alongside their core Budweiser and High-Life brands, Coors declined to expand a product line that hadn't grown in twenty-four years. At a time when advertising and promotions were considered essential to the beer business, Coors spent pennies on ads and refused to offer specials on weekends or holidays. They hadn't changed their slogan -- "Brewed with Rocky Mountain Spring Water" -- in thirty-three years. William and Joseph likewise refused for years to make a light beer, an enormous new market they had ironically helped create with their mild original brew. By failing to acknowledge trends in a trend-driven industry, they nearly sent the company down the tubes in the late 1970s.

Yet the Coors brothers could simultaneously be visionary innovators. They pioneered such fixtures of the modern beer industry as the aluminum can, coercive pricing to wholesalers, and faux "foreign" labels. Theirs was among the first breweries to be vertically integrated; they bought barley fields, can factories, even the natural gas fields that powered the brewery. While Anheuser-Busch and Miller were units of publicly traded corporations, Coors was closely held and autocratically ruled from the shabby steel-desk office the brothers shared. As such, the company could turn on a dime. Once they saw they needed a light beer, the brothers produced one overnight, then zoomed from near-zero advertising to number one in per-barrel ad dollars. Within two years Coors Light -- the "Silver Bullet" -- was the country's second-best-selling light beer.

This isn't just the story of an eccentric and successful family business. As the company grew, William and Joseph used their fortune to shape decades of American politics in accordance with their Prussian-heritage, bootstrap-ethic, fundamentalist vision. Their role in national politics began in 1971, when Congress passed water-quality laws requiring industries to reach zero emissions within fourteen years. William was incensed, and dispatched to Washington an aide bearing instructions to find conservative causes to which the Coors brothers might contribute. The aide met two men who would prove to be the most important fund raisers and organizers of the New Right and of Ronald Reagan's ascent to power: Paul Weyrich and Richard Viguerie. Together with the Coorses, they identified a panoply of conservative organizations needing support, and over the next three years, Coors poured more than two hundred thousand pre-inflation dollars into them.

The Coors brothers also started their own television news syndicate to counter what they considered the “liberal left” slant of the networks. At a cost of more than three million dollars a year, Television News Inc. produced short “news” documentaries that supported the war in Vietnam, derided the anti-war and civil rights movements, and lauded the free-enterprise system. Within a year, TV News Inc. had thirty-seven subscriber stations around the country.

The day before leaving the White House in 1974, Richard Nixon nominated Joseph Coors to the board of directors of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. During days of heated Senate questioning, Coors agreed to shut down TV News to avoid a conflict of interest. But he also acknowledged contributions to the John Birch Society and other extreme groups, and admitted to threatening a CPB board member over a documentary he didn’t like. Coors was denied the seat on the CPB board.

It was clear by then that his fragmented largesse wasn’t having the effect he desired. So the Coors brothers directed Weyrich and Viguerie to refocus their attack, and with a quarter-million dollars of Coors money they founded a conservative think tank to counter the centrist Brookings Institute. They called it the Heritage Foundation.

Heritage was founded at the height of the Watergate scandal, and the first thing it did was raise another half-million dollars from Coors to influence upcoming Congressional elections. Heritage used Coors money to target such “radicals” as Tom Foley, Claude Pepper, and Les Aspin; to advocate a cutoff of federal Legal Services money to any dispute involving gay rights; and to fight every new provision the AFL-CIO supported. “If organized labor is in command,” William was fond of saying, “then we no longer have a free society.”

It was around this time that Viguerie and the Coors brothers discovered a portly, telegenic preacher from Lynchburg, Virginia, with an attractively anti-choice, anti-gay, anti-pornography agenda. His name was Jerry Falwell. Viguerie advised Falwell: your organization’s name should refer to the moral majority of Americans who believe as you do -- and as we do. Viguerie then went to the Coors brothers for financing. The Moral Majority was born.

Thus began a flood of Coors money to conservative causes, from the Council for National Policy, a KKK-affiliated coalition headed by Nelson Bunker Hunt that supported apartheid South Africa; to Christian Reconstruction, which advocated executing homosexuals, adulterers, blasphemers, astrologers, and children who disobey their parents. Many captains of industry invest millions in campaign contributions in order to win favor in Washington. Some, like Dwayne O. Andreas of Archer Daniels Midland Corp., cynically shower money upon Republicans and Democrats alike so they are always backing the winning horse. Not so the Coors brothers. Their giving was almost entirely ideological. Coors money financed Phyllis Schlafly’s successful campaign to defeat the Equal Rights Amendment. Coors money gave Pat Robertson his first national platform. Coors money bought aircraft for Oliver North’s contras. The Coors brothers hired a gaggle of conservative lawyers to generate lawsuits against

environmental regulations. They dubbed the group the Mountain States Legal Foundation and installed as its director a soft-spoken evangelical Christian named James Watt.

When Ronald Reagan ran for president in 1976, Coors was one of his biggest sources of campaign funds. By the time of Reagan's inauguration in 1981, Joseph Coors was a member of Reagan's "kitchen cabinet" of close but unofficial personal advisors. (This group of wealthy businessmen actually installed themselves in a spacious suite of offices in the Old Executive Office Building until The Washington Post made a stink about it.) So many of the kitchen cabinet were from Colorado that The New York Times called it "the Colorado Mafia." They saw to it that their protégé James Watt was made Secretary of the Interior; that Coloradan Ann Gorsuch was made administrator of the EPA; and that her future husband, the rancher Robert Burford, was made director of the Bureau of Land Management -- even though he had for years led campaigns to abolish the agency.

By the early 1990s, the profits of Coors Light, Keystone, Zima, and other Coors beverages were likely the single biggest source of funds for the rise of the so-called New Right. But within its company walls, Coors was becoming an unusually progressive company. Coors recycled cans long before any other brewer and its pollution was a fraction of the industry standard. In the mid-1980s, the brothers were sued by the EEOC for sex and race discrimination and quickly made their company an exemplar of Affirmative Action. Watching Coors sales in San Francisco dwindle to zero because of their fire-and-brimstone condemnations of homosexual sin, the brothers extended benefits to employees' same-sex partners.

But until the end of their reign, William and Joseph continued giving millions to undermine environmental laws and the interests of minorities, women, and gays. The company was a bundle of contradictions. Coors paid high wages but subjected its workers to humiliating lie-detector tests, asking such questions as, "have you ever done anything with your wife that could be considered immoral?" and "are you a homosexual?" Free beer on the job was nice, but Coors also maintained a list of 21 dismissable offenses that included "making disparaging remarks about the employer or doing anything which would discourage any person from drinking Coors beer."

There was a whiff of nineteenth-century paternalism to the Coors paradox. The brothers were willing to take care of their own workers in return for fealty but never because labor demanded it. And they would zealously respect God's earth on Coors terms -- but not out of obedience to federal law.

The original Adolph's racial views were not much diluted by three generations of New World family history. During the debate over the 1964 Civil Rights Act, William called a compulsory employees' meeting to organize against the bill. "If it passes," he told his all-white workforce, "sixty of you will lose your job to Negroes." He bought the Denver Police Department a helicopter on the condition it be used to keep an eye on the city's growing Hispanic neighborhood. Even after being bludgeoned by the EEOC to hire minorities, William was an unreconstructed racist -- and a clumsy one. Facing a roomful of black businessmen in

1984, he told them “one of the best things (the slave traders) did for you is to drag your ancestors over here in chains.” In the stunned silence, he explained himself. “Look at Africa,” he said. “They lack the intellectual capacity to succeed, and it’s taking them down the tubes.” When Denver’s minorities rose in boycott against Coors, William apologized -- and then filed a losing \$150 million lawsuit against the newspaper that reported his comments.

The fourth generation of Coorses -- the one now running the corporation -- has been the most conflicted of all. William has three daughters, but in the Coors tradition none were educated or groomed for company management; they were given homes as wedding gifts but no role in running the company. William’s oldest daughter Geraldine, named for the alcoholic wife he cast out in 1970, threw herself to her death from a New York City highrise in 1983, leaving a husband and two babies behind. Mad with grief, William remarried soon after and fathered a son named Scott, whom he showered with the hugs and kisses no Coors child had ever before received.

Joseph’s wife Holly bore the sons -- Joseph Jr., Jeffrey, Peter, Grover, and John -- who now run the company. (William is still nominally chairman at age 78.) Like their forebears, they were denied the trappings of wealth; they were renown in Golden for being the last family to have a color TV. The eldest, Joseph Jr., was in line to be company president, but in 1963 he committed an unthinkable act of rebellion: he got married before finishing college. His grandfather, Adolph Jr., never spoke to him again. His father, Joseph Sr., cut him off without a cent and banished him from family holidays. After ten years, Joseph Jr. was on the sixteenth hole of a golf course when he heard God tell him to “go home.” He did, but Joseph Sr. wasn’t impressed, and sent him away again, saying only that “the family council would consider finding some job for him.” It ultimately did: Joseph Jr. now runs the family’s industrial-ceramics subdivision at a modest salary with no seat on the company board of directors. Joseph Jr.’s company résumé now lists two hobbies for the prodigal son: golf and “Biblical prophecy.”

Second son Jeffrey is company president at half a million dollars a year. Cool and ambitious, he is, in the Los Angeles Times’s words, “a fourteen-carat chip off the old block.” He never rose to his brother’s defense or gave his father any other reason to fault him. Peter, the third brother, is president of the central brewery division, and harbors dreams of running for the US Senate. Grover Cleveland Coors, brother number four, was as much a black sheep as big brother Joseph Jr.; he enjoyed a hippie phase in the sixties -- dropping acid, marching against the war, hanging Ho Chi Minh posters on his bedroom wall -- at precisely the moment his father, a University of Colorado regent, was expelling the SDS from campus. The Kent State massacre awoke Grover to the physical dangers of dissent, and an unsuccessful stint as a rock and roll musician told him “musicians starve.” He too returned to the family on bended knee and is now a company vice president. Youngest brother John says he “learned from Grover’s mistakes” never to stray from the Coors orthodoxy; he got the engineering degree all loyal Coors men get, married the daughter of a company engineer, and runs the company’s customer-satisfaction division.

Though differing in temperament, the new generation of brothers all describe themselves as “hard-core” born-again Christians and share a belief that Armageddon will occur around the year 2000. They reserve particular scorn for homosexuals, whom they regard as “abominations in the eyes of God.” (William’s son Scott is the only Coors who says he doesn’t buy that. “I’ve got a couple of good friends who are gay,” he told *The Los Angeles Times*.) In 1987 Joseph Sr., who had banished two of his sons for violating the Coors family code, stunned the clan by leaving his wife of 48 years for a younger woman and heading off to a new life in the wine country of northern California. Joseph Jr. had the retaliatory pleasure of denouncing him as “a sinner, along with homosexuals, gluttons, blasphemers, murderers, and liars.” The two have not spoken since.

For all their Christian conservatism, though, the new brothers are modern businessmen who are the first of their family to recognize a power greater than Coors: the marketplace. Although their father and uncle continue privately bankrolling conservative causes, the brothers decided in the 1990s to drop the right-wing philanthropy that alienated so many customers. They have taken an even higher-profile role in supporting the minority and gay-rights groups they abhor. And they even committed the ultimate Coors heresy by taking the company public, relinquishing a lot of family control and accepting far greater government regulation. But controversy is never far from Coors; now the company is under fire for marketing alcohol to children with a zeal that would make Joe Camel blush; Coors maintains a web site that lets kids pretend to drink at a bar until they pass out or drive home drunk, and heavily markets its Red Wolf beer with a Halloween theme. “We want to create a firm association between Halloween and beer drinking,” a company spokesman told *Advertising Age* magazine.

The Coors story is a real-life “Dynasty.” It begins with a penniless immigrant bent only on succeeding in the New World, follows the rise of the biggest family-owned brewery in a volatile and cutthroat industry, sweeps through an era of political activism, and ends with the triumph of profit over ideology. As COORS unfolds, family members drive each other to breakdown, alcoholism, divorce, and suicide. And they are forced, in the end, to accept the twentieth century.

No major book on the Coors family has ever been written.

Remarkably, very little has been published at all about the Coors dynasty and its political connections. The *Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature* shows hardly any reporting about Coors outside of the business press. Several stories mention Joseph Coors’s participation in President Reagan’s “kitchen cabinet,” and others note the Coors’ right-wing largesse without going into details. The brothers’ more explosive comments -- like William’s praising slavery to a roomful of black businessmen -- likewise attracted attention. But not a single article puts together the vastness of the Coors political empire or details the strange and sometimes tragic story of the family.

In 1991, Political Research Associates, a small liberal think-tank, financed a slim study of Coors politics that South End Press published under the title *The Coors Connection: How Coors Family Philanthropy Undermines Democratic Pluralism*. It is all but unreadable, a conspiracist diatribe against the right wing in general with little about the Coors family. It does, however, offer some starting points for research.

Places Around the Bases: A Historic Tour of the Coors Field Neighborhood describes the Denver stadium the Coors family built, and *Silver Bullets: A Soldier's Story of How Coors Bombed in the Beer Wars*, chronicles the business in the late 1980's. In 1990 the Coors family published *Coors, a Catalyst for Change: The Pioneering of the Aluminum Can* .

I've asked professors and journalists in Colorado why no big book has been written about so obvious a target. Word is, everybody with the familiarity and the inclination to take on such a task is affiliated either with a Colorado newspaper or a Colorado college, and is, frankly, too frightened of the Coors family to try.

I am the author of *SMOKE AND MIRRORS: THE WAR ON DRUGS AND THE POLITICS OF FAILURE*, published by Little, Brown & Co. in June 1996. The *New York Times* called *SMOKE AND MIRRORS* "devastating. . . often dramatic and sometimes outrageous" (May 29). The *Los Angeles Times* Book Review, which placed the book on its cover (June 9), says *SMOKE AND MIRRORS* is "compelling. . . an entertaining and lacerating look at how we got into this quagmire." The *Philadelphia Inquirer* called it "brilliantly conceived. . . thoroughly reported and documented" (July 7). I also am a former staff reporter for *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Atlanta Constitution*, and have worked as a journalist on four continents.

The Coors family is notoriously secretive. Researching COORS will be as formidable a task as documenting thirty years of drug policy. Here's how I will go about it: I'll start with the Coors family's many enemies. These include the AFL-CIO and Anheuser-Busch, Coors's most hostile competitor. Environmental groups, women's lobbies, and minority organizations have copious files on the flow of Coors money to their antagonists. Wall Street brewing-industry analysts have stories to tell. Coors has spawned disgruntled ex-employees, many of whom will be willing to talk. Those who lost political campaigns to Coors-backed candidates will be eager to share their experiences. And there is gold to mine in public documents -- filings with the Securities and Exchange Commission, National Labor Relations Board and Federal Election Commission; lawsuits; congressional testimony by Coors executives, family members, allies, and so on. Those on the right whom Coors has betrayed, slighted, and abandoned will want their stories heard. As I learned researching *SMOKE AND MIRRORS*, people tend to be proud of what they do and eager to talk about themselves, regardless of their reputation. I'll track down Joseph Corbett, Adolph III's killer. Little by little, I am confident I can assemble a compelling story of the Coors family, its brewing empire, and how its money helped steer the course of American politics for the past thirty years. Only after assembling the bulk of the story will I approach Coors family members. The rancor within the family, and the Coorses' desire to remake their image, suggest the new generation may be willing to cooperate. But it almost

won't matter if they do; unauthorized biographies are frequently more compelling than those guided by a gracious and willing subject.

This is a project that matches my skills. It is a big story, spanning many years, with lots of characters and plenty of interesting threads to follow. As a business story, it will call upon my Wall Street Journal training. Like the drug book, it will reveal to readers a Gorgon that has been hiding in plain sight. Everybody knows Coors; its logo stares from every televised sporting event, every supermarket shelf. It is time to connect the reality to that logo.

Baum: Proposal for Coors .