The NY Times has a disturbing story this morning about the secret alliance between some state attorney generals and the fossil fuel industry. Perhaps the most shocking is an example in which the Attorney General of Oklahoma had a draft by a coal company retyped on letterhead and submitted as his own opinion. The industry has rewarded its friends with campaign contributions and other forms of support.

The views of one former Republican attorney general are telling:

When you use a public office, pretty shamelessly, to vouch for a private party with substantial financial interest without the disclosure of the true authorship, that is a dangerous practice," said David B. Frohnmayer, a Republican who served a decade as attorney general in Oregon. "The puppeteer behind the stage is pulling strings, and you can't see. I don't like that. And when it is exposed, it makes you feel used."

It's true that other state attorneys general have openly collaborated with environmental groups. But there are key differences: the closeness of the ties, the subterfuge, and industry's ability to reward its friends with very generous campaign contributions. The line between special interest influence and ideological convergence becomes increasingly subtle.

It is particularly valuable to the industry to find advocates who are perceived as offering independent support for their positions, as they have done in the case of the state attorneys general. It has sometimes found such support in surprising places. Harvard law professor Larry Tribe has taken up the cudgel for the coal industry, filing a brief for Peabody Coal opposing climate change regulations. Professor Tribe, having established a reputation as a liberal constitutional law scholar early in his career, now engages in a thriving law practice. This is not the first time he has deployed his skills on behalf of industry to fight environmental regulation. In this case, he has filed a pro-industry brief on behalf of himself as well as Peabody Coal, not just as a representative for the company, putting his reputation as a scholar behind his views. As in the case of the state attorneys general, the result is to blur the boundaries between industry advocacy and independent judgment.

The fossil fuel industry has vast amounts of money and a huge stake in fighting environmental protection. At's not surprising in today's world that they are able to find spokesmen for their cause. They are obviously entitled to representation by skilled lawyers, but it is unfortunate when it becomes difficult to tell the difference

between industry advocacy and independent judgments by state officials or academics.