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The Future Of Attack Ads Is An Endless Loop Of Loony Billionaires Yelling At Each Other

By Jason Linkins
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Terrible political attack ads used to be so simple. Time was you could forget to press forward on your TiVo and accidentally catch some dire-sounding voice-over narrator telling you that "Candidate X says he's for improving education for everyone in Wilkes-Barre, but what he won't tell you is that he smells like fish, because he is a fish. A gross fish. Does Wilkes-Barre really want a gross gill-haver in charge of our public schools? Tell Candidate X to get out of the lake and start breathing oxygen with actual lungs."

But now that changes to campaign finance laws have let slip total anarchy on the world, obscure super PACs funded by anonymous, super-wealthy crypto-weirdos are the new order of the day. In Iowa -- where Rep. Bruce Braley (D-Iowa) is running against Iowa state Sen. Joni Ernst (R-12th District) to replace outgoing U.S. senator and famed steak-fry host Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) -- matters have devolved into a purely metaphysical state, where differing sets of billionaires are yelling at each other in attack ads, for daring to fund attack ads, in a billion-dollar, privately funded ouroboros.

Here is the latest entry in this battle of shouted, self-referential esoterica: an ad yelling at some out-of-state billionaires for yelling about out-of-state billionaires. This ad lasts a full minute barely getting out of its windup, because everything being discussed here is complicated and barely related to even a single real-world concern of an ordinary person. It's literally just one set of plutocrats upset at another set of plutocrats because the second set of plutocrats dared to do the same thing as another set of plutocrats.

TRANSCRIPT: You've probably seen this ad showing fictional out-of-state billionaires spending millions in Iowa politics. Not only is this ad false; it's actually funded by two real out-of-state billionaires spending millions to support Bruce Braley. Billionaire Tom Steyer made his fortune running hedge funds overseas to avoid U.S. taxes, but backs Braley raising taxes on hard-working Iowans. Steyer got rich off cheap foreign coal, but supports Braley shutting down access to affordable American energy. The other funder is billionaire Herb Sandler, whose toxic subprime mortgages were called the Typhoid Mary of the housing crisis. Now Sandler and Steyer are pouring millions from their overseas hedge funds and toxic mortgages into Iowa. Tell Bruce Braley to stand up to

the real out-of-state billionaire hypocrites and reject their job-crushing, tax-hiking agenda.

This new ad was created and funded by an organization called American Commitment, an obscure 501(c)(4) group. The Washington Post's Rachel Weiner [reported on its origins back in 2012](#):

American Commitment was founded by Phil Kerpen, who previously spent five years working at Americans for Prosperity. Before that, he worked for the Club for Growth, a Club offshoot called the Free Enterprise Fund and the libertarian Cato Institute.

AFP was co-founded by oil industry billionaire David Koch, but Kerpen would not say whether Koch and his brother Charles were helping fund his new group. "We take very seriously the privacy of protecting all of our contributors," he told the Fix. He did not attend the Koch brothers' recent fundraising summit in San Diego, although he has attended such confabs in the past.

So to translate: The people who are mad at out-of-state billionaires for criticizing out-of-state billionaires are also out-of-state billionaires.

Theoretically, the production of these advertisements could *never, ever end*. We might be witnessing the birth of a new, perpetually self-sustaining outrage organism. The bad news, of course, is that we could be entering a period in which political attack ads descend deeper and deeper into an increasingly abstruse rabbit hole of recursive nonsense. But the good news is that if all these weirdos weren't spending their money on this babble, they'd probably be using it to destroy the world. So let's call it a wash.