



## Clown of the Senate

From the June 2, 2014, issue of NR

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March 27, 2015

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** *To mark Harry Reid's announcement that he plans to retire in 2016, NR is running Kevin D. Williamson's 2014 cover piece on the Nevada senator.*

There are 53 Democrats in the Senate, plus two nominal independents who associate with them, and this clown caucus has chosen, since 2007, to place itself under the malignant leadership of Harry Reid, Washington's answer to Frankenstein's monster — stitched together out of the worst bits of Roger Chillingworth, Joe McCarthy, and Droopy — a teacup tyrant who has filled his own pockets to the tune of \$10 million while decrying the allegedly baleful influence of the wealthy on politics, a man who has done violence to ethical standards left and right, using campaign funds for personal expenditures and trying to hide payments channeled to his granddaughter, who takes to the Senate floor to make patently false, malicious, and increasingly loopy claims about his political rivals, and who is leading a partisan assault on the Bill of Rights. If America needs a(nother) good reason to hand Democrats their heads come November, then they would do well to study the career of Harry Reid (D., Ritz-Carlton), the Sheriff of Nottingham to Barack Obama's Prince John.

Harry Reid is in some ways a laughable figure, and one of his few charms is that he is known to make self-deprecating observations about his own unprepossessing nature. His obsession with Koch Industries and the intimations of venality that surround him might be grounds for annoyed eye-rolling if they were not of a piece with his audacious war on the most important of our fundamental constitutional liberties. The cheap histrionics, the gross hypocrisy, the outright lies, misusing campaign funds to tip his staff at the Ritz \$3,300 — all of that would be just about bearable, but the shocking fact is that Harry Reid and his Senate Democrats are quietly attempting to repeal the First Amendment. And that elevates Senator Reid's shenanigans from buffoonery to villainy.

Gutting the Bill of Rights to silence political criticism is a dramatic move, but then Senator Reid has always had a flair for the theatrical. In 1978 he was serving on the Nevada Gaming Commission and helped the FBI conduct a sting against casino operator Jack Gordon, who offered him \$12,000 to approve a new gaming device. Aware that the transaction was being videotaped, the future Senate majority leader seized Gordon by the neck and throttled him, screaming: "You son of a bitch, you tried to bribe me!"

After Reid had left the gambling regulatory agency, his wife reported discovering a wire connecting the ignition in her station wagon to the gas tank, apparently a crude attempt at a car-bombing that was nearly identical to an unsuccessful earlier effort directed against another former gaming commissioner. Reid blamed Gordon for the episode; his former bodyguard, Gary Bates, offered to assassinate Gordon in retaliation. Reid declined that offer, and the matter went no further. Asked about it later, Bates confirmed that he had offered to murder Gordon on a hunch, and did not seem to think very much of it: “I’d do it again,” he told the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*. Reid relates the offer to commit murder as merely an amusing anecdote in his memoirs.

The police logged the car bomb as an attempted homicide. Desultory attempted car bombings were kind of a thing at the time in Las Vegas: There were two failed car bombs outside of restaurants involved in disputes with the culinary union in 1977, and the head of that union was murdered shortly thereafter, apparently for refusing to pay for the unsuccessful bombing. That was Reid’s political incubator: mobbed-up unions fighting mobbed-up gambling interests, both sides quick to resort to violence but too blisteringly incompetent to manage very much of it effectively. Reid had some famous showdowns with the mob, one of which inspired the courtroom scene in *Casino*, but it is also true that the infamous gangster Joe Agosto was recorded on a wiretap boasting that he had Harry Reid — whom he nicknamed “Clean Face” — “in my pocket.” Gaming regulators investigating the claim for five months found no wrongdoing by their former colleague.

Reid has been dining out on that car-bomb story for decades, and his tough-guy image is dear to him. In an unintendedly hilarious bit of autobiographical prose, Reid poses to himself the rhetorical question: *What goes through your mind as you start a fistfight with your future father-in-law?* Which is what he did when the older, smaller man invited the future senator to stop visiting his daughter. “First comes the pandemonium of the yelling and pushing, and crying, and the sting of a punch just landed. Love comes later.”

It has been a while since Harry Reid has ’fessed up to punching any old men in the face, but C-SPAN watchers will have the distinct impression that he might yet be moved to an act of pugilism if he had a shot at Charles and David Koch. “Obsession” is not too strong a word for Reid’s relationship with the Wichita-based libertarian philanthropists: As of this writing, he has heaped contempt upon their surname at least 134 times on the Senate floor. He has made wild and implausible claims about them that have been debunked even by the friendly *Washington Post*. Most recently, Reid cited a White House report (“I have here in my hands a list . . .” as some other senator might have said) that, he claimed, identified Koch Industries as one of the main causes of global warming, emitting more greenhouse gases than Dow, Exxon, and General Electric combined. As the *Post* pointed out, the report says nothing of the sort. In fact, many of those in the business of ranking companies by their contributions to global warming — a questionable pursuit at any time — do not put Koch Industries on their top-50 or top-100 lists, because it is mainly in the business of refining and petroleum derivatives, rather than in the business of drilling for oil. Koch Industries is, by the White House’s reckoning, responsible for 0.006 percent of worldwide greenhouse-gas emissions. Reid’s office put out a subsequent statement maintaining that, facts and fact-checkers be damned, the senator’s broader point is still, somehow, true.

Charles and David Koch are involved in a very broad array of political and philanthropic endeavors. The New York City Ballet dances in the David H. Koch Theater at Lincoln Center; the Charles Koch Foundation provides grants to universities offering courses that explore the principles of free enterprise and classical liberalism, and the Fred and Mary Koch Foundation does similar things for Kansas public schools; they provided seed money for the Cato Institute; Koch support has been critical to such organizations as the Competitive Enterprise Institute and Americans for Prosperity. They are also involved in electoral politics, maintaining a PAC that spent about \$43,000 in the cause of electing Scott Walker in 2010, but their main activities were for many years several steps removed from politics as such, contributing to organizations such as the Mercatus Center, a free-enterprise think tank at George Mason University, and the Institute for Humane Studies, an organization that helps young scholars with an interest in the classical-liberal tradition to enter careers in academia and public policy. (IHS also until recently offered a program for aspiring journalists, of which I served as director some years ago.)

While Reid and other Koch critics habitually denounce the brothers as “conservative” and “right-wing,” the Kochs have also provided support for campaigns against the Patriot Act, in favor of homosexual marriage, in favor of legalizing marijuana, and — critically — in opposition to corporate welfare, which Charles Koch describes as inducing businesses to “compete with rivals in securing government largesse, rather than winning customers.” Contrasting the Koch brothers’ activities with those of Las Vegas gambling tycoon Sheldon Adelson, Reid pronounced that the man in charge of the Las Vegas Sands Corp. “is not in this for the money.” But David Koch is, apparently, at the center of a cabal involving Big Oil and Big Ballet.

If the Adelsons and the Kochs are not in it for the money, what about the Reids? Politics and business have been a profitable pairing for the clan: the thousands of dollars channeled to his granddaughter; the *Los Angeles Times* reports on the cozy relationships between Senator Reid and his children and sundry Nevada business interests; the senator’s lobbying to get his son hired as a city attorney in Henderson; and the thicket of nepotism that Nevada journalist Jon Ralston refers to as “Harry Reid’s Kryptonite.” The payments to Reid’s granddaughter were telling: When Ralston first contacted Reid’s office about the payment to his granddaughter, the senator’s people described her as a “jewelry vendor” and would not confirm that she was in fact his granddaughter. “If he was going to get tripped up by something as small-ball as a measly five-figure line item on a campaign finance report,” Ralston writes, “it had to be personal.”

But *personal* seems to be Harry Reid’s most comfortable mode. His dishonest tirades against the Koch brothers have been described as “McCarthyite,” but that is in many ways unfair to Tail Gunner Joe. For all of his shortcomings, McCarthy was concerned about the presence of Soviet operatives in the State Department, which was an entirely reasonable thing for a senator to be bothered about. Reid is busy denouncing private citizens for having the gall to exercise the rights guaranteed to them by the Constitution, which include the right of engaging in political speech and petitioning the government for the redress of grievances, in ways that do not meet with the approval of Senator Harry Reid. There is no legitimate policy issue in question here. Charles and David Koch are simply doing what millions of Americans, including millions of Democrats and progressives, do all the time: putting their money in the service of their political priorities. The only reason for this activism to be a subject of vitriolic denunciation in the Senate is simple

personal hatred, which Reid possesses in abundance, and the pursuit of political advantage, in which Reid is tireless.

Not only tireless, but ruthless. In the wake of the decision in the *Citizens United* case, which held that the federal government may not fine or imprison private citizens for showing a film critical of a political figure during a window of time deemed inappropriate by other political figures, Reid and the Democrats became agitated by their fear that the main currents of political discourse in these United States were moving outside of such Democrat-dominated institutions as newspapers and network news programs, as well as outside of federally regulated enterprises such as political parties and political campaigns conducted under the watchful eye of the Federal Election Commission. The Democrats have for a generation been able to fight the vast majority of national campaigns on friendly ground of their own choosing, the arbiters of political conversation being the editors of the *New York Times* and employees of the regulatory agencies. The Kochs, and others like them, had for decades been active at the ideas end of the political process, but once they started to take an interest in actual election outcomes, the hysteria set in. With the assistance of such feckless co-conspirators as Senator John McCain, the Left set about attempting to put practically all private political activism under federal regulation. Their greatest obstacle, as the Supreme Court has reminded them repeatedly, is the First Amendment.

Stymied by jurisprudence holding that the First Amendment says what it means and means what it says, and by the failure of their dreams of reviving the “Fairness Doctrine” to crush talk radio and Fox News, Senate Democrats, with the support of Harry Reid, have made the horrifying decision to introduce a constitutional amendment effectively repealing the first item on the Bill of Rights, a so-called amendment to reform campaign finance that would put not only nonprofit activist groups under the federal thumb but also, potentially, news organizations as well. Because the Democrats’ amendment would allow “in kind” donations in the form of political communications to be regulated like campaign donations, and because U.S. law does not make distinctions between media companies and other kinds of companies, the amendment would empower Congress to shut down newspapers and television networks for political reasons. The Supreme Court has consistently affirmed that the First Amendment does not allow the Democrats to do what they propose to do vis-à-vis regulating political speech, but if it takes an act of metaphorical violence against the Bill of Rights to get that done, Senator Reid has already shown himself to be reasonably comfortable with actual violence.

Which is to say, Harry Reid proposes to punch James Madison in the face like he wants to date his daughter. Why? Because the little people need a fair shot at helping to subsidize the tips for Harry Reid’s doormen at the Ritz? Because casino magnates and hedge-funders are preferable to oil magnates and private-equity guys? No. The answer is: *Because Harry Reid says so.* And, until November at least, that’s the only answer you’re going to get.