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Democracy in Chains: An interview with author Nancy MacLean

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by Hatewatch Staff

Distinguished historian Nancy MacLean didn't set out to research and write about an economist at George Mason University, James M. Buchanan, and the libertarian Koch Brothers network.

But while conducting research into a project on school segregation in 1950s and 1960s Virginia she came across several sources that dealt with school vouchers during the era, a reaction to desegregation.

As she looked further into vouchers, what became clear "is that a quest that began as a quiet attempt to prevent the state of Virginia from having to meet national democratic standards of fair treatment and equal protection under the law," would instead, some 60 years later, become the opposite: "a stealth bid to reverse-engineer all of America, at both the state and national levels, back to the oligarchic governance of midcentury Virginia, minus the segregation."

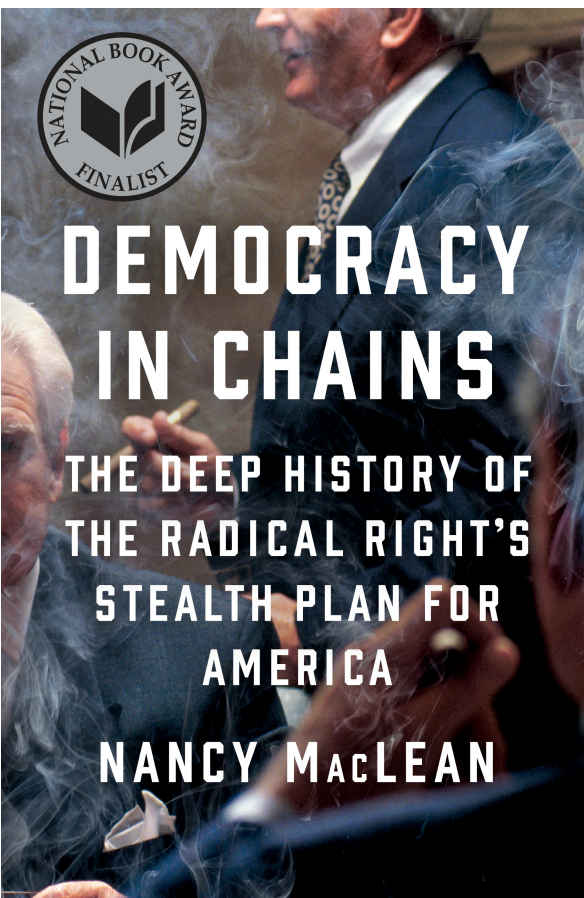
The results of her years-long investigation is the book *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America* (Viking, 2017), a finalist for the National Book Award, which uncovers the history of the well-heeled radical right's network and its effort to not only change who governs, but to fundamentally change the rules of governance.

In this vision for America, those without great power or property are prevented from using their majority votes to better their lives through a multi-pronged strategy that seeks to kill off unions, suppress voting, privatize schools, highways, Medicare and Social Security, stop action on climate change, transform the legal and judicial system and amend the Constitution to lock all of this into place permanently.

“The libertarian cause,” MacLean states in her book, “was never about freedom as most people would define it.” Rather, it was about “the promotion of crippling division among the people so as to end any interference with what those who held vast power over others believed should be their prerogatives.”

Hatewatch spoke with MacLean to discuss her book and what she found.

Could you tell us the circumstances that drove you to write this book, in which



Southern academic economist James M. Buchanan’s ideas about States’ rights and free markets link to Libertarian Charles Koch and, by extension, the Koch network?

I did not set out to study James Buchanan or Charles Koch. My original interest was in the school closures in Prince Edward County, Virginia, from 1959 to 1964. The public school system was completely shut down and black students were locked out of any formal education while their white peers went off to private, segregation academies with school

vouchers, essentially punishing the black community in Prince Edward for having been part of the *Brown v. Board of Education* case.

I went into the archives at the American Friends Service Committee and found a bunch of records related to that and I was embarrassed as a Southern historian and a historian of social movements that I hadn't known about it. I was intrigued and started to dig into the story and the broader policy of Massive Resistance to *Brown*. I very quickly found that vouchers were central to it and that Milton Friedman, a University of Chicago economist, had issued his first manifesto for vouchers in 1955, in the full knowledge of how it would be used by Southern segregationists. I know that because of correspondence between him and the editor who challenged him on all the key points that you and I would ask.

And then you ran across economist James M. Buchanan, who died in 2013. Who was he?

James M. Buchanan was the first U.S. Southerner to win the Nobel Prize in economic sciences. He had been born in Tennessee in 1919 and he was a grandson of a one-time Populist governor in Tennessee. Buchanan went through a Southern undergraduate institution and got his PhD at the University of Chicago after Naval service during World War II. When he moved to Virginia in 1956, it was in the midst of Massive Resistance to *Brown v. Board of Education*. With all talk circulating on the Right in Virginia about Calhounian constitutional remedies to restrain the federal government, Buchanan got very interested in the constitutional aspects of political economy.

What's Buchanan's connection to John C. Calhoun, the nineteenth-century political theorist and slaveowner in South Carolina who served as the seventh vice president?

I have a prologue [in the book] about Calhoun and about the connection to Buchanan's thought because some of Buchanan's colleagues at George Mason University actually called Calhoun a precursor to Buchanan, and observed that their two systems of political economy and constitutional thought had "the same purpose and effect."

Buchanan's career mission became shackling the majority to prevent them from achieving the kinds of changes that require government spending and government action that citizen action had pushed government to take over the whole course of the twentieth century. (Things like Social Security, Medicare, fair labor standards, antidiscrimination policies, and clean air and water protections.)

What was Buchanan's vision and how does it tie into libertarian ideas?

He saw the market as a realm of freedom. Of free contract, of free exchange between individuals. He saw the government, on the other hand, as the realm of coercion, claims that had been refuted by a few generations of scholars before him, who demonstrated the coercion vast wealth enabled and how government action was needed to offset that power so that the non-elite majority could also have freedom.

Buchanan was reviving the Gilded Age philosophy of employers' liberty, Social Darwinism, and all the rest.

He said — and I quote him in the book — “I don't want to control you and I don't want to be controlled by you.” That sounds superficially appealing, because most of us are freedom-loving people. But when you understand that when he says, “I don't want to be controlled by you,” he's also speaking of “you” plurally, as a democratic society and government, then the import becomes clearer. The Framers of our Constitution never thought there should be *no* regulation. They just did regulation at the local and state level more than the federal level in their time because the nature of their economy and their world was more local and state than national or international.

The libertarian notion that they're somehow re-creating the vision of the Founders is thus a total fantasy. What the libertarians would create is, in fact, an utterly unsustainable society, government and environment. They would say that their cause is “liberty,” and they say things like, “we are advancing pro-growth policies and limited government, putting more tax dollars in your pocket.” Who's going to disagree with bromides like that?

But when you find out they're using your energies to build momentum to privatize Social Security and Medicare, undermine our public education system, and make it impossible for the government to ensure clean air and water or action on climate change, then you start to get a different picture of what this is all about.

That's why I feel so strongly about getting the message of this book out: because I think these people have been very dishonest, not only with the rest of America, but even with the young people that they are recruiting and funding and training in such large numbers now. They're not telling them the truth about what the endgame is.

Some of the criticism you've received has included contentions that you can't draw a definitive line from Buchanan to Koch.

Well, I actually can. And I regret that I didn't put this in the book, which was originally twice as long as the final version. Richie Fink, who is [Charles] Koch's political adviser, also came out of George Mason University. He was recommended to Koch by Buchanan. And Richie Fink later wrote to Buchanan to say how indebted he and Charles Koch were for their understanding of the political economy. So Fink did express that direct debt to Buchanan for how they understand things. And what they did was weaponize his ideas of how government had grown to reverse-engineer it, without informing the people of their true goals -- because they knew that, as Charles Koch admitted, "we are greatly outnumbered."

The ideas they are applying in their stealth campaign are still coming out of Buchanan's last institutional home at George Mason University, which has become a base camp for this Koch project, through its economics department, the Scalia School of Law, and this strategy and training shop called the Mercatus Center. So much of the R & D for the Koch project comes from there. GMU students have actually sued the administration, under Virginia's FOIA act, to get access to these Koch donor agreements because they're so distorting academic integrity. You can learn more about such student organizing at unkochmycampus.org.

How are you seeing the ideas of the Koch and libertarian networks spread?

Thanks to vast investments in a range of think tanks over the years, they have spread quite widely. Now, too, the Koch donor network is funding gazillions of internships alongside the faculty positions, and recruited by them. First it was college, now they're going to the high school level. So there's a huge amount of money going to get young people into this, to get them steeped in the ideas, using the kind of "gravy train" approach Buchanan had urged. They're also making a bid for K-12 teachers — offering lush professional development opportunities where you get trained in these ideas and bring them back to your school district, as happened in Tucson, Arizona, where a Koch-propaganda course is being taught to large numbers without the usual school board approval.

Charles Koch said when he began investing in a big way at George Mason in 1997 that, "I want to unleash the kind of force that propelled Columbus to his discoveries." In other words, he wanted world-shaking impact. And

now they've got over 400 mega-donors funding the groups pushing this agenda and their allied elected officials. It's just astonishing how ambitious, well-funded and audacious this project is.

You noted in the book's Introduction that by the early 2010s, something extraordinarily troubling had entered American politics. What were you seeing?

In places from Scott Walker's Wisconsin to my own new home of North Carolina, a surge of radical rules changes was being rushed through, changes that came out of the Buchanan playbook. And those implementing them weren't being honest with the public about what they were doing and why. They were also showing that they were willing to inflict collateral damage on all kinds of constituencies. For example, vitriolic attacks on teachers. And the reason for that was this Koch-led cause needs to smash the power of organized teachers and teachers' unions to get what they want, even if it means defaming good hardworking people and wrecking hard-built institutions.

In the 2010s, observers of politics started seeing conservative-leaning bills designed to hamstring unions and public education. They seemed to coalesce at the same times in different state legislatures across the country. Then, in 2015, for example, nearly 400 anti-abortion bills were introduced, and they, too, seemed to tie into Koch-supported networks. Can you speak to how this cause might use such networks to further legislation?

In my research, I was following this idea of "enchaining the Leviathan," which was Buchanan's phrase for the shackling of democracy. But Koch is a smart man, with three engineering degrees from MIT. He knows libertarians are less than four percent of the population. And if you're going to try to shape policy, then you need to get a majority. So what they have done very shrewdly and effectively is reach out to other partners. Among those partners is the Religious Right, and to get the Religious Right, you have to push an agenda that will bring them in. And have people in charge who understand what that requires—like Tim Phillips, the head of Americans for Prosperity, who used to work with Ralph Reed to rally white evangelicals, in particular, for the right. Those anti-abortion bills, and the gay-bashing marriage amendments, and the push for so-called "religious liberty," did that: got the GOP base to the polls using fear and prejudice to move the economic liberty agenda.

Is it fair to say, according to your research, that U.S. libertarianism has roots in what we interpret as right-wing ideology in a quest to support “freedom” for specific types of people?

Yes. I can say this in Buchanan’s words, too. He said, on multiple occasions, in print, that his preferred system of constitutional rules were those of 1900. And if you look at the constitutional rules of 1900, that was the age of what was called the *Lochner* Court, which made it impossible for workers to organize under the doctrine of freedom of contract. It was also the period of the *Plessy* Court, where racial injustice was accepted under the rubric of separate but equal. And, not coincidentally, it was a time of mass disenfranchisement, to keep those hurt by such policies from participating in politics. So I think it’s quite reasonable to see libertarians as having a dream world whose closest embodiment most Americans are glad we managed to escape.

You’ve received both praise and criticism for your work, and a lot of the criticism appears to be emanating from the right and from libertarian sources.

No serious historian reviewer who is not on the Koch payroll has made any major criticisms of my work. On the other hand, most of those who have attacked the book and me as author are economists, political scientists and legal scholars who are connected to this operation, and who don’t understand what historians do: that our job is to analyze sources through close reading in context. So they’re criticizing me for doing what a historian does.

It’s the kind of thing these guys do to climate scientists. They try to make it appear that something is controversial when it’s not, by nitpicking to find what they imagine to be holes in the research that they can use to construct a case that the work is so flawed people should ignore it. When they get desperate, they are not at all averse to trying to undermine the reputations of legitimate scholars whether they be climate scientists, tobacco researchers, or in my case, a historian.

I don’t think that our newspaper editors, our foundations that focus on education, our higher education administrators — I don’t think these people are ready for what is essentially a campaign against truth on multiple fronts. I don’t think they understand what they’re faced with or how to ensure that people who are doing legitimate scholarship or research are protected.

What are the goals of this movement?

They want to change the U.S. Constitution so they can put locks and bolts on what popular majorities can do in our politics. They want to transform our society radically — transform it into a society that most of us would not recognize and I don't think many of us would want to live in.

What they seek, ultimately, is a system with total personal responsibility for all needs, where you're on your own for everything, with personal savings accounts and no hope of help from government. In their dream world, government would not have any obligation to citizens other than to provide for the national defense, to ensure the rule of law, and to police people to keep social order, which will become more and more of a challenge as this radical inequality develops.

The period that's closest to what this cause wants is the late 19th century, what is often called the Gilded Age. So if you think about 1900 with, again, the inability of people to secure reforms even though they were desperately wanted; the inability of workers to organize into unions and wield collective power so we had rolling civil wars between capital and labor; and the oppression that went on in the South that was upheld by the Supreme Court under the doctrine of states rights— those are the kinds of constitutional rules they're talking about as liberty.

What might be solutions?

The most important takeaway from my research is that this is a movement that is self-consciously a minority cause: they know that they will never persuade the majority, never win agreement if they tell the truth, so they're operating by stealth. The fact that they fear the majority getting on to what they're doing is a potentially colossal source of strength, I believe. Thus, the most pressing task of people who don't like what is happening, who think it is wrong, is to patiently inform that majority and organize to activate that majority to protect and renew our democracy. Given how quickly this Koch agenda is being pushed through in the Trump era and how much money the donor network is investing, we don't have time to waste. It's an all-hands-on-deck emergency for those who believe in government of the people, by the people, and for the people.

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