

# The New York Times

## How the Radical Right Played the Long Game and Won

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August 15, 2017

### DEMOCRACY IN CHAINS

The Deep History of the Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America

By Nancy MacLean

334 pp. Viking. \$28.

Earlier this year, when the Republican pollster Glen Bolger sat down with Donald Trump voters who had previously voted for Barack Obama, one Wisconsinite summed up his reason for favoring Trump this time around: “I think they all lie, but Trump was more — is more obvious.” This statement presents quite a puzzle. Why would any voter think that being a known liar is an asset?

Insight into this conundrum comes from an unlikely source, the life's work of the economist James McGill Buchanan — who happens to be the subject of a new book, “Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America,” by the historian Nancy MacLean. Buchanan, who was born in 1919 and died in 2013, advanced the field of public choice economics into politics, arguing that all interest groups push for their own agenda rather than the public good. According to this view, governing institutions cannot be trusted, which is why governing should be left to the market.

In the United States, promising and then delivering services and protections for the majority of voters provides a path for politicians to be popularly elected. Buchanan was concerned that this would lead to overinvestment in public services, as the majority would be all too willing to tax the wealthy minority to support these programs. So Buchanan came to a radical conclusion: Majority rule was an economic problem. “Despotism,” he declared in his 1975 book “The Limits of Liberty,” “may be the only organizational alternative to the political structure that we observe.”

Buchanan therefore argued for “curbing the appetites of majority coalitions” by establishing ironclad rules that would curb their power. As he was known for saying, “the problems of our times require attention to the *rules* rather than the *rulers*.” In 1986, he was awarded the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Science for “his development of the contractual and constitutional bases for the theory of economic and political decision making.”

Buchanan, however, also had what MacLean calls a “stealth” agenda. He knew that the majority would never agree to being constrained. He therefore helped lead a push to undermine their trust

in public institutions. The idea was to get voters to direct their ire at these institutions and divert their attention away from increasing income and wealth inequality.

This is the sordid tale that MacLean lays out in “Democracy in Chains.” She starts with Buchanan’s early engagement in policy work in the late 1950s, when he offered to help the state of Virginia respond to the federal mandate to desegregate public schools. After the Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* that public school segregation was unconstitutional, Buchanan and a fellow economist called for the state to issue tax-subsidized vouchers to any parents who wanted to send their children to private schools. What these economists were calling for was essentially the privatization of public education.

But even in 1950s Virginia, public schools were popular with many white parents, and “a fire sale of tax-funded public schools to private school operators would be political suicide,” MacLean writes. Buchanan’s plan failed, and he learned a tough lesson from this foray into policy making: If the majority demands services such as free public schools, politicians will acquiesce.

Buchanan decided he needed to influence policy at a deeper level. In the ensuing years, he sought to lead an economic and political movement in which he stressed that “conspiratorial secrecy is at all times essential” to mask efforts to protect the wealthy elite from the will of the majority. In September 1973, Buchanan held the inaugural meeting of the International Atlantic Economic Society, arguing for the need to “create, support and activate an effective counterintelligentsia” to reshape the way people thought about government. He believed the center-left controlled academia and “effectively indoctrinated political actors in both parties,” MacLean writes. To fight back, conservatives needed to develop new surrogates who could be “indoctrinated” in turn with right-wing ideas, and then “mobilized, organized and directed” to disseminate them.

We know all of this because MacLean found documentation of Buchanan’s plans — including correspondence, meeting minutes and personal papers — in his previously unexplored archives. She came upon her biographical subject “by sheer serendipity,” she writes, while researching how the state of Virginia responded to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Seeing the name of an unfamiliar economist eventually led her to rooms full of documents that made clear how “operatives” had been trained “to staff the far-flung and purportedly separate, yet intricately connected, institutions funded by the Koch brothers and their now large network of fellow wealthy donors.” Buchanan’s papers revealed how, from a series of faculty perches at several universities, he spent his life laying out a game plan for a right-wing social movement.

One part of his plan involved Social Security. The election of Ronald Reagan as president in 1980 was a watershed for conservatives, yet it quickly became clear that he, too, would succumb to political pressure. By 1982, Reagan’s fight to end Social Security — long a bugbear of Buchanan’s — was faltering. Amid that debate, the libertarian Cato Institute, funded by the brothers Charles and David Koch, made privatization of Social Security its top priority and turned to Buchanan for a master plan. Buchanan told them that “those who seek to undermine the existing structure” must do two things: Make people doubt the viability of Social Security, and

divide the public by suggesting high earners be taxed at higher rates — which might sound progressive but would ultimately undo the universal foundation of the program itself.

MacLean doesn't hide her antipathy to Buchanan's goals. As a historian of American social movements, she brings this expertise to her study of Buchanan, showing how his work helped to sow doubt that anyone — whether individuals, groups or institutions — can act in the public good. Nevertheless, her overt moral revulsion at her subject can sometimes make it seem as if we're getting only part of the picture.

American democracy was unprepared to defend itself against the agenda of Buchanan and conservative benefactors. Buchanan may not have been the only actor in this movement, and the role of conservative donors and economists has been documented elsewhere, but we are now living in a world he helped shepherd into reality. Public choice economists argue that those with the most to lose from change will pay the most attention, which has certainly been the case with Charles and David Koch. They and their friends have invested enormous sums in organizations that have changed the national debate about the proper role of government in the economy. Our politically polarized and increasingly paralyzed government institutions are the result.

With this book MacLean joins a growing chorus of scholars and journalists documenting the systematic, organized effort to undermine democracy and change the rules. In "Dark Money," Jane Mayer tells the tale of the Koch brothers. In "Invisible Hands: The Businessmen's Crusade Against the New Deal," the historian Kim Phillips-Fein shows how a small group of businessmen initiated a decades-long effort to build popular support for free market economics. The political scientist Steven M. Teles writes about the chemicals magnate John M. Olin in "The Rise of the Conservative Legal Movement."

Power consolidation sometimes seems like a perpetual motion machine, continually widening the gap between those who have power and money and those who don't. Still, "Democracy in Chains" leaves me with hope: Perhaps as books like MacLean's continue to shine a light on important truths, Americans will begin to realize they need to pay more attention and not succumb to the cynical view that known liars make the best leaders.