



Nancy MacLean responds to her critics

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Neither Nancy MacLean, author of the controversial “Democracy in Chains,” nor her publisher has responded to my invitation to post a response to [criticism of her book](#). MacLean has, however, responded to her critics in an [email interview](#) with the Chronicle of Higher Education, which also covers the controversy in an [accompanying story](#).

The interview is worth reading. Here are a few highlights.

First, the interview discusses the attacks on her book. MacLean confirms that she authored a [Facebook message](#) alleging the [existence of a “coordinated” campaign](#) against her book. The Chronicle then asked her about that allegation.

Do you have any evidence for your claim in that Facebook message that the attacks on your work are “coordinated”?

I’m not saying they called each other up and planned a series of critical responses to my book. What I’m saying is many of the critics come from similar backgrounds — they are libertarians who trained at or are employed by the very institutions I write about in my book.

And some of the rhetoric has been quite threatening. Jonah Goldberg, senior editor of *National Review*, said I should worry about the [“the libertarian super-posse on my ass.”](#)

So, according to MacLean, the only evidence of “coordination” behind the criticism of her book is, well, that many of us are libertarians who attended or teach at George Mason, and whom Jonah Goldberg referred to as a “super-posse.”

As for [some of the substantive critiques of her book that have come from liberals](#), this is what MacLean has to say.

The left-wing historian Rick Perlstein wrote in a Facebook [post](#), “The foundation of the entire book [*Democracy in Chains*] is a conspiracy theory that suggests that if you understand THIS ONE SECRET PLAN, you understand the rise of the right in America in its entirety. Which suggests you don’t need to understand any of a score of other important tributaries. ... That you don’t need to read anything else. Which is actively dangerous to historical understanding.” Perlstein was commenting on an [article](#) by Farrell and the political scientist Steven Teles. Its basic thrust was that your book caricatures its right-wing subjects in a way that does a disservice to political discussion and even misleads those

on the left and center searching for a way forward. What's your response to Perlstein, Farrell, and Teles?

As a scholar, I would never say “you don’t need to read anything else.” Of course there were other tributaries feeding the right; we have a huge body of scholarship now that explores them, much of which I cite in the 60 pages of endnotes that document the text. But my work draws attention to a missing piece of the puzzle that had been ignored, one that puts the current alarming state of our politics in an illuminating new light.

As for Farrell and Teles, I have to assume, based on what they wrote, that they did not give my book a close reading. My book is not a history of public choice (which I explained was broader than the Virginia variant on which I focused). The book traces the history of an idea — the idea of enchainning modern democratic government, as developed by James Buchanan. It shows how that idea came to appeal to an extremely wealthy and messianic individual, Charles Koch, who has harnessed it and organized other extremely wealthy donors to fund efforts, staffed by thousands of people, to radically alter our government in ways that will be devastating to millions of people and already seem to be producing an utterly unsustainable society in terms of social norms and governance.

So those who disagree with her, or who critique her work, simply didn’t read the book closely enough. Here, for the record, is an excerpt from the Farrell and Teles critique:

While some on the left have hailed the book, libertarians and conservatives have attacked it online. Several have argued that MacLean misleadingly truncates quotes, to make it seem as if Buchanan and other libertarians such as Tyler Cowen are anti-democratic. While they obviously have a great deal of skin in the game, their critiques of the book have landed a number of solid blows.

For instance, when MacLean claims that Cowen is providing “a handbook for how to conduct a fifth column assault on democracy,” she cites as evidence Cowen’s statement that “the weakening of checks and balances would increase the chance of a very good outcome.” Unfortunately, she declines to provide the reader with the second half of the sentence, which goes on to note that “it would also increase the chance of a very bad outcome.” Nor, as she has claimed in interview, is the title of Cowen’s blog *Marginal Revolution* a signal to the illuminated that Cowen is undertaking a gradual revolution by stealth (it’s actually a well-known term for the birth of modern economics).

She accuses David Boaz, executive vice president of the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, of believing that “close to half of American society is intent on exploiting the rich” when he writes about a “parasite economy” of predators and prey. In fact, the predators Boaz is talking about are specific interests lobbying for subsidies, tariffs, quotas, or trade restrictions. While his claims can be contested, they are simply not what MacLean says they are.

Elsewhere in the interview, MacLean says that she and Farrell “have a different understanding of what would constitute adequate evidence” to support a claim” (in this case, the claim that a paper James Buchanan published in the Cato Journal was an important strategy document). As for

close reading of sources and use of evidence to substantiate claims, [this review by J. Morgan Kousser](#) of MacLean's 1994 book on the Ku Klux Klan appears somewhat prescient.

On the question of whether Buchanan's work bears any relation to that of John Calhoun, MacLean writes:

The anger over my linking Buchanan with Calhoun at least brought me a moment of levity. George Mason's Donald Boudreaux called it "[astonishing](#)" that I drew a parallel between Buchanan's political economy and that of John C. Calhoun. Yet it was not I but Boudreaux's own colleagues at George Mason's Mercatus Center, Alexander Tabarrok and Tyler Cowen, who called the antebellum South Carolina senator's thought "[a precursor of modern public choice theory](#)" and concluded that the two systems of thought had "the same purpose and effect.

MacLean says Boudreaux found it "astonishing" that she "drew a parallel" between Buchanan and Calhoun. Here, however, is what Boudreaux actually wrote:

Even more astonishing is MacLean's assertion that Buchanan-style libertarians' "fundamental core concepts" come from John C. Calhoun. Her only evidence for this claim – namely, that Calhoun was mentioned as an influence by the libertarian Murray Rothbard – isn't evidence at all. Buchanan was no great admirer of Rothbard, and the number of times that Calhoun is cited in any of Buchanan's published works is zero. As in "never." Not once. (I knew Buchanan for the last 28 years of his life and I do not recall ever hearing Jim mention Calhoun.) [Emphasis added.]*

So what Boudreaux found "astonishing" was not that someone might find parallels between Buchanan's work and that of Calhoun, but instead MacLean's claim that Calhoun was the source of Buchanan's ideas. Among MacLean's claims in the book is that Calhoun was the "intellectual lodestar" for Buchanan and like-minded intellectuals. For more on MacLean's efforts to link Buchanan and Calhoun, I recommend [this post](#) by Phil Magness.

On her critics, MacLean also adds:

Most disturbing, though, is how many of the book's critics fail to disclose their financial indebtedness to the cause whose history my book explores. The book is critical of the network of think tanks and foundations that operate with aid from the Koch brothers. Many of the critics have benefited from grants from the Koch Foundation or related groups. Yet very few have acknowledged that financial relationship. And that's troubling because full disclosure of such income is Ethics 101, as it calls into question the recipient's ability to remain unbiased.

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Since MacLean apparently believes some of us have not been sufficiently candid with potential conflicts of interest, I should probably remind readers that I attended law school at George Mason University, which has also received money from the Kochs, much of it long after I

graduated. As I am a Virginia resident, my tuition was subsidized by state taxpayers (thanks, guys!) and a non-Koch-related scholarship. I paid the rest as I went at night while working full time. I spent a semester as a visiting professor at GMU some years later and was offered a tenured position on the faculty. I declined the offer because my bride-to-be and I decided we'd rather raise a family in Ohio than inside-the-Beltway.

Over the years I have spoken at various Koch-sponsored programs, for which I received modest honoraria. I have also spoken at programs sponsored by organizations receiving money from George Soros, the late Peter Lewis and various progressive donors. In the past, I have solicited and received grants for projects from the Charles Koch Foundation, the last of which was this roundtable eight years ago, for which I received no compensation (which probably reflects how bad I am at working the whole gravy-train thing). Ditto various progressive donors.

As longtime VC readers can attest, none of this prevented me from being quite critical of the Kochs when I thought they deserved it (as in my extensive series of posts on the Koch-Cato dispute, many of which may be found here) or from taking positions at odds with many Koch-funded organizations (such as my support for a carbon tax and other policies to mitigate the threat posed by climate change). I don't know whether such work will affect my chances of obtaining another Koch grant should I seek one in the future, but I frankly don't care. That's not why I write what I write. It also has absolutely nothing to do with whether MacLean adequately substantiates her claims or fairly represents her sources.

The interview concludes with MacLean explaining that her hope is to expose the libertarian plan to "radically change the rules of governance in order to change society" so as to give capitalism "free rein" and protect "the rights of the wealthy few." Writes MacLean: "It's critical to bring this vision out into the open, so we can have honest debate about the kind of country we want." I agree with MacLean that it's important to have an "honest debate" on Buchanan's ideas, as well as other ideas that inform public debates over the future of our great nation. Readers can decide for themselves whether "Democracy in Chains" contributes to that endeavor.