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Nancy MacLean Responds to Her Critics

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The Chronicle Review asked Nancy MacLean to comment on the uproar sparked by her new book, *Democracy in Chains* (Viking). Through her publicist, MacLean, a professor of history and public policy at Duke University, agreed to respond to questions submitted via email. Our questions and her answers, below, have been condensed and lightly edited for clarity.

Describe the experience of coming under attack for your book.

The personal attacks have been a shock. Knowing I'm not the first helps, though. As I say in the book, climate scientists and investigative reporters, among others, have received similar treatment from right-wing critics when they published their work.

What's your general reaction to the controversy over your book, which started with critiques from libertarians but has now come to encompass attacks from a few critics on the left as well?

On the one hand, it's been disheartening that people — in particular, some scholars — are willing to criticize the book without having read it. On the other hand, people have pointed out to me that sometimes a vehement reaction can be a backhanded compliment: This kind of strong reaction can suggest that a work is timely and important and lead more people to want to check it out.

Many on social media have been circulating a message said to be from you in which you call for help and attack your critics for trying to destroy your reputation. Can you confirm that you wrote this message?

Yes. In short order one afternoon, after a string of very positive reviews and interviews, a number of things happened. Misleading critiques from the right had shot up so far on Google that if you searched my name, you saw these critiques before any of my usual personal or professional information (department webpage and such). Very combative "reviews" were appearing on Amazon from people who appeared not to have read the book but to be recycling the talking points from these critiques in sometimes crude terms. Someone, unbeknownst to me, had set up a Wiki page on me that featured the attacks.

And some of the comments were vicious. On Mises Wire, one commenter wrote, "No doubt she's a rabid feminazi, anti-Southerner, socialist and pathologically focused on race and gender.

She's a historical victimologist who produces nothing of value." That same commenter actually supplied information on my home — he had gone so far as to look up where I lived.

Needless to say, the combined impact was unnerving. It made me feel vulnerable and exposed (which may have been their intent).

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."

At times, the debate over your book has felt more like a political campaign fight — with partisans on both sides digging in, sometimes without even having read the book — than a discussion of a work of scholarship. What do you make of that? And how do you characterize your own politics?

The initial reviews and commentary from scholars and journalists (of no particular partisan persuasion) were based on careful reading and thoughtful engagement. And scholars and regular readers who have read the book continue to offer fact-based, well-reasoned responses to the critics, who often seem to be arguing ideologically more than factually. I have been really impressed with the corrective power of the community of fair-minded scholars.

Nevertheless, it has been disheartening how many people are willing to criticize the book without reading it. I take that as another sign of our troubling political moment. And yet this moment did not arise of nowhere. In my book, I tell the story of some of the actors who helped create the current toxicity, by making conscious efforts to poison public life to achieve their ends. As an example, I offer this quote from Grover Norquist: "We are trying to change the tones in the state capitals — and turn them toward bitter nastiness and partisanship."

As to my own politics, I am a politically progressive person who believes deeply in democracy and fair play. Today, both my research and my observations as a citizen lead me to believe American democracy is in peril. That's why I was willing to write this book and to risk incurring the wrath of libertarians.

Critics say that your book's arguments leap far beyond what the evidence supports, or, worse, that you distort or make up evidence to further your case. A couple of libertarian critics focused on the aspects of your book related to *Brown v. Board of Education*, *John C. Calhoun*, and the Agrarian poets and their connection to Buchanan's thought. Henry Farrell, a political scientist on the left at George Washington University, points to your discussion of a document Buchanan wrote laying out a strategy for dividing the coalition of groups who supported the welfare state. You suggest this was a kind of master plan that shaped much of the American right, but Farrell thinks you fail to provide evidence either for the crucial role played by this

document or that Buchanan himself was more than a midlevel intellectual within a much larger movement. What's your response?

Two of the aforementioned fair-minded scholars have written lengthy corrections to the incorrect claims regarding *Brown v. Board of Ed* and the midcentury Southern aspect of the book, which I highly recommend reading.

As for Farrell's claim, I guess we have a different understanding of what would constitute adequate evidence. In the document in question, Buchanan was providing the Cato Institute with counsel for its then-top policy priority: privatization of Social Security, which Buchanan expressly pointed out had no support from any demographic group of voters, so he proposed an indirect approach designed to mislead the public about the true intent. Cato and the wider radical right have since pursued the strategy he urged. As for the second claim, of course Buchanan was part of a much larger movement. My book makes that abundantly clear. But it also shows how his ideas provided that long-marginal movement with something it had never had before: an analysis with which to create an operational strategy to take down the liberal state. And I have solid evidence for the difference that strategy made to the current success of the right.

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."

But, look, Buchanan was a gentleman, generous and kind with students and colleagues who shared his commitments and was well-liked by them in return.

And I'm getting the sense from the complaints of movement insiders that they view the book as disrespectful to heroes of the cause.

So it's perhaps important for everyone to understand that I did not set out to critique Buchanan or other libertarians as human beings. I was not writing a biography or biographies. I was looking at these scholars' ideas and tracing the impact of those ideas.

This is a group that has been insular since its founding. Now its members are confronted with an outsider's view of their history. And they don't like what they're seeing in the mirror *Democracy in Chains* puts up to them.

The left-wing historian Rick Perlstein wrote in a Facebook post, "The foundation of the entire book 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 enchaining 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.

What's your response to critics who take issue with how you represent public-choice economics?

Those who read beyond the introduction will find that I credit some of the truly original insights of public-choice economics, among them Buchanan's explanation of why governments run deficits in periods of prosperity, not just during recessions.

Indeed, some scholars working in the public-choice tradition who are not part of the libertarian movement have written to me to praise how the book situates the development of Buchanan's idea of enchaining democracy in its historically specific formative context — and also for showing how once-stimulating ideas can ossify into ideology impervious to question or factual correction.

Some of the criticism from others is, frankly, bizarre. For example, the book devotes a whole chapter, backed by original research, to Buchanan's work in Chile. He was invited there to advise on the Pinochet junta's Constitution of 1980. The book quotes both the leading regime newspaper on Buchanan's counsel and his own letter of thanks to a top regime official. Yet the "review" that is ricocheting around the right as the best critique of the book simply pronounces: "Nothing to see here." That's dogma, not analysis.

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.

One critic, Jason Brennan of Georgetown University, went so far as to say , "I look forward to seeing Duke fire her." What kind of response, if any, have you seen from Duke?

Duke made its assessment of my scholarship clear in recruiting me from Northwestern University in 2010 with a chaired position like the one I was appointed to there, and then appointing me to the Arts & Sciences Distinguished Professors Advisory Committee, to vet the scholarship of other nominees for distinguished named chair positions. In answering this brouhaha, my department chair and many university colleagues have sent messages of concern and condemnation of the ad hominem character of so many of these attacks — and congratulations for the very enthusiastic reception of the book outside the precincts of libertarianism.

But, really, a call to fire me? I love this "Off with her head!" incitation, because it demonstrates the eagerness to abuse power in this self-styled liberty movement that I found in the primary sources. Such rhetorical bullying would be laughable if it weren't part of a pattern on the right of escalating attempts to intimidate scholars who disagree with them. As early as 1969, James Buchanan outlined a strategy to transform higher education so that it served the interest of the right wing. I describe that vision and its current application in the book.

Some critics have made a note of the fact that the book was not peer reviewed. Is this true? And, if so, how different would the book be if it had been peer reviewed? Do you think it would've come under fire from critics regardless?

Another desperate charge. Just because the book was not published with a university press does not mean it was not peer reviewed. I hold myself to high standards of scholarship and eagerly seek peer input at every stage. Three distinguished and exacting area historians critiqued every chapter in draft. I sought out specialist readings from scholars of Virginia history, political theory, political economy, intellectual history, public sector labor history, Latin American history, and more.

I doubt the book would have caused the same uproar if it had come from a university press, not because it would have been better but because few would have noticed it outside the academy; it would not have changed the public conversation. What's upsetting the right wing is that *Democracy in Chains* is reaching the public and the media.

Has anyone made a criticism of the book that you think has merit? What are those criticisms and how do you respond?

Yes. For example, Sam Tanenhaus, in his otherwise favorable review in *The Atlantic*, said, "a movement isn't the same thing as a conspiracy. One openly declares its intentions. The other keeps them secret. It's not always clear that MacLean recognizes the difference." As a scholar, I understand the problems of conspiracy theories and while I never called this movement a conspiracy in the book, we do face a problem that our language has not caught up to our world.

In hindsight, I wish I'd said more about that in my book because we do not yet have a conceptual system adequate to capture what is happening. On the one hand, yes, absolutely, there is a big movement out there on the right that has varied sources and whose many members are openly declaring their intentions. On the other hand, there is also an audacious elite project underway that is not open with even these rank-and-file followers about its endgame.

Economic inequality has now advanced to the point that several hundred incredibly wealthy donors, who are hostile to our democracy as it currently operates and are led by a messianic multibillionaire, have contributed vast amounts of dark money to fund dozens upon dozens of ostensibly separate but actually connected organizations that are exploiting what Buchanan's team taught about "the rules of the game" of modern governance in a cold-eyed bid to bend our institutions and policies to goals they know most voters do not share (such as the repeal of Obamacare without replacement).

And they're operating within the law, informed by some of the best legal talent money can buy, so it's not a conspiracy, by definition, because that involves illegality. The world has never seen anything like it before; no wonder it's hard to find the right term to depict it. It's a vexing challenge to understand, let alone stop, and in hindsight I wish had been more explicit about that conceptual challenge. But so far no criticism has made me question the fundamentals of the research, the narrative, or the interpretation. I stand by those.

Any broader thoughts on the state of scholarship and academic debate spurred by this episode?

The modus operandi of today's right wing goes well beyond normal book reviewing and customary academic debate. "Nancy MacLean is Either Grossly Incompetent or a Liar," is a sample [headline](#). Yet this mock debate is not really about me, at the end of the day. When discussion about ideas and research gives way to insulting swagger and personal attacks, the more important damage is to our civic discourse and our society's institutions.

In the past, publishers and media outlets often assumed "both sides are equally at fault." Those assumptions may have once applied, but in the current context they rarely do. We are experiencing what Norman Ornstein and Thomas Mann called "asymmetric polarization," in a book aptly titled *It's Even Worse Than It Looks*. The coarsening of dialogue that we often now see from the radical right is hurting people, norms, and all that enables a society to work. In order to deal with this shift effectively, we need to stop reacting case by case and understand the trouble as systemic. That's part of the message of my book.

Anything else that I didn't ask that you'd like to add?

One thing has really stood out for me. For all the thousands of words that they have written, my critics still fail to engage the central message of the book: Leading libertarian thinkers concluded they could never win over the majority to their agenda. Therefore, they decided to achieve their utopia by attempting to radically change the rules of governance in order to change society.

In their writings, Buchanan and other libertarian thinkers lay out a vision for a certain kind of society. It's a society where capitalism has free rein and the rights of the wealthy few are protected, while the many are prevented from exercising countervailing power. It's a society where government is so shrunken as to be unrecognizable. In the country they envision, most protections that benefit average Americans have vanished: Social Security has been abolished, worker and public-health protections are gone, and public schools are shuttered in favor of private education. It's a country where national parks and water supplies are sold to the highest bidder.

That's not a country most Americans would recognize. And it's not a country most of us, from any political party, would want to inhabit. Yet it's the America Charles Koch and his fellow donors dream of bringing into being by applying Buchanan's insights. It's critical to bring this vision out into the open, so we can have honest debate about the kind of country we want. That's why Buchanan's vision of enchaining democracy — and the frightening degree to which it has become a reality — is a central focus of my book.