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The Architect of the Radical Right

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If you read the same newspapers and watch the same cable shows I do, you can be forgiven for not knowing that the most populous region in America, by far, is the South. Nearly four in 10 Americans live there, roughly 122 million people, by the latest official estimate. And the number is climbing. For that reason alone, the South deserves more attention than it seems to be getting in political discussion today.

But there is another reason: The South is the cradle of modern conservatism. This, too, may come as a surprise, so entrenched is the origin myth of the far-westerners Barry Goldwater, Richard Nixon, and Ronald Reagan as leaders of a Sun Belt realignment and forerunners of today's polarizing GOP. But each of those politicians had his own "southern strategy," playing to white backlash against the civil-rights revolution—"hunting where the ducks are," as Goldwater explained—though it was encrypted in the states'-rights ideology that has been vital to southern politics since the days of John C. Calhoun.

Nancy MacLean's *Democracy in Chains* is part of a new wave of historiography that has been examining the southern roots of modern conservatism. That lineage features episodes like the third-party presidential ticket headed by the Virginian T. Coleman Andrews in 1956, with its double-barreled attack on the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and the federal income tax. Further back lies the breakaway Dixiecrat candidacy of the South Carolinian Strom Thurmond in 1948, after the Democratic Party added a civil-rights plank to its platform. Earlier still was the quixotic insurrection in 1936 led by Georgia Governor Eugene Talmadge, the front man for something called the Southern Committee to Uphold the Constitution. A Dixie offshoot of the more visible Liberty League, it shared that group's conviction that "an ever spreading governmental bureaucracy" spelled "the end of democracy."

Talmadge's movement is a footnote now, but it boasted delegates from 18 states and offered an early mix of the populist grievance and anti-tax fervor that presaged Tea Party protests, though the original brew had a pungent tang of racism. At a rabble-rousing "grassroots convention" held in Macon, Georgia, delegates received a news sheet that showed a photo of Eleanor Roosevelt in the company of two Howard University ROTC students. Her husband, the caption warned, was permitting "negroes to come to the White House banquets and sleep in the White House beds." What looked like a redneck eruption was in fact financed by northern capitalists

nursing their own hatred of the New Deal. Talmadge's promise to slash property taxes brought in big checks from the du Ponts, among others.

Why does all this matter today? Well, we might begin with the first New Yorker elected president since FDR, a man who has given new meaning to the term *copperhead* (originally applied to Northern Democrats who opposed the Civil War). Lost amid the many 2016 postmortems, and the careful parsing of returns in Ohio swing counties, was Donald Trump's prodigious conquest of the South: 60 percent or more of the vote in Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and West Virginia, with similar margins in Louisiana and Mississippi. And the message is still being missed. We've heard much about the "older white men" in the administration, but rather less about where they come from. No fewer than 10 Cabinet appointees are from the South, in key positions like attorney general (Alabama) and secretary of state (Texas), not to mention Trump's top political adviser, Steve Bannon, who grew up in Virginia.

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All of this, so plainly in view but so strangely ignored, makes MacLean's vibrant intellectual history of the radical right especially relevant. Her book includes familiar villains—principally the Koch brothers—and devotes many pages to think tanks like the Cato Institute and the Heritage Foundation, whose ideological programs are hardly a secret. But what sets *Democracy in Chains* apart is that it begins in the South, and emphasizes a genuinely original and very influential political thinker, the economist James M. Buchanan. He is not so well remembered today as his fellow Nobel laureates Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman. Yet as MacLean convincingly shows, his effect on our politics is at least as great, in part because of the evangelical fervor he brought to spreading his ideas.

It helped that Buchanan, despite his many accomplishments, continued to think of himself as an embattled outsider and also as a revolutionary. In 1973, well before the term *counterestablishment* was popularized, Buchanan was rallying like-minded allies to "create, support, and activate an effective counterintelligentsia" that could transform "the way people think about government." Thirteen years later, when he won his Nobel Prize, he received the news as more than a validation of his work. His success represented a victory over the "Eastern academic elite," achieved by someone who was, he said, "proud to be a member of the great unwashed."

This is the language of a movement intellectual. But 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. Nevertheless, she has dug deep into her material—not just Buchanan's voluminous, unsorted papers, but other archives, too—and she has made powerful and disturbing use of it all. A historian at Duke who has written a good deal about the South, she comes at her subject from the inside, with a feel for the legends and stories that southerners have long told themselves and others about the kind of country America is supposed to be. The behind-the-scenes days and works of Buchanan show how much deliberation and persistence—in the face of formidable opposition—underlie the

antigoverning politics ascendant today. What we think of as dysfunction is the result of years of strategic effort.

Buchanan owed his tenacity to blood and soil and upbringing. Born in 1919 on a family farm in Tennessee, he came of age during the Great Depression. His grandfather had been an unpopular governor of that state, and Buchanan grew up in an atmosphere of half-remembered glory and bitterness, without either money or useful connections. His exceptional mind was his visa into the academy and then into the world of big ideas. “Better than plowing,” which he made the title of his 1992 memoir, was advice he got from his first mentor, the economist Frank Knight at the University of Chicago, where Buchanan received his doctorate in 1948. During the postwar years, other faculty included Hayek and Friedman, who were shaping a new pro-market economics, part of a growing backlash against the policies of the New Deal. Hayek initiated Buchanan into the Mont Pelerin Society, the select group of intellectuals who convened periodically to talk and plot libertarian doctrine.

Buchanan got his first plum teaching job at the University of Virginia, in 1956, during the single most crucial event in the birth of the modern conservative movement, the rise of the strategy of “massive resistance” to the Supreme Court’s mandate for school desegregation. Since the New Deal, conservatives like Herbert Hoover and Robert A. Taft had pushed back hard against the expanding federal government and its tentacular programs. But it was an uphill battle; the public was grateful for Social Security. *Brown* changed all that. More than the economic order was now under siege. So was a way of life, with its cherished “mores and folkways,” in the phrase favored by defenders of Jim Crow. A new postwar conservatism was born, mingling states’-rights doctrine with odes to the freedom-loving individual and resistance to the “social engineering” pursued by what conservative writers in the mid-1950s began to call the “liberal establishment.”

Today we remember ferocious civil-rights struggles waged in Birmingham and Selma. But ground zero for the respectable defense of Jim Crow was Virginia, where one of the nation’s most powerful politicians, Senator Harry F. Byrd Sr., ruled with the authority of an old-style feudal boss. His notorious “machine” kept the state clenched in an iron grip; the oppressions included a poll tax that suppressed black voter turnout so that it was on a par with the Deep South’s (and kept overall turnout under 20 percent). Byrd had allies in the president of the University of Virginia, Colgate Darden, and the newspaperman James Jackson Kilpatrick, who, long before his lovable-curmudgeon TV role on the “Point-Counterpoint” segment of *60 Minutes* in the 1970s, was a fanatical and ingenious segregationist.

Buchanan played a part, MacLean writes, by teaming up with another new University of Virginia hire, G. Warren Nutter (who was later a close adviser to Barry Goldwater), on an influential paper. In it they argued that the crux of the desegregation problem was that “state run” schools had become a “monopoly,” which could be broken by privatization. If authorities sold off school buildings and equipment, and limited their own involvement in education to setting minimum standards, then all different kinds of schools might blossom. Each parent “would cast his vote in the marketplace and have it count.” The argument impressed Friedman, who a few years earlier had published his own critique of “government schools,” saying that “the denationalization of education would widen the range of choice available to parents.”

Why not see politicians as players in the marketplace, rather than as selfless public servants?

Far-fetched though these schemes were, they gave ammunition to southern policy makers looking to mount the nonracial case for maintaining Jim Crow in a new form. Friedman himself left race completely out of it. Buchanan did too at first, telling skeptical colleagues in the North that the “transcendent issue” had nothing to do with race; it came down to the question of “whether the federal government shall dictate the solutions.” But in their paper (initially a document submitted to a Virginia education commission and soon published in a Richmond newspaper), Buchanan and Nutter were more direct, stating their belief that “every individual should be free to associate with persons of his own choosing”—the sanitized phrasing of segregationists.

Either way, the proximate result of Buchanan’s privatizing scheme was to help prolong the stalemate in Virginia. In Prince Edward County, to cite the most egregious example, public schools were padlocked for a full five years. From 1959 to 1964, white children went to tax-subsidized private schools while most black children stayed home—roughly what some politicians had in mind all along. The episode was, among other things, a vivid early instance of the bait and switch, so familiar now, whereby many libertarians seem curiously indifferent to the human cost of their rigid principles, even as they denounce the despotism of all three branches of the federal government.

Yet race, MacLean acknowledges, was not ultimately a major issue for Buchanan. Fending off desegregation was only a skirmish in the long campaign to revive antigovernment ideas. That campaign dated back to the nation’s founding, gained new strength in the pre-Civil War nullification arguments of John Calhoun, and reached its modern apogee in debates over taxes and spending. Here the enemies were unions (“the labor monopoly movement,” in Buchanan’s phrase), leftist policy makers, and also Keynesian economists. Together these formed a “ruling class” that was waging war against the marketplace. This was not a new argument, but Buchanan gave it fresh rigor in his theory of “public choice,” set forth in his pioneering book, *The Calculus of Consent* (1962), written with Gordon Tullock. Governments, they argued, were being assessed in the wrong way. The error was a legacy of New Deal thinking, which glorified elected officials and career bureaucrats as disinterested servants of the public good, despite the obvious coercive effects of the programs they put into place. Why not instead see politicians and government administrators as self-interested players in the marketplace, trying to “maximize their utility”—that is, win the next election or enlarge their department’s budget?

This idea turned the whole notion of a beneficent government, and of programs and policies designed more or less selflessly, into a kind of fairy tale expertly woven by politicians and their flacks. Not that politicians were evil. They were looking out for themselves, as most of us do. The difference was in the damage they did. After all, the high-priced programs they devised were paid for by taxes wrested from defenseless citizens, who were given little or no effective choice in the matter. It was licensed theft, reinforced by the steep gradations in income-tax rates.

Buchanan expertly maximized his own utility. Money was flowing into the Thomas Jefferson Center he established at the University of Virginia in 1957, enabling him to run it as an autonomous entity, with its own lecture series and fellowship programs. Free of oversight, Buchanan gathered disciples—he screened applicants according to ideology—and his semiprivate school of thought flourished. The obstacles lay in the body politic. The 1960s looked even worse than the '50s. Not long after Buchanan's big book was published, the War on Poverty began and then the Great Society—one lethal program after another.

Nixon called himself a Keynesian and committed a succession of sins, from creating government agencies (like the Environmental Protection Agency) to instituting wage and price controls. Meanwhile, the government kept expanding through entitlements and programs aimed at the middle class. You didn't have to accept Buchanan's ideology to see that he had a point about the growth of government-centered clientelism—"dependency," in the term used by a new wave of neoconservatives such as Daniel Patrick Moynihan. For Buchanan, the trouble now went beyond the government. The enemy was the public itself, expressed through the tyranny of majority rule: The have-nots preyed on the rich, egged on by the new elite—labor bosses, benevolent corporations, and pandering politicians—who fell over themselves promising more and more.

The rules of government needed to be rewritten.

With Reagan, deliverance seemed possible. Buchanan's political influence reached its zenith. By this time, he had left the University of Virginia. As early as 1963, there were concerns—on the part of the dean of the faculty, for one—that Buchananism, at least as practiced at his Thomas Jefferson Center, had petrified into dogma, with no room for dissenting voices. After a battle over a promotion for his co-author, Tullock, Buchanan left in a huff. He went first to UCLA, next to Virginia Tech, and in 1983, climactically, to George Mason University, not far outside the Beltway—and much nearer to the political action. *The Wall Street Journal* soon labeled George Mason "the Pentagon of conservative academia." With its "stable of economists who have become an important resource for the Reagan administration," it was now poised to undo Great Society programs. In 1986, Buchanan won the Nobel Prize for his public-choice theory.

But triumph gave way again to disappointment. Not even Reagan could stem the collectivist tide. Public-choice ideas made a difference—for instance in the balanced-budget act sponsored by Senators Philip Gramm, Warren Rudman, and Ernest Hollings in 1985. Buchanan's theory found another useful ally in the budget-slasher and would-be government-shrinker David Stockman, who idolized Hayek and declared that "politicians were wrecking American capitalism." But Stockman also discovered that restoring capitalism to a purer condition would mean declaring war on "Social Security recipients, veterans, farmers, educators, state and local officials, the housing industry." What president was going to do *that*? Certainly not Reagan. As Stockman reflected, "The democracy had defeated the doctrine."

That was Buchanan's view, too. It wasn't enough to elect true-believing politicians. The rules of government needed to be rewritten. But this required ideal conditions—a blank slate. This had happened once, in Chile, after Augusto Pinochet's coup against the socialist Salvador

Allende in 1973. A vogue for public choice had swept Pinochet's administration. Buchanan's books were translated, and some of his acolytes helped restructure Chile's economy. Labor unions were banned, and social security and health care were both privatized. On a week-long visit in 1980, Buchanan gave formal lectures to "top representatives of a governing elite that melded the military and the corporate world," MacLean reports, and he dispensed counsel in private conversations. But Buchanan said very little about his part in assisting Chile's reformers—and he said very little, too, when the country's economy cratered, and Pinochet at last fired the Buchananites.

At his death in 2013, Buchanan was hardly known outside the world of economists and libertarians, but his ideology remains much in force. His view of Social Security—a "Ponzi scheme"—is shared by privatizers like Paul Ryan. More broadly, Buchananism informs the conviction on the right that because the democratic majority can't really be trusted, empowered minorities, like the Freedom Caucus, are the true guardians of our liberty and if necessary will resort to drastic measures: shutting down the government, defaulting on the national debt, and plying the techniques of what Francis Fukuyama calls our modern "vetocracy"—refusing, for example, to bring an immigration bill to a House vote lest it pass (as happened in the Obama years) or, in the Senate, defying tradition by not granting a confirmation hearing to a Supreme Court nominee.

To see all this as simple obstructionism, perversity for its own sake, is a mistake. A cause lies behind it: upholding the sanctity of an ideology against the sins of the majority. This is what drives House Republicans to scale back social programs, or to shift the tax burden from the 1 percent onto the parasitic mob, or to come up with a health-care plan that would leave Trump's own voters out in the cold. To many of us, it might seem heartless. But far worse, Buchanan once explained in a famous essay, is misguided Good Samaritanism, which, by helping the unlucky, cushions them against the consequences of their bad choices. This is exactly the sentiment voiced by the House Republican who voted to strip away Obamacare and then explained that the new proposal, which punishes people with preexisting medical conditions, has the advantage of "reducing the cost to those people who lead good lives."

With a researcher's pride, MacLean confidently declares that Buchanan's ideological journey, and the trail he left, contains the "true origin story of today's well-heeled radical right." Better to say that it is one story among many in the long narrative of conservative embattlement. The American right has always felt outnumbered, even in times of triumph. This is the source of both its strength and its weakness, just as it was for Buchanan, a faithful son of the South, with its legacy of defeats and lost causes. MacLean's undisguised loathing of him and others she writes about will offend some readers. But that same intensity of feeling has inspired her to untangle important threads in American history—and to make us see how much of that history begins, and still lives, in the South.