



Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right's Secret Plan for America

Nancy MacLean

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The frightening and largely unknown backstory of the radical right's political agenda, a seven-decades-long strategy pinned to the expressed belief that freedom can survive only if the rule of the majority ends

“It is not easy to uncover the inner workings of an essentially secretive political establishment,” wrote the reviewer of Jane Mayer’s *Dark Money* in *The New York Times*. But in *Democracy in Chains*, the award-winning historian Nancy MacLean does what no one else—not Jane Mayer or Naomi Klein or any other talented investigator—has been able to do, parting a curtain on the radical right’s moment of creation. Billionaires didn’t create this movement; the South did. Until you understand that today’s right was forged in the crucible of *Brown v. Board of Education*, and that its thinkers trace their ideas back to John C. Calhoun’s defense of extreme property rights, you cannot understand the strategy and tactics of today’s Republican Party. Nor can you see that hyperpartisan politics is only one element of a multipronged stealth plan to free corporations by permanently disarming democracy.

In a brilliant and engrossing narrative, MacLean shows how *Brown* made the State of Virginia painfully aware that its old arguments in defense of “liberty” could no longer protect segregated schools: voting laws that excluded the many, the lowest taxes in the nation relative to wealth, and one-sided labor relations. Not only civil rights activists backed by federal courts, but also trade unionists and suburban residents bridled at the cunning rules that shored up the old order. If the majority gained power, it was doomed.

The intellectual visionary who came to the ruling elite’s aid was no one’s fool. To the contrary, James M. Buchanan, a son of the South educated at the University of Chicago, would win the Nobel Prize in Economic Science in 1986 for the school of thought he invented to expose government failure. What the prize judges did not know is how enmeshed Buchanan already was by that date with a long-term project to revolutionize American politics. Guided by Buchanan’s ideas, the billionaire Charles Koch and his allied donors have built a vast apparatus to impose on twentieth-first-century America a version of liberty stamped by Calhoun and his admirers, the oligarchic, segregated South.

Based on ten years of research and unique access to Buchanan’s archives, *Democracy in Chains* provides the missing piece to the puzzle of what is happening to American politics, the piece that explains it all. A magisterial work of scholarship, this is also a call to arms.

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