

# TRUTH

A year-long conversation about knowledge crises  
& politics from humanistic perspectives

ALICE KAPLAN INSTITUTE FOR THE HUMANITIES  
Northwestern University

A Truth Dialogues Report/Reflection

by [Samantha Schmidt](#)

Franke Undergraduate Fellow of the Kaplan Humanities Institute

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## Democracy in Chains

(Nancy MacLean—September 27, 2017)

The first event in the 2017-2018 Truth Dialogues series, Nancy MacLean's talk about her new book *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America*, had the feel and festivity of a homecoming event. Having taught at Northwestern for over twenty years and chaired the History Department from 2005 to 2008, McLean left her mark on the university in a multitude of ways. At the start of her talk, she joked about her pride in the skylight that shines over the stairs in Harris Hall, an addition whose necessity, she assured the audience, she had vehemently insisted upon, though she no longer recalls the reason. More touching was the moving introduction that Professor Michael Allen, on whose dissertation committee she had sat back in 2003, gave at the opening of the event. As in any introduction, he celebrated her accomplishments in academia and social justice organizing, but their personal relationship enabled him to delve deeper. He called her "as exacting and brave as she is generous and caring," a sentiment that the audience, which had filled the hall to the point that the lecture became standing-room-only, greeted with approval.

Ironically, however, McLean made clear over the course of the talk that her book would not have been possible had she remained at Northwestern. The research that led to the book was partially inspired by McLean's move to Duke University and to North Carolina, which coincided with the 2010 midterm elections. These elections resulted in the ascent of a radical right wing assembly in the state, thereby providing McLean with an immediate political context for the ongoing project that would ultimately become *Democracy in Chains*.

The book explores the political endeavors of Nobel prize-winning economist James McGill Buchanan and his partnership with billionaire Charles Koch, which helped build the radical right movement working to dismantle democracy as we know it. MacLean, whose scholarly focus is on social organizing in the United States and in the southern United States in particular, was introduced to Buchanan's work when she stumbled across the story of Prince Edward County, Virginia, at the turn of the sixties. After the federal government ordered the desegregation of public education there in 1959, the county decided to close down its school system rather than integrate. As a result, black students had no access to formal education for the next five years, while Buchanan and others advocated for the state to give tax-funded private school vouchers to white families in order to maintain the school closures. MacLean explained that this story both stunned her as an educator and intrigued her as a historian. One particular phrase remained with her long after she had completed her reading about the case: the assertion by the libertarian organization with which Buchanan was working that they intended to simply "let the chips fall as they may," regarding the consequences of this policy. This nonchalant disregard for the disastrous impact that their work would have on the lives of real people "lodged itself in her gut," and she decided that she could not leave this issue alone.

McLean continued to look closely at Buchanan, learning about his theories and his “stealth plan” for America. Essentially, she found, Buchanan’s free will economics maintains that politicians, like any individual, work principally to achieve their own personal goals, and consequently their desire to get re-elected determines their decisions. Because re-election requires popularity, politicians become incentivized to promote programs that benefit the most people. Funding such programs, including public services like Social Security and Medicare, involves taxing the wealthy, which Buchanan wished to avoid; in fact, he dreamed of “tearing down” the ideal of public interest in American life. To accomplish this goal, he chose to focus on changing *the* rules rather than changing *who* rules. If his plans were to succeed, MacLean predicted, our constitution would much more closely resemble that of Chile, where Buchanan contributed to Augusto Pinochet’s efforts to amend the constitution so that it now strives primarily to protect corporations rather than individual citizens. MacLean reported in her talk that his cause, which now consists of hundreds of well-funded organizations, has thus far recruited twenty-seven of the thirty-four states needed to call a constitutional convention to amend — or rather upend — the foundations of our society.

McLean discovered the final pieces of this puzzle after Buchanan died in 2013 and she gained access to his private papers. Perusing them, she recalled, literally took her breath away and made her ill, as she revealed his project’s scope and audacity. Her research assured her that the country that Buchanan and his ilk envision will eerily resemble mid-century Virginia, complete with restricted enfranchisement and a virtual plutocracy. However, she also learned that Buchanan knew that the greatest risk to his strategy was the prospect of people discovering it, given that his cause can only ever appeal to a small minority. MacLean called this revelation of his anxiety over being discovered the most important finding of her research because it points

to libertarianism's greatest weakness: its reliance on secrecy. Thus, she decided to write *Democracy in Chains* in hopes of exposing the truth about this scheme to undermine our democracy. Her determination and commitment to her cause left the audience with a small bit of hope that there remains a way out of the dark path down which our country is treading.

Listening to MacLean speak, I became most interested in the complex process of her research. She repeatedly compared her findings to a puzzle, as if these key events she encountered along the way, like reading about Prince Edward County school segregation and observing North Carolina's 2010 midterm elections, were pieces of a greater picture that, once assembled, could explain our current political climate. This metaphor presented me with a new way of understanding the work that historians do: they are detectives striving to solve mysteries that others have relegated to the past. MacLean's puzzle sheds light on our present, as well, and demonstrates how efforts to illuminate history can reveal hidden truths that help us better respond to the dilemmas we face today. On a more disquieting note, the persecution that she has faced since the book's publication as a target of libertarian wrath exposes the risks inherent in making such truths known.

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*The 2017-18 [TRUTH Dialogues](#) are a year-long conversation about knowledge crises and politics from humanistic perspectives, co-presented by the Alice Kaplan Institute for the Humanities in partnership with multiple Northwestern departments and programs.*

*[Franke Undergraduate Fellowships](#) are awarded to three promising seniors pursuing independent humanities research projects. Franke Fellows receive a stipend and research funds, and enrich their projects by taking part in a senior humanities seminar and interdisciplinary exchanges sponsored by the Kaplan Humanities Institute. They present their work at the annual Future Directions Forum in the spring.*