

Jennifer  
Berkshire:

Welcome to Have You Heard. I'm Jennifer Berkshire. In this episode, I'm going to be talking to the author of one of the most buzzed about books of the summer. The book is called Democracy in Chains and it's by Duke University historian Nancy MacLean.

It's a deep dive into the intellectual origins of conservative libertarianism. The you're-on-your-own philosophy that now dominates the Republican Party and increasingly the country. But it's also a story about public education, and just how far back the efforts to dismantle it really go.

MacLean's book is a richly researched page-turner and I hope that this interview inspires you to read it for yourself. Just don't blame me if you have to sleep with the lights on.

Nancy MacLean, thanks for joining me on Have You Heard. I want to begin where Democracy in Chains does. In Prince Edward County, Virginia. It's several years before the Supreme Court would hand down the Brown v. Board of Education decision. Set the stage for us.

Nancy MacLean:

In 1951, some students at the high school in Prince Edward County went out on strike and they had a 100% solid strike for a better high school. And it was organized by young woman named Barbara Rose Johns, with her favorite teacher, a woman named Inez Davenport.

They were striking for a better school, because the county refused to provide decent education and decent schools for black kids of the county and interestingly, you know, most people now will think about the issues involved in school segregation and Brown in terms of race, and imagine that it's just kind of like out of the thick ideas about race, but actually what the white county leaders always said was that black residents weren't paying enough taxes to have better schools in the situation of segregation.

Which was, of course, a total source of frustration to the black parents, because they said, you know, "How can we make bricks without straw?" You know, if you don't give us education, how can we get better jobs in order to pay more taxes?

But I just raise that because the way that I look at Brown and the fight over schools in this book is a little different from what we've heard over the years in that it draws attention to the public finance aspect of racial equality in the schools. And it shows how even back at the time of the Brown, you know, the cases that led up to Brown v. Board of Education and Prince Edward County student strike was one of the five cases folded into Brown. And the reaction to Brown, these issues of taxes were always foremost.

And these white property upholders, these very conservative white elites in Virginia who suppressed the vote of all other citizens really did not want to pay taxes to support the education of any but their own children. So in that sense, I think it's a really contemporary story. It has such echoes of what we're hearing

now.

Jennifer B: There is a heated debate going on right now about the origin story of school vouchers that really focuses on this very moment in history. The president of the American Federation of Teachers, Randi Weingarten, recently wrote an op ed tying school choice to racism. That set off a firestorm. But what actually happened in Virginia?

Nancy MacLean: Basically, what happened is as soon as this strike started, this student strike ended, and the students filed a case in federal court with the NAACP, to desegregate the schools, Prince Edward County, Virginia, the local elites started talking about ending public education and sending students off to private schools.

And so, throughout the South, the most extreme segregationists, as these cases wended their way up to the Supreme Court, they, these Southern segregationist leaders were saying, you know, in the case of Georgia, "Not only will we end the public education before we'll obey the courts and desegregate," but they actually said, "blood will flow in the streets." I mean, it was hideous, hideous rhetoric, but really this reckless, you know, desire to destroy education rather than integrate.

And what was interesting to me, in finding this story, and kind of seeing it through new eyes, is that Milton Friedman, I learned, had written his first, you could say manifesto. It was buried in an academic collection. But he used it over the years as a manifesto. His first manifesto for school vouchers in 1955, as the news was coming out of the South.

I mean, that was after, you know, several years of reports on these arch-segregationists saying they were going to destroy public education and send kids off to private schools. And Friedman wrote this piece advocating school vouchers in that context. I'm such a nerd I could really go into weeds on this.

Jennifer B: You have my permission to venture deep into the weeds. The argument that school choice proponents seem to be making is that whatever went down in Virginia didn't have much to do with Milton Friedman's vision for school vouchers. But your book, about the economist James McGill Buchanan, argues that the goal of privatizing schools and the efforts by elites to prevent schools from being desegregated, really can't be separated.

Nancy MacLean: There is absolutely no question that voucher provision would have become public policy in Southern states without the most racist, the most arch-segregationists pushing for it. And they were very clear about that in the documents, and there's just no escaping that. So there's that part.

But then the other part that's interesting to me was to see these economists, you know, trained at the Chicago, University of Chicago economics department and Milton Friedman was on the faculty. But to students of the University of Chicago program, James McGill Buchanan, who's my focus, who had a different advisor, and a man named Warren Nutter, who was Friedman's first student, start pushing these

voucher programs in the South, and pushing very opportunistically.

Friedman himself actually came down to University of North Carolina in 1957 at a conference designed to train these new, you know, arch free market economists and he actually made school the case in point. So he was really pushing for this in the South at the moment that it's happening.

And his two students, James Buchanan and Warren Nutter, then actually, in 1959, put out a report from this new center that they'd created at the University of Virginia, to basically try to keep the fight going after this mass mobilization of white law, and again, they're not radicals. It's the South, right? It's moderate parents, many of whom were moderate Republicans, in the South. Moderate white parents and other civic groups, in defense of the schools, and then two federal courts had said that Virginia couldn't shut down schools in some counties while leaving them open in others.

Ten days after the court ruling, Buchanan and Nutter issue this report calling for, essentially using the tools of their discipline to argue that it would be fine for Virginia to privatize its schools. And that all, even these business leaders who were saying, "No, we can't do that. We already have one starved public education system. You know, if we start bleeding out these tax monies we'll destroy it."

And so they actually were using their economic reasoning to say that wouldn't be the case, and it would be fine to sell off these public resources to private providers. And they directed this report to the state legislatures, who were trying to figure out what to do in the wake of the court decision.

And the thing that just most put the chill in my bones is that they had a cover letter on one report that they sent to a legislator who was an arch, one of, you know, the most avid, kind of racist, in the Virginia General Assembly, and they said that they were sending this report using the tools of their discipline to analyze the problem, and then, they said, "letting the chips fall where they may."

Jennifer B: What do you think they meant by that?

Nancy MacLean: In other words, what they were doing is using this crisis to advance their, you know, what some people would call neoliberal politics or ultra-free market politics or, you know, breaking down the democratic state. There's many ways of describing this. But whether they were or were not consciously racist or most motivated by racism, I don't know.

And it's kind of not, almost not relevant. The thing is, they did not care at what they could tell would be the impact on black students of their pushing this agenda, and they capture that in saying, "letting the chips fall where they may."

Jennifer B: One of the themes that comes up again and again in the book, and feels so relevant to our current moment, is how, when the ultraconservatives that you chronicle hit a wall with one of their schemes, like getting rid of public education, they go for

plan B. Which is basically to alter the structure of government. You describe how Buchanan was proposing removing public education from the Virginia Constitution. But that it was such early days that the word privatization had barely even been coined.

Nancy MacLean: Right. Right. Yeah, they wanted to take away the requirement that there be public education in the Constitution, which would then enable mass privatization. Yeah. It's really, it's stunning.

I mean, this was the moment, the kind of crucible of the modern period in which these, you know, sort of ultra free market property supremacists ideas got their first test. And it is in this situation of the most conservative whites' reaction to Brown.

And, as you said, one of the things that interested me and that I talk about in the book is that, you know, a lot of, I think, Northerners in particular, imagine that white Southerners were some kind of unified mass, you know, in opposing Brown. And that really wasn't true.

I mean, most people were, whites, you know, had been raised in a culture of Jim Crow, of segregation, of, you know, white supremacy, so it's not like they wanted to, you know, that they embraced the idea of, you know, equality for all citizens and fair treatment, but they were patriotic. They were law-abiding. They understood this was a decision of the highest court in the land. Some of them probably understood, you know, how they'd been cheating and harming black students for so long.

And so, you know, in most, many, I shouldn't say most. But, you know, many, many localities that weren't part of the old plantation belt in Virginia, were willing to at least embrace a kind of modest, very gradual, desegregation and these, the segregationist leaders who were also the economic conservative leaders of the state, were determined to prevent that. And that's why they used the power of the state government to prevent local communities from doing this.

And so there was this amazing mobilization, or I think it's amazing in light of what we're seeing now, a mobilization to save the schools. And it started with the labor movement and with some of the more mainline Protestant churches, particularly clergy, particularly women, who wanted to, who believed that public education was essential to a civilized society. And they wanted to save public education more than they wanted to preserve segregation.

Jennifer B: I'm talking to Nancy MacLean, the author of *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America*. Nancy, much of your book is centered on mid-century Virginia. But you basically make the case that the goal of today's conservative libertarians is to take us back there.

They don't like government schools. They don't like the taxes that pay for them. They especially don't like teachers' unions. Take us up to the present.

Nancy MacLean: They hate the idea of collectives, they would call them. You know, whether it's labor unions, civil rights, women's groups. You know, all these things they see as terrible. And any kind of government provision for people's needs.

And instead they think that ultimately each individual, and then they sneak in the family, because of course no individual could live, you know, free of being raised by a mother and parents and you know ... You know what I'm saying. But anyways, they sneak in really the family.

But they basically think that, yes, we should all provide ultimately, like in their dream society every one of us is solely responsible for ourselves and our needs. You know, whether it's for education or it's for retirement security or it's for healthcare. Just all these things.

We should just do it ourselves and they think it's a terrible coercive injustice that we, together, over the 20th century, have looked to government to do these things. That have called on and persuaded government to provide things like Social Security or Medicare or Medicaid or, you know, college tuition support or, you know, any of these things.

So it's, for me, it was just such a shock to learn about the ideology of this movement, because it is so marginal. I mean, they're really infinitesimal as a demographic in electoral surveys and yet because of this donor power they've acquired this overweening influence over the Republican Party, which they've turned into a delivery vehicle even though they have no sentimental attachment to it. And they are pushing through these radical changes that I think most people would find breathtaking if they understood what the ultimate agenda was.

Jennifer B: I'm a devoted chronicler of our Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos. And she shares many of the views that you just described. One of my great frustrations is that people decided early on that DeVos is a dimwit. And so they don't pay any attention to her ideas. Where they come from, and just how extreme they are.

Nancy MacLean: I have to say, I think, that intellectual condescension is the Achilles' heel of the left. Particularly right now, with the Trump Administration and DeVos and people like that. I totally agree with you. You know, there's a sense that, oh, these people are stupid.

Rather than no, these people are working with a completely different ethical system from the rest of us. You know, and a different philosophy. But they, it's a coherent one, and they are pursuing their goals with very strategic, calculating tools. And so I'm really, really glad that you raise that. Because I think, you know, people just desperately need to understand that.

And that's also why they have done so much at the teachers' unions. And again, this is really, has come up overwhelmingly from the radical, you know, extreme Libertarian right. But it's spread now to the wider right and the Republican Party.

But they're not attacking teachers' unions, you know, because they, you know, are only concerned about the quality of education and think that teachers are blocking that or something. They, first of all, this is a cause that hated public education before there were teachers' unions. You know, and we can go back and trace the lineage of that. You know, well before there were powerful teachers' unions, this cause, people in this Libertarian cause were attacking what they would call government schools, you know. They don't even want to say public education.

But also, at this point, you know, in the last few decades, they've also attacked teachers' unions because in today's America, with so many, you know, industrial jobs destroyed or outsourced, or automated, our main labor unions are teachers' unions, and teachers' unions are really important forces for defending liberal policy in general. Things like, you know, Social Security and Medicare, as well as defending public education.

And so, in targeting teachers' unions, they're really trying to take out their most important opponents to the kind of plans, the kind of radical plans that they're pushing through. And one of the things that's been most chilling to me, too, is to see how willing these people on the right are to insult and debate, and debase teachers, you know, and just, you know, teachers are, they're so many amazing good teachers in our country who are doing hard work against the odds, who are touching children's lives, who are so important to them.

And this Libertarian radical cause wants to shame them all. You know, and make the public despise these, basically, these civil servants. Because they're getting in the way of their plans for radical change. And I just find that so disturbing.

Jennifer B: One of the bleakest sections of the book isn't about mid-century Virginia but the country of Chile. You chronicle how under the military dictatorship, Chile made radical and unpopular changes. Like privatizing its schools. But the real cautionary tale seems to be how the Chilean Constitution has become a tool for making sure that people can never change those policies.

Nancy MacLean: Yeah. And what happened in Chile, and I include a whole chapter on that, called The Constitution in Locks and Bolts, or Constitution of Locks and Bolts, because I think in some ways if people want to understand where this cause is heading, they could look at the Chilean model.

And many people, you know, at least Americans on the left, have heard that Milton Friedman had gone to advise the Pinochet dictatorship in 1975 on how to combat the inflation that the country was facing. But almost no one knows the story of James McGill Buchanan, who went in 1980, and his ideas actually were more influential than Friedman's, including what you were just talking about in terms of privatizing the education system.

Privatizing Social Security. They ended employer contributions to worker's pensions. And put, and all the pensions went from being government overseen to

going to financial sector corporations. You can imagine what happened with that, right? People lost their savings. Because the financial corporations acted like, you know, some of the ones we're familiar with here.

So it was really a terrible tragedy for the Chilean people on so many fronts. But what was also interesting is Buchanan advised the Pinochet government on the Constitution that would remain in place after the return to civilian rule.

And the phrase that I use, you know, "Constitution of locks and bolts," actually came from Michelle Bachelet, who was an elected leader, and I think it was in 2013, she said, and she has somewhere like 66% of the vote and these, as you said, millions of young people in the street wanting to, you know, get rid of this privatized system of education. You know, people had lost their savings in the privatized pension system. You know, there was rampant corruption from all the privatization that had gone on.

And yet, they were still prevented from reversing all of this because of that constitution that Buchanan had advised on, that required such large super majorities to make change and that also radically overrepresented a conservative properties interest against the rest of the country. A kind of electoral gerrymandering, you could call it. That it makes it almost impossible to achieve really fundamental change.

And some people are worrying there that legitimacy of the political system maybe in doubt to which the legitimacy of democracy because it's been unable, because of that constitution, to respond to, even again, you know, two thirds of the population calling for serious changes. And so that's the kind of thing that this cause would like to see in the United States, too.

Jennifer B: Public education and the efforts to get rid of it are really at the center of your book. But one thing that makes school privatization different than some of the other conservative Libertarian causes you mention is that Democrats have backed it too.

Nancy MacLean: I think one thing that's happened with so many Democrats is they are afraid to make a credible case about, you know, taxes. And to talk about taxes in a way that would be compelling to people as what we need for civilized society and as a result, they, like Republicans, are so focused on cutting costs.

And they have also, I think, in some ways, kind of drunk the Kool-Aid of the people on the right who, very self-consciously and strategically, in the 1980s realized that they were never going to win this case for school vouchers in the white suburbs because parents in the mostly white suburbs were very happy with their schools. They don't want school vouchers. You know, why should they change what they had? They were paying taxes, supporting these schools, and they by and large liked their schools.

So they actually started talking in the 1980s about, "nontraditional alliances," was the phrase. And they started going after people who were dissatisfied with the

quality of their education. Of course, that was overwhelming urban, African American parents after metropolitan desegregation plans were overruled in the court case Milliken v. Bradley.

And so I think they really exploited the understandable anxiety of black parents about the quality of schools and the, you know, what their children are experiencing. So I think that's one part of it.

But the other part with the Democrats that's very sad, I think too, is that once the spigots of corporate finance of elections opened and Democrats are trying to stay competitive with Republicans in this, they have gone overwhelmingly to the financial sector for contributions.

And there are so many hedge fund billionaires who are interested in transforming the education industry because it is such a vastly huge potential source of cash, right? That could go into new private schools. And so there's this whole education industry that's developed and a lot of Democrats are really connected to that agenda.

I mean, Corey Booker would be, you know, a case in point. And I'm sure, you know, you know about his work. But many other Democrats. You know, Obama and Arne Duncan, and all these other folks, I think are destroying their party's own base and capacity to fight back against this horrible antidemocratic agenda by attacking public education and teachers' unions as they have.

Jennifer B: I want to end on an inspiring note. I want to go back to where we started this conversation, with the African American students who walked out of their high school in Prince Edward County, Virginia, in 1951. Their story isn't widely known. But you argue that even the way they protested points to something we've forgotten about that period.

Nancy MacLean: One of the things that was so interesting for me, researching this book and thinking about the issues of the past in light of what's going on in our world, is that I saw that some of the silos that we can get in today didn't really make sense when you look at the past.

So, for example, I really think that it was the labor movement and its tremendous successes in the 1930s and 40s and, you know, at the beginning of the 1950s that really inspired these students. You know, why did they adopt a strike?

Well, because they could see, even in their own state, Virginia, which was a right to work state, but they could see that the labor movement was ... People were organizing collectively. They were using their power at the workplace. They were using this tool of the strike. And they were winning. They were getting results. So these kids were really inspired by that and that's why they chose the strike as a method.

Jennifer B: That was Nancy MacLean. She's the author of a new book called Democracy in

Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America. I can't recommend it highly enough. MacLean is also a professor of history at Duke University in North Carolina. Which, as she points out, used to be a pretty moderate state. Until next time, I'm Jennifer Berkshire, and this is Have You Heard.