

Gaslit Nation Transcript  
Democracy in Chains: The Nancy MacLean Interview - Part II  
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[intro theme music]

Sarah Kendzior:

I'm Sarah Kendzior, the author of the bestsellers, *The View From Flyover Country* and *Hiding in Plain Sight*, and of the upcoming book, *They Knew: How a Culture of Conspiracy Keeps America Complacent*, available for pre-order now.

Andrea Chalupa:

I am Andrea Chalupa, a journalist and filmmaker and the writer and producer of the journalistic thriller, *Mr. Jones*, about Stalin's genocide famine in Ukraine, a film the Kremlin doesn't want you to see so be sure to see it.

Sarah Kendzior:

And this is *Gaslit Nation*, a podcast covering corruption in the United States and rising autocracy around the world.

Andrea Chalupa (00:00:48):

Welcome to our special spring series, *Gaslit Nation Presents... Rising up from the Ashes: Cassandras and Other Experts on Rebuilding Democracy* [Train Whistle SFX]. Our bonus episodes available to Patreon subscribers at the Truth-teller level and higher feature our esteemed guests taking the *Gaslit Nation Self Care Q&A*, so for fun ideas, sign up to hear that.

Sarah Kendzior:

Joining at this level also gives you access to hundreds of bonus episodes on topics in the news today. We'll be back with our regular episodes in July. If you're signed up any time between now and then at the Democracy Defender level or higher on Patreon—

Andrea Chalupa:

You'll get special access to watch a live taping of *Gaslit Nation* over the summer. More details to come.

Sarah Kendzior (01:37):

This interview is recorded on January 11th, 2022.

So regarding the 2022 election and, you know, the perils we will face if the GOP retakes the House for example, or takes the House and the Senate, one of the things people are struggling with is how Democrats could even win this election when the assault on voting rights has been so successful, where we have the laws that were created after the partial repeal of the VRA in 2013, followed by new laws, followed by laws like in Georgia that just allow state legislatures to throw out the vote, which seems to be the response to the unexpected 2020 win in Georgia. How do we prevent this from happening and, in your opinion, has the Biden administration and the Democratic Party put up a sufficient fight against this assault in voting rights?

Dr. Nancy MacLean (02:28):

Yeah, I mean, all the progressive groups on the ground have been saying for several years now that serious democracy reform should be a top priority and that we need things like what had been after the 2018 midterms brought a ton of new voters into the electorate—I think it was 18 million people who had not voted before but who understood the threat from Trump—and so those midterms were a big success for the progressive side and for Democrats. So, that's important. And then also with the Biden election, I believe there were 25 million Biden voters who hadn't voted before or voted only irregularly. So, I think—or what I hear from people who do this work in the trenches—is that it's really crucial to make sure that those voters feel motivated, understand the stakes and come out again in large numbers and that could be adequate to do it.

Dr. Nancy MacLean (03:26):

That goes back to something we were talking about a little bit earlier of the importance of not letting all the craziness on the Right and the feelings of, you know, “Golly, why aren't things moving more quickly?” demoralize people because getting massive turnout for those 2022 midterms that create bigger margins for the Biden administration to work with so that they're not dependent on someone like Joe Manchin or Kyrsten Sinema, but have more Democratic senators in the Senate and more representatives in the House to work with, that will be crucial to moving a positive agenda but it will also be critical to stopping some of the other stuff that we're talking about. And even now this week next and going forward, the For The People Act is coming to the Senate floor today. President Biden and Vice President Harris are going to Georgia to talk about that and talk about the need to create a carve-out in the filibuster to make sure that this democracy reform goes through, precisely as you say, because of what we saw on January 6th and ever since then with efforts coming from one of our parties that has totally jumped the tracks as far as any commitment to democracy or to the Constitution.

Dr. Nancy MacLean (04:48):

I think that the Biden administration, I think that they knew this but they, you know, they had a notion of a kind of sequence of legislation to work through and between the total opposition of the Republican Party to allowing and have that to pass and the role played by Senator Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Kyrsten Sinema in Arizona, who essentially are captured Democrats by corporations and also individuals frightened, I think, of these Koch network operations in their own states, the Biden administration has kind of re-pivoted and now is, I think, going to be pushing hard, I hope, on democracy reform. And certainly Nancy Pelosi in the House has been committed to this all along and Chuck Schumer, now Senate Majority Leader, is also putting shoulder to the wheel and saying that essentially we must pass this and suspend the filibuster to do so because this radicalized donor and MAGA faction captured Republican Party has become an anti-democratic party and is moving in an authoritarian direction.

Dr. Nancy MacLean (06:04):

So the only way to stop that is to empower voters and to prevent the kind of shenanigans—and shenanigans is too gentle a word really for it—that we've seen, including what you were saying, in their efforts to change how votes are counted and elections are certified. But I think it is also important for people to remember how extraordinary the mobilization was in Georgia that produced Senators Warnock and Ossoff. And I feel like one of the horrible things about January 6th, 2021 is that that morning, we got the news of their victory, right? In that off election. And by that afternoon, the insurrection of the Capitol was underway so no one had ever had a chance really to savor that or to comment on it. But it was the product of deep canvassing, serious organizing, a multi-year effort in

Georgia, all of which showed that when those things happen, that they were able to overcome even the voter suppression efforts that had been there in Georgia.

Dr. Nancy MacLean (07:16):

So, I'm not saying it will be an easy lift [laughs], but it's also either you give up and let these people steamroll the vast majority in the country and destroy the planet with climate change and fossil fuel production OR we figure out how to win in difficult circumstances. And that, by the way, we haven't really talked about yet, but I knew in *Democracy in Chains* and I've talked about it, but it's really kind of since then I've realized how central the fossil fuel determination to stop a shift to clean energy and to stop multilateral government action on the climate is to all of this. I would say now the core thrust in the United States and I think on a global scale as well of this radical right is based in the fossil fuel industry. And of course Koch Industries, one of the largest privately held corporations in the world, is an example of that, that it is deeply rooted in fossil fuels. So that is a key part of the picture here.

Sarah Kendzior (08:23):

Yeah. I have a question about that. I asked this of so many people who are historians watching these horrific movements play out. So they've been building up to this for 40 years. They've known about climate change being catastrophic for over 40 years. There are documents from Exxon. What do they think is going to be their future, their children's future, their grandchildren's future in an era of catastrophic climate change? We know they're all getting, like, decked out bunkers so that they could apparently try to ride it out or whatnot, but it seems like, you know, one, they wanna accelerate it, and two, they feel like they're immune to it. But that seems misguided, to say the least. What's in it for them?

Dr. Nancy MacLean (09:06):

Yeah. There's a... Whatever, thinker, media figure, Chris Hayes, who I'm sure you and many of your listeners know, but some years back, maybe a decade or more back, he wrote this piece about the fossil fuel industry and its determination to stop any action. And he compared it, he said the only comparison we have in American history that suggests the scale of this determination, not only for how much they've already invested in this particular form of property and profit-making, but also their anticipated returns from that kind of sunk investment, as economists call it, is antibellum slavery. He caught a lot of flack for that and people were like, "It's not the same as slavery." And that wasn't the point. What he was talking about was a whole sector of the economy that lost its, what some people say, social license, right?

Dr. Nancy MacLean (10:07):

Where so many people in the country by 1860, they may not have been anti-racist, but they had become anti-slavery because they saw what slaveholders' power was doing to the country and to their own prospects, not only what they were doing to their own states and to the enslaved men, women and children that they built their wealth upon. And so if you look at what slave holders did in this country in the run up to 1860, their tremendous determination of becoming more and more aggressive, it really is in many ways, I think, analogous to what this fossil fuel sector is doing. And particularly the independently held corporations like Koch Industries and some of the others, like the coal industry that's aligned with Donald Trump. And as you say, most sane people think, you know, "What are they thinking!??"

Dr. Nancy MacLean (11:07):

Exactly. Their grandkids are gonna grow up in this world of destruction. How can they possibly imagine they can protect themselves? But I think that's where ideology becomes very important and I think about libertarianism now—at least a Koch variety—as a deadly dogma. And the thing is, they hate government so much that they cannot acknowledge the government has a role to play and they don't want it to do anything to interfere with fossil fuels, so they kind of like back up and then create this crisis, again, in much the way that the Southern slaveholders did where they just like, they almost couldn't see beyond where they were and they came to deeply believe their ideology. You know, they had a theology that said that slavery was legitimate.

Dr. Nancy MacLean (12:01):

They had pseudoscience that said that there was white superiority. It's just like, at a certain point you build up such an apparatus that you come to believe your own mythology. I will say though, too, that some of the more cagey ones, I guess you could say, like Peter Thiel, he's gotten citizenship in New Zealand, you know? Some of these guys get citizenship in other places that they think are gonna be less affected by the upheaval that will happen elsewhere in the world. I think it's a fool's errand. I mean, we've seen in the United States alone that there's no escaping from the impact of what's being done to the planet by fossil fuels. So, you know, the incredible wildfires in California and other places, the floods that we've experienced, the droughts, the hurricanes, the tornadoes in Kansas, all of these things being significantly worsened by climate change. and even the Pentagon.

Dr. Nancy MacLean (13:05):

And even the Pentagon—there's a great book about the Pentagon and it's called *All Hell Breaking Loose* and it's basically the Pentagon's perspective on climate change and how actors in the Pentagon are having to prepare for this. Because, you know, unlike the party that many military people align with, they cannot pretend this isn't happening or minimize the threats to national security that will come not only from the extreme weather, but from the huge numbers of people who will be turned into climate migrants, governments that will fail. I mean, we could go on in that vein, but really that's why it really is in this world, I think, inform yourself and organize or be looking at a future that almost no dystopian fiction can come close to. Sorry about that.

Sarah Kendzior and Andrea Chalupa (13:57):

No!

Andrea Chalupa:

This is what we talk about on the show all the time. [laugh] So obviously there's more of us than there are of them and the United States military, the most well-funded, largest military in the world, seems to be—at least what they publicly say—very much on the side of seeing climate change now as a national security threat. You just mentioned the book by the Pentagon. So if we have all of these forces on our side and you even have Wall Street that has done its bit recently to, you know, when Joe Manchin at the end of December came out and said he is not going to vote for Build Back Better, which included important climate change legislation, the most aggressive we would've had the chance of passing ever, news was coming outta wall street saying, “Oh, that's bad news. Manchin turning this back on Build Back Better is bad news for the economy.”

Dr. Nancy MacLean:

Uh huh.

Andrea Chalupa (14:51):

So it seems like all these big forces want to have action, want to have meaningful government response, but we seem to have this tyranny of the minority-

Dr. Nancy MacLean:

Yeah.

Andrea Chalupa:

-that is playing smoke and mirrors with the American public and taking advantage of a government system that is very much cursed by... I don't have to tell you, but I'm just pointing out like the slave monuments of the electoral college and the Senate being part of our problems with inequality in our government system. So what is going on, Nancy?

Dr. Nancy MacLean:

[laughs] Yeah.

Andrea Chalupa:

Why can't we just overcome these guys?

Dr. Nancy MacLean (15:30):

Yeah, well I think part of it is that we may have to learn to pace ourselves better and I think it's hugely important what you just pointed out, that there are encouraging signs of change from quarters that had resisted recognizing the need to act and the need to alter directions, with those Wall Street investors being a case in point. So I think that it's a case where we just have to keep at it precisely because as you said, even though the vast majority now sees the need for action and wants to take action not only on the climate, but on all kinds of things; taxing billionaires, putting more money into our schools (going back to our earlier discussion), making healthcare accessible. We actually have majority support on so many of these things.

Dr. Nancy MacLean (16:24):

But as you also point out, we suffer from a Constitutional structure that makes it difficult to achieve those things, particularly when we have actors like the ones we've been talking about on the political right who are really taking advantage of that governmental structure and those slaveholder-inserted measures of the Constitution to enable minority rule and to get what they want. So, yeah, we are in the bizarre situation now that a slight majority of Americans are represented by 12 senators in the US Senate while a slight minority is represented by 88 senators [laughs]. And again, to think about how something like that is possible, you can look at the contrast that's usually made between Wyoming and California, where Wyoming has, I believe, it is like 500 and... I don't know, maybe 590,000 people as compared to the millions in California.

Dr. Nancy MacLean (17:35):

So their votes end up counting more than, I think it's like 440 times, having the weight of those California votes. So we have some serious structural obstacles. Also, because the side of the vast majority has not thought as strategically as the side that is conscious that it's moving a minority agenda. So I think that we have to start being as strategic. Not as diabolical, but as strategic as the other side. So, for example, we live in a country that is based on geographic representation. That's true in our state legislatures and that is true in our Senate. With that being the case, then unless we want to live in a string of, like Venetian city states, you know, we do have a lot of the progressive population and organizing now concentrated in blue cities, in coastal states and we've gotta get beyond that.

Dr. Nancy MacLean (18:33):

We've got to be investing in rural organizing because rural people also value clean air and water. They want good schools. They want a secure retirement, etc. So we've gotta do that kind of thing, of getting out there. We've gotta take state politics very seriously, as the political right did. Most people don't realize it, but most of the decisions that really affect their lives are made at the state level, in terms of education, healthcare, quality of water, all of these kinds of things are decided unless federal legislation passes that supersedes the state level, like the voting rights bills we're talking about, many crucial decisions will be made closer to home. So, I mean, I have to say, since *Democracy in Chains* came out, I have been—well, until COVID. Now it's on zoom.

Dr. Nancy MacLean (19:29):

But I was traveling around the country doing a lot of speaking to organizations all across the progressive spectrum from good government groups like Common Cause, to labor unions, to civil rights groups, environmental groups like Greenpeace, Planned Parenthood, you know, just all of these organizations that are doing such important work, but they have been until recently doing that more in their individual silos and not really working together as much. So that is something also that I think is changing, where across the spectrum, people are seeing this need for serious democracy reform. And you see that like, you know, Annie Leonard, who's the wonderful leader of Greenpeace says, "We realize we'll never get a healthy environment until we have a healthy democracy." Over at Planned Parenthood, they're saying, "We realize we won't be able to defend women's health unless we have a healthy democracy."

Dr. Nancy MacLean (20:26):

So this is happening. People are realizing how we got into this trench, even on issues that have such popular support, but I think it's gonna take a while to dig out. And that means getting more and more people informed and involved and spreading out from blue cities and college towns and other places into all parts of our states and putting shoulders to the wheel a lot to turn this thing around. But I do really believe, too, that there's so much promise in that, because again, that majoritarian agenda has been pent up for so long by the power of the political right and by the way that they had rigged the rules against the majority, so by breaking through this impasse, we will enable, I think, a new era that could make the era that followed World War II look almost modest by comparison in terms of a situation that would liberate the potential of so many people, that would enable us to not just address climate change but really clean up our air in water so it's good for people. Schools that let children thrive, making sure that nobody loses their dignity and has to live in horrible poverty in old age. There's so much that so many of us want that's been blocked by the setup that we're facing, so if we can break those barriers, it could be a pretty extraordinary new era. And I think we have counterparts in other countries who are in the same, you know, not the exact same constellation of forces but who are in a similar situation. So I really do feel like this is a transnational effort to make the new century something that will enable everyone to thrive.

Andrea Chalupa (22:24):

Along that line, I wanted to bring up Russia because, as we've seen, this Republican Party has become aligned with Russia. We have a production manager based in North Carolina who sent me a photo he took of a car in North Carolina where the bumper sticker said in really big letters, "I love Putin."

Dr. Nancy MacLean (22:47):

Oh wow.

Andrea Chalupa (22:49):

And I have to tell you, as a Ukrainian American, my grandfather (who's Ukrainian) was very supportive of Reagan because he brought down communism.

Dr. Nancy MacLean:

Yeah.

Andrea Chalupa:

And now you have all these figures from the Reagan administration; Chief Justice John Roberts at the DOJ was always wanting to go after voting rights and he did that on the Supreme Court with Citizens United and gutting the voting rights act. And then you had Paul Manafort who goes off and becomes the Kremlin's operative for many years and runs Trump's campaign. And now you have a Republican Party that's openly in love with Vladimir Putin and calling out Putin's ally in Hungary, Tucker Carlson is - [laughs]

Dr. Nancy MacLean:

Yes.

Andrea Chalupa:

And so it's this strange thing. Obviously, yes, there is a global movement that's pushing back against this. There's a lot of immense bravery we've seen from Russian and Ukrainian human rights activists, especially. And then, of course, with these countries like Putin's Russia, which is a gas station dictatorship-

Dr. Nancy MacLean:

Yes.

Andrea Chalupa:

-which has put out papers saying they plan to profit off of climate change-

Dr. Nancy MacLean:

Yes.

Andrea Chalupa:

-that the unfreezing of Siberia will open up more farmland. That's out of *ProPublica*. And then, of course, Rex Tillerson—who has a Medal of Friendship from Russia—was picked by Trump to be our secretary of state. The guy that led Exxon. That's the jaw dropping moment in America's history. So could you talk about that? What happened to my grandfather's... I mean, this is a whole conversation, but my proud Ukrainian grandfather's Republican Party is now firmly, openly pro Kremlin. What does that mean? How did we get here and what does that tell us about the future?

Dr. Nancy MacLean (24:31):

Yeah. So, I will say that my expertise doesn't go into all of this, but you're absolutely right that there's a much grimmer global scenario that we have to come to terms with and that this captured Republican Party—and again, it is not just the Trump, as some people call it, the MAGA faction of that party that's now driving it, but they work in almost a pincers action with the donors also forcing this unpopular agenda so that all that's left is the racist and the fearful, bigoted notion that somehow they are the victims and they are losing everything. And this is a phenomena that we're seeing in other countries as well. And again, I hate to go all doom and gloom here but the Koch network also has... They help fund something called the Atlas Network which operates, well ,there's over 450 affiliates in, I think it's 96 countries, last time I checked.

Dr. Nancy MacLean (25:30):

What we've seen in a number of those countries is these arch right corporate donors—again, many of them from the fossil fuel industry. Not all, but many—and many of them are coming to rely on these Trump and Orban figures. You know, like in Britain, the Atlas affiliates there, particularly the Institute for Economic Affairs, supported Boris Johnson and Brexit, pushed very hard for that. A similar phenomenon in Australia, similar impulses there where they're saying, you know, “Can Australia get a Trump?” There are people saying in Brazil, you know, those kinds of forces supported Bolsonaro, who's an even more exaggerated, frightening version of Trump. And Canada, they're pushing similar figures. So I think what we're seeing is this arch corporate right is relying more and more on the weaponization of fear and the mobilization of often white, kind of nationalist identities.

Dr. Nancy MacLean (26:36):

And as you say, this infatuation of the MAGA faction and the Republican Party and of frankly vile media figures like Tucker Carlson with Viktor Orbán in Hungary is really breathtaking. Also, now I can't remember if it's happened or it's gonna happen soon, but the Conservative Political Action Conference is gonna be meeting in Orbán's Hungary, or, you know, has those ties. too. So you're absolutely right that this is something that we need to watch and be wary of and do what we can to shine a light on because it really tells you who they really are [laughs] and what kind of government they would like to live under, and that is one that does not allow for the dissent of its citizens, and instead allows oligarchs to flourish at the expense of the people.

Andrea Chalupa (27:33):

Would you say that America's an oligarchy right now? Or we're headed there?

Dr. Nancy MacLean (27:38):

Yeah, I think we're headed there. I wouldn't say we're full-on there because I think the people still have power, but I think that in many regards we have become that, a kind of corporate oligarchy, and you see



that most clearly in the decisions of the Supreme Court, particularly the Roberts court. I mentioned Senator Sheldon Whitehouse from Rhode Island earlier. He has a very good book that's a few years old now, but it was called *Captured: The Corporate Infiltration of American Democracy*, and it's kind of an exposé but also kind of a witness account since he had a front row seat on all this. But he also has another project called "Captured Courts" where he looks at the vast number (it was five to four before, now six to three) but this extraordinary run of pro corporate decision-making by the US Supreme Court that, again, is at odds with the views of most of the people.

Dr. Nancy MacLean (28:41):

There was a piece, I think it was one *ProPublica* did some years back, that showed that the Roberts court was to the right of 90% of the American people on these corporate decisions. So the courts are really a place where that is farthest advanced. You could look at different arenas and see different amounts of concentration, but we can surely say that the desires and interests of the American people are not by and large breaking through and being acted on by government in the way that they should because of all the developments that we've been talking about to this point in the conversation.

Andrea Chalupa (29:21):

So the one thing that jumped out at me in *Democracy in Chains* is how Lenin, they take inspiration from Lenin, the Kochs do and we've heard Bannon, allegedly in some reporting, called himself a Leninist. They just want to destroy things, zero compromise, and they have that revolutionary spirit of "take no prisoners" Vladimir Lenin sort of strategy. Could you speak a little bit about that?

Dr. Nancy MacLean (29:49):

Yeah, that was really eye popping for me when I was doing the research and I came across this. It was in the 1970s when Charles Koch was funding a libertarian thinker named Murray Rothbard. And Rothbard had grown up in New Jersey. Jewish American. His father had some kind of a gas business. Anyway, and you know, the workers struck and they like never got over it. But anyway, Rothbard was very smart. He was actually also funny too. It's kind of interesting to read. But they had relatives who were in the communist party in New York. And so I guess they would have holidays. And anyway, he was exposed to a lot of this thinking and then he himself started reading Lenin, even though of course his politics were kind of diametrically opposed. So it was Murray Rothbard who introduced Charles Koch to reading Lenin.

Dr. Nancy MacLean (30:47):

Rothbard, in this famous trip, he went out and met Koch in Vail, Colorado, I believe it was. Koch was a big skier and Murray Rothbard kind of never left Manhattan and was terrified to get on a plane, but went out there and basically made this case to him that they wanted to see a revolution, right? A kind of minoritarian revolution. And in order to do that, they could look to Lenin for strategic guidance. In particular what Murray Rothbard talked about with Charles Koch was the need to develop a cadre, a revolutionary cadre of hardcore libertarians who would be so steeped in the most extreme and full version of these views that they could, even as a minority, go into larger organizations and instead of themselves being converted to the views of the people in the larger organizations, they could pull the people in those larger organizations to their own kind of capitalist bullshit views, if you will.

Dr. Nancy MacLean (31:53):

You could look at the Republican Party after 2008 as an exhibit of this, where these donors and the Tea Party libertarians—and this was underway for a long time, but really accelerated then—just went in as

kind of commandos. I'm sure your listeners now are familiar with this language, of RINOs (Republicans In Name Only), but basically they would call out as RINOs anyone who was willing to take action on the climate, anyone who was willing to see taxes increase, anyone who would raise the debt ceiling, and on and on and on, and essentially anyone who would compromise, right? Anyone who would compromise with Democrats, as governance had always been done in America and would be done in a democracy where compromise and coming in and out of power is the norm.

Dr. Nancy MacLean (32:46):

But instead they wanted this really hardcore vision that would brook no compromise and that has brought us to where we are. But absolutely it was inspired by Rothbard explaining his view of Leninism to Koch. And I actually saw Koch has a book—he has a couple of books, but I believe it was the book *Good Profit*—where he actually includes Lenin among his influences. [laughs] So, yeah. It's a really interesting side story, but that refusal to compromise and that brinkmanship is something we've really seen more and more on display and it's just becoming catastrophic, as we're seeing with the COVID crisis, where Republican governors like Abbot in Texas and DeSantis in Florida essentially are campaigning for the support of that MAGA base and for the Koch donor money by being absurd and extreme non-compromising libertarians on basic public health.

Dr. Nancy MacLean (33:49):

You know, so saying not only will they not have a mask mandate but they will make it so local communities cannot have their own mask mandates. They've even—for a party that portrays itself as pro-business—got furious that employers have mandates and tried to stop the employers from having mask or vaccine mandates in order to mitigate the spread of COVID and its deadliness. So again, I think watching them really does become a kind of Exhibit A of why this libertarianism is a deadly dogma and the deadly part is not rhetorical. We're seeing it in the fact that the United States has had more than 800,000 COVID deaths. It's just unthinkable. But if you break that out, what you see—and I think it was *The Washington Post* recently had a piece on this—but if you break it out by states and their presidential votes in 2020, the bluest, pro-democratic Biden states actually have very high vaccination levels and after the initial impact of COVID much lower death levels so that they're more like European countries, whereas in the extremely pro-Trump states, COVID is now ripping through. Their hospitals are overwhelmed. Their healthcare occupations are devastated.

Dr. Nancy MacLean:

People are exhausted. Many of them are leaving the profession. People can't even get into hospitals for things like cancer surgery or heart surgery because the wards are filled with COVID people who believed the Big Lie that COVID was not to be worried about and that vaccines would harm you and that the terrible liberals were trying to pull one over on America. It is really heartbreaking and it kind of leaves me to say, if you want an indictment of all that we've been talking about in this conversation and you want to see the true impact of these ideas and this political project, what other cause can you think of in world history that didn't care about sending off its own supporters to die? But that's what we're seeing here with the MAGA faction of the Republican Party that follows Donald Trump and with these corporate donors like the Kochs who have tried to make it impossible to act on COVID. They are willing to kill off the people whose support they depend on in order to achieve their goals. And to me, it doesn't matter what religious tradition you're from or none, if you're just a person of ethics, but that to me is just breathtaking that any cause would do that.

Sarah Kendzior (36:39):

I'm just wondering what you think the long term repercussions are going to be, assuming this pandemic ever does end, because it seems like a boon for the movements that you described that have wanted to shrink government "to the point that you can drown it in a bathtub", I think is the quote from Grover Norquist, and destroy the rest of our institutions; public schools, any kind of service to the public. A lot of these institutions are crumbling under the pressure of an ongoing pandemic that keeps producing new variants. That creates great instability, further erosion of trust. In the aftermath—assuming it ends— what is America going to look like?

Dr. Nancy MacLean (37:20):

I actually think it's impossible to predict. And like you, I'm watching as they undermine one institution after another. You don't have to be a sociologist to understand that societies are made up of institutions and norms and when you start destroying all the institutions and the norms, you're gonna have a problem. So as you say, education is crumbling under the pressure of all this, healthcare is, certainly government in general. But also, as a historian, I know the power of contingency and I know how quickly and unexpectedly things can change if good people keep on the job. Lately I've been reading a lot about the 19th century, for example, and seeing particularly the 1850s so many abolitionists were feeling so discouraged because they thought, you know, this is hopeless, that this country will never change, will never come around.

Dr. Nancy MacLean (38:16):

10 years later you had Union troops singing "John Brown's Body" and the emancipation of slavery and the enfranchisement of the formerly enslaved. So we don't really know what will happen. And I could be terribly wrong on this. I think any prediction is inherently flawed. But given the way COVID is now penetrating places that it hadn't affected as much early on, including citadels of MAGA strength, I wonder if at some point there won't be a change there, maybe not in everyone but in a significant enough number of people to realize how hideous this is and how badly people have been misled. Part of the challenge there though, too, is I think that people on the progressive side will have to be more generous-spirited [laughs] than they might feel.

Dr. Nancy MacLean (39:16):

You know, I'm one of those that's just so frustrated with people who won't even put on a mask to save children or the elderly, but I think it is very important to create off-ramps and to enable people who have believed the Big Lie and acted on these things to feel like they can leave that arena and have a life elsewhere. I think we may well be surprised. And of course we can be surprised for the worst, but it's also possible that we could be surprised.

Sarah Kendzior (39:47):

I agree with that. I live in a state that heavily voted for Trump and I sometimes interact with people who were acolytes of, say, QAnon or something, and there are points of mutual agreement, mainly that the government has been deeply, deeply corrupt, our institutions have been rotted for decades on end and powerful, wealthy actors are working to hurt us. It's just a matter of opinion about which powerful and wealthy actors are at fault, to which I usually say, "Well, nearly all of them because they're either doing the terrible action or they're enabling the terrible action and so therefore we need a broad movement of transparency and accountability and justice." Do you think that that is possible with the current political climate and the current administration, Senate, Congress, etc.?

Dr. Nancy MacLean (40:37):

Yeah, and you're in Missouri, so yeah, you're like me here in North Carolina. You know all this up close and personal, which I think is important. Sometimes I talk to people, quite frankly, you know, Cambridge, Massachusetts, forget it. Some of them don't even understand what's going on-

Sarah Kendzior:

Lost cause. [laughs] Sorry.

Dr. Nancy MacLean:

But anyway, I think you're right that it's a mistake to think of people as being... You know, people are trying to find ways to navigate the world with the materials at hand and we need to recognize that. One person that I was reading at one point, a really interesting European thinker, Bruno Latour, was saying, "Why wouldn't a lot of these people in kind of the rust belt be subject to distrusting establishment information after they were told for years that free trade and NAFTA were gonna make their lives better?" [laughs] You know? That really helped me see things in a somewhat different way.

Dr. Nancy MacLean (41:35):

Like you,, I think that's possible. I think it is really important when we say, Is this possible with what we have to remember that none of these institutions—or at least the mainstream institutions or parties—are monolithic, so I think there's a fight on for the soul of the Democratic party right now-

Sarah Kendzior:

Mmmhmm <affirmative>

Dr. Nancy MacLean:

-and there has been for some time, that really crested in some ways with the popularity of Bernie Sanders, who did have a capacity to reach across that divide and persuade Fox viewers and do well in West Virginia, etc. So I think truth-tellers who recognize, as you say, that there's been a kind of systemic corruption and enabling going on from corporate-captured elected officials and so forth for a long time, if people can recognize that truth, then we can begin to get somewhere.

Dr. Nancy MacLean (42:31):

But I see so many people who are doing really important work, you know, shoulder to the wheel. And maybe they're not the majority, but they're significant. Again, I go back to Sheldon Whitehouse in the Senate who I think has been a really, really important figure, particularly in fighting against this court capture. He and Senator Markley and Bernie Sanders and others have been really pushing for action on climate change and on income inequality. Sherrod Brown in Ohio has done really important work, trying to represent working class voters and working class interests for a long time. In the House, there are so many figures, but including, you know, some of those in the limelight now with January 6th, like Jamie Raskin in Maryland, who actually has a new book out about dealing with his son's suicide and the insurrection in the Capitol at the same time.

Dr. Nancy MacLean (43:28):

I mean, he is such an interesting figure and has been a key figure for the House progressive caucus. There's Pramila Jayapal from Washington state who's so impressive. There's the folks who are part of the Squad like AOC and Cori Bush and others who are really trying to bring change to the party. So I'm more encouraged about—even as it's frustrating—what's happening in the Democratic Party now than I would say at any time in my adult lifetime. And if you look at Biden's agenda, I mean, it's the agenda of the progressive wing of the party. The Build Back Better effort and these democracy reform bills that are up, those are coming from people who are doing the hard work of organizing in working class communities and communities of color.

Dr. Nancy MacLean (44:20):

So I think it is a really, really good time for people, even if they have felt disillusioned (rightly so), disengaged and Lord knows overwhelmed by COVID and by the pressures of daily life in such an unequal society, you know, I totally relate to that and at the same time though, I think that this is a moment where if enough people put shoulder to the wheel and start informing people in their networks, in their communities about what's happening and motivating other people to get engaged in the process, we could really see a breakthrough for the kind of agenda and country we all want.

[outro theme music]

Andrea Chalupa:

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Sarah Kendzior:

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Andrea Chalupa:

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