

# SUICIDE OF THE WEST

AN ESSAY ON THE MEANING AND  
DESTINY OF LIBERALISM

JAMES BURNHAM

WITH A NEW FOREWORD BY  
JOHN O'SULLIVAN  
AND INTRODUCTION BY  
ROGER KIMBALL

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THE MANAGERIAL REVOLUTION  
THE MACHIAVELLIANS  
THE STRUGGLE FOR THE WORLD  
THE COMING DEFEAT OF COMMUNISM  
CONTAINMENT OR LIBERATION?  
THE WEB OF SUBVERSION  
SUICIDE OF THE WEST

INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS  
*(with Philip Wheelwright)*

THE CASE FOR DE GAULLE  
*(with André Malraux)*

CONGRESS AND THE AMERICAN TRADITION

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A WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY, JR. PROGRAM AT YALE BOOK

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*I dedicate this book to all liberals of good will*

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# CONTENTS

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*Foreword, by John O'Sullivan*

*Introduction, by Roger Kimball*

*Preface*

1. The Contraction of the West
2. Who Are the Liberals?
3. Human Nature and the Good Society
4. The Universal Dialogue
5. Equality and Welfare
6. Ideological Thinking
7. A Critical Note in Passing
8. Do Liberals Really Believe in Liberalism?
9. The Liberal's Order of Values
10. The Guilt of the Liberal
11. Pas d'Ennemi à Gauche
12. Dialectic of Liberalism
13. Again: Who Are the Liberals?
14. The Drift of U.S. Foreign Policy
15. Liberalism vs. Reality
16. The Function of Liberalism

*Index*

# FOREWORD

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JAMES BURNHAM IS USUALLY seen as a cool and unsentimental analyst of world politics and ideological movements in the twentieth century. This description is certainly one that fits most of his major works, such as *The Machiavellians* (his best book, in my judgment) and *The Struggle for the World* (his most consequential book). It also accords with his advice in these works for assessing and dealing with global politics and ideologies. And it probably reflects his own image of himself as a sober realist warning people not to trust the idealistic slogans that mask the cruel realities of all power.

In most of his works, he seems to be saying, like the Prophets: This world is a vale of tears. Don't expect justice in it. The wicked flourish like a green bay tree. The good are doomed to be continually betrayed and disappointed. The best we can hope for is that a balance between different masters between greater and lesser evils, will allow the humble to enjoy a moderate temporary prosperity. Analyze your way to that clearing in the jungle as best you can.

His famous maxims at *National Review*—where he is remembered by Linda Bridges and Richard Brookhiser as a quiet, authoritative, exacting editor and a kindly colleague beneath a restrained gentlemanly exterior—exude the same dry, unillusioned tone of rebuke to human self-deception. For instance: You can't invest in retrospect.

Some of Burnham's critics, notably George Orwell, accept this self-portrait of the artist as a self-consciously scientific, even amoral, analyst of power politics. Orwell's criticism, indeed, includes the accusation that Burnham displays altogether too much relish when he is describing the remorseless necessities that drive men to oppress and murder others in uncertain times. He comes close, writes Orwell, to the worship of power under a mask of realism.

All these aspects of Burnham's literary personality, except perhaps the last, support the picture of him as a realist, almost passionless, analyst. But this impression is blown away by reading even a few pages of *Suicide of the West*. There can be no real doubt that this is the work of an engaged and passionate writer responding fiercely to events in the world that strike him as something between tragedy and an outrage.

The realism is there still, as it always is. So is the cold logical reasoning. But they are now expressed coldly—and not indignantly either, since a Lear-like raging at the political weather is for Burnham the mark of modern American liberalism. On the contrary, the realism and logic are now expressed sarcastically, wittily, savagely, and at times with a kind of despairing enjoyment at the repeated follies of his inveterate opponents in the liberal camp.

*Suicide of the West* is the first book in which Burnham grabs his readers by the lapels and shakes them hard rather than merely pointing quietly to obvious facts they have managed to avoid noticing. His arguments are as strong as ever, but not always as minutely documented. He builds his case against liberalism with bold insights as much as with his usual logical deductions. His tone is prophetic rather than professorial. Injustice and folly no longer amuse him; they enrage him. This is the unbuttoned Burnham. And the result may not be his best book, but it surely is his most inspired.

What inspired him, then? Let me suggest three things.

First, as Roger Kimball's fine and informative introduction establishes, Burnham's life was a succession of different moral, political, and artistic commitments until he reached a permanent haven in the 1950's. He was an aesthete in the 1920's, a Trotskyist in the 1930's, a theorist of oligarchy and collectivism (see Orwell) in the first half of the 1940's, an anti-communist strategist in the second



half, and a founder of a new American conservatism in the 1950's. These are the conversions of a man who was ~~highly attuned to the spirit of the age even when he was sharply opposed to it. As such, he divined in the early 1960's what was to happen in the later Sixties. And this shaman-like sensitivity transformed the tone of his arguments even when he was rehashing older material from his lecturing days.~~

Second, the contradiction between the objective realities of the early 1960's and the response of liberal policymaking must have been infuriating to an observer of Burnham's insight and ability. Though the West and in particular the United States were dominant economically, militarily, and morally, they were everywhere faltering, uncertain, or even in retreat—over Hungary, Suez, Algeria, Vietnam, the Bay of Pigs, and so on. Burnham had argued for a form of political warfare designed to undermine the Soviets; he thought containment inadequate, and even that was being feebly enforced.

Third, even while he was helping to found the Congress for Cultural Freedom in the 1940's to win over Europe's liberal intelligentsia to the side of anti-communism, he had glimpsed that liberal intellectuals on both sides of the Atlantic would bolt toward a morally equivalent "neutrality" as soon as the United States had to take some action internationally that could not be justified in simplistic liberal terms.

He knew by now that the Western order of global power was the freest, most prosperous, and most just order available to mankind in that era. He had looked into the soul of American liberalism and seen the vacancy there. He could guess what was coming. And in response, he cast aside his customary restraint and indicted liberalism as the doctrine that reconciled the West to its own needless defeat and eventual dissolution.

We should probably read Burnham's other works in the light of *Suicide of the West*. But we should also follow the light that it casts forward to illuminate his final years. On his deathbed, Burnham returned to the Catholic Church that he had left in his twenties without, as Kimball notes, any apparent soul-searching. What prompted his return to faith? Any man's reasons for turning to faith can only be known fully to God. But it would hardly be surprising if someone who saw clearly that injustice is the way of this world while also finding injustice intolerable should seek—and find increasing comfort in—a world in which the wicked no longer flourish and the good no longer suffer and the intelligent analyst can find more pleasurable pursuits than indicting crime and folly for what they really are.

— John O'Sullivan

# INTRODUCTION

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*I put for a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death.*

—Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*

*The common-place critic . . . believes that truth lies in the middle, between the extremes of right and wrong.*

—William Hazlitt, ‘On Common-Place Critics’

*Americans have not yet learned the tragic lesson that the most powerful cannot be loved—hated, envied, feared, obeyed, respected, even honored perhaps, but not loved.*

—James Burnham, *Containment or Liberation?*

‘WHO IS JAMES BURNHAM?’ How often did I field variants of that question while pondering this essay? My informal survey suggests that almost no one under the age of sixty has even heard of him (“James Burnham, who?”). And for most people over that magic age, Burnham is but an attenuated presence, a half-remembered, even vaguely embarrassing fashion that has failed to return—fins on the back of a mod that was discontinued long ago for lack of sales. “Ah, yes,” speak the glimmers of remembrance: “author of *The Managerial Revolution*”—Burnham’s first and most famous book, published in 1940—“ardent Cold Warrior, helped organize the Congress for Cultural Freedom (remember that?), and . . . wasn’t he a supporter of Joseph McCarthy?” The answer to that last question is No—more on that below—but even the hint of an adumbration of a suspicion of “McCarthyite” leanings is sufficient to expel one from the ranks of civilized recollection, as Burnham learned to his cost.

The most notable exception to the oblivion surrounding Burnham is among people associated with *National Review*, the conservative fortnightly that Burnham helped start in 1955, when he was fifty. For more than two decades, Burnham enlivened the magazine’s pages with his spare but unsparing prose and editorial intelligence. He ranged widely, dilating on everything from foreign policy—his specialty—to (early on) the movies. William F. Buckley, Jr., the founding editor and perpetual *genius loci* of *NR*, called Burnham “the number one intellectual influence on *National Review* since the day of its founding.” In a just world, that would be patent enough for continued interest and recognition. But in this world, the combination of Burnham’s ferocious intellectual independence and unclubbable heterodoxy long ago consigned him to the unglamorous limbo that established opinion reserves for those who challenge its pieties too forcefully.

In 2002, the late Daniel Kelly published *James Burnham and the Struggle for the World*, a meticulous and thoughtful biography of this sage political gadfly. If any book could resuscitate Burnham’s reputation, this was it. But Burnham is too idiosyncratic, too polemical, and too faithful to the dictates of intellectual integrity to enjoy anything like a general renaissance. As I write, in the summer of 2014, all of Burnham’s ten or so books are listed as “Out of Print” or being of “Limited Availability,” i.e., more limited than available.

I am doubly grateful, therefore, that the William F. Buckley, Jr. Program at Yale suggested bringing out a new edition of Burnham’s classic admonition, *Suicide of the West: An Essay on the Meaning and Destiny of Liberalism*. First published in 1964, *Suicide of the West* provides an accurate anatomy of that species of self-infatuated sentimentality we continue to misname “liberalism” (

there anything *less* liberal than contemporary liberalism?). The book also, fifty years on, speaks powerfully to a broad range of current deformations, moral or existential as well as political.

James Burnham (who died in 1987 after a decade's incapacity) was an astonishing writer. Subtle, passionate, and irritatingly well read, he commanded a nimble style that was sometimes blunt but unfailingly eloquent. Burnham was above all a *rousing* writer. Immanuel Kant paid homage to David Hume for awakening him from his "dogmatic slumbers" about metaphysical questions. Burnham performed a similar service for the politically complacent. If he occasionally exaggerated the extent or imminence of the evils he described—Burnham was liberally endowed with what Henry James called "the imagination of disaster"—he was fearless in opposing and exposing the totalitarian temptation. Which is to say that he was fearless in opposing and exposing the most corrosive, most addictive, most murderous ideology of our time: communism.

Today, Burnham is best known—to the extent that he is known at all—as an anti-communist crusader. He was that. But he did not confine his criticism to communism. On the contrary, he understood that the impulse to totalitarian surrender comes in many guises. That is part of what underwrites his contemporary relevance. The "managerial revolution" that he warned about in the book of that title was a revolution aiming to repel freedom for the sake of bureaucratic efficiency and control. That revolution has not—not yet—succeeded in the monolithic fashion that Burnham envisioned. He did not, as his subtitle promised, so much tell us "what is happening in the world" as what *might* happen should certain tendencies be left unchecked. But who can gaze upon the ever increasing routinization of life and regulation of individual liberty in our society without acknowledging the pertinence of Burnham's gloomy analysis?

Over his long career, Burnham changed his mind about many things. He went from being a sort of philosophical aesthete to having a serious infatuation with Trotskyism—a form of Marxism peculiarly seductive to intellectuals—emerging in the 1940's as a prominent spokesman for an astringent species of democratic realism. But throughout the evolution of his opinions, Burnham remained unwavering in his commitment to freedom. This commitment had two sides: an infrequently exercised celebratory side, which he reserved for freedom's genuine triumphs, and an oppositional side, which he lavished with cordial hostility on those opinions, policies, sentiments, and personalities that worked to stymie freedom.

This dual commitment made Burnham an equal-opportunity scourge. He was almost as hard on what Tocqueville called democratic despotism—the tendency of democracies to barter freedom for equality—as he was on communism. Burnham was a connoisseur of insidiousness, of the way benign—or seemingly benign—intentions can be enlisted to promulgate malevolent, illiberal policies. He described this process as accurately in Western democracies as he did in communist tyrannies, and he was tireless in his excoriation of what he called "that jellyfish brand of contemporary liberalism—pious, guilt-ridden, do-goody—which uses the curious dogma of 'some truth on both sides' as its principal sales line."

Kelly observes in his biography that Burnham was "the living embodiment of what would later come to be known as political incorrectness." Kelly is right. Consider, to take just one example, Burnham's observation that most African nations were really "half-formed pseudo nations." Now, at the time, that is indisputably the case, but how many accredited intellectuals have the forthrightness to apprise Robert Mugabe of this inconsiderate fact? (Burnham was refreshing on many subjects, not least the United Nations and its disapproving resolutions about U.S. policy: "Why in the world," he wondered, "should any sensible person give a damn what some spokesman for cannibalistic tribes and slave-holding nomads thinks about nuclear tests?")

It would be easy to multiply such crisp interventions. Nevertheless, I hesitate to apply the label “politically incorrect” to so insightful and spirited a critic as James Burnham. In many quarters calling someone “politically incorrect” has become a popular method of discounting his opinions without the inconvenience of allowing them a hearing. It is a clever, if cowardly, rhetorical trick that allows you to ignore someone by the simple expedient of declaring his arguments to be beyond the pale, “extreme”—that is, unworthy of a place in the forum of public exchange. At bottom, the procedure is a form of political ostracism. The goal is to silence someone not by forbidding him to speak but by denying him an audience. This technique is especially effective with writers, like Burnham, who specialize in telling truths that most people would rather not hear.

James Burnham cut an odd figure in the world of intellectual polemics. He impressed his peers as both unusually pugnacious and curiously disengaged. His background had a lot to do with the mixture. The eldest of three sons, he was born in 1905 to a prosperous Chicago railway executive. His father, Claude, was a classic American success story. At fourteen, he was a poor English immigrant delivering newspapers at the head office of James J. Hill’s Great Northern Railway. Two decades later he was a vice president of the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad (among other lines), traveling with his family in a private railway car. In later life, Burnham objected to the description of his father as a “minor railway magnate,” but the epithet does seem to cover the facts.

Even moderate wealth can be a segregating force, and it was one factor that set Burnham apart from many of his fellows. Religion was another. Burnham’s father (who died of pneumonia in his late forties in 1928) was Protestant but his mother, in Kelly’s phrase, was a “rigorous Catholic.” Burnham grew up Roman Catholic in a world still mildly suspicious of papist influence. Society did not snub the Burnhams, exactly, but neither did it welcome them without reserve. And if Catholicism was grounds for distance, so was culture. The Burnhams were a cultivated family. Art, literature, and argument were staple goods in the Burnham household. Young James was musical, like his mother, and delighted throughout life in playing the piano. He enjoyed an expensive education. When the Burnhams understood that their local parochial schools discouraged their charges from applying to Ivy League colleges, they decided to send James and his brother David to the Canterbury School, a top Catholic institution in New Milford, Connecticut. Burnham performed well, brilliantly in English and math, and matriculated at Princeton in 1923. He majored in English, graduated at the top of his class, and went to Balliol to study English and medieval philosophy. Among his teachers were an unknown professor of Old English called J.R.R. Tolkien—I wonder if Burnham ever recorded his opinion on *The Hobbits*? I doubt that it was flattering—and the suave Jesuit philosopher Martin D’Arcy, who had a magnetic effect on nonbelievers such as Evelyn Waugh. But while Burnham gloried in theological argument, D’Arcy’s example and tutelage did not salvage Burnham’s religious commitments, which he shed without noticeable struggle while at Balliol.

Being an ex-Catholic is not the same thing as being a non-Catholic, and an ex-Catholic with a taste for theological argumentation is a decidedly strange hybrid. Burnham did not return to the Church until the very end of his life, but his Catholic up-bringing and intellectual training served to inflect his intelligence in distinctive ways. In 1929, he went to teach philosophy at New York University—a task he discharged for some two decades—and he stood out not only because of his brilliance but also because of his tone, a combination of passion, polish, and polemic. One of Burnham’s students, Joseph Frank, the future biographer of Dostoevsky, remembered him as “very sophisticated, very serious, and very intense.”

Among Burnham’s early colleagues at NYU was the philosopher Philip E. Wheelwright, whose book *The Burning Fountain: A Study in the Language of Symbolism* made a deep impression on

generations of students. Wheelwright had been one of Burnham's teachers at Princeton. The two had corresponded for some time about starting a new literary-philosophical magazine, and in January 1932 (one year after the debut of Lincoln Kirstein's *Hound and Horn*) the first issue of *Symposium: Critical Review* appeared. The first issue of the quarterly contained essays by John Dewey, Ramon Fernandez (the French literary critic who is probably best known today as a figure in Wallace Stevens's poem "The Idea of Order at Key West"), and the philosopher Morris R. Cohen. Burnham contributed a long review of I.A. Richards's *Practical Criticism*. It is a canny essay. Burnham judges Richards's book to be "the most considerable and the most formidable study of poetry . . . which has appeared in America during the past year." But he also noted that he could "not help feeling . . . that Mr. Richards's Defense of Poetry is more 'inspired,' more 'stirring,' and more *desperate* than any Sidney's or Shelley's."

To those of us who, however ardent may be our affection for poetry, do not look to it so entirely for the organization of our lives, Mr. Richards's defense may seem most damaging to poetry itself; and poetry may appear through his efforts, as in the old twist of Pope's, faint with damned praise.

That is pretty good stuff.

*Symposium* had a run of three years. It was an impressive, if sometimes discursively academic achievement. Burnham and Wheelwright snagged essays by Lionel Trilling (on D.H. Lawrence), Frederick Dupee (on Edmund Wilson's *Axel's Castle*), Allen Tate (on Emily Dickinson), and Sidney Hook (on Marxism). Ezra Pound wrote for *Symposium*, as did Herbert Read, John Middleton Murry, Harold Rosenberg, and G. Wilson Knight. The first bit of Ortega y Gasset to appear in English—portion of *The Dehumanization of Art*—appeared in *Symposium*, as did important essays on Eliot (a major influence on Burnham's thinking at the time), Valéry, and other modernist figures.

In general, the magazine lived up to its announced ambition "not to be the organ of any group, sect or cause," which may be one reason that Burnham let it fold in 1933. In one of the last issues Burnham contributed a long review of Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*. He was deeply impressed. That "remarkable book," the reading of which was "an exciting experience," had strengthened his conviction that "a major transition [was] taking place" in the world. As for the lineaments of that transition—perhaps "revolution" is the apt word—Burnham was more and more coming to see it in Marxist terms.

Whatever the internal logic that propelled Burnham toward Marxism in the 1930's, there were also two important external factors. One was the Great Depression. Burnham looked around and saw the institutions of American society in crisis. The liberal nostrums seemed useless at best; more likely their effect was positively malevolent. Burnham loathed the paternalistic, big-government policies of Roosevelt, describing the New Deal as "Fascism without shirts." The second factor was the philosopher Sidney Hook, who was Burnham's entrée into the world of "pragmatic" Marxism—Marxism with a human face (or so Hook thought at the time).

Burnham was an idiosyncratic Marxist. It's not that he lacked fervency. On the contrary, as Kellomaki reports, he fell "head-over-heels" for Marxism and "labored mightily for the Trotskyist cause." Under Hook's guidance, he joined the American Workers Party and petitioned, agitated, organized, and above all wrote to further its aims. He helped edit and contributed innumerable broadsides and publications like *The New Militant*, *Socialist Appeal*, and *The New Internationalist*. His efforts did not go unnoticed. Before long he was in regular correspondence with "the Old Man," with Trotsky himself; and although they never met, Burnham became a trusted lieutenant in Trotsky's left-wing

anti-Stalinist movement.

At the same time, Burnham always regarded the utopian strain of Marxism with a suspicion bordering on contempt. He had too low—too accurate—an opinion of human nature to be seduced by the promise of perfection. And while he did not repudiate violence, he was always alert to Marxism (or any bureaucracy's) sweet tooth for totalitarian strategies. Burnham was also a social oddity among the comrades. In 1934 he married Marcia Lightner—like him, a Midwesterner—and moved from New York's Greenwich Village (bohemian paradise) to Sutton Place (adult respectability), where he entertained in a style appropriate to that address. (For her part, Burnham's wife always seemed to regard her husband's adventures in Trotskyist radicalism with bemused distaste.) It is likely, as Kelly notes, that Burnham was "the only Trotskyist to own a tuxedo." When he summered with his family in Biarritz, he perused Marx and Engels during the day and played chemin de fer at night. His acquisition of a summer house in Kent, Connecticut, completed the contrast.

Of course, Burnham was hardly the only privileged beneficiary of capitalism to embrace communism while holding fast to his bank account. But his intellectual independence made him an unreliable militant. Burnham happily immersed himself in Aquinas, Dante, and the Renaissance on the one moment, Marx and bulletins from Comrade Trotsky the next. It was a giddy but unstable amalgam. Unwilling, as Kelly puts it, to sacrifice intellect to militancy, Burnham became an increasingly restless recruit. The break came in 1939 when the Soviets, fortified by the Hitler-Stalin Pact, attacked Poland. Trotsky justified the action as a step toward the abolition of private property (and how!), but Burnham saw it for what it was: a brutal land grab by a totalitarian power. He wrote as much and in short order found himself expelled from the Socialist Workers Party and the object of Trotsky's rage. Overnight Burnham went from being a favored if sometimes wayward collaborator to being an "educated witch-doctor," "strutting petty-bourgeois pedant," and (the coup de grâce) an "intellectual snob." Burnham's response was to gather his correspondence with Trotsky and dump it into the incinerator.

By the end of the 1930's, Burnham was a minor but respected public intellectual. In 1938 he began a long association with *Partisan Review*, the premier intellectual organ of the anti-Stalinist left. But he did not become an intellectual celebrity until 1941, when *The Managerial Revolution: What is Happening in the World* became a runaway bestseller—much to the surprise of its publisher and the chagrin of the several houses that had turned it down. Written at the moment when Hitler's armies seemed poised to overrun Europe, the book is a grim exercise in dystopian prognostication. It is not, I think, one of Burnham's better books. As he himself later admitted, it is full of "remnants of Marxism," above all the depressing aroma of economic determinism and praise for the superiority of central planning. But *The Managerial Revolution* certainly is a bold, an impressive book. Its vision of the rise of an oligarchy of experts and alignment of world powers into three competing superstates made a deep impression on many readers, not least on George Orwell.

Orwell wrote about Burnham at least three times, reviewing *The Managerial Revolution* in 1941 and then in long essays about his work in 1946 and 1947. As Kelly notes, Orwell found *The Managerial Revolution* both "magnetic and repellent." Orwell criticized Burnham for "power worship," for being "fascinated by the spectacle of power" (and hence contenting himself with analyzing rather than condemning Hitler's early military successes). Burnham's essential intellectual failing, Orwell thought, was in "predicting a continuation of the thing that is happening." Nazi power is on the rise, ergo it will continue irresistibly; American capitalism is in crisis, ergo it will necessarily disintegrate—except that the rude, unkempt force of reality intervenes, transforming those ergos into "might have beens."

With hindsight, we can see that Orwell was right that Burnham underestimated “the advantages of a military as well as social, enjoyed by a democratic country.” His neat, schematic intelligence lulled him into believing that the (apparently) better-organized nation was going to be the victorious nation. Burnham undervalued the advantages of the ad hoc, the unexpected reversal, the sudden inspiration. His “besetting sin,” Orwell said, was to overstate his case: “He is too fond of apocalyptic visions, too ready to believe that the muddled processes of history will happen suddenly and logically.” (Orwell makes the arresting observation that during the Second World War, the smarter Brits were often the more pessimistic: “their morale was lower because their imaginations were stronger.”) At the same time, Orwell repeatedly underscored Burnham’s “intellectual courage” and willingness to deal with “real issues.” And it is clear that, whatever his criticisms, Orwell was deeply influenced by *The Managerial Revolution*. In 1984, he adopted wholesale Burnham’s idea that the world was reorganizing itself into three rival totalitarian states. *The Managerial Revolution* itself appears in Orwell’s novel under the title *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchic Collectivism*.

From 1939 to 1941, the communists worked mightily to keep America “neutral.” Good Trotskyism, that he aspired to be, Burnham, too, was opposed to America’s entry into the war. His opposition persisted after his break with Trotsky. But it did not survive Pearl Harbor. The Japanese attack on the Pacific Fleet precipitated a political metanoia. Overnight, Burnham became a vociferous supporter of all-out war against the Axis powers.

This hardening, or clarifying, is evident in his next book—considered by many critics to be his best—*The Machiavellians: Defenders of Freedom*. Published in 1943, *The Machiavellians* is ostensibly an exposition of, and homage to, some modern followers of Machiavelli. Its larger purpose is to distinguish between the sentimental and the realistic in politics. Dante (in *De Monarchia*), Rousseau, and the architects of the French Revolution are prime examples of the former; the latter represent “politics as wish”: noble, optimistic, ultimately futile—indeed, ultimately “reactionary and vicious” in Burnham’s judgment.

Machiavelli and his heirs belong to the latter camp. They saw things as they really were and faced up to unpleasant facts about human nature. Because they saw humanity as it was—in its imperfections, its treachery, its unceasing desire for power—they were the true friends of liberty. They did not exchange real freedoms for pleasant-sounding but empty idealities. They understood that all political freedom is imperfect freedom, won through struggle, preserved with difficulty, constantly subject to assault and diminution.

Burnham’s political thought is often described as “hardboiled.” *The Machiavellians* is the cauldron in which the promised firmness is achieved. “All societies,” he writes, “including societies called democratic, are ruled by a minority.” Although the minority, the ruling “élite,” naturally seeks to legitimize its power in the eyes of society, in the end “the primary object of every élite, or ruling class, is to maintain its own power and privilege,” an aim that is sought largely on “force and fraud.” Burnham had high hopes for “an objective science of politics”; at the same time, he believed that “logical or rational analysis plays a relatively minor part in political and social change.” The true friends of freedom budget heavily for the imperfection of humanity and acknowledge the relative impotence of reason in political affairs. Above all, they understand that the possession of power is inseparable from its intelligent exercise.

In terms of the evolution of Burnham’s thought, *The Machiavellians* is perhaps most important not for its exposition of power politics but for its implicit recognition of the value of freedom, “the minimum of moral dignity which alone can justify the strange accident of man’s existence.” As the 1940’s and the Second World War unfolded, Burnham came more and more to understand that the

preservation of freedom was primarily a salvage operation. And as the war hurried to its end, I looked on aghast as the West timidly made concession after concession to the Stalinist tyranny. In 1944, Burnham wrote a paper on postwar Soviet ambitions for the Office of Strategic Services. In 1947, an expanded version of this document appeared as *The Struggle for the World*. It is with this book, I believe, that Burnham comes into his own, for it is here that he first clearly articulates the opposition between the West as a precious heritage to be defended and communism as a murderous tyranny to be defeated.

Was Burnham's opposition "oversimplified," as many critics charged? Doubtless it was. But he was also right in essentials and was, moreover, a salutary corrective to the naive—and therefore deluded—advice of good-hearted liberals. Burnham understood with searing clarity two fundamental facts. First, that communism was an expansionist ideology bent on world domination. And, second, that its triumph would entail the destruction of every liberty, intellectual as well as political, that was in the West held sacred and yet (perilously) took for granted—above all, "the absolute value of the single human person." Communism, Burnham saw, was opportunism elevated to a position of absolute power. Unchecked, no human good, not even the commitment to truth, can withstand its assault. Anyone who has leafed through Marxist-inspired writings will remember attacks on "mechanistic logic." But this, Burnham notes, is at bottom an attack on "the rules of objective inference and proof—the rules that permit us to test for truth and falsity." The alternative, what is called "dialectical logic" is simply a device that declares "whatever serves the interest of communist power is true."

In terms of foreign policy, the fight against communism required neither appeasement—appeasement was merely a prelude to capitulation—nor containment—containment was merely appeasement on the installment plan. What was required was a concerted campaign to undermine, roll back, the communist juggernaut. In domestic terms, the fight against communism had to begin with the recognition that communists used and abused democratic freedoms in order to destroy them. Their aim was the subversion of democracy. Therefore, Burnham argued, their capacity to subvert must itself be subverted. In the end, he thought, this meant that communism would have to be outlawed. In the near term, it required that serious restraints be placed upon communist sympathizers and agents. Would this be a violation of their civil rights—the right to free speech, for example? Doubtless it would. But, Burnham argued,

Democracy in practice has never, and could never, interpret the right of free speech in an absolute and unrestricted sense. No one, for example, is allowed to advocate, and organize for, mass murder, rape, and arson. No one feels that such prohibitions are anti-democratic. But why not? Why cannot some purist tell us that any restriction whatsoever is, logically, counter to the absolute democratic principle of free speech?

Burnham's point was that because "Communism, in democratic nations, makes use of free speech in order to abolish free speech," its own right of free speech had to be curtailed. (Burnham stressed later that great care would have to be taken to avoid lumping real communists together with "socialist liberals, honest progressives," and other "legitimate" critics and reformers.)

Burnham's point, as pertinent today as when he uttered it, is that free speech cannot be understood in isolation, but only in the context of that which makes it possible, that is, in the context of democratic government and the functioning social community that supports it. "The principles of a well-organized society," he argued,

cannot be interpreted in such a way as to make organized society impossible. . . . Any individual right or freedom is properly extended only to those who accept the fundamental rules of democracy. How . . . could any society survive



The publication of *The Struggle for the World* happened to coincide with President Truman's speech announcing what came to be known as the Truman Doctrine, according to which the United States sought to "support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures." This coincidence garnered a great deal of publicity—much of it negative—for the book. It also aroused the interest of the fledgling Central Intelligence Agency. Burnham, recommended by his Princeton classmate Joseph Bryant III, worked as a consultant to the Political and Psychological Warfare division (which Bryant headed) of the Office of Policy Coordination, a semi-autonomous covert branch of the agency. He took a leave from New York University—to do "research," the university explained—and moved to Washington.

Perhaps Burnham's greatest contribution while working for the CIA was to help found the Congress for Cultural Freedom. This organization, covertly funded by the CIA, was established to provide a liberal but also anti-communist alternative to the communist-controlled propaganda initiatives for "peace and friendship." The liberal element of the Congress cannot be overemphasized; this was an effort to win over the liberal intelligentsia—forgive the pleonasm—to the cause of anti-communism. Accordingly, in 1950 at the Congress's inaugural conference in Berlin, patrons and speakers included Bertrand Russell, John Dewey, Benedetto Croce, Karl Jaspers, Jacques Maritain, Herbert Read, A.J. Ayer, Ignazio Silone, Sidney Hook, and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. Burnham was one of the few hardliners. In his talk, Burnham directly tackled "neutralism" (what we have come to call "moral equivalence"), the "denunciation on equal terms of American and Soviet barbarism." Burnham admitted the demotic nature of American pop culture. But tawdriness was better than tyranny: Coca-Cola might be bad, he said, but "not quite in the same league with Kolyma," the Soviet labor camp.

Burnham's tenure with the CIA (which, we tend to forget, was and is a deeply liberal institution) came to an end over the issue of "McCarthyism." Burnham was ambivalent about the Wisconsin senator: he was not, he explained, a McCarthyite but an "anti-anti-McCarthyite." He understood that anti-McCarthyism was often "a screen and cover for the Communists and . . . a major diversion from anti-Communist efforts." Reflecting on the phenomenon after McCarthy's death, Burnham noted that

McCarthy became the symbol through which the basic strata of citizens expressed their conviction . . . that Communism and Communists cannot be part of our national community, that they are beyond the boundaries: that, in short, the line must be drawn somewhere. This was really at issue in the whole McCarthy business, not how many card-carrying members were in the State Department. . . . The issue was philosophical, metaphysical: what kind of community are we? And the Liberals, including the anti-Communist Liberals, were correct in labeling McCarthy the Enemy, and in destroying him. From the Liberal standpoint—secularist, egalitarian, relativist—the line is not drawn. Relativism must be Absolute.

Burnham's stand on McCarthy precipitated his deportation to political Siberia. Overnight, the influential public commentator became persona non grata. Philip Rahv, his colleague at *Partisan Review*, put it well: "The Liberals now dominate all the cultural channels in this country. If you breathe completely with this dominant atmosphere, you're a dead duck. James Burnham had committed suicide." The irony is that Burnham, so astute about the workings of power, should have become a casualty of this skirmish: one might have expected him to negotiate the battle-field more cannily.

It was *National Review* that rescued Burnham and provided a home for his intellectual energies and a platform for broadcasting his insights in the final decades of his career. "Every aspect of the

magazine interested him,” William F. Buckley, Jr. recalled at the magazine’s twenty-fifth anniversary banquet. “Its typography—just for instance.” But also its coverage of culture, the length of its book reviews, and, above all, its stance with respect to America’s foreign policy. Burnham saw with ferocious clarity that, as he puts it in the present volume, civilizations generally collapse because of internal failures, not attacks from outside. “Suicide,” he wrote, “is probably more frequent than murder as the end phase of a civilization.” Contemplating the expansionist threat of Soviet communism, Burnham warned that “The primary issue before Western civilization today, and before its member nations, is survival.”

In some ways, *Suicide of the West* is a period piece. It is a product of the Cold War, and many of its examples are dated. But in its core message it is as relevant today as ever. The field of battle may have changed; the armies have adopted new tactics; but the war isn’t over—it is merely transmogrified. Burnham promises “the definitive analysis of the pathology of liberalism.” At the center of that pathology is an awful failure of understanding which is also a failure of nerve, a failure of “the will to survive.” Burnham admits that his invocation of “suicide” may sound hyperbolic. ‘Suicide,’ it is objected, is too emotive a term, too negative and ‘bad.’ ” But it is part of the pathology that Burnham describes that such objections are “most often made most hotly by Westerners who have their own civilization, readily excuse or even praise blows struck against it, and themselves lend a willing hand, frequently enough, to pulling it down.”

Burnham offered this still-pertinent reflection about facing down the juggernaut of communism: “just possibly we shall not have to die in large numbers to stop them; but we shall certainly have to be willing to die.” The issue, Burnham saw, is that modern liberalism has equipped us with an ethic too abstract and empty to inspire real commitment. Modern liberalism, he writes,

does not offer ordinary men compelling motives for personal suffering, sacrifice, and death. There is no tragic dimension in its picture of the good life. Men become willing to endure, sacrifice, and die for God, for family, king, honor, country, from a sense of absolute duty or an exalted vision of the meaning of history. . . . And it is precisely these ideas and institutions that liberalism has criticized, attacked, and in part overthrown as superstitious, archaic, reactionary, and irrational. In their place liberalism proposes a set of pale and bloodless abstractions—pale and bloodless for the very reason that they have no roots in the past, in deep feeling and in suffering. Except for mercenaries, saints, and neurotics, no one is willing to sacrifice and die for progressive education, medicare, humanity in the abstract, the United Nations, and a ten percent rise in social security payments.

In his view, the primary function of liberalism was to “permit Western civilization to be reconciled to its dissolution,” to regard weakness, failure, even collapse not as a defeat but “as the transition to a new and higher order in which Mankind as a whole joins in a universal civilization that has risen above the parochial distinctions, divisions, and discriminations of the past.”

It’s a mug’s game, worthy of all those “friends of humanity” whose sentimentality blinds them to the true realities of human life. Like the poor, such dubious friends seem always to be with us. Which is another reason that the teachings of James Burnham are as relevant today as they were when Nikita Khrushchev came to the UN to bang his shoe on the table and warn the West that “we will bury you.” “But,” says the Friend of Humanity, “that didn’t happen. We overreacted, don’t you see?” As the great Oxford don Benjamin Jowett observed, “Precautions are always blamed. When successful, they are said to be unnecessary.” James Burnham would have liked Jowett.

— Roger Kimball

# PREFACE

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THIS BOOK IS A BOOK, and not a collection of articles, papers or lectures. Some of the material from which it has been made had a first form as three lectures on “American Liberalism in Theory and Practice” that I gave as the 1959 Maurice Falk Lecture Series at Carnegie Institute of Technology. Considerably transmuted and grown during four intervening years, there next emerged a set of papers on “Liberalism as the Ideology of Western Suicide” that for six evenings at Princeton, early in 1960, suffered the slings and arrows of a Christian Gauss Seminar in Criticism. So, in the third generation, this book.

*What franticke fit (quoth he) hath thus distraught*

*Thee, foolish man, so rash a doome to give?*

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*What justice ever other judgement taught,*

*But he should die, who merites not to live?*

*None else to death this man despayring drive,*

*But his owne guiltie mind deserving death.*

*Is then unjust to each his due to give?*

*Or let him die, that loatheth living breath?*

*Or let him die at ease, that liveth here uneath?*

.....

*What if some little paine the passage have,*

*That makes fraile flesh to feare the bitter wave?*

*Is not short paine well borne, that brings long ease,*

*And layes the soule to sleepe in quiet grave?*

*Sleepe after toyle, port after stormie seas,*

*Ease after warre, death after life does greatly please.*

# SUICIDE OF THE WEST

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## The Contraction of the West

### I

WHILE WORKING ON THIS BOOK one morning, I happened to come across, lingering on a remote shelf, a historical atlas left over from my school days long, long ago. I drew it out and began idly turning the pages, for no particular reason other than to seize an occasion, as a writer will, to escape for a moment from the lonely discipline of his craft. We Americans don't go in much for geography, but I suppose nearly everyone has seen some sort of historical atlas somewhere along the educational line.

This was an old-timer, published in 1921 but carried through only to 1929. It begins in the usual way with maps of ancient Egypt under this, that and the other dynasty and empire. There is Syria 720 B.C. under Sargon II, and in 640 B.C. under Assurbanipal. Persia "prior to 700 B.C." appears as more than a splotch in the Middle East along with the Lydian Empire, Median Empire, Chaldean Empire and the territory of Egypt. But by 500 B.C. Persia has spread like a stain to all the Near and Middle East and to Macedonia. Thereafter, it shrinks in rapid stages. Macedonia in turn pushes enormously out in no time; then as quickly splits into the fluctuating domains of Bactrians, Seleucids and Ptolemies.

Then Rome, of course, with dozens of maps, beginning with the tiny circle of "About 500 B.C." around the seven hills themselves plus a few suburban colonies; flowing irresistibly outward over Italy, Sicily, Asia Minor, Macedonia and the Balkans, Greece, North Africa, Spain, Switzerland, Dalmatia, Gaul, Britain, Egypt . . . ; then ineluctably receding, splitting, disintegrating until by the end of the fifth century A.D. the Eastern Empire is left stewing in its own incense while the Western lands are fragmented into inchoate kingdoms of Goths, Vandals, Burgundians, Franks, Angles, Saxons and lesser bandits.

The successive maps of Islam are also there, rushing headlong out of the Arabian desert in all directions, to India, the Danube valley, around North Africa into Spain and the middle of France; then falling back, phase by declining phase. The ebb and flow of Mongol Hordes and Ottoman Turks are duly translated into their space-time coordinates. Because this atlas was made when the Westernized straight-line "ancient-medieval-modern" historical perspective still prevailed over the historic pluralism made familiar by Spengler and Toynbee, it makes only minor display of the civilizations that flourished far from the Mediterranean Basin. But successive maps of the empires and civilizations of China, India and Central America would have shown the same general forms and space-time cycles.

Leafing through an historical atlas of this sort, we see history as if through a multiple polarizing glass that reduces the infinite human variety to a single rigorous dimension: effective political control over acreage. This dimension is unambiguously represented by a single clear color—red, green, yellow, blue . . . —imposed on a particular segment of the outline world. The red on Italy, Gaul, Spain, Egypt means Roman Rule; the blue means Parthian Rule; the uncolored fringes mean the amorphous

anarchy of barbarism.

What of our own Western civilization, then, viewed through this unsentimental lens? More than half the pages of this old atlas of mine are used to chart its course. In the seventh and eighth centuries its birth pangs can be seen succeeding hard on Rome's death agonies, until the West is shown plainly alive and breathing in the compact purple that marks "The Carolingian Empire About 814 A.D." From then on it moves unceasingly outward over the globe from its west European heartland. In the fifteenth century it bursts from western Europe and the Mediterranean into Africa, Asia, the Americas, Oceania, and all the seas. The last map in my atlas' Western series—a double-size inserted page is needed for—is entitled, "Colonies, Dependencies and Trade Routes, 1914"; and there before your eyes you can see at once that in A.D. 1914 the domain of Western civilization was, or very nearly was, the world.

True enough, in many regions the Western dominance was only external; the local societies had not been Westernized, or only superficially so; the peoples were subjects rather than citizens of the West. But, still, the West held the power. It held the power in western Europe itself, original home of the civilization, and in central Europe; in both Americas; over all Africa, Oceania and much of Asia. Japan was outside the Western domain, though there had been Western intrusions. China, too, was largely outside; though the system of concessions and enclaves had turned many of the most important areas of China into at least semidependencies of the West. The case of Russia is harder to classify. Peter the Great, the Napoleonic Wars, the Holy Alliance and the influence of Western ideas and technology had brought her in some measure within the Western concert of nations. But the combination of Byzantine, Asiatic and barbarian strains in her culture had prevented her from becoming organically a part of the West, while her strength and remoteness had fended off Western conquest. With these exceptions, or partial exceptions, plus a few oddities like Afghanistan and Ethiopia—all of which together would have seemed to a galactic observer almost too trivial to note—the planet, water and land, at the start of the First World War belonged to the West.

My atlas ended there; but as I closed it that morning and replaced it in its dark corner, my imagination was automatically carrying the series of maps forward over the intervening five decades: Territories and Possessions of the Major Powers in 1920, at the Founding of the League of Nations; Eastern Europe at the Conclusion of the Second World War; Asia and Oceania in 1949, after the Communist Conquest of Mainland China; Decolonization of Africa in the Period 1951-196x . . .

The trend, the curve, is unmistakable. Over the past two generations Western civilization has been in a period of very rapid decline, recession or ebb within the world power structure. I refer here to the geographic or what might be called "extensive" aspects only. I ignore the question whether the decline is a good thing or a bad thing either for the world as a whole or for Western civilization itself; whether the decline in extensive power may be accompanied by a moral improvement like the moral rejuvenation of a man on his deathbed. I leave aside also the question of increases in material power and wealth that may have come about within the areas still remaining under Western control. I want to narrow my focus down to a fact so obvious and undeniable that it can almost be thought of as self-evident; and, having directed attention to this undeniable fact, to accept it hereafter as an axiom serving to define, in part, the frame of reference for the analysis and discussion that are to follow.

IT WAS WITH RUSSIA that the process of the political and geographic disintegration of the West began. However we may describe Russia's relation to the West prior to 1917, the Bolsheviks at the end of that year broke totally away. What we mean by "Western civilization" may be defined in terms of the continuous development through space and time of an observable social formation that begins (or is revived—the distinction is irrelevant to the present purpose) about the year A.D. 700 in the center

western Europe; in terms of certain distinctive institutions; in terms of certain distinctive beliefs and values, including certain ideas concerning the nature of reality and of man. In the years 1917-21 most of the huge Russian Empire, under the command of the Bolsheviks, became not merely altogether separate from Western civilization but directly hostile to it in all these senses, in the moral, philosophical and religious as well as the material, political and social dimensions. The separateness and hostility were symbolized by the sealing of the borders that has continued ever since, often under such grotesque forms as the Berlin Wall, to be a conspicuous feature of Bolshevik dominion. The new rulers understood their initial territory to be the base for the development of a wholly new civilization distinguished absolutely not only from the West but from all preceding civilizations, and destined ultimately to incorporate the entire earth and all mankind.

During the years between the first two world wars, through a process completed in 1949 except for a few small islands off her southeast coast, China shook off what hold the West had established on her territory. With the end of the Second World War, the rate of Western disintegration quickened. The communist enterprise conquered all eastern and east-central Europe, which had always been the march and rampart of the West against the destroying forces that periodically threatened from the steppes and deserts of Asia. Western power collapsed in the great archipelago of the South Seas, leaving only a few isolated enclaves that are now being picked off one by one. The Indian subcontinent fell away and step by step the Arab crescent that runs from Morocco to Indonesia, along with the rest of the Near and Middle East.

In 1956 the Isthmus of Suez, the bridge between Asia and Africa, fell; and thus all Africa was left exposed and vulnerable. From 1957 on it has been the turn of sub-Saharan Africa. In 1959 communism's anti-Western enterprise achieved its first beachhead within the Americas. It is like a film winding in reverse, with the West thrust backward reel by reel toward the original base from which it started its world expansion.

IT MAY BE RIGHTLY POINTED OUT that this shrinking of the West comprises two phenomena that are in at least one respect different in content: *a)* the ending of Western dominion over a non-Western society; *b)* the ending of Western domination within a society and region that have been integrally part of Western civilization. Undoubtedly the distinction can be drawn; and it may be important within some contexts. For example, there are many Westerners who find this distinction to be a proper criterion for moral judgment: the ending of Western rule over a non-Western society ("liberation" or "decolonization," as it is usually called), they deem right and good; but they are less happy, even aggrieved, at the collapse of Western rule within a plainly Western area.

I am not sure that the line is quite so plain in practice as these persons feel it to be. Civilization is not a static condition but a dynamic development. The first stage of Western civilization in any area of the globe's surface is, by the nature of the case, Western dominion over a non-Western society; and there must be an analogous first stage in the case of any other civilization also. The society is not created Western, Indic, Sinic, Babylonian, Incaic or Moslem *ex nihilo*, but becomes so. Moreover, the society over which the dominion of a given civilization is extended is not necessarily that of another civilization that is conquered and then in time replaced; often it is, as in New Guinea, eastern South America or sub-Saharan Africa, a primitive, pre-civilized social order, in which case the moral differentiation becomes rather blurred.

Still, this distinction between the two kinds of recession, whatever its relevance for some purposes, has none for my own. A greater refinement in definition will not alter the main point that I am making. I am referring to what can be seen in the changing colors of maps. These show that over



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