

# Reactionary Radicals

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## RADICAL REACTIONARIES



### Wheeler's Progress

Shutting Down "The Company"

by Justin Raimondo

On October 15, 1905, Burton K. Wheeler stepped off a train at the Northern Pacific depot in Butte, Montana, thinking that he had seen more of the West than Lewis and Clark but wondering if his luck had run out. After looking up every lawyer in town (Wheeler had graduated from the University of Michigan Law School) and receiving only one offer, he decided to go up to Spokane, Washington, on the grounds that he had never been there. On his way to the train station, he passed a saloon. Standing outside were two men dressed like respectable citizens and, as Wheeler described them, "oozing with geniality." Before he knew it, he was inside and deep in a poker game. A friendly game of cards turned out to be a complete loss for young Wheeler: Inside of a few hours, both the train and his savings were long gone. He had no choice but to stay in Butte—a quirk of fate that would have a major impact not only on the course of his own career but on the developing politics of the state of Montana.

Butte was a boomtown in the middle of mountains, the countryside denuded for 50 miles around; it was a jumble of soot-stained buildings, crisscrossed wires, and mountains of slag. "The Company," as Butte's citizens called the Anaconda Copper Company, dominated not only the town but the state: A gigantic smokestack, said to be the largest on earth, commanded the skyline, belching smoke and hellfire. In its shadow, the workers rose each morning and descended into the mines, more than 2,000 miles tunneled through the Butte mountains.

On average, one miner was killed or seriously injured each day; survivors were prone to "miner's con," a disease of the lungs that struck down many more in the long term. The politics of the state revolved around the feuds of the copper kings, who used the state and local governments (just as their employees used crowbars and dynamite) as weapons in the struggle over disputed mines.

By the time Burt Wheeler was first elected to the state legislature, these battles had been largely resolved in favor of The Company. Anaconda owned not only most of the state of Montana but both major political parties, the state legislature, the governor, and local officials down to the county level. The Company's leaders were used to getting their way, and they were not shy about paying off their friends and potential ene-

mies. However, to their great consternation, Wheeler could not be bribed. Wheeler became a champion of miners and successfully proposed legislation protecting "workers' rights" and giving them the benefit of the doubt in personal-injury cases—but not without furious opposition from The Company.

Wheeler's political fortunes rose on a wave of left-populist sentiment symbolized by the Socialist Party's victory in Butte's 1911 city elections, when they elected their candidate for mayor or along with a majority on the city council. The new mayor was inaugurated on a platform that he would close all dance halls in the red-light district, ban the sale of alcohol in "any place where there is traffic between the sexes," and regulate the prostitution business by requiring the girls to get regular check-ups. The ten-dollar license fee collected by the city from practitioners of the world's oldest profession was promptly abolished.

This was hardly the socialism of Marx and Lenin but more the moralism of Carrie Nation mixed with the suffragette radicalism of Jeanette Rankin. Rankin, a Montana Republican and the first woman ever elected to Congress, was a staunch opponent of World War I, one of only 49 members of Congress to vote against entering the European maelstrom. The war had some pretty fearsome consequences in Montana. Stories of German spies in the state were common, and there was a great fuss raised about a possible attack from the Luftwaffe. There were numerous sightings of the airborne Hun, who was said to be dropping to earth in balloons; and if the newspapers of the time are to be believed, the hills of Montana were crawling with the Kaiser's legions. The immigrant miners, of course, were caught up in this hysteria, much of it based on ethnicity, and the Germans and Irish came under particular scrutiny. Union leaders were accused of sabotaging the war effort. The Montana Council of Defense, a group appointed by the Company-owned governor, assumed almost total power in the state—in the name of "winning the war," of course.

By this time, The Company had marginalized Wheeler in state politics. Still, he managed to get himself appointed state district attorney upon the resignation of the incumbent. As D.A., he felt called to defend the Non-Partisan League organizer who was beaten and driven out of town by a pro-war mob: Wheeler searched (in vain) for the murderers who dragged Frank Little—an IWW organizer who spoke out against the war—from his bed and hanged him from a railroad trestle in Butte. More than 2,500 mourners turned his funeral procession into an antiwar protest. When the editor of the *Butte Bul-*

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letin, Bill Dunn, thundered that “every man, woman and child knows that Company agents perpetrated this foulest of all crimes,” he was accused of sedition. But Wheeler refused to prosecute him, just as he refused to prosecute all the other dissidents whose only crime was to take the U.S. Constitution seriously. The governor and his Council of Defense demanded that Wheeler crack down: Montana, they whined, had become a hotbed of sedition and high treason, and it was all his fault. Wheeler replied that free speech was no crime. This statement, and the antiwar views of his wife, Lulu, caused him a great deal of trouble. When Lulu was approached and asked to take the wheatless-sugarless pledge—a conservation measure designed to help the war effort—she steadfastly refused, citing her friend Jeanette Rankin’s opinion that one ought not to deny her children wheat or sugar as long as it was still being used to make whiskey. This outraged the town gossips and local superpatriots, who soon spread the canard that the Wheelers were pro-German. The Council of Defense went on the warpath, and the newspapers joined in, demanding his resignation. Wheeler’s life was threatened. While his wife stood by his side and his good friend, Sen. Thomas Walsh, offered to reappoint him despite the tremendous political pressure to dump him, Wheeler resigned and returned to the practice of law. The Company, it seemed, had beaten him; as it turned out, however, their victory was only temporary. Wheeler was soon up and running for office, this time for governor: He was determined to break Anaconda’s death-grip on Montana politics.

Montana’s Company-controlled press went ballistic. They called him “Bolshevik Burt” and accused him of everything from treason to advocating “the nationalization of women.” Posters appeared all over the state showing a hand dripping with blood, over the caption: “Don’t let this happen to Montana!” For all the red-baiting hysteria, however, Wheeler and his supporters in the Non-Partisan League were little more than good-government reformers. Wheeler’s slogan, during his race for governor, was “If elected, I will not put Anaconda out of business, but I will put it out of politics.” The slogan of the NPL candidates was “We are opposed to private ownership of public officials”—hardly a revolutionary call to overthrow the capitalist state. The Company, on the other hand, had used the alleged threat of sedition and “anarchy” to impose martial law on the state and crush all opposition: Anaconda’s vision of *laissez-faire* capitalism was that The Company should be left alone to control not only the economy but the state government.

Wheeler’s defeat in this election meant that The Company would retain control for a while longer. His friends and supporters in the Non-Partisan League urged him to run for the U.S. Senate in the 1922 elections, and, after a hard-fought campaign, he was elected by a large margin. He immediately joined the progressive caucus of the next Congress. When he arrived in Washington, he addressed the national Council of Progressives, made up of some 800 delegates, and spoke not only about the concerns of farmers—freight rates were too high; boxcars, too dear—but also hailed the call of the conference to release the free-speech prisoners who were still imprisoned as a result of the recent war hysteria. In so doing, he pointed out that he was acting as “a true conservative” would, explaining that the United States needed to return to the original letter and spirit of the Constitution, “from which we have wandered in recent times.”

Wheeler’s career in the Senate was immediately marked by a

brashness that was very different from the complacent collegiality of that august body. His first major speech was a rip-roaring attack on Attorney General Harry M. Daugherty for protecting the profiteers of the Teapot Dome scandal. The Mammoth Oil Company had bribed Secretary of the Interior Albert B. Fall, who had been a Republican senator from New Mexico, to turn over public lands for private profit. Great tracts of Midwestern and California land had been bought up by the federal government in the name of “conservation”—but these were leased out secretly by the Department of the Interior to those “entrepreneurs” who were generous with their “loans.” Secretary Fall raked in the cash, as did several others in the Harding administration, and the progressives, when the scandal was exposed, were up in arms, with Walsh, Wheeler, Robert La Follette, and a phalanx of Midwestern progressives taking the lead. Wheeler’s investigations of the Teapot Dome scandal led to a vicious reprisal from the attorney general’s office, which indicted him on the trumped-up charge of unlawfully using his influence to obtain oil and gas leases for one of his supporters.

The progressives won a moral and political victory in the wake of the Teapot Dome scandal and shook up the political landscape to such an extent that they threatened the two-party system. While the Republicans renominated Coolidge, the Democrats ignored Wheeler’s forewarning of a progressive revolt and put up Morgan lawyer John W. Davis. Wheeler repudiated the national Democrats, and the progressives walked out of the party and put up Robert M. La Follette as the candidate of the newly formed Independent Progressive Party. Wheeler was drafted to run for vice president but initially refused. He did not think he had the national stature and had never ventured into such alien lands as New York, Boston, or Chicago.

Then, however, Wheeler received word that a second indictment against him was imminent but that the Justice Department lawyers would not release the charges if he declined to run. The progressive movement, although strong in the Democratic Party, was even more militant and pervasive in the Republican Party, especially out West, and the Republicans were convinced that a La Follette-Wheeler ticket would hurt them more than it would hurt the Democrats. Wheeler was so enraged by this threat that he told La Follette that he had changed his mind: He would run after all.

During that campaign, both Wheeler and La Follette offered up an array of nostrums—public power, government control of vast tracts of wilderness land—as a cure for the all-pervasive corruption of national politics. The government, it seemed, was for sale to the highest bidder. It never occurred to the progressives that the very instruments that were designed to “protect” consumers from monopolism and theft had been created by the same interests they were supposed to regulate.

Wheeler proved far less of a Midwestern naif when it came to foreign affairs. At an election event in San Francisco, a man rose to announce that, as a captain in the British army, he was very much interested to hear Wheeler’s opinion of La Follette’s antiwar stance. After La Follette voted against U.S. entry into World War I on the grounds that it served only the Morgan interests and the international bankers, the Wisconsin state legislature passed a resolution accusing the senator of being an agent of the Kaiser. Wheeler prefaced his reply by averring that “we have had too much British interest in our national affairs” and declaring that he had no apology to make for La Follette’s antiwar stance. The American people, in electing Woodrow Wilson, had done so on account of his lying boast: “He kept us out

of war.” Besides, said Wheeler, he was not campaigning for the votes of English, Japanese, or any other foreign nationals, “but just Americans who believed in America.” Wheeler records in his memoir that “this answer met with such wild cheering that I used the story again at an evening meeting and any other place I could figure out a way to drag it in.”

When all the votes were in, the La Follette-Wheeler ticket had polled a little under five million votes, carrying Wisconsin and running ahead of Democratic nominee Davis in 12 states—all of them out West. In California, the ticket garnered 33 percent to Davis’s eight percent; in Montana, the Independent Progressives achieved 39 percent of the vote, with Calvin Coolidge barely edging them out at 42.5 percent.

Wheeler returned to the Democratic Party, but he always emphasized the meaninglessness of party labels—or political-ideological labels of any kind—and took up the cudgel on behalf of a number of “liberal” causes, including the repeal of Prohibition and the fight against the Smoot-Hawley tariff. In the latter fight, Wheeler was the tribune of his agrarian constituents, who had to sell in a free market and buy in a protected one. Wheeler and his fellow “sons of the wild jackass”—as Sen. George H. Moses of New Hampshire characterized the progressive free-traders of both parties—saw themselves as the defenders of ordinary folk against the aristocrats of corporate privilege. Just as Wheeler had stood up to The Company in its demands for special privileges and subsidies from the state government back home in Montana, he opposed the machinations of the Eastern manufacturers and the various investment-banking institutions to enrich themselves.

Wheeler was one of the first Democrats to support Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s presidential bid—in April of 1930, in a speech at the Democratic Party’s Jefferson Day dinner—and also one of the first to turn against him once he became President. While Roosevelt made all the right liberal-progressive noises and seemed to empathize with the plight of the ordinary American in his famous fireside chats, his sort of progressivism was neither populist nor American. It took some time for the progressives of both parties to wake up to the danger posed by FDR, but when they did they were galvanized, and none more so than Burton K. Wheeler.

The debate over the National Recovery Act was the first real division between the formerly solid pro-New Deal progressives and the President. Whereas the old progressive goal of legislation had been to foster competition within a capitalist framework (and thereby protect the medium-to-small businessmen and the farmers from monopolist predators), the apparent aim of the NRA was to create giant cartels and stifle competition. Wheeler denounced the act as unworkable and undemocratic and saw in it the first inklings of a dangerous trend in the administration: a lust for centralized power.

The Wheelers’ daughter, Elizabeth Wheeler Colman, tells the story of how, upon passage of the Agricultural Adjustment Act, Secretary of Agriculture and noted fellow traveler Henry A. Wallace presented her parents with two apple trees that he had hybridized. “They grew beautifully,” she writes, “but bore no fruit. Mother thought that they symbolized the philosophy behind AAA.” Here was a government agency that was authorized to pay hundreds of millions of dollars to farmers to slaughter animals, throw out milk, and *refrain* from planting crops. Wheeler, always on the lookout for corporate welfare schemes, could not help but notice that one sugar company alone received over

a million dollars to keep its sugar off the market. Opposition to government largesse was hardly a new position for Wheeler: He had opposed Herbert Hoover’s prelude to the New Deal, the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, which had the power to extend all sorts of government-backed credits to railroads, banks, and insurance companies. Not all progressives saw it that way, however: Young Bob La Follette had supported the RFC because, as he confided to Wheeler, he was terrified of a crash. “Yes,” said Wheeler, “and the sooner it’s over the better. This will only prolong the depression.” But the economy was not allowed to shake out the massive malinvestment that had been caused by credit expansion. The house of cards was built higher and higher, and the collapse, when it finally came, was catastrophic.

In the main, the Western bloc supported FDR as long as they thought he was just trying to get the country back on track. But there was one “emergency” measure that they could not support: FDR’s court-packing scheme. When the NRA and the AAA were declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, the President retaliated by proposing a sweeping “reorganization” of the federal judiciary—which, among other things, involved granting himself the power to appoint a new Supreme Court justice for every member of the court who refused to retire after the age of 70. With six at that age or over, and with none of them planning on retiring, Roosevelt would get to pack the court with at least six more justices. It was a prescription for a presidential dictatorship, and Wheeler was appalled.

As long as the New Deal was seen as an emergency measure, a kind of insurance against the economic royalists taking advantage of the crisis to extend and cement their control of industry, the progressives had been reliable allies of FDR. But as soon as it became apparent that he and his Brain Trust were out for pure power and that they reveled in and even extended the economic downturn precisely because it empowered them, men like Wheeler began to turn against the administration.

Court historians endlessly quote the famous words of the President’s plea to pass his court-packing scheme: “Here is one third of a nation ill nourished, ill clad, ill housed—now!” he thundered. “If we keep faith with those who had faith in us, if we would make democracy succeed I say we must act—now!” Wheeler commented that it was “the most demagogic speech [he] had ever heard,” and what was frightening was that it was “coming from the President of the United States” instead of some strutting European would-be Caesar.

Wheeler’s opposition and that of the other congressional progressives was a fatal blow to FDR’s ambition: While he was inveighing against the “nine old men” as the virtual embodiments of economic royalism, the avowed enemies of plutocracy were siding with the conservatives! Roosevelt sent his emissary, Tommy Corcoran, to negotiate a deal, but Wheeler would have no truck with it. The President, said Corcoran, “doesn’t care about those Tories being against it, but he doesn’t want you to be against it.”

Roosevelt and his supporters launched a tremendous propaganda campaign, with every sort of pressure brought to bear on senators to get them to vote in favor. Even some of Wheeler’s own appointees wrote him letters, protesting his opposition to the President’s plan. This had the opposite of its intended effect on Wheeler, whose personality was naturally averse to this insult to his incorruptibility, and he redoubled his efforts. Wheeler crippled the President’s propaganda blitz and stopped the heretofore undefeated FDR dead in his tracks. He went to Jus-

tice Louis Brandeis, who recommended that he take his case to Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes. Wheeler balked: He had opposed the appointment of Hughes, but Brandeis himself went to the phone, called up the Chief Justice, and handed the phone to Wheeler. Soon, Wheeler had a statement from the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, which he dropped like a bombshell in the congressional hearings on the bill. The sound of the explosion could be heard all over Washington, and the opposition carried the day—and the vote. When the Judiciary Committee reported unfavorably on the bill, one sentence stood out: “This is a measure which should be so emphatically rejected that its parallel will never again be presented to the free representatives of the free people of America.” This may be one of Wheeler’s most lasting achievements: No one has dared raise such a bill ever since.

The completion of the progressives’ break with FDR and the New Deal came over the issue of intervention in Europe. As war clouds gathered on the European horizon and the New Dealers ran out of peacetime ways to spend themselves out of the Depression, Roosevelt increasingly looked abroad for the solution to his domestic political problems. Wheeler recalls a conversation between FDR and the First Lady in which the latter asked: “Franklin, when are you going to do something about unemployment?” The President ignored her, turning his attention to Wheeler. She repeated the question, to no avail. Finally, after a third inquiry, FDR turned to her and said: “My dear, if I knew I would have told you a long time ago. I’m going to try a little of this and a little of that and see what we come out with.” Wheeler, in his memoir, notes that, in 1937, he related this story to a White House aide and was surprised by his comment: “Did it ever occur to you that there is no unemployment in wartime?”

Wheeler spoke out against the British attempt to lure us into protecting Western economic interests in Shanghai, arguing that “England’s strong-arm policy in the Orient has failed, and if the US follows the advice of some of our pro-British citizens in the Orient, she will also fail.” We could either get out of the way and let a moderate democratic regime take root in China or face the prospect that the country would go Bolshevik. Wheeler proved prescient, as he was on the question of the European war. There, too, the unintended consequences of our actions would produce a boomerang effect, and we would later have cause to regret it. If we had allowed Hitler and Stalin to fight it out, he believed, then “one would end in his grave, the other in the hospital, and the United States and the world would have been rid of two menacing tyrants.”

This was the crux of the Old Right’s foreign-policy stance in the pre-war years, and it was the natural extension of the old progressive critique of dollar diplomacy, with the added feature of a growing anticommunism. When Wheeler was first elected to the Senate, he took a trip to Russia and returned thinking that perhaps the regime would soften and begin to moderate its repressive features. He thought recognizing the regime might help accomplish this. He came to realize, however, that communism was something different altogether, and by the time Hitler had invaded the Soviet Union and American leftists were demanding U.S. intervention to save the “worker’s fatherland,” Wheeler was completely disabused of the notion that the Soviets could be tamed or even tempered. In 1940, as we teetered on the brink of entering the war, Wheeler saw much further than most: “The United States,” he said, “will undoubtedly en-

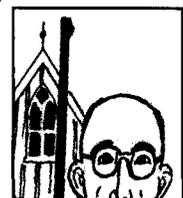
ter the war with Germany and win. But mark my word, within ten years we will be asking Germany to assist the West in controlling Russia.”

It was, of course, the Old Right’s worst nightmare: By building up the Soviet Union, we were laying the foundations for a Cold War that would extend until 1989. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Wheeler did not give up the fight but kept on the administration’s case, even lobbying for a negotiated peace. Why, he wanted to know, was the United States not making a deal with the anti-Hitler opposition in the German military? These heroic fighters against Nazism on the home front were haughtily dismissed by FDR and the pro-Soviet Harry Hopkins as “Prussian *junkers*” who had to be swept away along with Hitler. Yet they could have saved millions from dying after the Allied invasion of Europe by overthrowing Hitler before the Normandy landing and negotiating an end to the war. FDR, however, would not deal with the German underground and insisted on Germany’s unconditional surrender—even against Stalin’s advice.

In the postwar period, Wheeler was targeted by the left wing of the Democratic Party, the labor unions, the communists, and the big Eastern interests. Together, they succeeded in unseating him in 1946, after a smear campaign that made the one they waged against Charles Lindbergh look mild in comparison. The communists went to the trouble of having an entire book published and widely distributed throughout the state. *The Plot Against America: Senator Wheeler and the Forces Behind Him*, by David George Kin, reads as if the author wrote it during the course of a prolonged drinking binge. Indeed, in this work, Mr. Kin turned the run-on sentence into an art form. According to this screed, Wheeler was really a flunkie of The Company all along, not to mention a Nazi. The crudeness of the prose is matched by the crudeness of the illustrations, which show Wheeler in tow behind the Führer and Anaconda.

The communist-dominated labor unions had turned against Wheeler for his antiwar position and his outspoken anti-Russian stance, and in 1946, when he faced formidable opposition in the person of Leif Erickson, a former justice of the state supreme court, he underestimated the number, power, and determination of his numerous enemies. A longtime friend of Wheeler’s in the miner’s union said to him: “BK, just say something good about Russia. It will soften the union’s opposition to you.” Wheeler refused. Out-of-state money poured into his opponent’s coffers, and in the end, Erickson barely won: The vote was 47,828 to 41,912. Wheeler’s political career was over. He retired to practice law in Washington, where he died in 1975 at age 92.

Wheeler’s progress from the champion of progressivism to the greatest enemy of the New Deal had shorn him of his leftist tinge and his taste for economic nostrums. He matured into something else: a healthy skeptic of all centralized power, whether public or private, and an opponent of war. Unlike the ex-communists and liberal Johnnys-come-lately of the postwar era, Wheeler did not fall for the Cold War version of interventionism. In his memoir, he writes that “the ‘preventive war’ urged by the ‘radical right’ recommends itself to me even less than intervention in prior wars.” This ornery old progressive, who had stood up against The Company, had shed his left-liberal skin and made a similar stand against the Managerial State—this time, as an exemplar of the Old Right.



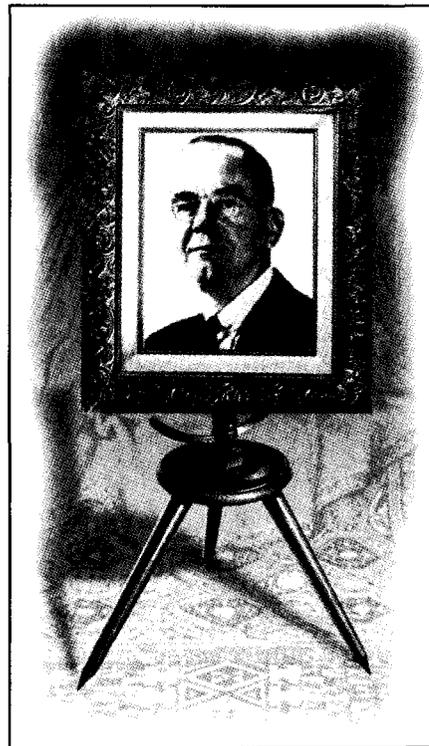
# Burnham Agonistes

by Samuel Francis

“Who says A must say B.”

—James Burnham

**James Burnham and the Struggle for the World: A Life**  
by Daniel Kelly  
Wilmington, DE: ISI Books;  
443 pp., \$29.95



left/Drew

Most adult conservatives as well as many educated people know that James Burnham was an anticommunist author and columnist for William F. Buckley’s *National Review*; a number of others will be aware that Burnham’s name seems to flap through the corridors of early 20th-century American intellectual history, though they may not be able to explain just who he was or what he did.

Born in Chicago in 1905 to a well-off railroad executive, Burnham was educated at Princeton and Oxford and, by his 20’s, had sprouted into a leading figure in literary criticism and philosophy among the New York *cognoscenti*. During the Depression, Burnham became a Marxist (of a sort) and a major presence in the Trotskyist movement. Breaking with the far left in 1940, he developed distinctive political theories of his own in *The Managerial Revolution* (1941) and *The*

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*Machiavellians* (1943) and acquired an increasing influence as a spokesman for a militantly anticommunist foreign policy in the late 1940’s and 50’s. After a brief period with the CIA, Burnham joined with Buckley at *National Review* and, for the next two decades, turned out a series of books, columns, and articles on both foreign-policy issues and conservative political theory until a stroke that impaired his memory ended his career in 1978. He died of cancer in 1987.

Although Burnham never attracted the kind of cultish following that Buckley and some of his colleagues at *National Review* encouraged, he was a far more significant figure in both the history of American conservatism and the intellectual history of the last century than most

conservatives understood during his lifetime—or understand today. When the late Sen. John P. East, for whom I worked in the 1980’s, was writing a book on the major conservative intellectuals of the 1950’s, he was told by David Collier, then editor of *Modern Age*, not to bother with James Burnham because his thought was not worth the effort. Around the same time, when Adam Meyerson became editor of the Heritage Foundation’s *Policy Review*, a member of the audience at his inaugural speech asked him a question that referred to Burnham, and it became embarrassingly clear that Meyerson had never heard of the man. That was while Burnham was still alive but only a few years after he had ceased writing for *National Review*. The situation has not improved much since then, among either “orthodox” conservatives such as East and Collier or neoconservatives such as Meyerson, but that is largely because of their own limitations. In fact, there has been a fairly steady flow of studies and essays on Burnham’s thought in recent years.

With all due respect to the concern expressed by Daniel Kelly in his preface to this first full-scale biography of James Burnham, there is little reason to believe that Burnham is in danger of sinking into obscurity—let alone that Mr. Kelly’s work is the rope that will drag him from the abyss. Several of Burnham’s major works have been reissued by the Regnery