

# 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

Gateway Company (albeit with what seem to be now obligatory forewords by neoconservatives such as Sidney Hook and Newt Gingrich, who actually attack or distance themselves from the ideas of the very books they are introducing), while Burnham's life and thought have been the subjects of two monographs (my own, recently reissued in a revised format by a British publisher, and one by academic Kevin Smant) as well as of a number of extended discussions in essays or chapters by John P. Diggins, George Nash, Paul Gottfried, John Judis, Christopher Hitchens, James Gilbert, John O'Sullivan, Gary Dorrien, and Justin Raimondo, among others (not to mention such nonresidents of oblivion as George Orwell, Benedetto Croce, C. Wright Mills, and Raymond Aron). Indeed, with the exception of Whittaker Chambers and Friedrich Hayek, Burnham by now has probably been more widely discussed than any other conservative thinker of his era.

Mr. Kelly's biography is based mainly on Burnham's published writings as well as his papers, now archived at the Hoover Institution, and he offers a wealth of obscure but important information about Burnham's social and educational background and his early years in the Marxist and postwar anticommunist movements. What is far more problematic about Mr. Kelly's book, however, is the interpretation he imposes on Burnham's political thought.

The main view he advances, as he tells us about halfway through, is that

despite differences on particular issues, his [Burnham's] general stance—secular, empirical, modernist, resigned to the welfare state as inevitable in a mass industrial society, emphatic on the need for victory in the struggle for the world—afforded a preview of the neo-conservatism of the 1970s.

Mr. Kelly repeats and somewhat expands upon this interpretation at the end of his book, citing in particular the similar view expressed by *National Review* editor Richard Brookhiser. (Although Professor Smant advanced much the same interpretation some years before Brookhiser did, his views are never mentioned.) Some of Burnham's political beliefs, Mr. Kelly writes, "foreshadowed neoconservatism in its early phase," while

his mode of argument—that of a secular and empirically minded social scientist rather than that of a deductive moralist—also resembled that of the neoconservatives, as did the low-key tone of most of his writings. Moreover, like the neoconservatives, he called for adamant resistance to the USSR and communism. Finally, though he defended tradition, his cultural sensibility was modernist.

Sad to say, the logic of this interpretation is deeply flawed, and the actual content of Burnham's thought and writing fairly contradicts it. In the first place, arguing that, because Burnham's thought and "mode of argument" were "secular," he therefore resembles the (also secular) neoconservatives is rather like saying that, because Hilaire Belloc was a religiously oriented thinker, he foreshadows Jerry Falwell and the Christian Right. "Secular" and "empirical" argumentation are no more distinctive of the neoconservatives than religious commitment is distinctive of the Falwell legions. Nor are some of the other attributes Mr. Kelly ascribes to the neoconservatives either real or, if real, unique to them: for instance, a "low-key tone" (consider for example, neoconservatives such as Charles Krauthammer denouncing Pat Buchanan) or "adamant resistance to the USSR and communism" (Frank Meyer, Whittaker Chambers, Willi Schlamm, Joe McCarthy, and Buckley himself, among many other 1950's conservatives, held the same views long before the neoconservatives discovered them, if in fact they ever did).

To anyone at all familiar with Burnham's writing and thought, the Smant-Brookhiser-Kelly thesis that Burnham approximated neoconservatism in the 1970's is simply preposterous; Mr. Kelly is able to sustain this claim only by blatantly skimming over, dismissing, or simply ignoring most of Burnham's writings that do not fit the neoconservative "foreshadowing" on which he insists. Thus, Burnham's most paleoconservative work, *Congress and the American Tradition* (1959), receives only brief and shallow treatment from Mr. Kelly, in contrast to his much more extensive consideration of Burnham's anticommunist trilogy of the 1940's and 50's. Mr. Kelly ignores Burnham's critique of Abraham Lincoln (a neoconservative hero) as an architect of presidential "Caesarism" and also his

brilliant synthesis of neo-Machiavellian theorists, such as Gaetano Mosca, with the *Federalist* and John C. Calhoun (a neoconservative demon). Nor is it clear how firmly Mr. Kelly grasps what Burnham was talking about in the book: Had Burnham "foreshadowed" neoconservatism, he would not have championed Congress at the expense of the presidency. (Even under Clinton, most neoconservatives continued to defend the power of the executive branch against assertions of a significant congressional role in foreign policy.)

Mr. Kelly is also uneasy dealing with what is probably Burnham's best-known and most influential book among "orthodox" conservatives, *Suicide of the West*, which he calls "the most uneven of Burnham's works." His account of the book is, in some respects, simply mistaken. Thus, he writes, Burnham's

version of liberalism has no room for liberals who did not fit his model—his fellow Augustinian Reinhold Niebuhr, for example, a complex figure . . . whose view of the world was hardly less doleful than Burnham's.

Burnham does not discuss Niebuhr specifically in *Suicide*, but he does acknowledge a subspecies of liberalism similar to the kind that Niebuhr tried to articulate, as represented by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., in *The Vital Center*, Max Lerner, and Charles Frankel, whose writings ostensibly sought to accommodate a more pessimistic and irrationalist view of human nature than the mainstream liberalism Burnham argued was more typical. His answer to these liberal pessimists was that, while renouncing conventional liberal optimism in theory, they were generally forced to embrace it in practice in order to justify liberal policies and principles.

Mr. Kelly also wonders, "[g]iven his usual linking of liberalism to the managerial revolution his failure even to mention that trend is puzzling." But, as I argued in the chapter on *Suicide of the West* in my monograph, Burnham subtly presents liberalism as the ideology or political formula of the managerial class, while the text as a whole can be read as a kind of Paretian dissection of a "derivation" (ideology) in terms of the underlying psychic and social needs that liberal ideology serves. The conventional criticism of *Suicide of the West*—that its por-

trait of liberalism as embodying an inherent suicidal tendency is “overdrawn” or a “caricature” (a view Mr. Kelly seems to share)—founders on the subsequent general history of liberalism. No action that liberals and liberalism have since taken—against communism, against Third World anti-Western forces, or against internal criminal, subversive, or “multiculturalist” threats—has challenged Burnham’s characterization in the least. What Mr. Kelly is quite unable to see is that this liberal “death wish” was at least implicit in the New Deal-Great Society liberalism that was Burnham’s main target in the book. Despite the obsolescence of some of its anticommunist references, *Suicide of the West* remains more relevant than ever—although today its warning applies to neoconservatism itself as much as to the 1960’s liberalism from which neoconservatism sprang.

Finally, Mr. Kelly simply ignores entirely several articles and reviews that Burnham wrote in the late 1960’s or early 70’s that explicitly reject or contradict any tendency toward neoconservatism. These include a savage review of Norman Podhoretz’s *Making It* in 1968, a fulsome endorsement of John Murray Cuddihy’s *Ordeal of Civility* in 1975, and—most important—a withering critique of neoconservatism as it was emerging in 1972.

The last of these was part of an exchange in *National Review* with neoconservative Peter Berger, who had criticized conservatives for what he called their “selective humanism” and lack of compassion. Burnham argued that, while Berger and other neoconservatives (including “a good many of those who write for the magazines *Commentary* and *The Public Interest*”) shared a “break with liberal doctrine, which they find both intellectually bankrupt and, by and large, pragmatically sterile in the present and unfolding situation,” they also had in common a “retention” of what Burnham called “the emotional gestalt of liberalism, the liberal sensitivity and temperament”—in other words, the emotional knee-jerks and neurological reflexes of the left. In particular, they retained the liberal attachment to universalism. “When we start talking about ‘humanism,’” Burnham wrote,

... we tend to think in terms not of individual men but of Man: of Man or Mankind, the abstraction,

the Universal; of men only insofar as they are members of the class, Man. This is the way liberal ideology conceives men, and it is through this conception that liberal rationalism deduces its universalistic imperatives and its equalitarian tendencies.

Retaining the *gestalt* of universalism, Burnham predicted, the neoconservatives probably would not evolve much further toward an authentic conservatism, which he believed was characterized by its rejection of universalism and its affirmation of “selectivity” and particularism. “Selectivity is a built-in feature of conservatism,” he wrote, and “conservatives are tribal—let us not pretend on this score.”

Conservatives are not indifferent to family, home, neighborhood, party, community, church, school, country, to all the interlinked ties that form man’s existential context. They do not, like rationalists, dismiss these ties as prejudice and superstition, but find the meaning of human life in and with and through them. At heart (and the heart, too, has its reasons) even the most sophisticated conservatives are peasants, Norman Rockwell types.

In 1967, Burnham had expressed similar skepticism of universalism. “There is no Humanity,” he wrote:

that is to say, actual human beings, though they may share a metaphysical and theological identity, do not in point of fact have common psychological, social and historical traits that link them into an operative social grouping that we may name “Humanity.” In real life men are joined on a much less than universal scale into a variety of groupings—family, community, church, business, club, party, etc.—which on the political scale reach the maximum significant limit in the nation.

In fact, what Burnham wrote about the neoconservatives’ retention of the *gestalt* of liberal universalism not only clearly demonstrates his distancing of himself from the neoconservatism of the 1970’s but is perhaps the most profound insight into it that has ever been penned. The

dominance of the universalist *gestalt* within neoconservatism remains to this day, as evidenced by the neoconservative commitment to the concept of a “credal nation” or a “proposition country” that denies or ignores the “interlinked ties” and “existential context” on which Burnham insisted as the distinctive trait of conservatism, as well as by neoconservative support for the logical implications of political universalism: attachment to mass immigration, embrace of a “color-blind society” and the glorification of Martin Luther King, Jr., as its champion, and preoccupation with a universalist democratic globalism as the morally imperative agenda for American foreign policy. Burnham’s affirmation of particularism, on the other hand, distinctly separates him philosophically from neoconservatism and places him in much the same tradition as such counterrevolutionary theorists of the right as Joseph de Maistre—“But there is no such thing as *man* in the world. During my life, I have seen Frenchmen, Italians, Russians, and so on . . . as for *man*, I have never come across him anywhere; if he exists, he is completely unknown to me”—and Oswald Spengler (“‘Mankind’ is a zoological expression”).

Indeed, Mr. Kelly is at some pains to explain away Burnham’s views and remarks, throughout his career, about non-white and non-Western societies and peoples. In the 1960’s, Burnham defended segregation on pragmatic and constitutional (though not explicitly racial) grounds and, by the 70’s, was suggesting actual racial separation of blacks in a “non-contiguous” area accorded “limited sovereignty.” He also defended both Rhodesia and South Africa, as well as other right-wing states (he was one of the first to distinguish between “totalitarian” and “authoritarian” regimes), and by the 1960’s perceived that, in Mr. Kelly’s description,

For centuries the peoples of Asia and Africa had been “historically inert,” while Europeans and their overseas descendants—the “whites”—had been “the historically dynamic portion of mankind,” imposing their rule on the greater part of the world. Now Asians and Africans had awakened and “moved historically on stage.” The whites, who formed only a small minority of the human race and whose elite had “lost [its] nerve,”

thus faced a mortal challenge: how were they to preserve their privileged status?

Burnham's thoughts on the subject are almost identical, in fact, to Lothrop Stoddard's warning 50 years earlier in *The Rising Tide of Color*—but they are definitely not suggestive of neoconservatism.

Mr. Kelly is thus simply wrong to portray Burnham as a precursor of neoconservatism (indeed, few of the standard accounts of the emergence of neoconservatism even mention Burnham as an influence, nor do many neoconservatives claim him as one). It is also clear, however, that Burnham was neither an "orthodox" conservative of the 1950's and 60's nor what is now known as a "paleo-conservative" in any strict sense. His commitment to *laissez-faire* economics and the "free market" was too vague for the one; his hostility to "isolationism" and his insistence on U.S. interventionism and even "empire," too firm for the other. It is quite true, as Mr. Kelly points out, that Burnham's support for Medicare, against most other conservatives at *National Review*, his favoring of Eisenhower over Taft and Nelson Rockefeller over Nixon as well as Goldwater, and his occasional other "heresies" (such as sympathy for Robert McNamara) all separated him from the "conservative mainstream" then and from most paleos now. Yet even these "deviations" do not amount to "a preview of the neo-conservatism of the 1970s."

Burnham's idiosyncratic synthesis of "modernism" (*i.e.*, secularism, historicism, and a good deal of amorality drawn from Machiavelli) with what Mr. Kelly accurately characterizes as his "Augustinian" pessimism regarding human nature, society, and history is distinctive of what, in a 1987 essay (reprinted in my *Beautiful Losers*), I called Burnham's "anti-modern modernism" or "counter-modernism." It is probably this position that William Barrett thought Burnham was trying, in 1948, to define as "a new political stance, one beyond the conventional categories of Left and Right"—a stance that is as removed from the neoconservatism of the 1970's as it is from the conservative orthodoxies of the 50's and 60's that Burnham rejected.

In my view, although most of Burnham's analysis of communism and his assessment of its threat was substantially correct, he wasted much of his later ca-

reer in what turned out to be rather ephemeral anticommunist polemics that had little impact on actual policy after the early 1950's. Burnham would have served modern political theory far better, and his reputation would be far more secure, had he devoted that part of his life to formulating more explicitly a "new political stance" within the framework of neo-Machiavellian elite theory and to the closely related project of exploring more deeply the political and social implications of the managerial revolution. Mr. Kelly also might have devoted more attention to these implications, as well as to the influence of Burnham's first book on such thinkers as Karl Wittfogel, Milovan Djilas, and Jacques Ellul.

If James Burnham made one basic error, it was in his insistence on a political strategy for the American right (as embodied in *National Review*) that sought to influence and persuade the dominant (managerial) class and its verbalist and intellectual spokesmen, rather than formulating a more populist (and more radically conservative) strategy aimed at the displacement or overthrow of the managerial system. It was probably that strategy that accounts for much of Burnham's support for Medicare, Rockefeller, and McNamara. By the late 1960's, however, he seems to have recognized the bankruptcy of the managerial class and to have turned more sympathetically toward a populist and explicitly antimanagerial strategy. Yet, by following the strategy they formulated in the 1950's, he

and Buckley effectively cut the "respectable" American right away from grassroots support and isolated it in Manhattan. Without a firm social and political base separate from, and opposed to, the managerial class, *National Review's* conservatism brought little social power to the bargaining table. Hence, it could acquire "influence" not by mounting an effective resistance to the apparatus of the managerial intellectual class from without but only by gradually assimilating itself within the apparatus. That is essentially what neoconservatism accomplished through its domination of the right. While Burnham lived, assimilation could not take place completely, but it is significant that neoconservatism began to devour the American right (and especially *National Review*) almost as soon as he vanished from the conservative scene.

Mr. Kelly has produced a well-researched book that needed to be written and that answers many biographical questions that students of James Burnham have long wanted answered (though it remains weak in answering others, such as those regarding Burnham's activities with the CIA). His analysis of his subject's political and philosophical thought, however, is simply not reliable. To understand it properly, readers will have to go to James Burnham's works themselves—and to examine them without the neoconservative goggles that Mr. Kelly insists they wear.

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# Royal Teddy

by Clyde Wilson

**Theodore Rex**

by Edmund Morris

New York: Random House;  
772 pp., \$35.00

**The Selected Letters of  
Theodore Roosevelt**

edited by H.W. Brands

New York: Cooper Square Press;  
656 pp., \$32.00



Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., was the first of our Northeastern rich-boy presidents, blazing a trail for his kinsman Franklin, John F. Kennedy, and the two Bushes. Even Nelson Rockefeller, who had no abilities and no popularity that was not bought and paid for, ended up a heartbeat from the executive mansion. TR was also the first president to market himself as a personality. A colorful and energetic man, head of the U.S. government at the dawn of the 20th century and at the high tide of the “Progressive” era, he played a decisive role in the creation of the America that we inhabit today.

If you are one of those who suffer from that strange, widespread American folk delusion that presidents are intrinsically interesting and that their daily thoughts and actions are subject for retelling, then *Theodore Rex* is the book for you. His administrations (1901-1909) are given a thoroughly researched account at the level of good popular history or journalism. Many readers will appreciate the close look not only at Roosevelt but at many other public characters of the period.

The author is, to my taste, a bit too eager to prove Roosevelt right on every occasion. He wants us to accept TR as an early racial liberal, a characterization he supports by giving a few incidents greater importance than they had at the time. Roosevelt was, after all, a believer in the White Man’s Burden. And if he behaved more generously toward black people than many at the time were willing to do, that was not a terribly unusual thing.

I thought I knew a good deal about TR already, yet I only truly began to understand the man by perusing H.W. Brands’ collection of selected letters. Though I would like to have seen a little more in-

formation about his editorial practices, Brands has chosen an interesting and seemingly representative sample of private correspondence written by Roosevelt from the age of ten until his death, as he stood chafing on the sidelines of World War I.

By “private,” the editor does not mean merely personal but something expressive of private thoughts, often about public matters, and even philosophical waxings. Though somewhat hampered by wealth and a Harvard education, TR really tried to understand, and act constructively in, the world that existed. His motives were consistent—he desired constructive reform to adjust to new conditions without destructive radicalism. Whether his actions were appropriate to his goals is doubtful. His “trust-busting,” for instance, was certainly made in ignorance of economics (though, come to think of it, ignorance of economics might be an advantage in economic-policy decisions).

Perhaps inevitably for a man of intense action, Roosevelt did not grow very much intellectually, but he kept learning. A 1906 letter to his friend Owen Wister, on the subject of Wister’s novel *Lady Baltimore*, shows a man reading and thinking with some range, if not much depth. Neither FDR nor JFK could have written such a letter. Teddy Kennedy and George W. Bush would not even understand it. The great flaw of monarchy is that dynasties run down, and our American royals are no exception.

The Progressive Era was the seedbed for the century that followed. It is an endlessly fascinating and multifarious bit of history that could well occupy a lifetime of study. Nearly every controlling assumption and policy of today was formulated or anticipated in Progressive thinking or in its natural culmination, American intervention in World War I. I suspect that TR would be pleased with the American empire of today, except for its multicultural aspect. (Multiculturalism was invented in the 1930’s by European totalitarians.)

For me, the most important question that an historian can bring to the period is why the United States abandoned all its traditions and vigorously entered into the imperial competition for the regulation of the globe. The imperial impulse led Theodore Roosevelt, *qua* historian, to write silly books that portrayed the Southwestern frontiersmen of the pioneer period as forerunners of the imperialists who

wanted to dominate China. (His books were not nearly as silly as Woodrow Wilson’s non-books, however. Wilson had a Ph.D. and was a professional educator.)

We can explain American entrance—frequently enthusiastic entrance—into the hideous world power scramble and the insane mayhem of the European war in many ways. Big banking interests and the dishonesty and shallowness of politicians no doubt played a part (as they do in every significant public question), but that alone is not, I believe, a sufficient explanation.

As far as I can tell, the American people never wished for their government to become the world’s policeman. It was the ruling class that longed to intervene, whether they were, according to Joseph Stromberg’s apt classification, cooperative imperialists like Wilson or unilateral imperialists like Henry Cabot Lodge. Something—an aggressive sense of nationalism (that replaced patriotism), reasonable or unreasonable fear of the other armed powers of the world, a perverted Calvinist impulse to correct unrighteous nations—made the American ruling class leap enthusiastically into the fiery doom of worldwide war.

Reading the letters of Theodore Roosevelt gives some insight into the mindset of the folks who made that critical choice, the ultimate expression of which we are now perhaps seeing in the imperial “New World Order.” They give some insight, but they do not really explain. Perhaps the explanation is simply that power corrupts, and what corruption can be more tempting than the dream of benevolent global command?

*Clyde Wilson is a member of the historical profession, but probably not for much longer.*

## LIBERAL ARTS

### SLOUCHING TOWARD GOMORRAH

“Hal Sparks, costar of the . . . Showtime series *Queer as Folk*, tells *TV Guide* that kissing another man proved to be something of a challenge. “It couldn’t be weirder . . . I get a lot of crap for saying this, but it’s a little like kissing a dog . . . So as an actor, it’s a unique challenge, because you’ve got to bring it from someplace, make it convincing.”

—from the October 17, 2001,  
issue of *TV Guide*