

MACHIAVELLIAN RACIALIST?

James Burnham and the Struggle for the World: A Life

Daniel Kelly

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Political and social ideologies seem to have fairly limited life spans. All revolutionary agitations experience a period of great initial fervor and, if successful, come to power. After a time, they age. Having lost their initial passion, they no longer capture the fancy of their own, now institutionalized, elites or that of the masses, whose forever shifting affections follow the cues given by their leaders. Others fail to achieve even this passing success, and the reins of power remain in someone else's hands.

Like these latter movements, the postwar American right lived and died without ever experiencing even the momentary elation of political power. Its national candidates were perennially defeated at the polls. Its practical program, consisting, in its varying incarnations, of the restoration of constitutional government, laissez-faire economics, aggressive pursuit of "victory over Communism," and preservation of the religious, cultural, and racial identity of America never accomplished anything other than an occasional, minuscule slowing down of what *National Review's* editors once described as the "on-rushing train of history."

However, it is possible that, amidst the ideological remains of that long-since defeated crusade, there may be bits and pieces of wisdom that might prove beneficial to the current, more explicitly racial, defenses of our civilization.

Among all the thinkers of the post-war rightist revival, James Burnham was surely among the most idiosyncratic. He never warmed to many of the movement's public heroes. McCarthy, Goldwater, and Wallace all left him cold. He was a supporter of many aspects of the modern welfare state and saw his colleagues' opposition to it as theoretically errant and tactically wrong.

HIS OWN DRUMMER

Religiously, Burnham was a non-believer, and his views on politics were, as he saw them, rooted in a dispassionate, empirical assessment of reality. Following this "realism," he asserted that beneath all political struggles lay neither virtue nor ideals, but rather the drive for power and domination. No matter how persuasive the doctrine or sincere its presenters, Burnham saw, above all, man's desire to rule. Thus, he concluded, all serious efforts to win in the world of politics must be hard-nosed and willing to resort to strategies based on man's deeply flawed nature.

Yet despite the amoralism of his thought, he did seem to have two abiding loyalties. First, he valued some degree of individual liberty because he saw it as the only means to limit the all-consuming drive for power of ruling elites. Second, he valued the West. He wanted it to triumph as it battled its assorted enemies over the years. Thus, he turned his fire first on the communists and later on the Third World masses as well. And, of course, he was always critical of what he saw as our persistent internal enemy, the "ideology of Western suicide," liberalism.

In addition, Burnham never felt pledged, as did many of his colleagues, to pay lip service to the blessings of majority or popular rule. To him the very notion of democracy was a sham. All men live under the direction of elites, he maintained. It was all a question of whose elite was in charge.

The above picture of Burnham emerges quite clearly in Daniel Kelly's *James Burnham and the Struggle for the World: A Life*. The man depicted therein possessed a "somber toned realism, [an] unflinching awareness of the tragic vein running through human life." (p. xvii) He rejected the hopes of utopians as well as the dogmatic doctrines of his *National Review* colleagues.

One is reminded of Woody Allen's observation at the conclusion of *Sleeper*, to the effect that all politics eventually corrupts and all there is to believe in is "sex and death." Burnham might have added "power" to complete the trinity.

VALUE TO WESTERN RESISTANCE

Nothing could be further from the tepid confusion of contemporary "conservatism" than the unblinking defense of the West that James Burnham offered so many decades ago. Yet to Burnham the West was not the Christendom of so many '50s rightists' world view.

If anything seems clear at this point in our history, it is that the traditional Christianity that once proved itself an ally of the West is dead. Indeed, even those tiny remnants of Christians who still mouth the old doctrines have added, in most cases, over the past fifty years, two more planks to their Westminster Confessions and Baltimore Catechisms. These are: first, an endless zeal in praise and promotion of multiracial society; and second, an equally endless fear of Jewish power coupled with promotion of all Jewish agendas.

As early as 1969, Revilo Oliver wrote in *Christianity and the Survival of the West* that the only hope we have as a race is "that the collapse of Christendom, loss of faith in the religion of the West, was a traumatic shock to our racial psyche that stunned but did not kill."

In Burnham we have an example of a profound thinker whose own personal loss of faith (he was raised a Catholic) did not weaken his commitment to race and civilization. The question for racially conscious conservatives today is whether this visceral loyalty to race, emanating from a totally materialist reading of existence, will suffice to inspire the masses of men in an age of self absorption. Is the stoic allegiance of a Burnham sufficient for the general populace?

The further question is whether the realpolitik of Burnham's reading of power can permeate the often romantic mindset of racial counter-revolutionaries. In this sense of the need to view things as they are and to assess rigorously how best to get from "point A" to "point B" without illusions, Burnham also may have much to offer a movement long intent on symbolic, quixotic posturing.

KELLY AS BURNHAM'S CONDUIT?

Kelly's biography of Burnham is fairly thorough. The latter's early years of aesthetic indifference to politics, followed by his embrace of assorted forms of Communism, are described in great detail. Unfortunately the odyssey of Burnham's early rejection of Christianity receives short shrift. Finally, his disenchantment with Trotskyism and the emergence of the new Burnham, cold warrior of the West, is spelled out.

Here the author spends much time detailing *The Managerial Revolution* (1941) and *The Machiavellians* (1943). These two works form the theoretical core of the Burnhamite view on how societies function.

In the former work he posits that the world is being slowly taken over by faceless managers, men of no clear political loyalty or religio-cultural identity. Their goal is simply to rule. What a marvelous picture of the Clintons, Blairs, and Bushes with their European Unionism and New World Order!

In the latter work, Burnham goes a step further. All ideologies are a mask for the drive for power. Seemingly a variation on Freudian sexual reductionism, *The Machiavellians* reduces the realm of politics to the desire to exercise power over others.

In later years, Kelly tells us, Burnham backed off a bit from the sweeping generalizations of *The Machiavellians*. He still considered it his "most important book." However, he saw it as "a little callow." He had given his theoretical mentors "rather more than their due."

When viewed with this disclaimer, the book has much value. All elites do seem to share the same desires and methods to maintain their authority. They are generally ready to compromise, falsify, use force, bully, and do all sorts of nasty things to stay on top.

Thus, politics presents the moral man with the same quandary as “good guy” wrestlers had in the sport’s golden years. When does cheating by the opponent allow you to stretch the rules yourself? Presumably, according to Burnham the key is always to remember that one’s opponent wants power and will usually have few Marquis of Queensbury constraints on its pursuit.

BURNHAM’S PASSION

Besides his sometime mockery of those who didn’t realize the “true” nature of politics, Burnham was generally a calm and thoughtful writer and thinker. There was, however, one area where his rhetoric soared—race.

Kelly spends several pages detailing Burnham’s passion and biting humor on this subject. Whether quoting Burnham’s views on the decolonization of Africa, which he saw as “an upsurge of black men against white men” and the latter as “fleeing head long, beaten and panic stricken” or his defense of school segregation and disenfranchisement of southern blacks, Kelly honestly presents the reality of Burnham’s thoughts.

He grants that “most people would probably say” that Burnham was “a racist.” Yet Kelly rejects this conclusion. He argues that Burnham saw racial differences as the result of history and culture, not genetics. Hence, Kelly argues, Burnham believed that, in the long run, blacks and other Third World peoples could improve to the point where legal equality and self-determination would and should be allowed. In the article “What Is Ahead for Black Africa?” (which Kelly references as the source of his understanding of Burnham’s view), we do find the “colonial system” described as a “transition period to civilization.” In the same article, though, and left unquoted by Kelly, Burnham describes the current African situation as one in which “the natives are—and, who knows, may perhaps long be—at the stage of primitive, pre-civilized barbarism; quite simply, savagery.” This in Kelly’s view is still not the dreaded “racism.”

In other words, for Kelly, neither the most graphic description of current racial differences nor legalized racial discrimination based upon them is “racism” and therefore presumably remains free of whatever sin he simplistically assumes is attributable to that ideology. Races are allowed to be seen as inferior provided they can change in the future.

This analysis is most extraordinary. It will surely anger the totalitarian multiracialists and their neo-conservative allies who see racialist descriptions and laws in all circumstances as morally repugnant. It might at first glance anger racially conscious conservatives as well. Who wants even so much as

eventual racial amalgamation? Yet, if genetic racialists are correct, a Burnham-anchored policy that would wait for blacks to work their way towards equality would simply go nowhere.

One has to wonder what Burnham would say today. How would he view the rapidly changing racial demographics of America and the West? Would he regard the threat of the New World Order as being as dangerous as communism? Would he recognize the enormous power and tendency towards social disruption of the international Jewish establishment, and be courageous enough to confront it publicly?

TOO GENTEEL?

There is one disturbing aspect of James Burnham's thought. Its contours became clearer after reading Kelly's book. On the one hand there is the Burnham of *The Machiavellians*, advocating hard-boiled political realism when confronting the great struggles for power of our time. On the other hand there is the Burnham who remained decidedly cool to those rightists of the fifties and sixties who actually excited the public and generated mass support. Neither McCarthy, Goldwater, nor Wallace caught Burnham's fancy.

In the early sixties he was one of the leaders of *National Review's* condemnation of the John Birch Society, thus effectively breaking in half the movement and allowing the leftist-dominated media to define who was an "extremist."

In fact, Kelly tells us Burnham had a seemingly child-like faith in America. After crossing the nation by car he wrote, "The country shrugs off the fires of the arsonists, the crime of the cities and the riots of the youth as a great ship shrugs off waves."

What allowed Burnham to speak so optimistically of a nation, which, although existing in name, only a few decades later seems drained of the very racial stock and spirit that made it great?

Of all the '50s conservative theorists to emerge from Buckley's *National Review*, Burnham alone was willing to address racial matters with at least some honesty. Of course, there were others with some inclination to racial consciousness, such as E. Merrill Root, Medford Evans, and Revilo P. Oliver, who left the limiting environs of Buckleydom, but of those who stayed only Burnham would so much as mention the white race.

Is there anything to be gained by once again returning to the thought of James Burnham today? Communism as a viable force is gone. The vague phrase of "managerial elites" seems tepid, almost meaningless, in an era of massive social decadence, the self-loathing of white elites, and Jewish power.

EMPIRICISM

In the end, Burnham's uniqueness as a non-religious and racially conscious thinker may be his lasting legacy to attempts at Western revival. To Burnham morality was a human construct. So too were the myths by which man and nations constitute themselves.

Despite these assumptions, Burnham remained a man of the West. He bemoaned its weakness. He summoned it to battle. He despised the "savages" before whom it was humbled.

Why? Neither God or gods were his ultimate source. It lay somehow within: A desire to see one's own kind survive and prosper. Of course, Burnham seemed to believe that should the "savages" become "civilized" then we could allow ourselves to mingle with them.

Ignoring Burnham's particular blindness, the larger question is whether any people can endure when stripped of the tales of a deity or deities that have motivated men from the beginning of time. Are we of the West crippled in our encounters with more primitive peoples by our very rationality that today renders all gods suspect in our eyes?

Further, was this very arid empiricism that served as the bedrock of Burnham's thought precisely the cause of his failure to embrace passionate mass movements dedicated to some form of a major change in the American system? Does racial consciousness need faith? A reflection on Burnhamism may be helpful in arriving at answers.

MORALITY

In addition, one of the core issues which fascinates and divides racialists is that of group versus universal morality. One of the great strengths of pre-modern peoples – of which it seems the Jews are still an example – is the vast gulf between morality for one's own group, seen as just and compassionate, and that for the out-group, which is viewed as less than human, worthy of exploitation and conquest.

Surely many of the racial ideologies of the postwar era that have sought to work together with nationalists of all races and faiths were deeply influenced by universal morality. One may not deprive any other people of that which we ourselves demand and desire. Others have maintained the more Darwinian/imperialist view that life is a struggle between species (nations, classes, races). During the pre-World War II period most racially conscious people accepted the tribal-centered view. Does one owe any moral considerations to those outside the group? Must morality be reciprocal? How should Western man wage war against those who do not have his higher moral vision?

In all probability Burnham would not have been much burdened by these scruples. As a realist he would have counseled that the world is an often brutal place and those who are to survive must be willing for the sake of their own kinfolk frequently to behave with toughness.

In fact, white racially conscious movements are today split between those who believe that even in the midst of a life and death struggle we must always behave like Christian or, at least Western, gentlemen and those who would like to see a bit more of the tribal rage of Europe's pagan ancestors.

Burnham did not explore these questions in any great depth in his writings. Nonetheless, by being who he was, he set an example for those who followed alternative models and philosophies for white survival. Indeed, the mere fact that he thought in racial terms and took the "suicide of the West" seriously sets him apart from most of his *National Review* contemporaries.

Mr. Kelly's book is a fine introduction to Burnham's life and thought. It is worth reading first because Burnham's Machiavellianism has much to offer students of any socio-political setting, and secondly, because his secular, non-universalist thinking will be of value to many racially conscious rightists when preparing for the battles of the future.

James Burnham was a quiet man who carried his learning and intelligence with much dignity. Yet, his voice may well still be heard even after those of the vast majority of his contemporaries have long since faded into oblivion.

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