

From Revolutionary Intellectual to Conservative Master-Thinker

The Anti-Democratic Odyssey of James Burnham

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There have been many journeys made from the left to the right end of the political spectrum over the past two centuries by intellectuals who originally believed in giving “power to the people” but who — for one or another reason — became disappointed with the effort to achieve such a goal. Some of the most influential political and social theories have been developed out of such disappointment. The radical-democratic conception of socialism developed by Karl Marx and others of his persuasion, especially because of the intellectual power of its “historical materialist” underpinnings, has first attracted and subsequently repelled many an alert and critical mind.

The recent “collapse of Communism” has given even greater impetus to post-Marxist theorizing. Much of this “new thinking,” however, simply goes over ground covered many decades before by such people as James Burnham. His own trajectory led to conclusions that would certainly be unpalatable to the democratic inclinations of many “post-Marxists” in the 1990s, and he would hardly have had patience for intricate theorizations of those turning from Marx to Foucault and from Lenin to Derrida. A greater kinship can be found with those “new leftists” migrating to the “neo-conservative” banner.¹ Yet from all of those disappointed with Marxism and Leninism, regardless of their present location on the political spectrum, we can hear echoes of the critique Burnham articulated in 1941.

1 Gary Dorrien, *The Neo-Conservative Mind: Politics, Culture and the War of Ideology* (Philadelphia 1993), 63. For “new leftists” duplicating Burnham’s trajectory, see Peter Collier and David Horowitz, eds., *Second Thoughts: Former Radicals Look Back at the Sixties* (Lanham, MD 1989); also relevant is the collective portrait of slick and secular young conservative publicists — much in the Burnham mold — who have become a power in U.S. politics, sketched in James Atlas, “The Counter-Counterculture,” *New York Times Magazine*, 12 February 1995. On parallels of Burnham’s thought with recent post-Marxism, see works cited in footnotes 7 and 24, below.

The full-scale biography that Burnham deserves has yet to be attempted — although we have fine sketches by such intellectual historians as John Diggins, Alan Wald, George Nash, and Gary Dorrien, who focus on one or another aspect of his career. Missing from all of these, however, is the kind of in-depth exploration of Burnham’s evolution from left to right that highlights his power as a thinker and (most important, given the importance for Burnham of the interpenetration of theory and practice) what he actually *did* about the things he thought: his impact as a history-maker. Even restricting ourselves to published materials (Burnham’s papers have been deposited with the Hoover Institute), we can trace continuities and discontinuities between his Marxist and conservative phases that illuminate aspects of Marxist (and post-Marxist) theory, of democratic (and anti-democratic) thought, of US politics and foreign policy, and of anti-Communist and conservative ideology.

Commitment to Change the World

Burnham’s writings were meant to be far more than intellectual reflections. They were produced by a man who was committed to action, first from the far-left, later from the far-right, and who was intent upon having an impact on world events. Articulated with a great boldness and clarity, his political analyses were both sweeping and closely-reasoned. In his lifetime they profoundly affected the thinking of U.S. and European intellectuals, of influential shapers of public opinion, and of powerful decision-makers.

The access to such power seems reasonable, given his personal background. Burnham was born into a wealthy Chicago family in 1905. His father had emigrated from Britain as a child and became vice-president of the Burlington Railroad. There was no difficulty, therefore, in sending his son to Princeton University, where Burnham graduated first in his class in 1927. He then went abroad to round out his education at Oxford, where he studied literature and received a Master’s degree at Balliol College in 1929. Although he had left the Catholic Church mid-way through Princeton, at Oxford he studied philosophy under Father Martin C. D’Arcy, concentrating on medieval and Thomist philosophy. While there are no indications that Burnham had ever been plagued by “ill feelings toward the business world of his father” (who died in 1928), he was soon affected by the revolutionary currents of his time. “At the onset of the Great Depression, he was torn by incongruous sentiments,” writes Alan Wald. “Propelled leftward by the economic crisis, he started reading Marx while living in the south of France during the

summer of 1930; yet that same autumn he and Philip Wheelwright initiated a magazine, *The Symposium*, modeled after T.S. Eliot's *Criterion*." Assuming a position in the philosophy department of New York University, he produced with Wheelwright *Introduction to Philosophical Analysis*, "a highly imaginative textbook," according to John P. Diggins, which at the time Susanne K. Langer praised as a "pedagogical masterpiece." Yet Burnham, through the medium of *The Symposium* and increasingly in his practical activity, began to utilize his philosophical and literary talents to deal with questions of contemporary politics.²

Sidney Hook (Burnham's colleague at New York University's philosophy department and at the time a prominent young Marxist) later recalled that *The Symposium* "was required to deal with social and political issues; and...the worsening of the Depression, which destroyed much of the world in which Jim had grown up," helped to move the intellectual young editor further leftward. Among those writing for the magazine were a number of left-wing intellectuals such as F.W. Dupee, Paul Goodman, Dwight Macdonald, William Phillips, Harold Rosenberg, Morris U. Schappes and Lionel Trilling. Hook's essay "Toward the Understanding of Karl Marx" (later expanded into an influential book) was also published in *The Symposium*, offering a sophisticated interpretation of Marxist theory. Burnham himself wrote a lengthy review of Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution* for the magazine, commenting: "Reading this remarkable book was an exciting experience; and it left me with the impression of understanding very clearly those events of which it claims to be an accurate record and a valid explanation."³

Reviewing Ralph Fox's biography of Lenin for the Communist Party's *New Masses*, he declared the Bolshevik leader to be "the chief political leader of all time." In this period he began to work with the Young Communist League at New York University and became the group's educational advisor. US Communist leader Earl Browder met with him to explain the Communist program in an almost-successful effort to recruit him. Hook recalls that Burnham was critical of the dogmatic and rigid qualities of the Stalinists but believed that "the overriding significance of the Communist Party was its effective centralized structure, without which all social criticism was just talk."⁴

2 Alan Wald, *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left From the 1930s to the 1980s* (Chapel Hill 1987), 176; John P. Diggins, *Up From Communism, Conservative Odysseys in American Intellectual History* (New York 1975), 163, 164.

3 Wald, 176-177; Sidney Hook in "James Burnham, 1905-1987," *National Review*, 11 September 1987, 32. This reminiscence was in a special memorial issue of *National Review* dedicated to Burnham; further citations in these notes to "James Burnham" refer to that issue of *National Review*.

4 Hook, "James Burnham," 32; Wald, 178.

Some commentators on Burnham's intellectual trajectory (Lasch, Diggins, Dorrien), assume that there is a link between such Leninism, which they see as inherently manipulative and totalitarian, and the conservative elitism to which Burnham later gravitated. This distorts the Leninism to which Burnham committed himself, however, and consequently underestimates the ideological distance that Burnham had to travel from the 1930s to the 1950s. In the early 1930s he was deeply influenced by the revolutionary-democratic interpretation of Marx and Lenin which Sidney Hook had advanced in his classic *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx*. "Burnham...became what the Communist Party used to call a Hookworm, at least for a short period of time," Hook later recalled.⁵

Like Hook, Burnham soon broke with the Communist Party — believing that it was not in harmony with the valid revolutionary perspectives of Marx and Lenin—and went on to participate (with Hook, the former minister A.J. Muste, the prominent trade union official J.B.S. Hardman, the talented labor organizer Louis F. Budenz, and others) in forming the American Workers Party (AWP) in 1934. The new organization attempted to combine a non-dogmatic revolutionary Marxism with a rootedness in distinctively American radical traditions plus practical labor organizing. During its short existence it played a significant role in the unemployed movement and in a number of militant labor struggles, particularly the Toledo Auto-Lite Strike.⁶

Soon Muste, Burnham and a majority of the AWP decided to join with the Communist League of America, a Trotskyist organization led by James P. Cannon and Max Shachtman, to form the Workers Party of the United States. According to Sidney Hook, essential to this merger was the Trotskyists' "willingness to accept the AWP conception of a workers' democracy." This had been articulated by Hook himself, who argued that Marxists, far from being opposed to democracy, "hold that a true democracy is possible only in a socialist society." Citing Marx and Lenin, he explained: "Since in a capitalist

5 Sidney Hook, *Out of Step, An Unquiet Life in the 20th Century* (New York 1987), 533. On the democratic nature of Lenin's and Trotsky's thought, see Paul Le Blanc, *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ 1990) and Ernest Mandel, *Trotsky, A Study in the Dynamic of His Thought* (London 1979); one can argue whether these particular interpretations are "correct," but the point is that they correspond to the manner in which Burnham himself, during his left-wing incarnation, understood Leninism and Trotskyism. See the self-consciously *Leninist* formulations which Sidney Hook employs in his defense of revolutionary democracy in *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx, A Revolutionary Interpretation* (New York 1933), as well as in his essay "On Workers' Democracy." That Burnham intellectually embraced such revolutionary democracy is clear from his writings (e.g., see footnote 11 below).

6 Information on the American Workers Party can be found in A.J. Muste, "My Experience in the Labor and Radical Struggles of the Thirties," in Rita James Simon (ed.), *As We Saw the Thirties* (Urbana, IL 1967), 123-150; Hook, *Out of Step*, 190-207.

society, only a small minority holds ownership, and the actual reins of control, over the means of production, what we really have under the guise of formal democracy is the dictatorship of a minority owning class.” He asserted that “against the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, Marxists have always opposed the ideal of workers’ or proletarian democracy,” and that the method by which such a workers’ state would achieve a classless society was “the progressive expansion of democratic processes to a point where the whole population is drawn into the ranks of the producers and the repressive functions of the state apparatus becomes unnecessary.” Hook noted that Marx and Lenin had “employed interchangeably” this notion of workers’ democracy with the concept of “dictatorship of the proletariat,” the political rule by the working class which would constitute the ever-increasing democratic transition from capitalism to communism. Even though Hook remained no more than a “fellow-traveler” of the enlarged Trotskyist group, Burnham and others — embracing this revolutionary-democratic understanding of Marxism — helped to make the fusion a living reality.⁷

In 1936 the Trotskyists briefly merged into the left wing of the Socialist Party, emerging with a doubled membership of about 1500 a year later to establish the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in early 1938. Throughout this period and up to 1940 Burnham was one of the foremost leaders of American Trotskyism. The Trotskyists — a dissident faction in the Communist movement influenced by the ideas and example of Leon Trotsky — opposed what they considered to be the corruption of Marxist and Leninist perspectives by the bureaucratic dictatorship of Joseph Stalin in the USSR. They insisted that socialism was inseparable from such principles (which they believed Stalinism had betrayed) as “workers’ democracy” and “revolutionary internationalism.” They insisted that the progressive achievements initiated by the

7 Sidney Hook, “On Workers’ Democracy,” *Modern Monthly*, October 1934, 532, 531; Hook, *Out Of Step*, 198-9, 202. Hook’s views changed in a manner that also paralleled changes in Burnham’s “mature” thought. He later commented self-critically that his workers’ democracy essay “suffered from the old illusion that the fundamental conflict was between socialism and capitalism rather than between democracy and totalitarianism.” This conceptual shift is related to his later rejection — more or less shared by Burnham — of the Marxist view that “the mode of economic production determines politics,” a notion which he felt had been “decisively refuted” by historical experience, Sidney Hook, *Marxism and Beyond* (Totowa, NJ 1983), 31. There is an important link here with more radical post-Marxists of recent years. Applauding Hook’s “trenchant and prescient... critique of historical materialism’s traditional failure to recognize the disjuncture between the economic infrastructure and the forms of political rule,” radical post-Marxist Stanley Aronowitz (in an explication of the ideas of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe) concludes: “Thus, if the political level is autonomous, just as the economic and the ideological, then the centrality of class and class struggle in the Marxist paradigm must be denied” (Aronowitz, *The Politics of Identity* [New York 1992], 181-2). This “de-privileging” of economics and class constitutes a theoretical link with the post-Marxism of Hook and Burnham.

Bolshevik Revolution in Russia must be defended not only from the imperialism of the capitalist world but also from the bureaucratic cancer of Stalinism. Only a relative handful of idealistic workers and intellectuals rallied to the Trotskyist banner in the United States and various other countries in the 1930s, although they had influence well beyond their numbers.⁸

Max Shachtman later recalled that Burnham “was very much welcomed in the Trotskyist movement, although he was regarded as something of a curio, a personal curio, not a political curio. He was very much respected by everybody — the leadership and the ranks, not just by the intellectuals but by the proletarians, including the pseudo-proletarians in the party. It was known that he came from the bourgeois aristocracy” He was very scholarly not “in demeanor but in knowledge. Very urbane.” Burnham “immediately acquired a reputation for impersonality, impartiality, fairness, and logical thought.”⁹ Sidney Hook, who continued to identify himself as being on the left (but not as a Trotskyist, and in later years as a pro-Reagan “socialist”) describes him in this way:

What were the sources of Burnham’s intellectual appeal during his radical years? They were more manifest in his writings than in his speeches. First was his fresh, forceful, direct style, completely free of “radicalese.” Second was the organization of his arguments, so that his conclusions seemed to flow naturally from his points as he clicked them off. Third, although he was not a professional economist, he was quite familiar with economic history and contemporary currents of economic thought. Finally, although he wrote simply, there was a certain elegance in his diction, an occasional cultural reference that suggested depths of meaning to be explored.¹⁰

With Max Shachtman he served as co-editor of the Trotskyists’ impressive theoretical magazine *New International*, writing a number of lucid articles on theory, current politics and culture. In 1937 he penned a penetrating critique of the Stalinists’ new reformist orientation, *The People’s Front: The*

8 On the U.S. Trotskyist movement, see: Robert J. Alexander, *International Trotskyism, 1929-1985: A Documented Analysis of the Movement* (Durham, NC 1991), 751-952, and entries by Paul Le Blanc on “Socialist Workers Party” and Tim Wohlforth on “Trotskyism” in Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakas (eds.), *Encyclopedia of the American Left* (Urbana, IL 1992). Also see George Breitman, Paul Le Blanc and Alan Wald, *Trotskyism in the United States: Historical Essays and Reconsiderations* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ 1996). Various issues related to Marxism are also dealt with succinctly in Tom Bottomore, Laurence Harris, V.G. Kiernan and Ralph Miliband (eds), *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought* (Cambridge 1983).

9 Diggins, 161.

10 Hook in “James Burnham,” 33.

New Betrayal. In 1938 he wrote a popular party pamphlet *Let The People Vote on War!* He maintained an extensive correspondence with Trotsky and enjoyed considerable influence throughout the Trotskyist movement and beyond. “Yet all of us,” Shachtman recalled, “and this went for Cannon and myself in particular, felt that although he was with us and with us thoroughly, he was not, so to say, of us.” In a letter to Trotsky, Cannon expressed concern over Burnham’s tendency “to deprecate his party co-workers and to resist the idea of being influenced or taught anything, even by our international comrades.”¹¹ Alan Wald provides this portrait:

Tall, thin, bespectacled, conservatively dressed, and a good speaker, Burnham, however, displayed little warmth in personal relations. He was liked by the young party members and admired by Shachtman, but he kept aloof from the party rank and file. An excellent teacher, he was asked one summer to give classes on socialism to Trotskyists in Minneapolis [a stronghold of the movement where his comrades had led a militant and successful general strike] but refused to give up his vacation in Connecticut. He lived at Sutton Place in New York City and would occasionally attend political committee meetings in a tuxedo because he had just come or was en route to cocktails at the Rockefellers or at the home of some other wealthy family with whom he was friends.¹²

Burnham was known to have philosophical differences with Marxism, operating — in the words of one philosophically-inclined comrade from that

11 Diggins, 161; James P. Cannon, *The Struggle for a Proletarian Party* (New York 1970), 29. Also see Burnham’s *The People’s Front: The New Betrayal* (New York 1937), a sophisticated left-wing analysis which has held up well over time — as suggested by an examination of E.H. Carr, *The Twilight of the Comintern, 1930-1935* (New York 1982).

In his pamphlet *Let the People Vote on War!* (New York [1938]), Burnham argued that “war has become, in our day, *totalitarian*,” that it “dominates and controls the total life and activities of the totality of the people,” and that “it would seem wise and proper for us to try to decide ourselves what to do, and not to turn ourselves blindly over to the hands of others.” Calling for a mobilization of the American people (through “rallies, petitions, speeches, meetings, canvassings”) to push through a law requiring a popular referendum whenever the question of war was posed, he concluded: “Before the assembled might of the people, the secret diplomats, the star-chamber heroes, the war-mongers and their fellow conspirators, will be routed into the open and compelled to give their accounting. *Let the people decide!*” (*Let the People Vote on War!*, 5, 14.)

The slogan with which Burnham concluded this pamphlet was, in the 1960s, popularized by the “new left” activists of Students for a Democratic Society, whose conception of “participatory democracy” harmonized with Burnham’s views of the 1930s. See James Miller, “*Democracy is in the Streets*,” *From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (New York 1987), 141-54.

12 Wald, 178.

period, George Novack — from “positivist rather than materialist premises” and opposing “the historical necessity of socialism on the general ground that no categorical determinism existed either in nature or society; any and every proposition about reality was no more than probable.” But Burnham’s imperfect connection with his revolutionary Marxist comrades was rooted in life more than philosophy. Both Cannon and Shachtman recognized that Burnham was personally torn, in crisis over the contradiction between his upper-class lifestyle and his left-wing commitments. Respecting his talents and sincerity, they gently sought to help him make the transition to being a full-time revolutionary. “There were clearly times,” according to Shachtman, “when he was on the very verge of throwing it all up — namely, his job at the University — and perhaps other personal involvements — and coming to work for the party, and that he felt this urge very strongly and very sincerely.” Yet he could never bring himself to take that step, in large measure because he was wracked by doubts, which he freely expressed to Shachtman: “questions that had arisen in his mind about Marxism — not just about dialectical materialism, toward which he was always skeptical, but about Marxism in general, socialism in general, about the social capacities of the working class in general.” These doubts were nourished by the triumph of Stalinism in the USSR and throughout the world Communist movement, the triumph of Nazism and fascism throughout much of Europe, the failure of revolutionary socialists to mobilize the working class around an alternative course anywhere — including in the United States where the New Deal enjoyed mass support for its welfare-state reforms of capitalism and its substantial military build-up.¹³

Nonetheless, in this period Burnham distinguished himself by publishing in *New Internationalist* a combination of seemingly razor-sharp political analyses and sophisticated defenses of revolutionary Marxism. Most interesting of these was a remarkable essay co-authored with Shachtman, “Intellectuals in Retreat,” in which a substantial layer of left-wing intellectuals of the 1930s was subjected to a penetrating and extensive critique, accused of constituting a “League of Abandoned Hopes” that was “moving from a revolutionary Marxian position, or one close to it, *towards* reformism, or a lit-

13 George Novack, “My Philosophical Itinerary: An Autobiographical Forward,” in *Polemics in Marxist Philosophy* (New York 1978), 21; Diggins, 162; Cannon, *The Struggle for a Proletarian Party*, 22-31. In addition to confessing such deeper doubts, Burnham represented at the 1938 founding of the Socialist Workers Party — along with Joseph Carter and Hal Draper — a minority arguing that the USSR was no longer a workers’ state but instead was “bureaucratic collectivist,” and also urging what they saw as a more democratic understanding of Leninist organizational norms. See George Breitman, (ed.), *The Founding of the Socialist Workers Party* (New York 1981), 28.

tle beyond it to bourgeois liberalism (or in some instances, scarcely concealed passivity),” all under the banner of opposing “totalitarianism.”¹⁴

Burnham did more in the revolutionary movement than simply write impressive articles. As a member of the SWP Political Committee, he played an influential role in shaping party policy. In 1938, as a minority of one he urged support of the Ludlow Amendment to the US Constitution, which would have mandated a national referendum before the nation could go to war. In the same year, he also advanced a minority position favoring SWP support for forming a mass labor party, in the face of growing sentiment among radicalizing workers in unions affiliated to the recently-formed Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) for independent politics. Both positions appeared to fly in the face of long-held Trotskyist “orthodoxy.” Yet Burnham advanced them with a boldness and lucidity which finally helped persuade a majority of his comrades (including Trotsky). The demand to “let the people vote on war,” and the call for a labor party based on the trade unions subsequently became standard ordnance in the arsenal of American Trotskyism.¹⁵

In January 1939 Burnham won a plurality in the Political Committee for a more problematical position regarding a factional war that had erupted in the United Automobile Workers of America (UAW), one of the most combative and effective affiliates of the CIO. UAW President Homer Martin, supported and advised by the dissident-Communist splinter group of Jay Lovestone, was in battle with the Unity Caucus which included Socialists around the dynamic Reuther brothers (Roy, Walter and Victor) and activists associated with the Communist Party. Rival UAW conventions were organized in Detroit (by Martin) and Cleveland (by the Unity Caucus). The Trotskyists, with a significant grouping in the UAW, were confronted with a choice of which side they were on. Maintaining that “everything healthy in the labor movement withers under the touch of Stalinism,” Burnham characterized the Cleveland convention as “a 100% Stalinist stooge assembly” in advance, predicting that “every move, every motion, every resolution will be dictated by Earl Browder,” the General Secretary of the US Communist Party. This outlook, which Burnham

14 James Burnham and Max Shachtman, “Intellectuals in Retreat,” *New Internationalist*, January 1939, 18, 15. In this article, however, the authors indicated that dialectics — which Burnham himself rejected — had little relevance to practical politics, which brought a sharp protest from Trotsky, who held that Marxism without dialectics is like “a clock without a spring” See Leon Trotsky, *In Defense of Marxism* (New York 1970), 43; also see 48-54 for Trotsky’s explanation of this view.

15 This is based on the scholarship of the late George Breitman, presented in “The Liberating Influence of the Transitional Program,” in Breitman, Le Blanc and Wald, *Trotskyism in the United States*.

developed into an editorial for the SWP's weekly newspaper *Socialist Appeal*, was consistent not only with the perspective of the Lovestoneites (with whom Burnham had collaborated on the short-lived *Marxist Quarterly* in 1937), but also with the analysis of prominent labor journalist Ben Stolberg, who had been active in the American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky (and the Dewey Commission which discredited Stalin's purge trials) and who had just authored *The Story of the CIO*, which critically focused on "Stalinist influences" in the CIO. Burnham's orientation was *not* consistent, however, with the perspectives of a majority of SWPers in the UAW, not to mention SWP leader James P. Cannon (who was out of the country). Aware of these differences, Burnham nonetheless chose to push forward for an implementation of his policy — only to find that the party's UAW fraction voted to junk the issue of *Socialist Appeal* which contained his editorial.¹⁶

"The formal logic here is perfect," said prominent SWP activist George Clarke of Burnham's analysis. "But just one little thing is omitted from the syllogism, just as it is omitted from all formal logic: an understanding of events in the process of motion and change, an understanding of the interaction of human beings and events. Or in other words, an understanding of the dynamics of the workers' movement." Burnham's perspective was consciously and consistently ignored by Trotskyists in the auto union, and he sought to bring them to heel for their indiscipline. But this proved impossible, and the orientation he had pushed through was quickly dropped by the Political Committee.¹⁷

The Cleveland UAW convention turned out to be, in fact, broadly representative, enthusiastically militant, profoundly democratic. The sessions of Homer Martin's rival convention, on the other hand, "were devoted to flag-waving patriotism and rabid red-baiting," as Martin prepared to lead his shrinking following out of the CIO and back to the more conservative American Federation of Labor. "This convention marked the public suicide of the Lovestoneites in auto," Clarke commented, "just as it would have marked our own had we participated in it." Burnham's behavior, he added, "revealed strong tendencies towards bureaucratism in administration, an arrogant

16 George Clarke, "The Truth About the Auto Crisis," in James P. Cannon, George Clarke, Leon Trotsky, and Fred Feldman (eds.) *Background to "The Struggle for a Proletarian Party"* (New York 1979), 24-29, 32. Also see Robert J. Alexander, *The Right Opposition: The Lovestoneites and the International Communist Opposition of the 1930s* (Westport, CT 1981), 56-59; Benjamin Stolberg, *The Story of the CIO* (New York 1938); Victor G. Reuther, *The Brothers Reuther and the Story of the UAW: A Memoir* (Boston 1979), 181-192; Irving Bernstein, *Turbulent Years: A History of the American Worker 1933-1941* (Boston 1971), 554-569.

17. Clarke, "The Truth About the Auto Crisis," 32.

approach to the rank and file, a hateful attitude towards the workers who correct his line, sterile and formalist in analysis.”¹⁸

While some of his comrades were to look back on this as a “moment of truth” revealing Burnham’s inevitable trajectory, it is conceivable that more time and additional experience in the Trotskyist movement might have helped him mature into a more capable left-wing leader. But 1939-40 brought events that would fundamentally alter Burnham’s commitments: the signing of the Nazi-Soviet pact in 1939, the German-Soviet overrunning of Poland, the onset of World War II, and the Soviet war against Finland. All this sent many left-wing intellectuals reeling and precipitated a fierce factional conflict in the Socialist Workers Party. Burnham hotly insisted, with growing support from Shachtman and others, that the USSR was not a bureaucratically-degenerated workers’ state (Trotsky’s position) but represented a new form of class society, which they labeled *bureaucratic collectivism*, that was in no sense progressive and was fully as exploitative and reactionary as fascism and capitalist imperialism. They argued that in the face of the two oppressive and expansionist camps of capitalism and Stalinism, revolutionary socialists must establish a “third camp” to which all the workers, oppressed and progressive-minded people should be rallied. The SWP split, and with a sizeable minority Shachtman and Burnham created a new organization, the Workers Party.

Yet Burnham’s evolution did not end there. According to one of his comrades, reminiscing eight years later, Burnham “announced his resignation from the Workers Party one lonely morning in 1940 [not long after its founding] by leaving a note at the office with a secretary who was trying to fix a radiator, tipping his hat politely and leaving.” This “note,” actually a long letter, asserted: “Of the most important beliefs which have been associated with the Marxist movements...there is virtually none of which I accept in its traditional form. I regard those beliefs as either false or obsolete or meaningless; or in a few cases, as at best true only in a form so restricted and modified as no longer properly to be called Marxist.”¹⁹ In the following year he published *The Managerial Revolution*, in which he elaborated his critique of (and alternative to) Marxism, summing up:

The grander scientific pretensions of Marxism have been exploded by this century’s increases in historical and anthropological knowledge and by the clearer contemporary understanding of the scientific method. The Marxian philosophy of dialectical materialism takes its place with the other out-

18 *Ibid.*, 33. This incident suggests a contradiction between revolutionary-democratic theory and elitist practice, which Burnham would soon resolve through the abandonment of the former.

19 Louis Cassel, “The Secret Life of James Burnham,” *New Internationalist* (February 1948), 62; Trotsky, *In Defense of Marxism*, contains the resignation letter, see 207.

moded speculative metaphysics of the nineteenth century. The Marxian theory of universal history makes way for more painstaking, if less soul-satisfying, procedures in anthropological research. The laws of Marxian economics prove unable to deal concretely with contemporary economic phenomena. It would be wrong, of course, to deny all scientific value to Marx's own writings; on the contrary, we must continue to regard him as one of the most important figures in the historical development of the historical sciences — which sciences, even today however, are only in their infancy. But to suppose, as Marxists do, that Marx succeeded in stating general laws of the world, of man and his history and ways, is today just ludicrous.²⁰

Some years later Burnham himself succinctly summarized the practical orientation of his alternative to Marxism:

Throughout the world ... informed and thoughtful men have come to a double realization: first, that the capitalist era, in anything like the traditional meaning that we derive from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, is drawing to a close, or may even be regarded as finished; but second, that it is not to be replaced by socialism, if "socialism" is taken to mean the free, classless, international society of the abstract Marxian ideal. If these two negative facts are accepted, there then remains a double positive task: from a theoretical standpoint, to analyze the precise nature of this present historical transition and of the form of social, economic and political organization into which it is developing; from a human and practical standpoint, to act in such a way as to promote those variants of the evolving new order that permit at least that minimum of liberty and justice without which human society is degraded to merely animal existence.²¹

In what follows we will 1) touch on Burnham's reasons for dismissing the possibility of socialism, 2) summarize his analysis of the nature of the new social form which he called *managerial society*, and 3) explore the manner in which he sought to act to ensure a "minimum of liberty and justice" within the new form of society.

20 James Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution* (Bloomington 1962), 55; for Burnham, Marxism was like "a clock without a spring," as Trotsky had put it (see footnote 14, above). Different evaluations than Burnham's on the relevance of Marxism in the light of later historical, anthropological and other research are offered in Bertell Ollman and Edward Vernoff (eds.), *The Left Academy, Marxist Scholarship on American Campuses* (New York 1982). Also see Ernest Mandel, *The Place of Marxism in History* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ 1994). Of interest as well is Paul Sweezy's 1942 essay, "The Illusion of the Managerial Revolution," republished in *The Present As History* (New York 1953), 39-66 — one of the earliest serious attempts at a Marxist critique of Burnham's book (along with that by Albert Glotzer cited in footnote 40, below).

21 Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution*, ix-x.

The Impossibility of Socialism

Burnham's 1941 study *The Managerial Revolution* stands as one of the most salient critiques of Marxian socialism. After making the case that the notion of socialism's *inevitability* is an indefensible dogma, Burnham argued that "there is ample evidence from actual events that socialism is *not* coming." He presented what he called "sets of facts" to demonstrate this:

1) Since the 1917 socialist revolution in Russia, socialism (defined as a free, classless, international society) is further away than ever. The upper 11 or 12 percent of the Soviet population in 1940 received approximately 50 percent of the national income (as opposed to the top 10 percent receiving 35 percent of national income in the United States). The freedom and democracy — "never very extensive," and yet existing to "a considerable measure" — maintained under the early Bolsheviks had disappeared under Stalin, and "the tyranny of the Russian regime is the most extreme that has ever existed in human history, not excepting Hitler." The early internationalism of the Bolsheviks had given way to "an ever growing nationalism which has in recent times come to exceed anything ever present under the Czars themselves. The pseudo-internationalism, still occasionally manifested and allegedly represented by the existence of the Communist International and its parties, is simply the extension of Russian nationalism on the world arena and internationalist only in the sense that Hitler's fifth columns or the British or United States intelligence services are internationalist."

2) Socialist revolutions did not succeed anywhere else. "All the important conditions supposed to be necessary for the transition to socialism were present in the immediate post-war era. The working class, presumed carrier of socialist revolution, proved unable to take power, much less to inaugurate socialism. Yet most of the capitalist world was in shambles; the workers, as the principal part of the mass armies, had arms in their hands, and the example of Russia was before them."

3) The abolition of capitalist private property rights in Russia "not merely did not guarantee socialism, but did not even keep power in the hands of the workers — who, today, have no power at all."

4) "If socialism is to come, the working class ... has always, and rightly, been held to be the primary social group which will have a hand in its coming." According to Marxist theory the overwhelming bulk of the population would eventually be "proletarianized" under capitalism, leaving a massive working class facing a tiny capitalist minority. This has not happened: "Small independent properties remain in many lines of endeavor; and the last seventy-five years have seen the growth of the so-called 'new middle class,' the salaried executives and engineers and managers and accountants and bureau-

crats and the rest, who do not fit without distortion into either the 'capitalist' or 'worker' category." In fact "the social position of the working class has gravely deteriorated." The rate of increase of industrial workers has slowed and in many countries changed to a decrease, the bulk of the unemployed come from the working class, and the development of technology and economic organization has resulted in a situation in which "the workers, the proletarians, could not, by themselves, run the productive machine of contemporary society." Also, militarily it has become impossible for workers to make a revolution: "Just as the new techniques of industry weaken the general position of the workers in the productive process as a whole, so do new techniques of warfare weaken the potential position of the workers in a revolutionary crisis. Street barricades and pikestaffs, even plus muskets, are not enough against tanks and bombers."

5) Marxism, as a political movement and as an ideology committed to socialism, has collapsed. "During the past two decades Marxist parties have collapsed on a world scale. Their fate can be pretty well summed up as follows: they have all either failed socialism or abandoned it, in most cases both." Throughout Europe, the left-wing workers' movement with tens of millions of adherents, has "simply disappeared from existence in nation after nation. Wherever fascism has arisen...the Marxist parties have gone under, usually without even a fight for survival." Although a Marxist party took power in Russia, "within a short time it abandoned socialism, if not in words then at any rate in the effect of its actions." In countries where Social Democratic governments have been established through elections, "the reformist Marxist parties have administered the governments, and have uniformly failed to introduce socialism or make any genuine step toward socialism; in fact, have acted in a manner scarcely distinguishable from ordinary liberal capitalist parties administering the government." The fate of those continuing to embrace the socialist goals and commitments of traditional Marxism clinches the argument: "The Trotskyist and other dissident opposition wings of Marxism have remained minute and ineffectual sects without any influence upon general political developments."²²

All of this, Burnham added, has been paralleled by the collapse of Marxist ideology:

The power of an ideology has several dimensions: it is shown both by the number of men that it sways and also by the extent to which it sways

22 *Ibid.*, 42, 46-47, 49-54. For studies of these matters, see: Wolfgang Abendroth, *A Short History of the European Working Class* (New York 1972); Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London 1979); Warren Lerner, *A History of Socialism and Communism in Modern Times: Theorists, Activists, and Humanists* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ 1982); Richard H. Hudelson, *The Rise and Fall of Communism* (Boulder, CO 1993).

them—that is, whether they are moved only to verbal protestations of loyalty, or to a will to sacrifice and die under its slogans. This power is tested particularly when an ideology, in reasonably equal combat, comes up against a rival. From all these points of view the power of Marxist ideology, or rather of the strictly *socialist* aspects of Marxist ideology, has gravely declined The only branch of the Marxist ideology which still retains considerable attractive power is the Stalinist variant of Leninism, but Stalinism is no longer genuinely socialist. Just as in the case of the Stalinist party, the Marxist ideology has kept power only by ceasing to be socialist.²³

The coherence of Burnham's critique of his own former orientation is demonstrated by the fact that its echoes reverberate through the next several decades among intellectuals of various persuasions — in sociological explorations of working-class de-radicalization and the exhaustion of revolutionary ideology, in historical analyses of the Russian Revolution's decline, and in exegeses on the multiple deficiencies of Marxist thought.²⁴

Managerialism

If Burnham had simply stopped here, his destructive critique would still be considered a classic of post-Marxist thought. What followed, however, is what made *The Managerial Revolution* (in the words of John Kenneth Galbraith) “an important book which changed people's minds on the nature of the modern corporation,” for Burnham's argument “legitimized what in the interests of reality the schools of business were already beginning to teach.” As Alfred Kazin put it, “Burnham was now reaching American business executives, scientists, and the technocratic elite with the news that they were the leaders of the future. Burnham's analysis was still functionally Marxist. History was nothing but the domination of one class over another. In this eternal power game it was the managers' turn to walk off with the pot.” Left-wing sociologist C. Wright Mills scoffed that Burnham was “a Marx for Managers.” Indeed, Burnham argued that there was a global transition underway from bourgeois society to managerial society. Key decision-makers and

23 Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution*, 56.

24 Various points that Burnham makes here can be found in the later work of such sociologists as Daniel Bell in *The End of Ideology* (New York 1960) and C. Wright Mills in *The Marxists* (New York 1962); such historical studies as Leonard Schapiro's *The Rise of Communist Autocracy* (Cambridge, MA 1956) and Carmen Sirianni's *Workers' Control and Socialist Democracy* (London 1982); in some of the themes and reflections to be found in Robin Blackburn, ed., *After the Fall: The Failure of Communism and the Future of Socialism* (London 1991); and in numerous articles in a magazine that has become the beacon of contemporary post-Marxism, *Telos*.

policy-makers in the increasingly complex economy (in the United States this would include growing corporate conglomerates interpenetrating with the growing state apparatus) “will, in fact, have achieved social dominance, will be the ruling class in society.” Yet this transition to managerial society takes different forms in different parts of the world and assumes different ideological expressions:

The ideologies expressing the social role and interests and aspirations of the managers (like the great ideologies of the past an indispensable part of the struggle for power) have not yet been fully worked out, any more than were the bourgeois ideologies in the period of transition to capitalism. They are already approximated, however, from several different but similar directions, by, for example: Leninism-Stalinism; fascism-nazism; and, at a more primitive level, by New Dealism and such less influential American ideologies as “technocracy.”²⁵

In fact, while not quite saying so, Burnham himself was engaged in a process of helping to shape an ideological orientation that would rise above the “primitive level” of New Dealism, one characterized by “sufficient clarity about what is happening in the world,” helping to advance the transition in a manner consistent with “law and order,” as he put it, and “in a comparatively democratic fashion.” We will see that the term “democratic” was soon jettisoned from Burnham’s program — without weakening its thrust in the

25 John Kenneth Galbraith, *The New Industrial State* (New York 1971), 115; John Kenneth Galbraith in “James Burnham,” 35; Alfred Kazin, *New York Jew* (New York 1979), 92; C. Wright Mills, “A Marx for Managers,” in *Power, Politics and People, The Collected Essays of C. Wright Mills*, edited by Irving Louis Horowitz (New York 1963), 53-71; Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution*, 71, 72. Since the appearance of *The Managerial Revolution*, prominent social critics and scholars keep returning to critical and often searching discussions of Burnham’s contribution — see Lewis Corey, *The Unfinished Task: Economic Reconstruction for Democracy* (New York 1942), 140-141, 202, 304; T.B. Bottomore, *Elites and Society* (Harmondsworth, England 1966), 77-82; Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (New York 1976), 90-94; and Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York 1991), 509-512, 568-569.

The positive evaluation of Burnham’s work by the liberal economist Galbraith became unusual after Burnham associated himself with political conservatism. Even before that, Burnham’s suggestion that Stalinism and fascism had something important in common with the modern liberal corporate-capitalist order seemed too bizarre or disturbing a notion for many. A common opinion, articulated from the cross-roads of liberalism and socialism by Michael Harrington, is that “the dangers inherent in the kind of sweeping historical generalizations that James Burnham learned during his years in the Trotskyist movement...are apparent in *The Managerial Revolution*,” but that, “impressionistic and sloppy as his insight was, Burnham was talking about an important trend in the world economy.” See Harrington, *The Twilight of Capitalism* (New York 1976), 390, 215.

slightest. To repeat the way he put it in 1959, it involved acting “in such a way as to promote those variants of the evolving social order that permit at least the minimum of liberty and justice without which human society is degraded to merely animal existence.”²⁶

Before exploring the theoretical and practical development of Burnham’s perspective, it may be interesting to note the reaction to *The Managerial Revolution* of Max Nomad and Selig Perlman (both of whom had earlier presented ideas similar to those elaborated by Burnham). Nomad put this entry into his *Skeptic’s Political Dictionary*:

MANAGERIALISM — The theory that the office-holder and manager, and not the worker, is going to take over the inheritance of the doomed capitalist. First briefly hinted at by Michael Bakunin, later developed by the Polish revolutionist Waclaw Machajski, subsequently presented to the American public by this writer [i.e., Nomad], it became the subject of a best-selling book by an author who gave no credit to his predecessors. He was a teacher of ethics.²⁷

To which Burnham later responded, in a fashion, by mentioning (in his 1959 introduction to a re-issuing of his book) that “many of the elements had been treated by Max Weber, Vilfredo Pareto, Messrs. Adolf Berle and Gardiner Means, the romantic anarchist, Makhaisky, and the eccentric ex-Trotskyite Bruno Rizzi ...”²⁸

Perlman, on the other hand, raised a more substantive objection. In his 1928 classic *A Theory of the Labor Movement* he had argued — as Burnham now did — that the working class lacked the capacity to take political power and become a ruling class, but he insisted that Burnham “underestimates ownership,” adding: “It is the industrial politician or businessman who decides if the technician’s plan is too perfect, and so on.” Perlman’s criticism has been supported by later scholars who argue that “ownership and control are interwoven in American industry.” While “it is evident that the capitalist class has been transformed over the past century by the rise to economic dom-

26 Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution*, 272, x.

27 Max Nomad, *A Skeptic’s Political Dictionary* (New York 1953), 69. Nomad’s first U.S. article on “managerialism” can be found in “White Collars and Horny Hands,” *Modern Quarterly* (Autumn 1932), 68-76. Another partial predecessor to Burnham’s perspective (especially related to the belief in the inability of the working class to bring about socialism) is Selig Perlman, *A Theory of the Labor Movement* (New York 1928).

28 Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution*, viii, ix. Introducing Bruno Rizzi’s *The Bureaucratization of the World* (New York 1985), Adam Westoby shows Burnham did not plagiarize from the 1939 work of this eccentric Italian radical (20-26).

inance of the large corporation, so that the structure of ownership or possession has become more impersonal than it used to be in the days of the individual capitalist entrepreneur,” according to T.B. Bottomore, the fact remains that “a few large shareholders are normally able to exert effective control, and that the top managers themselves are usually substantial shareholders.” Perhaps a recognition of this fact inspired Burnham’s 1959 reformulation: “the capitalist era, in anything like the *traditional* meaning that we derive from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, is drawing to a close.” The irretrievable passing of *laissez-faire* capitalism is a fact that few would deny. And Burnham, no less than Selig Perlman, had concluded that modern corporate capitalism interlocked with the modern interventionist state was a more preferable variant of managerial society than totalitarian Communism in the form of the Stalin regime in the USSR (which represented the ideal of — and issued orders to — ideologically and often materially powerful Communist parties throughout the world).²⁹

Critique of Democracy

Brian Crozier has expressed the view of many that “the most important of Burnham’s works is *The Machiavellians* (1943). It is the key to everything he wrote subsequently.” Editor of *The Economist’s* confidential weekly *Foreign Report* from 1954 to 1964, Crozier commented in a 1969 study that “*The Machiavellians* is as fresh as the day it was written: a deeply apposite textbook for our age.” Ostensibly a study of the political ideas of Machiavelli, Mosca, Sorel, Michels and Pareto, it is an exposition of political philosophy in which, in the words of one of his later admirers, Burnham sets forth his own “analytical principles so plainly — almost brutally — that it takes a stern mental effort to adjust to them; in order to grasp them you have to resist the normal temptation to import all the ‘values’ he has eliminated.” (This admirer, Joseph Sobran, worked with him on the conservative weekly *National Review* and also recalled: “Burnham was interested in the logic of power. His method was to look at everything in the world from its power-value. This made the moralist in me squirm, especially since he regarded even morality

29 A. L. Riesch Owen (ed.), *Selig Perlman’s Lectures on Capitalism and Socialism* (Madison 1976), 134, 147; T.B. Bottomore, *Sociology: A Guide to Problems and Literature* (New York 1972), 141; Tom Bottomore, “The Capitalist Class,” in Tom Bottomore and Robert J. Brym (eds.), *The Capitalist Class, An International Study* (New York 1989), 5-6.

under the same aspect. At times, with a few mild critical questions, Jim could make me feel like a sentimental, attitudinizing liberal.”³⁰

“‘Democracy’ is usually defined in some such terms as ‘self-government’ or ‘government by the people,’” Burnham wrote. “Historical experience forces us to conclude that democracy, in this sense, is impossible.” He believed that the demand for this impossible democracy was a mask for the creation of a despotic form of managerial society which in this book he termed Bonapartism. “Mature Bonapartism is a popular, a democratic despotism, founded on democratic doctrine, and, at least in its initiation, committed to democratic forms. If Bonapartism, in fact, rather than in theory, denies democracy, it does so by bringing democracy to completion The demagogues of the opposition say that their victory will be the triumph of the people; but they lie, as demagogues always do The Marxists and the democratic totalitarians claim that freedom can now be secured only by concentrating all social forces and especially economic forces in the state which, when they or their friends are running it, they identify with the people.” According to Burnham their glowing arguments and programs are simply myths employed in “a contest for control over the despotic and Bonapartist political order which they anticipate. The concentration of all social forces in the state would in fact destroy all possibility of freedom.”³¹

Against this notion of *self-government* or *government by the people*, Burnham articulated another conception: “a political system in which there exists ‘liberty’: that is, what Mosca calls ‘juridical defense,’ a measure of security for the individual which protects him from the arbitrary and irresponsible exercise of personally held power.” Related to this, he argued, was the importance of the right of opposition. He noted that “the primary object, in practice, of all rulers is to serve their own interest, to maintain their own power and privilege. There are no exceptions. No theory, no promises, no morality, no amount of good will, no religion will restrain power Only

30 Brian Crozier, Joseph Sobran in “James Burnham,” 36, 46; Brian Crozier, *The Masters of Power* (Boston 1969), 335. Like more than one agent for British and U.S. intelligence services engaged in what he calls “the secret war for people’s minds,” Crozier considered Burnham his mentor. See Crozier, *Free Agent: The Unseen War 1941-1991* (New York 1993), xii, xiii, 7-8, 13, 15, 17.

31 James Burnham, *The Machiavellians, Defenders of Freedom* (New York 1943), 236, 162, 247, 253-4. Influential “democratic theorists” of later years accepted Burnham’s critique of democracy but simply redefined the term “democracy” so that, rather than meaning *rule by the people*, it would be consistent with rule by competing elite factions as described by Burnham. See, for example, Henry B. Mayo’s explicit mention of and adaptation to Burnham in *An Introduction to Democratic Theory* (New York 1960), 270-1, 286-7. This general phenomenon is explored in Peter Bachrach, *The Theory of Democratic Elitism, A Critique* (Boston 1967), and in Philip Green (ed.), *Democracy* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ 1993).

power restrains power. That restraining power is expressed in the existence and activity of oppositions.” But his conception of such an opposition had little to do with the Marxists, “totalitarian liberals” and Bonapartist demagogues whom he detested. “When an opposition exists, this means only that there is a division in the ruling class; if an ‘out-elite’ replaces a governing elite, this is only a change in the personnel of the rulers. The masses remain still the ruled.” Yet this is in the interest of the masses too, because it preserves at least a minimum of liberty (which is beneficial to them no less than to the elites) and generates at least some responsiveness to their needs among the contending factions of the ruling class. “Political freedom is the resultant of unresolved conflicts among various sections of the elite.”³²

Burnham perceived this balance of liberty being jeopardized by the challenge of Bonapartist advocates of impossible democracy (government by the people) and by the fuzzy-mindedness of many opinion-molders and decision-makers in the face of that challenge. He concluded *The Machiavellians* with these words:

It is probable that civilized society will, somehow, survive. It will not survive, however, if the course of the ruling class continues in the direction of the present, and of the past forty years. In that direction there lies destruction of rulers and ruled alike. But, during the monstrous wars and revolutions of our time, there has already begun on a vast scale a purge of the ranks of the ruling class. That purge, and the recruitment of new leaders which accompanies it, may be expected to continue until they bring about a change in the present course. Though the change will never lead to the perfect society of our dreams, we may hope that it will permit human beings at least that minimum of moral dignity which alone can justify the strange accident of man’s existence.³³

Anti-Communism

Burnham continued to teach philosophy at New York University (one of his students remembered him as a “superior teacher” whose lectures were characterized by “brilliance” and an infectious “intellectual excitement”) and for

32 Burnham, *The Machiavellians*, 243-4, 246, 254. Burnham later repeated and elaborated on these perspectives, while focusing on U.S. political institutions, in *Congress and the American Political Tradition* (Chicago 1954), 34-44, 281-352. In this book he grudgingly accepted the common use of the term “democracy” to describe the form of elite rule he favored, labeling as *democratism* the “pure” definition of democracy.

33 Burnham, *The Machiavellians*, 270.

a time continued to be associated with the “non-Communist left” through his involvement with the increasingly de-radicalized magazine *Partisan Review* and the right-wing Social Democratic *New Leader*. Yet his one-time co-thinker Dwight Macdonald mused that Burnham now represented a new political type. Macdonald labeled it “Conservative Liberalism.” This was an orientation which “holds fast to progressive *values*: materialism, irreligion, scientific method, free development of the individual,” while at the same time embracing “reactionary concepts,” such as “seeing human nature as evil, history as either cyclical or without pattern, democracy as unattainable under any circumstances, class rule as inevitable, and man helpless to make any major improvement in society through conscious effort.”³⁴

Regardless of Burnham’s precise location on the political spectrum, a decided shift was taking place in his involvements in the final years of the 1940s. In 1947 his book *The Struggle for the World* appeared, whose fundamental thesis was this:

The discovery of atomic weapons has brought about a situation in which Western Civilization, and perhaps human society in general, can continue to exist only if an absolute monopoly in the control of atomic weapons is created. This monopoly can be gained and exercised only through a World Empire, for which the historical stage had already been set prior to and independently of the discovery of atomic weapons. The attempt at World Empire will be made, and is, in fact, the objective of the Third World War, which, in its preliminary stages, has already begun The present candidates for leadership in the World Empire are only two: the Soviet Union and the United States.³⁵

34 Jeanne Wacker in “James Burnham,” 33-4; Dwight Macdonald, “The Future of Democratic Values,” *Partisan Review* (July-August 1943), 336. It was not long before Burnham publicly proclaimed that the totalitarian order of Stalin was the genuine continuation of the Bolshevik Revolution, and perhaps the wave of the future, in “Lenin’s Heir,” *Partisan Review* (Winter 1945), 61-72, a much misunderstood essay which marked a deepening of his anti-Communism. To this Macdonald offered a spirited defense of revolutionary socialist perspectives (“Beat Me, Daddy,” *Partisan Review* (Spring 1945), 181-187). Burnham scornfully responded that Macdonald “is busily occupied with the defense of revolution in one psyche,” an irresponsible program of sentimental dilettantism “which shouts for the causes of totalitarianism [i.e., socialist revolution] without the totalitarian result” in “Politics for the Nursery Set,” *Partisan Review* (Spring 1945), 188-190. Richard H. Pells places this debate in its broader context in *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age: American Intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s* (New York 1985), 76-83.

35 James Burnham, *The Struggle for the World* (New York 1947), 55. In “The Double Crisis (a dialogue),” — a transcribed discussion with Andre Malraux appearing in *Partisan Review* (April 1948) — Burnham relates this global power struggle to the “long-term crisis [of] the transition from one dominant form of society to another: from traditional capitalism to what I have called in my books ‘managerial society,’ though the name itself is not important.

The book was enthusiastically embraced by Henry Luce, the *Time-Life-Fortune* mogul who had already proclaimed the dawn of “the American Century.” As Luce’s biographer notes, *The Struggle for the World* “was the first of the mailed-fist shockers to bring the American Century into martial postwar focus and to call for fast US preparation not only for war with Russia but for assertion of world leadership.” Condensed in *Life* magazine, it was given big play in *Time* as well, which asserted: “Only one defense of Burnham’s book can be made: it is — chillingly — true.” Burnham’s erstwhile comrades, on the other hand, responded bitterly. “Professor James Burnham once informed us, with a straight-faced solemnity, that for him ‘socialism is a moral ideal,’” recalled Socialist Workers Party leader James P. Cannon, in an article entitled “The Treason of the Intellectuals” (in *The Militant*, 24 May 1947). “Today, with the force-worshipping mentality of a fascist and the irresponsibility of an idiot shouting ‘fire’ in a crowded theater, he incites the power-drunk American imperialists to convince the world of their benevolence by hurling atomic bombs.” It seemed as if Burnham’s previous Trotskyism had been turned inside-out.³⁶

The Struggle for the World was hardly a piece of abstract theorizing. The book originated as an internal memorandum for the Office of Strategic Services, the wartime predecessor of the Central Intelligence Agency. Burnham was employed by both, serving as a consultant to the CIA’s covert-action staff from 1948 to 1952. In early 1953 he was brought in “to assist with AJAX, Kim Roosevelt’s operation to save the Shah of Iran from Dr. Mossadegh and his Tudeh (Communist) supporters,” recalls CIA veteran Miles Copeland. “Frank Wiesner, our boss, decided it needed ‘a touch of Machiavelli’ to ensure what emerged in Iran *after* the [US-sponsored] coup would make some kind of sense. *The Machiavellians* being fresh in his mind, Kim Roosevelt immediately thought of Jim Burnham, who, he said, would ‘lend credibility’ to the operation.” Burnham was also a regular lecturer in the early 1950s at the National War College, the Air War College, the Naval War College, and the School for Advanced International Studies. *The Struggle for*

Superimposed on the long-term crisis, like a wind-driven wave added to the deeper ground swell, is a shorter but still more acute crisis.” This second crisis is described as “the struggle for leadership in the organization of a world political order between Communism, directed from its Soviet inner fortress, and Western Civilization, basing itself necessarily, in terms of material power, first of all on the United States.” (407)

36 W.A. Swanberg, *Luce and His Empire* (New York 1972), 254; James P. Cannon, *Notebook of an Agitator* (New York 1958), 160; Burnham’s comment that “socialism is a moral ideal which men choose through a moral act” can be found in his polemic “Science and Style,” in Trotsky, *In Defense of Marxism*, 205.

the World was credited at the time (by *Life*, *Time*, *Newsweek* and *Christian Century*) as being an influence in the development of the aggressively anti-Communist Truman Doctrine. Two sequels — *The Coming Defeat of Communism* (1950) and *Containment or Liberation?* (1952) — were sharper critiques of the “containment” strategy that had been developed by State Department officer George F. Kennan. “At the time of the Korean war,” writes John P. Diggins, “his writings had considerable influence in the State Department, the Pentagon, and the Central Intelligence Agency, especially among those officials who wanted to oppose the policy of containment with a new strategy of ‘liberation-rollback.’”³⁷

In 1950 Burnham played a central role in helping organize — with an international array of anti-Communists that included Sidney Hook, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Melvin J. Lasky, Franz Borkenau, Arthur Koestler, Ignazio Silone, Stephen Spender, and other rightward-shifting leftists — the Congress for Cultural Freedom. Christopher Lasch has commented that “no gathering of the congress was complete” without Burnham, who undoubtedly was aware that this international anti-Communist alliance of moderate socialist, liberal and ex-leftist intellectuals, with all of its international gatherings and array of publications, depended on secret funding from the Central Intelligence Agency. At the founding conference, Borkenau expressed views coinciding with those of Burnham and many others (summarized by Hugh Trevor-Roper for the *Manchester Guardian*), “that he was a convert from communism and proud of it; that past guilt must be atoned for; that the ex-Communists alone understood communism and the means of resisting it; that communism could only mean perpetual war and civil war; and that it must be destroyed at once by uncompromising frontal attack.” In 1951, a US affiliate, the American Committee for Cultural Freedom was formed, by Burnham in conjunction with some of the most prominent US intellectuals, which — as Lasch has put it — “represented a coalition of liberals and reactionaries who shared a conspiratorial view of communism and who agreed, moreover, that

37 Miles Copeland in “James Burnham,” 36-7; George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (New York 1979), 96-7; Diggins, 321-2, 12. In *Blowback: America’s Recruitment of Nazis and Its Effects on the Cold War* (New York 1988), 276, Christopher Simpson argues that in this period Burnham’s political outlook was influenced by “his work with exiles during the early years of the [CIA-sponsored] American Committee for Liberation, Radio Liberation from Bolshevism, and similar projects that enlisted numerous Nazi collaborators among that generation of ‘freedom fighters.’” Varying perspectives on the larger context of U.S. foreign policy can be found in Frank J. Merli and Theodore A. Wilson (eds.), *Makers of American Diplomacy, From Theodore Roosevelt to Henry Kissinger* (New York 1974). Also see Walter La Feber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945-1980* (New York 1980).

the communist conspiracy had spread through practically every level of American society.”³⁸

It was in this period that Burnham effected his final break with the “non-Communist left” and with modern liberalism. As early as 1948 he had appeared as a friendly expert witness on Communism before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, urging that the US Communist Party be outlawed, although commenting: “It is unfortunate that Communism is referred to as the ‘left wing.’ It is actually the most ‘right wing.’” Burnham’s unequivocal defense of anti-Communist legislation and Congressional investigations of “un-American” activities in general (advanced most elaborately in his 1954 book *The Web of Subversion*) was capped by his defense of Senator Joseph McCarthy in particular. He angrily resigned from *Partisan Review* and also helped initiate a heated controversy in the American Committee for Cultural Freedom on this issue. There is also indication that Burnham’s defense of McCarthy — at a time when the Senator from Wisconsin was attacking the US State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency for allegedly harboring “Communists” — resulted in his dismissal from the CIA.³⁹

38 Christopher Lasch, “The Cultural Cold War: A Short History of the Congress for Cultural Freedom,” *The Agony of the American Left* (New York 1969), 64, 76, 82. Lasch comments (84, 67-68) that “the student of these events is struck by the way in which ex-communists seem always to have retained the worst of Marx and Lenin and to have discarded the best,” and elaborates: “Elitism was one of the things that attracted intellectuals to Leninism in the first place (more than to orthodox Marxism); and even after they had dissociated themselves from its materialist content, they clung to the congenial view of intellectuals as the vanguard of history and to the crude and simplified dialectic (of which Borkenau’s speech is an excellent example, and James Burnham’s *The Managerial Revolution* another) which passed for Marxism in left-wing circles of the thirties.” An extensive defense of these two organizations by a leading participant can be found in Sidney Hook’s *Out of Step*, 420-460.

39 James B. Burnham recounts the destruction of his father’s Trotsky correspondence in “James Burnham,” 51. The rise of liberal anti-Communism in the Cold War period, which Burnham did so much to shape, is charted in Mary Sperling McAuliffe, *Crisis on the Left: Cold War Politics and American Liberals, 1947-1954* (Amherst, MA 1978), and William O’Neill, *A Better World: The Great Schism—Stalinism and the American Intellectuals* (New York 1982). His Congressional testimony can be found in Eric Bentley(ed.), *Thirty Years of Treason: Excerpts from Hearings before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, 1938-1968* (New York 1970), his comment on Communism being right-wing rather than left-wing on 277. Burnham’s break with the “non-Communist Left” represented by *Partisan Review* is described in James B. Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans, A History of Literary Radicalism in America* (New York 1968), 273; his more general break with liberalism and departure from the CIA are described in John B. Judis, *William F. Buckley, Jr., Patron Saint of the Conservatives* (New York 1988), 122-123.

Burnham’s *The Web of Subversion* (New York 1954) is worth examining as one of the more articulate examples of the red-scare genre of the 1950s. More recent studies helping us contextualize Burnham’s writings and actions in this period include: Richard H. Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age, American Intellectuals in the 1940s and*

He went further and testified against the Independent Socialist League (which was Max Shachtman's re-named Workers Party that Burnham had helped found in 1940) when it sought to get itself removed from the Attorney-General's "subversive list." Shachtman later recalled: "I must say it was a shock We just didn't expect a man of his type, this suave, above-the-battle, academic, political man to descend to this sewage of the government's attempt to gag and outlaw a tiny little left-wing propagandist society." But, of course, Burnham was hardly "above the battle." He had broken fundamentally with his left-wing past (burning all of his correspondence with Trotsky in an incinerator behind his apartment) in order to commit himself totally to the US "struggle for the world." Ironically, Shachtman himself and a section of his followers would drift far enough to the political right by the 1960s and '70s to become allies in this struggle — without, however, shedding at least some shreds of their earlier socialist outlook. One participant-observer later commented that "their world-view was consistent with George Orwell's *1984*, Hannah Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism*, or James Burnham's *Managerial Revolution*."⁴⁰ Nonetheless, the dramatic change in his political trajectory stunned many as the 1940s shaded into the 1950s.

Burnham's metamorphosis was described, while obviously still in progress, in his own 1948 comments to Andre Malraux. In discussing "the broad movement of American intellectuals away from Communism," he

1950s (New York 1985); Allen J. Matusow, ed., *Joseph R. McCarthy* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ 1970); Ellen Schrecker, *The Age of McCarthyism, A Brief History with Documents* (Boston 1994); and David Cauter, *The Great Fear: The Anti-Communist Purge Under Truman and Eisenhower* (New York 1978).

Even after his departure from the CIA, Burnham was inclined (by his own admission) to remain an uncritical apologist for it — though late in life he expressed alarm that "innumerable bureaucratic protuberances" were making the U.S. intelligence community unwieldy as well as increasingly beyond the realm of accountability or control (in his article "Too Much Intelligence," *National Review* (4 July 1975), 711.

40 Diggins, 13; Wald, 189-192; Tim Wohlforth, *The Prophet's Children, Travels on the American Left* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ 1994), 47. According to Wohlforth, "Shachtman was the original theorist of the Evil Empire," a concept popularized by Ronald Reagan, but first advanced, it would seem, by Burnham rather than Shachtman. Also see Paul Buhle, ed., *The Legacy of the Workers Party, 1940-1949: Recollections and Reflections*, mimeographed (New York 1985), and Peter Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left, A Socialist's Odyssey Through the "American Century"* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ 1993). Incisive critiques of Burnham's anti-socialist and anti-democratic perspectives by his erstwhile Shachtmanite comrades can be found in Albert Gates [Glutzer], "Burnham and His Managers," *New International* (July 1941), 144-148, and R. Fahan [Irving Howe], "Machiavelli and Modern Thought: A Critique of James Burnham's Book," *New International* (December 1943), 334-337; (January 1944), 24-28; (February 1944), 50-54.

made an astonishing admission: “No doubt the Marxists are right, in part, when they scornfully say this is a response to the mounting ‘imperialist’ pressures. But,” he added, “it is also deeper than that.” The truths which he felt he had identified in *The Managerial Revolution* and *The Machiavellians* were no less essential for explaining the intellectual shift. Nor was Burnham sure that his left-wing commitments had led him down a blind alley. “In spite of my present rejection of Communism,” he said, “a rejection which I believe to be final and — one might say — absolute, I nevertheless often feel that *the experience of Communism* may have been a necessary phase in the moral development of our generation.” The most effective anti-Communists might be the ex-Communists; one cannot get at certain elemental aspects of the truth of the epoch, he suggested, without having “lived *through* Communism.” And yet he also confessed to a profound self-doubt: that “perhaps like the smug boast of a reformed drunk, this is a self-protective illusion of those of us who have ourselves been through Communism.” Those on the political Right may have been, all along, the more sober analysts: “If our eyes remain bleary, it may be that the sights can be accurately taken only by those who, by nature or luck or even moral coarseness, were immune to the disease.”⁴¹ Elsewhere in his discussion with Malraux, he offered a disturbing analogy meant to illustrate the post-War situation, but which was just as much autobiographical:

I have been reminded of a documentary movie that I saw recently. It showed a strange species of crab at the point in its development when it must totally rid itself of its old shell in order to grow the new shell without which it cannot live. The process was painful in the extreme, tortuous, slow, and in fact grotesque. The old shell was dead, but it clung nevertheless to the living flesh at a thousand points. Finally, when at last the attachments were broken, there came the most dangerous moment of all, when the old armor was gone and the new not yet gained, and the crab stood alone, exposed to all its enemies on the sea floor.⁴²

When Burnham had finally gained his own “new armor” after a painful and lonely period of crisis, he was aligned with those who had all along been immune to the disease of believing in a socialist future. Yet his new comrades, far from mocking Burnham for his earlier illusions, embraced him as one of their most clear-sighted theorists.

41 Burnham and Malraux, “The Double Crisis,” 434.

42 *Ibid.*, 408.

Conservative Master-Thinker

In 1955 Burnham joined with William F. Buckley, Jr. and a varied assortment of right-wing anti-Communists (traditionalists, libertarians and hardened ex-leftists) to establish the conservative weekly *National Review*. “Beyond any question,” Buckley later wrote, “he has been the dominant influence of this journal.” Former *National Review* staffer Garry Wills remembers: “Only Burnham, of those involved day to day in the magazine’s direction, was secure enough not to challenge Bill’s authority. But, of course, Burnham most completely shared Bill’s concept of the journal’s mission. Burnham, the student of power, saw *National Review* as a particular pressure point meant to have some real impact on the over-all strategic stance of America.” More was involved here than simply a meeting of the minds between Buckley and Burnham. The former Trotskyist was a profound influence on the younger man, who wrote to him in 1978: “With the death of my father, no one else came near to occupying the same role in my life as you have done: as advisor, mentor, friend, companion.”⁴³

Burnham’s general orientation in this last phase of his career is laid out in his incisive 1964 work, *The Suicide of the West*. One critic later commented that this leftist-turned-rightist “attacked the idea of a collectivist society with the weapons of nineteenth century liberalism,” but this misses the power of Burnham’s perspective, which goes well beyond the frontiers of all liberal ideology. “Liberalism is not equipped,” he argued, “to meet and overcome the actual challenges confronting Western civilization in our time.” He identified what he considered the three most crucial challenges: “first, the jungle now spreading within our own society, in particular in our great cities; second, the explosive population growth and political activation within the world’s backward areas, principally the equatorial and subequatorial latitudes occupied by non-white masses; third, the drive of the communist enterprise for a monopoly of world power.” He insisted that “liberalism cannot either see or deal with the domestic jungle and the backward regions — the two challenges are closely similar. Liberalism is unfitted by its rationalistic optimism, its permissiveness, its egalitarianism and democratism, and by its [feelings of] guilt.” What’s more, “the challenge of communism is from the Left; and all the major challenges that now bear crucially on survival come from the Left. But liberalism ... is unable to conduct an intelligent, firm and sustained strug-

43 William F. Buckley, Jr. in “James Burnham,” 31; Garry Wills, *Confessions of a Conservative* (Harmondsworth, England 1980), 35; Judis, 440. According to Gary Dorrien in *The Neo-Conservative Mind* (58), it was Burnham who recruited Buckley to the CIA in 1951.

gle against the Left. Liberalism can function effectively only against the Right.” In his elaboration of this point we can find echoes from his earlier writings:

The secular, historically optimistic, reformist, welfare-statish, even plebiscatory aspects of liberalism are all present in communism.... What communism does is to carry the liberal principles to their logical and practical extreme: the secularism; the rejection of tradition and custom; the stress on science; the confidence in the possibility of molding human beings; the determination to reform *all* established institutions; the goal of wiping out all social distinctions; the internationalism; the belief in welfare state carried to its ultimate form in the totalitarian state. The liberal's arm cannot strike with consistent firmness against communism, either domestically or internationally, because the liberal dimly feels that in doing so he would be somehow wounding himself.⁴⁴

This was the basic orientation of *National Review*. Although it was seldom stated so clearly, so was Burnham's uncompromisingly anti-democratic elitism. The poet Carl Sandburg's glowing hymn of the 1930s *The People, Yes* seemed as absurd to him as various intellectuals' later despair over the alleged limitations of “the American people.” As he explained in a 1975 column in *National Review*, “it does not make much sense to blame (or to praise) ‘the people’ as an undifferentiated entity. ‘A people’ becomes historically significant through its articulation into institutions and its expression through leaders and an elite.” Similarly, Burnham's tough-minded defense of the United States as an imperial power in the global political economy was essential to the magazine's orientation. As he explained in 1971:

Now it is obvious, as well as confirmed by historical experience, that carrying out the imperial responsibilities requires certain characteristics in the imperial citizens, or at least in the leading strata; confidence in both their rights and their ability to perform the imperial task; resoluteness; perseverance; a willingness to assure the strength — that is, the military force — to fulfill the task; and finally (it must be added) a willingness to kill people, now and then, without collapsing into a paroxysm of guilt.⁴⁵

44 James Gilbert, *Designing the Industrial State, The Intellectual Pursuit of Collectivism in America, 1880-1940* (Chicago 1972), 284; James Burnham, *The Suicide of the West* (New York 1964), 278, 283, 289-90. Burnham is appropriately placed in the context of American conservatism in William F. Buckley (ed.), *American Conservative Thought in the Twentieth Century* (Indianapolis 1970). Peter Viereck's relatively centrist historical survey, *Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ 1956) also is useful.

45. These quotations, from articles published in *National Review*, are presented in a sympathetic study of Burnham's ideas, Samuel T. Francis, *Power and History: The Political Thought of James Burnham* (Lanham, MD 1984), 124-5.

In fact, Burnham's regular column in *National Review* was entitled "The Third World War" (renamed "The Protracted Conflict" a few years later), and his introduction to a 1967 collection of those columns, *The War We Are In*, stressed that "one thing the Cold War has *not* been is 'cold.' From the very beginning ... there have been fighting and bloodshed." That "there should be shooting and killing" in this war, he mused, was hardly a distinctive quality of the Cold War. What *was* distinctive was "its multi-dimensional, indeed omni-dimensional nature." Burnham outlined the realities of the Cold War in "the last decade and the next" with his usual lucidity: "It is conducted, through shifting emphases, along every social dimension: economic, political, cultural, racial, psychological, religious as well as military; and the military dimension comprises every sort of guerrilla, terrorist, paramilitary, partisan and irregular combat as well as fighting by conventional forces." This is, of course, a policy recommendation as well as a description. In the 1970s, he also articulated what would become a touchstone of later US policy: the need to distinguish between "authoritarian" and "totalitarian" regimes.⁴⁶

Burnham's previous Marxism is clearly linked to the nature of his anti-Communism. The "omni-dimensional" nature of the Cold War, he explained, was necessitated by the comprehensive nature of the Marxist critique of capitalism: "Existing non-communist civilization expresses essentially the exploitation and corruption of class society; it cannot be reformed, but must be overthrown and destroyed, so that the new communist man can build in its place the new classless communist society." His break from the Marxist analytical method also shaped his critique of liberal foreign policy perspectives, which were based on the notion of "belly-communism" (i.e., "since bad economic conditions breed communism ... we will be able to prevent communism or eliminate it by improving the economic conditions"). Burnham argued that this was a false notion deduced from faulty ideology: "from a vague economic determinism inherited both from classic laissez-faire doctrine and from the 'vulgar Marxism' that entered the American thought stream through Lincoln Steffens, Charles Beard, Vernon Louis Parrington and Gustavus Myers." In

46 James Burnham, *The War We Are In: The Last Decade and the Next* (New Rochelle, NY 1967), 13. For the authoritarian/totalitarian distinction, see James Burnham, "The Alternatives to Democracy," *National Review* (25 October 1975) 1225, and "Distinctions Within Distinctions," *National Review*, (17 January 1975), 27 — which concludes that "democracy's defects lead toward its replacement by despotism," and that despotism of the Right is preferable to that of the Left. As Gary Dorrien shows (*The Neoconservative Mind*, 370-2), elements of Burnham's perspective were held in common with sectors of "the anti-Stalinist Old Left" (such as his old comrade Max Shachtman) as well as with Hannah Arendt's 1951 classic *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. It can be argued, however, that it was Burnham's version that was most faithfully reflected in neo-conservative Jeane Kirkpatrick's "Dictatorships and Double Standards," *Commentary* (November 1979), 34-45, consequently permeating the foreign policy of the Reagan-Bush administrations.

fact, “the primary active cause of communism is communists,” and the only way “to stop communism or get rid of it” would be by defeating communists throughout the world — not “by ‘avoiding confrontation’ abroad and granting them freedom to operate at home.” Burnham’s embrace of the systematic elitism of “the Machiavellians” was just as crucial a factor in his latter-day Cold War orientation: “The primary passive cause, or condition, for the advance of communism — and of subversive revolution more generally — is the failure of the governing elite to supply firm leadership and a clear, coherent policy, the failure to give the masses the impression that the elite knows where it is going and is prepared to take the necessary steps to get there.”⁴⁷

The orientation which Burnham articulated helped provide an ideological focus long lacking for US. conservatives. “America — a conservative country without any conservative ideology — appears before the world a naked and arbitrary power,” C. Wright Mills had commented in 1954, and as late as 1962, Mills could still assert: “The ideological and intellectual functions performed by nineteenth-century conservatism are now usually performed by liberalism. In fact, there is no half-way coherent conservatism that is not a variety of liberalism, a restatement of Edmund Burke, or mere eccentricity.” Even the early *National Review* struck many as not providing a coherent ideology, reflecting instead “a crude patch-work of special interests,” in the words of Dwight Macdonald, who added: “To be simply anti-liberal is not to be a conservative.” Yet as time passed, the influence of Burnham became increasingly pronounced in the magazine, as did its intellectual and political impact.⁴⁸

Intellectual historian George Nash has suggested that “if *National Review* (or something like it) had not been founded, there would probably have been no cohesive intellectual force on the Right in the 1960s and 1970s.” This is a particularly decisive achievement, for as Nash notes: “In 1945 ‘conservatism’ was not a popular word in America, and its spokesmen were without much influence in their native land. A generation later these once isolated voices had become a chorus, a significant intellectual and political move-

47 Burnham, *The War We Are In*, 13-14, 320, 321. Dorrien notes that Burnham was an early and consistent proponent of “the domino theory” (*The Neoconservative Mind*, 60-61), which mirrors Marxism’s revolutionary internationalism. Journalist Sidney Blumenthal has suggested that Burnham’s variant of Cold War anti-Communism represented a perverse utilization of elements in the Trotskyist orientation — transforming Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution into a policy of “permanent counter-revolution.” See Sidney Blumenthal, “The Reagan Doctrine’s Strange History,” *Washington Post*, 29 June 1986, cited in Simpson, *Blowback*, 276.

48 C. Wright Mills, “The Conservative Mood,” in *Power, Politics, and People*, 220; C. Wright Mills, *The Marxists* (New York 1962), 16; Dwight Macdonald, *Politics Past* (New York:1970), 342, 335.

ment which had an opportunity to shape the nation's destiny." Their influence was reflected at a 1980 banquet for *National Review* attended by 600 luminaries, including foreign policy architect Henry Kissinger and CIA director William Casey, as well as such prominent politicians as New York Mayor Ed Koch and Senator Alfonse D'Amato. The banquet celebrated the Presidential victory of Ronald Reagan, which was seen as the culmination of the conservative triumph.⁴⁹

Burnham was now unable to savor the triumph, however, because in late 1978 he had been incapacitated by a stroke. Nonetheless, in 1983 President Reagan awarded Burnham the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor. The accompanying citation read: "As a scholar, writer, historian and philosopher, James Burnham has profoundly affected the way America views itself and the world. Since the 1930s, Mr. Burnham has shaped the thinking of world leaders. His observations have changed society and his writings have become guiding lights in mankind's quest for truth. Freedom, reason and decency have had few greater champions in this century than James Burnham." Burnham died in 1987, only a few years before the close of the Cold War which his admirers felt had been "won" through the application of his strategic perspectives.⁵⁰

Indeed, the "new world order" which US policy-makers seek to consolidate is that envisioned by this ex-revolutionary turned conservative master-thinker, which prioritizes the security of privileged elites. While many liberals and conservatives alike have proclaimed "the West's" victory in the Cold War to be a victory for "democracy," one is entitled to wonder whether they share Burnham's view that our "democratic" elitism is all well and good, but that *genuine* democracy (or "democratism" — rule by the people) is neither possible nor desirable, being inconsistent with human dynamics, corporate realities and imperial responsibilities.

Comments of *National Review* associates in defense of their mentor, shortly after he died, help to illuminate aspects of his intellectual contribution no less than his personality. More than one took offense at the comments of Irving Howe, the editor of the moderate socialist journal *Dissent* (and an ex-comrade from Trotskyist days), who had once written that Burnham "has always been a cold-blooded snob, first as a Trotskyist, then as a herald of the 'managerial revolution,' and lately as geopolitical strategist in charge of World War III for the *National Review*." Jeffrey Hart responded tartly that "nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, on his vacations, Burnham liked to take long automobile trips with Marcia [his wife], both viscerally and

49 Nash, 153, xv; Judis, 425-426.

50 Medal of Freedom Citation, in "James Burnham," 53. Also see Simpson, *Blowback*, 276.

intellectually loving the ordinary life of the United States, fascinated by such things as families living in new sleep-in vehicles, and finding surprise and beauty in places such as Houston and Tucson.”⁵¹

C.H. Simonds also recalled: “Those in the know awaited with particular excitement his return from the periodic rambles to the hinterlands he took with Marcia, soaking up his country, conversing with mandarins and mechanics, and — always — observing and analyzing. His meditations on matters great (blue-collar conservatism in the heartland—he was the first to notice it) and small (the clothesline as a vanishing indicator of status) freshened the sometimes hermetic atmosphere of East 35th Street [where the *National Review* offices were located].” Linda Bridges added that “you knew Jim had put in his time with the workers in his Trotskyist days.”⁵²

And yet there were some erstwhile comrades who questioned the quality of this “time with the workers.” Morris Lewit, an aging working-class Trotskyist, later recalled a discussion which took place when James P. Cannon and he visited Burnham’s pleasant country home in Connecticut during the 1930s:

Burnham said, “Well the workers have no prejudices against Blacks.” So I said, “No, there *are* prejudices against Blacks.” For him it was a revelation. He idealized the working class. An intellectual, you know, who wanted to have a socialist revolution. I disappointed him He was involved in abstractions and knew nothing about the working class. That you could see. And as a consequence he idealized [the working class], and couldn’t stand the reality of it. Comes the revolution it will be a different working class, but it will have to go through struggles and learn something He was a naive intellectual, [who] could write abstract articles He entered without any experience in life. No wonder he’s ended up all the way on the right now.⁵³

That Burnham had been naive about the actually-existing working class during his Trotskyist days, of course, would obviously be less upsetting to his right-wing associates than the accusation that he was a “cold-blooded snob.”

51 Irving Howe, *Steady Work, Essays in the Politics of Democratic Radicalism, 1953-1966* (New York 1966), 253; Jeffrey Hart, “James Burnham,” 44.

52 C.H. Simonds, Linda Bridges in “James Burnham,” 52, 48.

53 Author’s interview with Morris Lewit, 19 December 1993; tape in author’s possession. Lewit, a plumber by trade, had been a teen-age participant in the Russian Revolution, later becoming active in the American Communist movement; a founder of the Communist League of America and an early translator of Trotsky’s works into English. Lewit was a sometime member of the Political Committee of the Socialist Workers Party; his party name was Morris Stein. A useful introductory study of “the workers” who were the source of Burnham’s idealization and disappointment can be found in James R. Green, *The World of the Worker, Labor in Twentieth-Century America* (New York 1980). Also see George Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight, Labor and Culture in the 1940s* (Urbana 1994).

Priscilla Buckley acknowledged that Burnham's "cool exterior ... led many to believe that he was cold." But she insisted: "There was nothing cool in the Jim Burnham I knew." It is possible, of course, that their similar social backgrounds contributed to the flourishing of an obviously warm friendship. It is certainly the case, in the last decades of his life, that he felt none of the agonizing inner conflicts which had torn him when he was part of the Socialist Workers Party. "That he stuck with *National Review* to the end of his life," notes Linda Bridges, "may say that he finally had found the appropriate means to his end."⁵⁴

Recalling tensions between Burnham and another *National Review* editor Frank Meyer, Garry Wills remembered: "When Frank was feeling particularly exercised over some policy of Burnham's, he would take off the shelf Orwell's *Shooting an Elephant* and read to visitors its attack on Burnham's 'power worship.'" Joseph Sobran, however, believes that Orwell was mistaken "when he accused Burnham of worshipping power. Jim didn't worship it; he did unsentimentally respect it, and he came to terms with it in his own way, without compromising his honor. Later, Orwell more perceptively saluted Jim's vision and courage, and made the geopolitics of Jim's early books the premise of *1984*."⁵⁵

Yet this may be a more dubious honor than Burnham's defender suspects. Literary critic Paul Siegel has suggested that George Orwell did more than use Burnham's geopolitics in his anti-totalitarian novel *1984*. The forbidden theoretical work that Orwell's hero Winston Smith begins to read — often taken to be modeled after Trotsky's *Revolution Betrayed* — is thematically and stylistically much closer to Burnham's own *Managerial Revolution*. And the sinister Inner-Party man in the novel, O'Brien, "in his adoration of power, in his unquestioning acceptance of power," is, Siegel suggests, modeled on Burnham himself! "For to Orwell the oppressor is always the same, whatever the oppressive society calls itself." As Orwell put it: "The real question is not whether the people who wipe their boots on us during the next fifty years are to be called managers, bureaucrats, or politicians: the question is whether capitalism, now obviously doomed, is to give way to oligarchy or to true democracy."⁵⁶

54 Priscilla Buckley, "James Burnham," 47.

55 Wills, 46; Sobran in "James Burnham," 46. Also see Irving Howe (ed.), *Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four: Text, Sources, Criticism* (New York 1963).

56 Paul Siegel, *Revolution and the 20th-Century Novel* (New York 1979), 150-60; George Orwell, "James Burnham and the Managerial Revolution," *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, Volume 4 (New York 1968), 165. A powerful alternative to Burnham's orientation is the approach which can be traced in the writings of one of his co-thinkers of earlier years (see footnote 13, above), Hal Draper (ed. E. Haberkern), *Socialism from Below* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ 1992); also Hal Draper, "The Secret Weapon: Political Warfare," *New Politics*, 2.3 (Summer 1963), 111-20.