

# JAMES BURNHAM

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## **Thinkers of our Time: James Burnham**

Samuel Francis

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*Reviewed by Louis Andrews*

James Burnham was possibly the leading theoretician of the twentieth century American anti-communist right, yet he is almost entirely unknown to the rank and file today. Even amongst the leadership he was often profoundly misunderstood. For example, one prominent antiwar libertarian considers him a globalist and a neoconservative. Thankfully the late American political journalist and author, Dr. Samuel Francis, left us with this updated version of his book *Power and History*, originally published in 1984. This new edition is in the "Thinkers of Our Time" series by the Claridge Press.

Burnham was of English Catholic immigrant background and graduated at the top of his class at Princeton, then attended Balliol before starting his academic teaching career. By the early 1930s he was already a dedicated Marxist and a friend of Sidney Hook and others on the Trotskyite left. Yet he was never doctrinaire and soon his differences came to the fore. By 1940 he was a member of the Fourth International, helped found the Workers Party, and then broke entirely with Marxism, Trotskyite or otherwise, with the realization that the end-stage of capitalism was not socialism, but "managerialism." The result was his first important work, *The Managerial Revolution*, which showed the relationship among Stalinism, fascism, Nazism, and New Dealism, and of all of these to totalitarianism. It became a minor classic and may have had more influence on the intellectual left than the right. *The Machiavellians* may be Burnham's most important and most misunderstood book. Subtitled *Defenders of Freedom*, it analyzed the political theories of four non-Marxist thinkers

who greatly influenced Burnham: Sorel, Mosca, Pareto, and Michels. Despite his decade-long flirtation with Marxism, Burnham recognized that ideologies were not scientific, but merely existed to provide a “rationalization for the existence and power of the dominant minority.”

Belief in an ideology is entirely nonrational and thus impervious to reasoned argument. Liberty and freedom best exist in societies where opposing forces, formal or informal, provide restraints on tyranny. Burnham notes “Juridical defense can be secure only where there are at work various and opposing tendencies and forces, and where these mutually check and restrain each other.” Private property, religion, and freedoms of press and speech are among these checks. Ultimately, though, only power can restrain power; thus the need for a strong opposition. Francis notes “virtually all of Burnham’s writing since *The Machiavellians* must be understood in reference to it.” In the years immediately following, Burnham concentrated on outlining a strategy for the defeat of communism in a series of books, some of which were originally prepared for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) during World War II. Today these are of but historical interest as a road largely not taken. In the early 1950s Burnham participated in the founding of *National Review* and was a senior editor until the end of his career. He was also one of the few notable intellectuals who refused to denounce Senator McCarthy, instead resigning from the board of *Partisan Review* in protest.

Burnham’s *Congress and the American Tradition*, which appeared in 1959, considers American government and American tradition through the Machiavellian lens and comes to conclusions that often support those of conservatives, but do so for untraditional reasons. For example, he valued tradition because of its social utility, not because of any “nostalgic sentiment or . . . ethical, metaphysical, or theological principles.” Romulus and Remus can be quite as good as the Magna Carta, if believed. Burnham’s last book is also his best known, if only because of its snappy title – *Suicide of the West*. As the title suggests, he argues that the West is dying and the death is self-imposed. Liberalism is not the cause, but is the ideology that “motivates and justifies the contraction, and reconciles us to it.” Thus, liberalism “permits Western civilization to be reconciled to dissolution.” James Burnham influenced a number of important thinkers besides Sam Francis, including Brian Crozier. This book provides an excellent look into the mind of one of the century’s most interesting intellects and also opens a window for a better understanding of its author, Dr. Samuel Francis, who will himself remain one of the most important American political thinkers.

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