



Essay by Francis P. Sempa

IF DESTRUCTION BE OUR LOT

FIFTY YEARS AGO, *NATIONAL REVIEW* founding editor James Burnham wrote *Suicide of the West: An Essay on the Meaning and Destiny of Liberalism*, a book that brilliantly examines the role of modern liberalism in reconciling the West to its geopolitical retreat. Like all of Burnham's books, *Suicide of the West* combines elegant writing, historical insight, unsentimental political analysis, and an unmatched understanding of power in all its forms. It was Burnham's last book (other than a collection of columns entitled *The War We Are In*, published in 1967), and it deserves to be remembered as one of the 20th-century's great works of political analysis.

Its central theme is that liberalism is the "ideology of Western suicide." Burnham makes clear from the outset that liberalism was not to blame for the global retreat of the West, but modern liberalism motivates, justifies, and reconciles the West to its global retreat. "[T]he influence of liberalism on public opinion and governmental policy," he explains, "has become—by obscuring the realities, corrupting will and confounding action—a major obstacle to...arresting, and reversing, the decline."

The West's global retreat began with the First World War—what an earlier generation called the Great War, and what the diplomat and historian George Kennan called the 20th-century's "seminal catastrophe." Europe, the

birthplace of Western civilization, tore itself apart in five years of total war. In Winston Churchill's unforgettable words, "When all was over, torture and cannibalism were the only two expedients that the civilized, scientific, Christian States had been able to deny themselves." In the war's aftermath Russia was Communized, and the West lost its confidence in the virtues of its political tradition.

The Second World War accelerated the West's global retreat as the Communist world expanded and Western colonialism gradually ended. Burnham describes the West's retreat in simple, geographic terms: "effective political control over acreage." In 1914, writes Burnham, "the domain of Western civilization was, or very nearly was, the world." By 1964, the trend of Western retreat was unmistakable: "For the past four generations Western civilization has been shrinking: the amount of territory, and the number of persons relative to the world population, that the West rules have much and rapidly declined." Invoking the research of Spengler in *The Decline of the West* (2 vol.; 1918-23) and Toynbee in his massive *A Study of History* (12 vol.; 1934-61) on the rise and decline of civilizations, Burnham concludes that once the process of contraction set in it is seldom if ever reversed: "We are therefore compelled to think it probable that the West, in shrinking, is also dying."

And yet the West still possessed unmatched economic and military power, and had not been forced to retreat by any external power. The cause or causes of decline lay elsewhere, in what Burnham calls "non-material internal factors." The West, he says, was committing "suicide." Although liberalism was not initially responsible for Western contraction, widespread acceptance of its basic tenets prevents Westerners from understanding, and so reversing, their shrinking influence.

Liberal Guilt

BURNHAM LABELS LIBERALISM A *WELT-anschauung*, or worldview, a system of belief based on what ought to be instead of what is and has been. At its most fundamental, liberalism is based on an abstract, rationalist view of human nature. Liberals hold that human nature is not fixed but changeable, that humans are perfectible and their potentialities unlimited, that reason can govern the affairs of men, and that human progress is inevitable. In the liberal worldview principles, customs, and religion are obstacles to human progress, not evidence of human nature's essence and limitations. For liberals, there is no evil, no social problem, no disagreement or conflict that cannot be overcome by their enlightened ideology.



Liberals believe that it is possible to create conditions for universal peace, perfect justice, economic equality, an end to crime, and the disappearance of poverty. Thousands of years of recorded history have no impact on the liberal belief system. As Burnham memorably writes,

The grimmest lessons of the past about the inherent limits and defects of human nature have been continuously confirmed by wars with tens of millions dead, by mass persecutions and tortures, deliberate starvation of innocents, wanton killings by tens of thousands, the ingenuities of science used to perfect methods of mass terror, new forms of enslavement, gigantic genocides, the wiping out of whole nations and peoples.... [I]n the face of what man has done and does, it is only an ideologue obsessed with his own abstractions who can continue to cling to the vision of an innately uncorrupt, rational and benignly plastic human nature possessed of an unlimited potential for realizing the good society.

The real world never satisfies liberalism's notion of the good society. This dissatisfaction produces "[t]he guilt of the liberal," which, Burnham writes, "causes him to feel obligated to try to *do something* about any and every social problem, to cure every social evil." Trying to do something about world peace, the arms race, poverty, hunger, economic inequality, injustice, or any other problem appeases this guilt. Good intentions substitute for actual results. It is enough for Western liberals to be "in favor of disarmament," regardless of the consequences to Western security if the enemy keeps building weapons. It is enough for Western liberals to favor a "war on poverty," even though the specific policies produce generational poverty and dependence on federal entitlements.

Burnham argues that liberal guilt also has the effect of morally disarming Westerners when confronted by non-Western nations and groups. Liberals vociferously condemned acts of terror committed by the French in Algeria, but their protests were far less ardent against Arab acts of terror that lasted longer, were more ferocious, and claimed many more victims. Similarly, liberals protested atrocities committed by South African whites, but rarely if ever condemned atrocities committed by South African blacks. "Judging a group of human beings...that he considers to possess less than their due of well being," Burnham summarizes, "the liberal is hard put to condemn that group morally for acts that he would not hesitate to condemn in his fellows." This phenomenon of liberal guilt

sometimes evolves into "a generalized hatred of Western civilization and of his own country as part of the West."

Communism and Containment

LIBERALISM SHARES WITH MARXISM and other leftist ideologies the vision of a classless society in which each person gives according to his ability and each person receives according to his needs. "[L]iberalism," writes Burnham, "is itself of 'the left'...part of the great Left wave that we can trace back to the French Revolution." This relationship affects liberals' approach to regimes that profess similar views. Burnham uses a French phrase to express this phenomenon: *il n'y a pas d'ennemi a gauche* (there is no enemy to the left); for liberals, all the enemies are on the Right. Liberals preferred Lenin to Nicholas II; Mao to Chiang Kai-shek; Tito to Mihailovich; and Castro to Batista. To most liberals, Senator Joseph McCarthy was thought to be a greater danger than Stalin. It is no accident that Communist expansion abroad and infiltration of the U.S. government achieved its greatest successes during the Roosevelt and Truman Administrations.

In a chapter entitled "The Drift of U.S. Foreign Policy," Burnham explores the ways in which liberal ideology helped to undermine the United States in its post-World War II role as the leading power of Western civilization. His analysis reiterates and updates his critique of U.S. foreign policy first formulated in his brilliant Cold War trilogy: *The Struggle for the World* (1947), *The Coming Defeat of Communism* (1950), and *Containment or Liberation?* (1952). "The United States," he notes, "is both offspring and organic part of Western civilization." After World War II, it became the "unquestioned leader of the West." Strategically, this meant "that a Western loss, retreat or weakening anywhere in the world...means a weakening of the basic position of the United States in relation to the world-strategic equilibrium."

The policy of containment set forth in George Kennan's "X" article in the July 1947 issue of *Foreign Affairs* and implemented by the Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy Administrations, corresponded to what Burnham calls the "Yalta Strategy," referring to the wartime conference where the U.S. acknowledged Soviet control over the nations of Central and Eastern Europe. The Yalta Strategy effectively accepted the Soviet-Communist division of the world into the "Zone of Peace" and the "Zone of War." As Burnham explains,

"The zone of peace" means the region that is already subject to communist rule; and the label signifies that within their region

the communists will not permit any political tendency, violent or non-violent, whether purely internal or assisted from without, to challenge their rule. "The zone of war" is the region where communist rule is not yet, but in due course will be, established; and within the zone of war the communists promote, assist and where possible lead political tendencies, violent or non-violent, democratic or revolutionary, that operate against non-communist rule.

Containment was "purely negative and defensive in conception" and "excluded the attempt to achieve a positive gain," while "any loss was and remained a loss." The outcome of the Korean War; the East German, Polish, and Hungarian uprisings in the mid-1950s; the 1956 Suez crisis; the 1961 partition of Berlin; the 1962 Cuban missile crisis; and the early strategic defensive approach to the war in Southeast Asia confirmed Burnham's analysis.

Containment's strategic flaws were compounded by American support for rapid Western de-colonization in the Third World. Western outposts in Southwest Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Africa were willingly abandoned. "Both geographically and politically," writes Burnham, "the Western strategic position was cumulatively eroded." Liberals consoled themselves by supplying foreign aid to Third World dictators who regularly voted in the United Nations against Western interests; creating such high-minded organizations as the Peace Corps and the Alliance for Progress; and funding wasteful U.N. programs intended to help the Third World. "The backward regions of the equatorial zones," Burnham argues, "are only, for liberalism, enlarged slums that will be put to rights by the standard remedies: education, democracy, and welfare in the special form of foreign aid."

Exceptionalism Abandoned

IN THE BOOK'S LAST CHAPTER, BURNHAM identifies the causes of the West's contraction as "the decay of religion...an excess of material luxury...and...getting tired, worn out, as all things temporal do." Liberalism did not initiate the decline and cannot be blamed for it, he reiterates, but it "permits Western civilization to be reconciled to dissolution," and therefore cannot help to reverse the process.

Fifty years later, little about liberalism as described by Burnham has changed. To be sure, Soviet Communism no longer poses the external threat to the West that it once did. In the 1980s, the Reagan Administration expressly rejected liberalism's approach to world politics



and developed and implemented policies—policies that most liberals actively opposed—to exploit Soviet weaknesses and undermine the Soviet empire. But the West’s victory in the Cold War did not reverse the overall trend Burnham identified in *Suicide of the West*, and there are and will be other external challengers. If anything, Western liberals today are less attached to Western civilization’s political traditions than they were 50 years ago.

As Burnham warns in *Suicide of the West*, liberalism is unequipped to defend and save Western civilization primarily because liberals no longer believe in the relative superiority of their civilization. Western civilization will only be saved when the West—most importantly the United States—reacquires

the pre-liberal conviction that Western civilization...is both different from and superior in quality to other civilizations and non-civilizations.... And there would have to be a renewed willingness, legitimized by that conviction, to use superior power and the threat of power to defend the West against all challenges and challengers. Unless Western civilization is superior to other civilizations and societies, it is not worth defending; unless Westerners are willing to use their power, the West cannot be defended. But by its own principles, liberalism is not allowed to entertain that conviction or to make frank, unashamed and therefore effective use of that power.

The anniversary of *Suicide of the West* has gone largely unnoticed. Burnham’s conclusion that Western civilization is dying was unpopular and unfashionable 50 years ago; it is more so today. At the end of his book, he expresses his hope that the final collapse of the West was not inevitable—that the trend could be reversed. Whatever happens, it must be said that Western civilization has had few greater intellectual champions than James Burnham.

Francis P. Sempa is an Assistant U.S. Attorney for the Middle District of Pennsylvania and the author, most recently, of Somewhere in France, Somewhere in Germany: A Combat Soldier’s Journey through the Second World War (Hamilton Books).