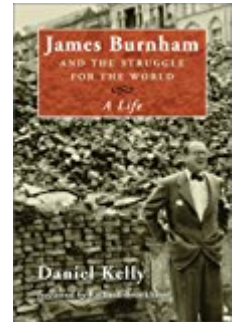


Daniel Kelly. *James Burnham and the Struggle for the World: A Life.* Wilmington: ISI Books, 2002. xxiii + 443 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-882926-76-3.



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Considering that his papers have long been available at the Hoover Institute, we have had to wait a long time for a full-length biography of James Burnham. Although his life and work have been considered by others such as Gary Dorreйн, this was generally in the context of Burnham's influence as one of the forefathers of neoconservatism.[1] Daniel Kelly has therefore done a valuable service with this study of one of the most intriguing conservative intellectuals of the Cold War period. Kelly admits to holding a special interest in Burnham since his first encounter with the latter's work in the pages of the *National Review* in the 1950s. He is right to claim that the scale and insight offered by Burnham's oeuvre, from the bureaucratization of modern life, through his critique of American liberalism, to his profound understanding of the dynamics of the Cold War, determine that this thinker should not disappear from our view. Burnham was also far from being a typical conservative, often displaying a flexibility in his standpoints which placed him beyond the pale for his colleagues at the *Review*. Having said this, a one-volume biography inevitably paints the narrative with a broad brush, making it

impossible to follow up fully on all the paths that Burnham went down during his career. In particular, there is the intriguing position he held for several years at the intersection between the U.S. state covert apparatus and the public role of the academic and intellectual. Kelly sketches this period mainly through Burnham's writings and offers little in the way of new material. Yet this is the one area where new insights could be offered on Burnham the Cold War intellectual.

Burnham came from a privileged background, his father rising rapidly within the railway business of the Great Northern line and able already in his mid-20s to provide a comfortable life in the Chicago suburbs for his family. Born in 1905, Burnham was the eldest of three sons, and his evident academic talents combined with sufficient financial backing soon set him up for the education fast-track: a private Catholic boarding school in Connecticut followed by graduation from Princeton in 1927 and two years at esteemed Balliol College in Oxford. By 1929 he had been taken on by New York University's philosophy department, a position he would hold for twenty

years. At this stage Burnham had shown no particular interest in politics and had not taken any political science courses at university. At Princeton he had majored in English, at Balliol he had taken courses in medieval philosophy and literature under J.J.R. Tolkien, and his reputation began to grow in New York as a specialist in aesthetics. His initial pursuit of this path was confirmed by his role as co-founder and co-editor of the literary journal *Symposium*, which first appeared in 1930.

However, as with so many of his generation, Burnham became radicalized by the Depression and sought direct political engagement. Always the empiricist, the desperate state of the economy and the visible plight of the unemployed convinced him more than anything that a major reckoning was approaching for Western civilization. Of the available explanations, Marx seemed to offer the key. By 1934 *Symposium* had folded and he was in the midst of the Trotskyite vanguard. Typical of his life-long search for an independent path, Burnham scorned the dogmas of the Communist Party (especially its primitive understanding of art) for the winding corridors of the left opposition. A critical influence on his thinking at this juncture was his NYU colleague Sidney Hook, then developing his ideas on how to adapt Marxism to the American experience. In 1933 Burnham joined the American Workers Party, and helped to direct its stormy course as it sought to aggrandize other groups of the left. By 1938 it had become the Socialist Workers Party and Burnham was not only on the political committee but also a regular contributor with both *New International* and *Socialist Appeal* and an important contact person in the U.S. for Trotsky himself (although they never met). But it didn't last. Burnham refused to accept Trotsky's call that the U.S.S.R., the only existing "worker's state," should be unconditionally supported in war. For Burnham, Stalin's invasion of Poland, Finland, and the Baltic States comprehensively discredited the Soviet Union, and Barbarossa did not change anything.

The decade of the 1940s was undoubtedly Burnham's high point as a public intellectual with considerable impact on both policy-making circles and wider opinion (not for nothing does Kelly term the three chapters that cover this period "Prophet," "Strategist," and "Warrior"). For the first time his written work reached a wider public. Kelly's portrayal of Burnham as a master synthesizer of different intellectual standpoints is exemplified by the *Managerial Revolution*, his first work as sole author, published in 1941. Examining the trend towards increasing bureaucratization within all forms of government, Burnham pointed out the dangerous collectivist tendencies ("democratic totalitarianism" or "Bonapartism") that existed as an inevitable consequence of the need to manage the complexities of socio-economic life in the twentieth century. Turning his realist-empiricist critique as much on Marxist ideology as on any other, Burnham declared his fundamental break with leftist politics. To make this clear, in 1943 he demonstrated that his real interest was the study of political power itself with his follow-up, *The Machiavellians*. By this stage, infused with the works of Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Machiavelli, and Niebuhr, the intellectual motifs that he would continue to express in his later works were evident. First, he had a tragic sense of determinism that inescapably ordered humanity's progress, opposed by a resilient belief in the capability of free will to reverse these destructive tendencies. Second, he rejected ideological solutions in favor of an objective analysis of the hard truths of reality. And there was a third theme, not always compatible with the previous two—his desire to belong to the vanguard forces that could shape politics and society for the better. Kelly rightly mentions Burnham's Trotskyite period as a valuable phase that directed him on his career as a political analyst, but otherwise he unfortunately goes no further in assessing what it was about the theory of the revolutionary left that attracted him. Christopher Lasch, in his seminal 1967 essay on the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF), identi-

fied precisely what was going on when he pointed out the following: "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.... "[2] Other lapsed Trotskyites applied their elitism later by means of a cultural vanguard, as Melvin Lasky did with *Der Monat* and the CCF.[3] Burnham, his fascination with the forces of history overshadowing his philosophical-cultural background, chose the political road.

Burnham's search for vanguard status took him through his Trotsky phase and into an alliance with the US covert state, an arrangement that began already in 1944 with a paper he wrote for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) on the future aims of Soviet power. It is on this relationship that Kelly is unfortunately at his weakest. Sticking to the materials he had available in the Burnham archive, Kelly makes no effort to explore the Burnham-OSS contact. How Burnham came into contact with OSS is not explained, and neither is there any assessment of why this report was commissioned, whether this was the only contact, and where it may have led. While Kelly rightly notes the influence of Toynbee's "geo-history" and Mackinder's geopolitics on Burnham's thinking in the mid-1940s, he does not make the connection on how institutions like the Council on Foreign Relations were also building on these works to project the post-war position of the United States. Likewise, Burnham's firebrand Cold War trilogy--*The Struggle for the World* (1947), *The Coming Defeat of Communism* (1950), and *Containment or Liberation?* (1953)--were all written with Burnham in close proximity to covert action circles, and his decision in 1949 to take long-term leave from NYU (he left formally in 1951) to become a political warfare consultant for Frank Wisner's newly-created Office of Policy Coordination (OPC) exemplifies how deep he was in that world. Kelly does a good job of sketching the pur-

pose of the OPC, the CCF, and Burnham's role on specific projects such as the Free Europe Committee's Free European University in Exile in Strasbourg. However, Kelly makes no concrete connections between the standpoints in Burnham's books and the OPC's operations, stating only that "it is unclear whether Burnham knew anything about the OPC when he wrote *The Coming Defeat of Communism*. But the book's proposals resembled the OPC agenda.... " (p. 151).[4] There is plenty of existing literature to provoke many more questions about Burnham's role in this period. In fact, he was at this stage effectively the intellectual mouthpiece for the covert war being waged by the OPC and its European syndicates against the Soviet bloc. His declamations that the U.S. must find the will to choose an aggressive stance against the pervasive determinism of Soviet expansion read as if they were taken word for word from NSC-68. Not only that but his outline of specific target areas such as Albania and the use of Eastern European exile movements are striking in how they offer intellectual justification and credibility for these covert strategies. Kelly notes in passing this side to Burnham's usefulness when he refers to how he was asked to join the planning for the 1953 CIA-backed coup against Mossadegh in Iran. But the author seems oblivious to the large-scale overt and covert efforts that were being made at that time to undermine the Eastern bloc.[5] He is also circumspect on Burnham's departure from his consultant role. The CCF disappears from Kelly's narrative, with no mention that Burnham was being excluded already in 1951 due to his wishes being at variance with the developing OPC-CIA goals for that organization. Kelly is also surprisingly circumspect about the cancellation of Burnham's consultant role in April 1953, mentioning Frank Wisner's order to end all contact, then contradicting himself by musing whether the contract was ended voluntarily. Yet one gets the strong impression that Burnham was by then too extreme for the CIA. By 1953, McCarthy, whom Burnham defended, was making in-

quiries about Agency personnel, something the director of the CIA, Allen Dulles, would not tolerate. The no-holds-barred schemes of OPC's early years had also been brought under a stricter rein. Someone like Burnham, adept at taking a controversial line on principle, was definitely expendable.[6]

It would be wrong to fault this biography too heavily for this lack of consideration towards specific phases of Burnham's career. In fairness, Kelly does a better job in covering Burnham's third and last shot at establishing himself in the vanguard, through his role as mentor, senior editor, columnist, and resident dominant personality with the conservative flagship journal *National Review*. Burnham's stormy relations with his *NR* colleagues (Buckley excepted) and his continuing war with the "mush-heads" of American liberalism are ably chronicled. All in all, then, this is a valuable book. The paramount goal for Kelly was to display Burnham's intellectual breadth and foresight in all its originality, and he fulfills this aim by concentrating on his subject's published works, the positions he took, and how they were received. The scholarly focus on the so-called New York Intellectuals has undoubtedly been to the detriment of an intellectual loner and outsider such as Burnham. As a biography determined to place its subject in the foreground once more, it therefore succeeds very well. Where it is sometimes lacking is in a more profound combined analysis of Burnham's desire for power and influence and his role as a public intellectual, particularly when this drive brought him into close contact with the U.S. state.

Notes

[1]. See for instance Gary Dorreйн, *The Neo-conservative Mind: Politics, Culture, and the War of Ideology* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), pp. 19-67.

[2]. Christopher Lasch, "The Congress for Cultural Freedom," *The Nation* (11 September 1967): p. 200.

[3]. See Giles Scott-Smith, "'A Radical Democratic Political Offensive': Melvin Lasky, *Der Monat*, and the Congress for Cultural Freedom," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 35 (2000): pp. 263-279; On "Eliotic Trotskyism" (the mix of Trotskyite impulses with the defence of high culture), see T.J. Clark, "Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art," *Critical Inquiry*, 9 (1982): pp.139-156.

[4]. This stance is all the more remarkable considering Kelly did track down and correspond with Burnham's erstwhile OPC contact man, Warren G. Fugitt.

[5]. See Peter Grose, *Rollback: America's Secret War behind the Iron Curtain* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000); Scott Lucas, *Freedom's War: The American Crusade against the Soviet Union* (New York: New York UP, 1999); Gregory Mitrovich, *Undermining the Kremlin: America's Secret Strategy to Subvert the Soviet Bloc 1947-1956* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2000).

[6] On Burnham's exclusion from the running of the CCF, see Peter Coleman, *The Liberal Conspiracy: The Congress for Cultural Freedom and the Struggle for the Mind of Postwar Europe* (New York: Free Press, 1989), pp. 44-45; Pierre GrÃ©mion, *Intelligence de L'Anticommunisme: Le CongrÃ©s pour la LibertÃ© de la Culture Ã Paris 1950-1975* (Paris: Fayard, 1997), pp. 96-97; Giles Scott-Smith, *The Politics of Apolitical Culture: The Congress for Cultural Freedom, the CIA, and Post-war American Hegemony* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 116-119.

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