James Burnham and Jonah Goldberg give dueling accounts of liberalism's role in our civilization's decline

Why the West Is Suicidal

Daniel McCarthy

How do you gauge the health of a civilization? There are geographic and demographic, strategic and economic, social and spiritual measures. By almost all of them, Western civilization appears to be in trouble. Fertility rates in the U.S. and Europe are below replacement levels. America is mired in the longest war in her history—having spent seventeen years in Afghanistan come December—with no glimmer of victory in sight. Indeed, for the West's greatest military power, one war shades into another in the Middle East: Iraq, ISIS, Syria, Yemen, perhaps soon Iran, none ever quite won.

The West remains rich, but the Great Recession of a decade ago and the sluggish recovery that followed suggest that our prosperity is faltering. Workers and the middle classes fear losing their jobs to automation, immigration, and financial chicanery. The destruction of old party coalitions and the dethronement of liberal elites on both sides of the Atlantic by new congeries of nationalists, populists, and socialists are an index of economic as well as political dissatisfaction. Meanwhile pews continue to empty throughout what was once Christendom. The religious group growing most quickly in the U.S. and Europe are the churchless "nones."

Daniel McCarthy is editor of *Modern Age*.

This gloomy litany is overfamiliar. Less well known, but unforgettable once seen, is the image of Western eclipse drawn from geography in the first chapter of James Burnham's *Suicide of the West*. Looking over an old atlas, Burnham describes how the maps from year to year and decade to decade show the lines and colors of the great European empires expanding almost continuously from the fifteenth century until the twentieth—and then, as he imagines the sequence continuing from 1914 to the mid-1960s, suddenly drawing back, to leave a world filled by scores of postcolonial regimes and vast new domains under the control of Communism. Burnham eschews the language of Oswald Spengler and does not call this a "decline." In neutral terms, it is a "contraction." But what, he wonders, brought it about?

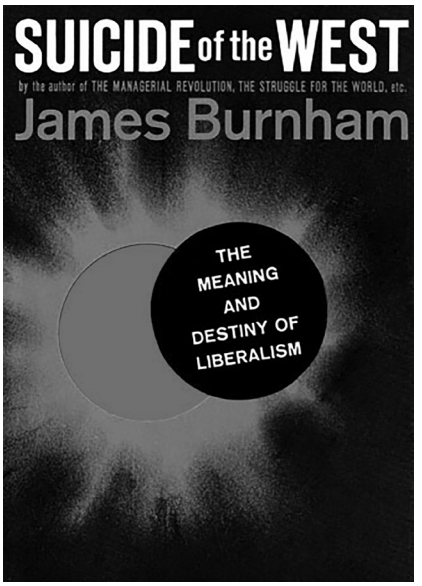
Suicide of the West, published in 1964, does not provide a definitive answer. What Burnham was certain of, and what we can be just as sure about today, is that the West had not been conquered by some greater outside power, as the empires of pre-Columbian Central and South America once were. The West did not, and does not, suffer from any lack of material resources, either. If our civilization is in retreat—geographically or otherwise—the cause must lie within its own mind and spirit. Decline, for lack of a better word, has not been forced upon the West; it has been chosen. In this sense, it is a suicide.

Burnham wrote in a spirit of hope, not despair: his book was intended as a warning against, and corrective to, the path of Western self-destruction. He was heard in time—or perhaps the West just received an unearned reprieve when Soviet Communism imploded at the end of the 1980s. Today, as a post–Cold War liberal world order underwritten by American power unravels, thoughts of suicide have returned. And like Burnham, another *National Review* mainstay, Jonah Goldberg, has written a book called *Suicide of the West*.

Goldberg's *Suicide* is subtitled *How the Rebirth of Populism, Nationalism, and Identity Politics Is Destroying American Democracy*. His book is, in some respects, the opposite of Burnham's earlier *Suicide,* whose subtitle was *An Essay on the Meaning and Destiny of Liberalism.* Goldberg can fairly be called a liberal conservative, and his *Suicide* argues for the preservation of a civilizational patrimony inherited from the Enlightenment. This includes economic liberalism (in the "classical" sense); religious and political pluralism; and faith in democracy, properly understood. Burnham, by contrast, was an economic nationalist with a Machiavellian understanding of politics that left no room for democratic idealism or any other kind. Where race and colonialism are concerned, Burnham's *Suicide* reads in places like a bible for the alt-right. Liberalism, far from being something he wished to conserve, was for Burnham "the ideology of Western suicide"—not the cause but a rationalization of the West's waning will to live.

Each *Suicide* is a specimen of a significant kind of right-wing thought, perhaps the two most significant kinds struggling for dominance today: Goldberg is a leading "Never-Trump" conservative, while Burnham, through the influence he exercised on later writers, can be considered the grandfather of Trump-era nationalism. Each book thus merits critical examination in search of a better understanding of—and perhaps an escape from—the predicament of our time. Before the books can be considered, however, some biographical background is in order.

James Burnham was one of the first sages William F. Buckley Jr. recruited to *National Review* before its launch in 1955. Already Burnham was famous as one of the country's leading ex-Communists turned anti-Communists. As a young professor of philosophy at New York University in the 1930s, Burnham had been among the country's foremost intellectual disciples of



Published in 1964, Burnham's classic work on Western contraction still speaks to conservatives today

Leon Trotsky. But by the time he published his first book, *The Managerial Revolution*, in 1941, he had abandoned Trotsky's Marxism for a theory of his own about the post-bourgeois future. The dawning age would be ruled, he believed, neither by workers nor by capitalists but by a new class of technocratic managers. New Deal planners and Soviet industrial commissars were early examples; a later, more refined archetype was to be U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara.

After serving with the Office of Strategic Services in World War II—and while working for its successor, the CIA, in the postwar years—Burnham emerged as a high-profile anti-Communist, author of such books as *The Struggle for the World*, *The Coming Defeat of Communism*, and *Containment or Liberation?* He became a mentor to William F. Buckley Jr. and eventually, in the younger man's words, his "paramount associate" at *National Review*. In Buckley's absence, Burnham would often lead the magazine's editorial meetings. He regularly clashed with the more ideologically driven members of the staff, notably Frank Meyer, whose libertarian-conservative "fusionism" was not pragmatic enough for the muscle-minded Burnham. Meyer, for his part, deemed Burnham a Rockefeller Republican, which he was: Burnham urged Buckley to support Nelson Rockefeller over Barry Goldwater in the 1964 Republican presidential contest, convinced that the Arizona senator was unserious and could not win.

That was the same year *Suicide of the West*, Burnham's last book of original material, appeared. It had its origin in a series of lectures, seminars, and papers on American liberalism delivered at the Carnegie Institute of Technology and the Christian Gauss Seminar in Criticism at Princeton University between 1959 and 1963. Liberalism was the first of several ideological "syndromes" Burnham wished to investigate: his method was to outline their membership, their members' shared beliefs and values, and the policies and social attitudes adjoined to those beliefs—connections arising not so much from logical necessity as by habit and feeling. Yet Burnham never did analyze the conservative or Communist syndromes at book length. Only liberalism received that treatment, in what became *Suicide.*

Burnham devoted the rest of his working life to his *National Review* column—originally titled The Third World War, later known as The Protracted Conflict—and other duties at the magazine. In early 1978, while flying back from a television debate in which he and Buckley defended the treaties that would return the Panama Canal to Panama against Ronald Reagan and other critics (including Pat Buchanan), Burnham suffered a sudden loss of vision. Later that year, he had a massive stroke and was forced into complete retirement. He received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from Reagan in 1983 and died four years later, at the age of eighty-one.

A small but influential series of disciples, most of whom never met him, has kept Burnham's thought alive ever since. When Buchanan ran for president in the 1990s, one of his closest advisers was Samuel Francis, a former Senate aide and newspaper columnist who adapted the patrician Burnham's ideas for a populist insurgency against the managerial class. Francis was the chief political theoretician of what came to be known as "paleoconservatism," whose themes of economic nationalism, immigration restriction, an "America First" foreign policy, and hardline opposition to multiculturalism would find an unmistakable echo in the Trump campaign of twenty years later.

Yet Francis, who died in 2005, was only one of several later conservatives who turned to Burnham to explain the drift of American politics in recent decades. Matthew Continetti, editor in chief of the *Washington Free Beacon* website, and Julius Krein, founder and editor of the quarterly journal *American Affairs*, have developed new variations of their own on Burnham's ideas, particularly those found in *The Managerial Revolution*. But *Suicide of the West* has not been neglected: it was brought back into print in 2014 by Encounter Books, in an edition with a foreword by John O'Sullivan, former editor of *National Review*, and an introduction by Roger Kimball, editor of the *New Criterion*.

Burnham had been gone from *National Review* for nearly two decades when Jonah Goldberg became a contributing editor at the magazine in 1998 and thereafter the editor of its fledgling website, *National Review Online*. Burnham's career took him from the academy to journalism. Goldberg's career as writer and pundit has been divided between *National Review* and the American Enterprise Institute, where he early on worked as an assistant to Ben Wattenberg and has lately become the inaugural holder of the Asness Chair in Applied Liberty. Goldberg enjoyed great success with his first book, *Liberal Fascism*, in 2008, and published a second, *The Tyranny of Clichés*, in 2012. He also wrote a foreword to a new edition of Frank Meyer's important anthology *What Is Conservatism?*, published in 2015 by ISI Books.

Goldberg personifies the liberal conservatism, with a dash or more of neoconservatism, that prevailed at *National Review* and AEI over the past two decades. He is easily the most popular spokesman for this point of view—no ready rival comes to mind. Goldberg's conservatism might be summarized as free market but not strictly libertarian; friendly to religion on practical grounds but not dependent on religious conviction; favorable to immigration; and assertive of a leading role for America in promoting democratic values and practices globally. (Goldberg once went so far as to urge "going in—guns blazing if necessary" to "mount a serious effort to bring civilization . . . to those parts of Africa that are in Hobbesian despair." His recommendations have been more modest since the Iraq War, however.)

John Locke is a larger presence than Edmund Burke in Goldberg's *Suicide*, but these pages contain one characteristically Burkean truth: civilization is a hard-won achievement, never to be taken for granted, and is more easily lost than regained. Even

a liberal, or a conservative more liberal than Burke—who was hardly a reactionary himself—must appreciate this. "Capitalism is unnatural. Democracy is unnatural. Human rights are unnatural. The world we live in today is unnatural and we stumbled into it more or less by accident," Goldberg writes. He calls modernity "the Miracle," borrowing the term and its capital letter from the work of the sociologist Robin Fox and the historian Ernest Gellner. Throughout *Suicide*, Goldberg also draws upon the thought, and citations, of Deirdre McCloskey, author of a trilogy of studies on commercial civilization and its underpinnings: *The Bourgeois Virtues*, *Bourgeois Dignity*, and *Bourgeois Equality*.

Largely absent from Goldberg's *Suicide*, however, is the man from whom its title is borrowed: James Burnham does not appear until more than a hundred pages into the book, and what brief mention he gets does little justice to him. Goldberg makes a common mistake, conflating Burnham's "managerial class" with what Irving Kristol called "the New Class"—the latter consisting not of Burnham's masters of technological organization but of people Burnham dismissed as "verbalists," mere mouthpieces for real power. The significance of this misunderstanding is that it leads Goldberg to misjudge the seriousness and depth of Burnham's diagnosis of what ails capitalism, and this in turn leads Goldberg to be more optimistic than is warranted.

For Burnham, modern, progressive liberalism was an excuse for Western weakness, a pretext for declaring that defeats were really victories, as bourgeois capitalist civilization lost ground to managerial organization (the Communist bloc, for example) and self-liquidated when challenged by more confident non-European cultures. Goldberg writes that "Fatalism, not Burnham's 'liberalism,' is the real force driving the suicide of the West." But Burnham did not argue that liberalism was the driving force of Western suicide, only that it reconciled the West to the suicidal decision it had already reached in the face of tough competition. Burnham was against fatalism, too, but he understood that liberalism was perhaps the most virulent form of fatalism.

Both *The Managerial Revolution* and Burnham's *Suicide of the West* are in need of reinterpretation in light of all that has happened in the decades since they were published. But the crux of Burnham's arguments holds up surprisingly well. In *The Managerial Revolution*, Burnham pointed to the New Deal, fascism, and Communism as early forms of the new managerial control that was replacing capitalism. Today we might point to the curiously nameless economic system of the People's Republic of China, neither capitalist nor simply Communist, as a modern manifestation of the managerial revolution. Likewise, while Burnham's *Suicide* took for granted Western retreat before an advancing Communism, a notion that seems hopelessly dated nearly thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, what Burnham has to say about liberalism's timidity when confronted by non-Western cultures applies very well to the way many Westerners have responded to dangers from the Islamic world.

The much cheerier thinking behind Goldberg's *Suicide* can be encapsulated thus: maintaining the Miracle of modern civilization requires effort; complacency and forgetfulness are fatal because savage nature is always waiting to reemerge in the form of "tribalism," which is a preference for group cohesion (be it racial, religious, or otherwise) over liberal individualism. To preserve the unnatural freedom and prosperity that are our patrimony, it is necessary, Goldberg argues, to accept a wholesome "dogma"—the myths and precepts of classical liberalism, essentially—and to educate rising generations in that dogma. Failure to do so is a choice,

and so the life or death of the modern West is a matter of choice: its decline, natural in one sense, is ultimately the result of our own decisions, and thus a suicide.

"The only solution," writes Goldberg, "is for the West to re-embrace the core ideas that made the Miracle possible, not just as a set of policies, but as a tribal attachment, a dogmatic commitment." The trouble here is that a call for tribal loyalty to universal principles is a dubious proposition. If Christianity has at times succeeded in squaring that circle, it is because Christianity is simultaneously both worldly and otherworldly, capable of affirming universalism and tribalism at the same time. The family and political community, for example, have their particular rights alongside the universal spiritual justice of God. Liberalism, by contrast, is a purely worldly thing; its justice is not a matter of the eternal soul but of earthly outcomes. The disjunction between the universal and the "tribal" that Christianity is metaphysically prepared to tolerate is intolerable to any ideology of merely political redemption. This is why "saving" Africa by means of military force might seem like a noble idea to a liberal, while to those for whom the universal and worldly are not identical, the notion is not only unwise but unnecessary.

Burnham's *Suicide,* and his 1944 book, *The Machiavellians,* are more helpful than Goldberg's *Suicide* in illuminating the worldly relationship between tribalism and universalism. Both works by Burnham owe an acknowledged debt to Vilfredo Pareto, the Italian economist and social philosopher whose masterwork is translated into English as *The Mind and Society*. From Pareto, Burnham adopts the concepts of psychological "residues" and "derivations." The former are psychological drives, such as "the instinct for combining" (Class I residues) and "the persistence of aggregates" (Class II residues). What Goldberg calls "tribalism" is one expression of Class II residues, while many of the attributes of progressive liberalism—such as a penchant for multiculturalism and a love of novelty—spring from Class I residues. In more poetic terms employed by Machiavelli, among others, people with a high proportion of Class I residues are clever "foxes," while those more characterized by Class II residues are honor- or duty-bound "lions."

Pareto's "derivations," meanwhile, correspond roughly to ideologies and rationales. Under a misleading guise of consistency and logic, they serve to justify and explain—to the individual himself, as well as to others—feelings and actions that arise from the residues. In this light, progressive liberalism is a "derivation" that puts a sophisticated veneer on the behavior of foxes, rationalizing their essential faithlessness as a philosophy of openness.

This liberalism, writes Burnham, "ranging from somewhat dubious blends to the fine pure bonded 100-proof . . . is today, and from some time in the 1930s has been, the prevailing American public doctrine, or orthodoxy. . . . Liberalism of one or another variety prevails among the opinion-makers, molders and transmitters: teachers in the leading universities . . . editors and writers of the most influential publications; school and college administrators; public relations experts; writers of both novels and nonfiction; radio-TV directors, writers and commentators; producers, directors and writers in movies and the theater; the Jewish and non-evangelical Protestant clergy and not a few Catholic priests and bishops; verbalists in all branches of government; the staffs of the great foundations that have acquired in our day such pervasive influence through their relations to research, education, scholarships and publishing."

Groups among whom liberalism does not prevail, or did not at the time Burnham wrote *Suicide of the West*, include the company of retired generals and admirals, the populace of the Deep South, and much of

the National Association of Manufacturers and, surprisingly by today's lights, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. Also noteworthy is that in listing various nonliberals in academia, Burnham includes classical liberals such as Milton Friedman and F.A. Hayek. *Suicide of the West* includes some discussion of how liberalism has changed over time, though Burnham leaves open the question of just how closely classical liberalism may be related to its modern variety. (He remarks in passing that "there was little trace of pacifism in nineteenth-century liberalism; rather more imperialism than pacifism, indeed.")

A weakness of Burnham's *Suicide*, one that he attempts to brush away in his text, is that many of the particular views he ascribes to liberalism would seem to be common to many other "syndromes" as well. Burnham places great emphasis on liberal attitudes toward racial equality and the injustice of colonialism, for example. He is surely correct to highlight the importance of these beliefs for liberals. But he creates the impression, only partly dispelled by modest disclaimers, that anyone who would not defend Southern racial segregation was likely a liberal. Burnham could claim not to be making value judgments and not to be implying that whatever is not liberal (such as segregation) is therefore good. But the presentation of race and related questions in *Suicide of the West* is blundering, to say the least.

There is some value even in Burnham's missteps, however. They prompt the reader to consider how they could be corrected. In this case, they provoke reflection on how inhuman a mere anti-liberal ideology can become and what resentful "residues" might lurk behind such a thing. Of the utmost importance in Burnham's work is the relationship between psychology and politics, and each can illuminate the other. Intractable political problems may occasionally have psychological remedies—that is, remedies in good character and a balanced outlook on life.

What drives the West to suicide, for Burnham, is not liberalism or its putative logic but rather the way in which our civilization has come to value certain types of mind over others—foxes over lions—in a proportion that leaves the West excessively reliant on cleverness or fraud and incapable of effectively wielding force or the threat thereof. In a passage that perfectly anticipates the way much of U.S. foreign policy has been run over the past thirty years, Burnham writes:

> It is not that liberals, when they enter the governing class . . . never make use of force; unavoidably they do, sometimes to excess. But because of their ideology they are not reconciled intellectually and morally to force. They therefore tend to use it ineptly, at the wrong times and places, against the wrong targets, in the wrong amounts.

Note that liberal ideology, despite being a rationalization of underlying mental tendencies, still has an effect on liberals' behavior, encouraging them along paths of folly that they lack the character traits to avoid. The use of force, modulated by liberalism and its underlying psychological residues, becomes idealistic and technical, a matter of communicating healthy values and practices by means of oh-so-precise munitions. The reality that war is chaos in which innocent people die is scrubbed and polished away.

Burnham did not write *Suicide* to refute liberalism. He concludes that if the West decides to resist its contraction, "then the ideology of liberalism, deprived of its primary function, will fade away, like those feverish dreams of the ill man who, passing the crisis of his disease, finds he is not dying after all." But what could change the mind of the West? What accounts for its suicidal turn in the first place? Burnham only hints at the answers. The loss of traditional religious faith is part of the tale, but even that may be,

in earthly terms, as much effect as cause. The clearest prescription to be found in *Suicide of the West* is for the rediscovery of the spirit of the lion—to cherish again "the persistence of aggregates." In a word, to respect "tribalism" once more.

That might seem to be exactly what Jonah Goldberg dreads: "the rebirth of populism, nationalism, and identity politics," as his subtitle says. But in fact the nation-state, along with a broadly Christian culture, has always been the surest foundation for a classically liberal order of the sort that Goldberg wishes to defend. America's ideals depend not on tribal loyalty to universal propositions but on loyalty to the tribes—and little platoons—from which our ideals arise. ✝