

Lessons for Obama in a Still Relevant 1964 Text

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By **Peter Berkowitz** - December 16, 2014

The Obama administration's embarrassment over the exercise of U.S. power encourages the hesitant, half-hearted use of it, thereby threatening American security and global political freedom.

Consider a few of the administration's maladroitnesses and actions.

President Obama declared at an April 2009 press conference in France, “I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism.”

Trying to have it both ways, the president clumsily suggested that talk of American exceptionalism is nothing but the idiosyncratic form in which the United States expresses the ordinary vanity of nations. Obama's critics overlook that he went on to say, “We have a core set of values that are enshrined in our Constitution, in our body of law, in our democratic practices, in our belief in free speech and equality that, though imperfect, are exceptional.” Far from clearing things up, the president compounded the confusion as to whether he regards America as ordinary or exceptional.

In the spring of 2011, one of the president's advisers told *The New Yorker* magazine that in deciding to intervene in the Libyan civil war, Obama conceived of America as “leading from behind.” This awkward conception stems from conflicting administration impulses.

On the one hand, Obama wanted to encourage a more humble America by reining in what he regarded as his country's penchant for unilateral military action. On the other hand, he surrounded himself with foreign policy advisers—including Susan Rice, Anne Marie Slaughter, and Samantha Power—who made their reputations arguing that America should employ its superior assets to prevent the worst kind of mayhem and murder around the world. The strange brew of diffidence and boldness driving the White House's intervention in Libya produced grim results: the overthrow and killing of dictator Moammar Gadhafi turned much of Libya into a free-fire zone where Islamists and Arab nationalists continue to struggle for supremacy—and which produced the chaos leading to the tragic Benghazi debacle.

More was to come. In a September 2013, press conference in London, Secretary of State John Kerry pledged that American military action intended to hold Syrian President Bashar al-Assad accountable for his use of chemical weapons would be an “unbelievably small, limited kind of effort.”

Later that day, Russia and Syria seized upon another remark Kerry made at the news conference to announce that Syria would be willing to place its chemical weapons under international supervision. The Obama administration seemed only too pleased to scrap its comical threat to punish Syria with puny force. Little more than a year later, the United States is intervening in Syria to defeat Assad's enemy ISIS.

These Obama team moments reveal an enervating ambivalence about the purpose of American power. Readers of the 50th anniversary edition of James Burnham's "Suicide of the West: An Essay on the Meaning and Destiny of Liberalism" will discover that the administration's ambivalence about the role of the United States in the world constitutes an integral part of a "liberal syndrome," a set of beliefs and moral and political reflexes, that was recognizable in its mature form in 1964, well before the late-'60s upheavals that are typically thought of as ushering in the current era in liberal thought.

Burnham's worst fears were not realized: Communism did not defeat the West. Then again, in his book's concluding paragraph he observed that "the final collapse of the West is not inevitable" and that one could glimpse "a few small signs" of hope. It is consistent with Burnham's analysis that the West defeated communism in no small measure thanks to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, President Ronald Reagan, and Pope John Paul II. They led the West to change course by unabashedly championing individual freedom, democratic self-government, and religious faith while condemning communism's implacable enmity to all three.

Few today are familiar with Burnham's books or even his name. To remedy the situation, John O'Sullivan's trenchant foreword and Roger Kimball's eloquent introduction provide a vivid sketch of the man and his ideas. By situating Burnham's mature thought in the context of his times, O'Sullivan and Kimball show how "Suicide of the West" transcends its era and illuminates ours.

As a young professor of philosophy at NYU, Burnham embraced Trotsky. He became famous in 1941 with the publication of "The Managerial Revolution: What Is Happening in the World," a bestseller that envisaged the rise of oligarchies of experts that would rule the planet despotically. In the 1950s and 1960s, from his perch at National Review -- according to William F. Buckley Jr., Burnham was "the number one intellectual influence on National Review since the day of its founding" -- he forged the leading themes of modern American conservatism, most prominently the imperative to not merely contain but to roll back communism.

Burnham's dedication of "Suicide of the West" to "all liberals of good will" is the first and last conciliatory gesture in a philosophically textured and politically sophisticated polemic that proclaims liberalism "the ideology of Western suicide." Nonetheless, Burnham's conciliatory

gesture is offered in good faith. He attacks what is more accurately called left-liberalism or progressivism to defend the distinctively Western tradition of freedom that, then as now, provides common ground for left and right in America.

Burnham distills the essence of left-liberalism into a cluster of convictions: Man's nature is not fixed but plastic. Ignorance, custom and tradition, and improperly constructed or corrupt social institutions are the main obstacles to building the just society. Reason, particularly in the form of natural science, can solve all the problems of morality and politics. Education and politics should be conducted as an inclusive dialogue among equals. Because society is responsible for bad conduct, criminals should not be punished but rather rehabilitated through government programs. The main task of political reform is to eliminate inequality, which requires dispensing with the fraud of equality of opportunity and instituting equality of result. Since we can't know the ultimate truth, all opinions should be equally respected.

But because we do know that all differences among human beings are morally irrelevant, we should work to overcome patriotism and national sovereignty -- which sow discord by irrationally dividing humanity into groups driven by selfishness and prejudice -- and seek to establish world government. War should not merely be the last resort in the resolution of conflicts but should be seen as always inferior to diplomacy, transnational organizations, and international courts.

This ideology is unrealistic, Burnham argues, because it denies what is universal and unchanging in human nature, which includes both our base passions and our virtues. It rejects the wisdom stored up in custom and tradition. It reduces hierarchy to unjust hierarchy, nationalism to bigotry, and patriotism to thoughtlessness. And it treats the use of military power to defend freedom as worse than the violence perpetrated by freedom's enemies.

Left-liberalism, Burnham contends, is also divided against itself. Its relativism cuts the grounds out from under its own conceit that it knows how to establish the just society. Its efforts to end hierarchy install a new class of experts who pride themselves on their capacity to devise the complex schemes necessary to redistribute wealth and eliminate the advantages conferred by family, good fortune, and even self-discipline and hard work. And it nurses a debilitating rage against the civilization that nourishes it.

“Suicide of the West” tends toward the hyperbolic and apocalyptic, and will alienate many on the left and flatter many on the right, leading both to overlook its admonition to recover the Western tradition of freedom, or liberalism well understood. At the same time, Burnham's unsparing analysis of the reigning form of liberalism in 1964 uncannily accounts for the combination of haughtiness and haplessness that, 50 years later, impairs Obama administration foreign policy.

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