

**THE FOURTH TURNING: WHAT THE CYCLES
OF HISTORY TELL US ABOUT AMERICA'S
NEXT RENDEZVOUS WITH DESTINY**
(WILLIAM STRAUSS AND NEIL HOWE)

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I am almost ashamed to review this book. It is like reviewing *Fifty Shades of Grey*—the mere fact that someone publicly admits he has read it degrades both him and his listeners. My only defense is that Steve Bannon has repeatedly stated this book is a major influence on his thought. He's a clever man. So I sought wisdom by following his lead, but instead, I got a rotten egg. While I still have a great deal of respect for Bannon, having read this book, the Respect-O-Meter has dropped by roughly 60%. He may gain the respect back, for example by correctly predicting the results of, and the impact of, this coming May's elections to the European Parliament. But it will be a task, after subjecting me to *The Fourth Turning*.

This will not be a long review; that merely prolongs the agony. I write only to sketch out the major areas of failure, to make clear your need to avoid losing time you will never see again. At its core this book requires a total detachment of the reader from reality. The singer Cat Stevens (bear with me) is known nowadays for having adopted Salafi Islam and being a rabid Jew-hater. But before he converted, he was big into numerology, as I remember from watching, some years ago, a VH1 "Behind the Music" special on his life. In that phase of his life, at least, Stevens would have been very comfortable with *The Fourth Turning*, because the entire book is prophecy based on numerology. All that's missing is a good dose of astrology.

In a nutshell, what William Strauss and Neil Howe claim is that all human affairs are, always have been, and always will be, governed by a time period, the *saeculum*, which approximates the length of a "long human life," or roughly eighty years. Each *saeculum* has four generations, each of which has universal and certain characteristics, which succeed each other like the tick-tock of a clock. I am not going to tell you anything about them, their names or anything else, though, because they are stupid. Each *saeculum* also has a succession of events, from Awakening to Crisis, in a repeating pattern. After the climax of a Crisis, the society

reboots itself and is reborn; this is the “Fourth Turning.” Strauss and Howe predicted, in 1997, such a Crisis beginning around 2005, with the rebirth to be complete by around 2025.

Before we get to the predictions, let’s cover the core structure. The reader quickly realizes that all this is a charlatan’s game, when he reads how narrowly the authors constrain their historical examination. Despite muttering about the Romans and the ancient Hindus, they identify only six *saecula*, beginning at the end of the Wars of the Roses, through 1997. This is the “Anglo-American Saeculum.” No attempt whatsoever is made to extend their analysis beyond England, until the Glorious Revolution, after which no mention at all is made of England, and the focus shifts solely to America. No Europe. No Asia. No Africa. Nothing at all. You’d think at least some attempt would be made to extend this supposedly universal framework beyond a very stripped-down history of America, but you would be wrong.

Even worse, the stated reason for beginning the examination of cycles around A.D. 1500 is not, as one might expect, lack of data. As becomes clear later, only the most trivial and superficial data is necessary for the authors to claim support for their theory. No, it’s because until the Reformation, don’t you know, Europeans could not comprehend linear time, except for maybe a few priests. Everyone lived in the eternal, cyclical now. The ignorance of this is astounding, and moreover it’s not clear why supposedly immutable and invariable generational cycles would be obviated by the common people’s perception of time, but nonetheless, it is the authors’ excuse for narrowing their time window to a convenient one—namely, one where throwing out a few names from the relevant time period makes it seem like the authors know what they are talking about, because of the vague familiarity most people have with at least some of the names.

Much ink is spilled in pseudo-academic and pseudo-scientific jargon. Many tables and charts are offered, complete with arrows to guide the confused reader through pop history along the desired garden path. The writing is terrible—rambling, repetitive, and reeking of selective fact choice. Even ignoring the tightly constrained focus, the exposition of the supposed *saecula* is risible. It consists of shouting out references to well-known figures, such as Abraham Lincoln, or cultural happenings, such as the Great Depression or rock-and-roll; giving a short and

utterly flat (and often false) description of the figure or happening; and then making an enormous leap to conclude that figure or happening proves something, by itself, about a twenty- or forty-year period in history, which just so happens to coincide exactly with the authors' thesis. It is a total waste of time; you would be better informed about world history by reading *Goodnight Moon*.

Every substantive prediction in this book has been falsified. No, there has not been another religious "Great Awakening" in America. The 1990s are not remembered as a time of misery. Old people today are not inspired to refuse government handouts and young people have not stood up to deny them handouts. The Baby Boomers in their retirement have not created new forms of civic life. Nor have they created an "elder ethos that will hinge on self-denial." I laughed out loud when I read that, before I read that "On the job, Millennials will be seekers of order and harmony. They will delight employers with their skills, work habits, and institutional loyalties." I nearly ruptured myself laughing after that one. Even a blind squirrel is supposed to find a few nuts, but surveying the predictions in this book, that adage has been disproven.

The Crisis, ending a *saeculum*, that the authors predict isn't some minor tumult, but, by the examples they give, something along the lines of complete political breakdown, major war, or a widespread pandemic leading to social near-collapse. Society will stabilize; then, after a few years, society will change dramatically, creating a new Awakening, and beginning the cycle again. Some people, doubtless Bannon among them, seem to think that because Strauss and Howe predicted a Crisis beginning around 2005, that they are therefore great prognosticators. No doubt Bannon would like a Crisis to help move his program forward; I have a lot of sympathy for that view. But it takes no skill to claim that any advanced society will, at least every few decades, pass through something that can justly be cast as a crisis, yet is still modest, and the 2007 financial crisis fits into that mold. It was not an existential Crisis in the sense the authors predicted. Nor does it take much skill to predict that America, which has been in decay for decades, will someday face an existential Crisis. It hasn't arrived yet, though, and time is up on Strauss's and Howe's predictions.

Oh, it'll come, because history will return. But this book does not tell us anything about it. Certainly, if there is a such an extreme Crisis, the

path of initial stabilization followed by a reworking of society is more or less the typical one. Where the authors go wrong is in thinking there is any more pattern to history than that. That in retrospect some groups of people born roughly at the same time may evince, when viewed from certain angles, a set of common characteristics, does not create some kind of magic predictability machine. There is no wisdom here.