

# Where did Steve Bannon get his worldview? From my book.

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By Neil Howe February 24

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The headlines this month have been alarming. “Steve Bannon’s obsession with a dark theory of history should be worrisome” ([Business Insider](#)). “Steve Bannon Believes The Apocalypse Is Coming And War Is Inevitable” ([the Huffington Post](#)). “Steve Bannon Wants To Start World War III” ([the Nation](#)). A common thread in these media reports is that President Trump’s chief strategist is an avid reader and that the book that most inspires his worldview is “[The Fourth Turning: An American Prophecy](#).”

I wrote that book with William Strauss back in 1997. It is true that Bannon is enthralled by it. In 2010, he released a documentary, “[Generation Zero](#),” that is structured around our theory that history in America (and by extension, most other modern societies) unfolds in a recurring cycle of four-generation-long eras. While this cycle does include a time of civic and political crisis — a Fourth Turning, in our parlance — the reporting on the book has been absurdly apocalyptic.

I don’t know Bannon well. I have worked with him on several film projects, including “[Generation Zero](#),” over the years. I’ve been impressed by his cultural savvy. His politics, while unusual, never struck me as offensive. I was surprised when he took over the leadership of Breitbart and promoted the views espoused on that site. Like many people, I first learned about the alt-right (a far-right movement with links to Breitbart and a loosely defined white-nationalist agenda) from the mainstream media. Strauss, who died in 2007, and I never told Bannon what to say or think. But we did perhaps provide him with an insight — that populism, nationalism and state-run authoritarianism would soon be on the rise, not just in America but around the world.

Because we never attempted to write a political manifesto, we were surprised by the book’s popularity among certain crusaders on both the left and the right. When “[The Fourth Turning](#)” came out, our biggest partisan fans were Democrats, who saw in our description of an emerging “Millennial generation” (a term we coined) the sort of community-minded optimists who would pull America toward progressive ideals. Yet we’ve also had conservative fans, who were drawn to

another lesson: that the new era would probably see the successful joining of left-wing economics with right-wing social values.

Beyond ideology, I think there's another reason for the rising interest in our book. We reject the deep premise of modern Western historians that social time is either linear (continuous progress or decline) or chaotic (too complex to reveal any direction). Instead we adopt the insight of nearly all traditional societies: that social time is a recurring cycle in which events become meaningful only to the extent that they are what philosopher Mircea Eliade calls "reenactments." In cyclical space, once you strip away the extraneous accidents and technology, you are left with only a limited number of social moods, which tend to recur in a fixed order.

Along this cycle, we can identify four "turnings" that each last about 20 years — the length of a generation. Think of these as recurring seasons, starting with spring and ending with winter. In every turning, a new generation is born and each older generation ages into its next phase of life.

The cycle begins with the First Turning, a "High" which comes after a crisis era. In a High, institutions are strong and individualism is weak. Society is confident about where it wants to go collectively, even if many feel stifled by the prevailing conformity. Many Americans alive today can recall the post-World War II American High (historian William O'Neill's term), coinciding with the Truman, Eisenhower and Kennedy presidencies. Earlier examples are the post-Civil War Victorian High of industrial growth and stable families, and the post-Constitution High of Democratic Republicanism and Era of Good Feelings.

The Second Turning is an "Awakening," when institutions are attacked in the name of higher principles and deeper values. Just when society is hitting its high tide of public progress, people suddenly tire of all the social discipline and want to recapture a sense of personal authenticity. Salvation by faith, not works, is the youth rallying cry. One such era was the Consciousness Revolution of the late 1960s and 1970s. Some historians call this America's Fourth or Fifth Great Awakening, depending on whether they start the count in the 17th century with John Winthrop or the 18th century with Jonathan Edwards.

The Third Turning is an "Unraveling," in many ways the opposite of the High. Institutions are weak and distrusted, while individualism is strong and flourishing. Third Turning decades such as the 1990s, the 1920s and the 1850s are notorious for their cynicism, bad manners and weak civic authority. Government typically shrinks, and speculative manias, when they occur, are delirious.

Finally, the Fourth Turning is a "Crisis" period. This is when our institutional life is reconstructed from the ground up, always in response to a perceived threat to the nation's very survival. If history does not produce such an urgent threat, Fourth Turning leaders will invariably find one — and may even fabricate one — to mobilize collective action. Civic authority revives, and people and groups begin to pitch in as participants in a larger community. As these Promethean bursts of civic effort reach their resolution, Fourth Turnings refresh and redefine our national identity. The years 1945, 1865 and 1794 all capped eras constituting new "founding moments" in American history.

Just as a Second Turning reshapes our inner world (of values, culture and religion), a Fourth Turning reshapes our outer world (of politics, economy and empire).

In our paradigm, one can look ahead and suggest that a coming time period — say, a certain decade — will resemble, in its essential human dynamic, a time period in the past. In “The Fourth Turning,” we predicted that, starting around 2005, America would probably experience a “Great Devaluation” in financial markets, a catalyst that would mark America’s entry into an era whose first decade would likely parallel the 1930s.

Reflecting on the decade we’ve just lived through, we can probably agree that the 1930s parallel works well. In the economy, both decades played out in the shadow of a global financial crash, and were characterized by slow and disappointing economic growth and chronic underemployment of labor and capital. Both saw tepid investment, deflation fears, growing inequality and the inability of central bankers to rekindle consumption.

In geopolitics, we’ve witnessed the rise of isolationism, nationalism and right-wing populism across the globe. Geostrategist Ian Bremmer says we now live in a “G-Zero” world, where it’s every nation for itself. This story echoes the 1930s, which witnessed the waning authority of great-power alliances and a new willingness by authoritarian regimes to act with terrifying impunity.

In social trends, the two decades also show parallels: falling rates of fertility and homeownership, the rise of multi-generational households, the spread of localism and community identification, a dramatic decline in youth violence (a fact that apparently has eluded the president), and a blanding of pop youth culture. Above all, we sense a growing desire among voters around the world for leaders to assert greater authority and deliver deeds rather than process, results rather than abstractions.

We live in an increasingly volatile and primal era, in which history is speeding up and liberal democracy is weakening. As Vladimir Lenin wrote, “In some decades, nothing happens; in some weeks, decades happen.” Get ready for the creative destruction of public institutions, something every society periodically requires to clear out what is obsolete, ossified and dysfunctional — and to tilt the playing field of wealth and power away from the old and back to the young. Forests need periodic fires; rivers need periodic floods. Societies, too. That’s the price we must pay for a new golden age.

If we look at the broader rhythms of history, we have reason to be heartened, not discouraged, by these trends. Anglo-American history over the past several centuries has experienced civic crises in a fairly regular cycle, about every 80 or 90 years, or roughly the length of a long human life. This pattern reveals itself in the intervals separating the colonial Glorious Revolution, the American Revolution, the Civil War, and the Great Depression and World War II. Fast-forward the length of a long human life from the 1930s, and we end up where we are today.

America entered a new Fourth Turning in 2008. It is likely to last until around 2030. Our paradigm suggests that current trends will deepen as we move toward the halfway point.

Further adverse events, possibly another financial crisis or a major armed conflict, will galvanize public opinion and mobilize leaders to take more decisive action. Rising regionalism and nationalism around the world could lead to the fragmentation of major political entities (perhaps the European Union) and the outbreak of hostilities (perhaps in the South China Sea, the Korean Peninsula, the Baltic states or the Persian Gulf).

Despite a new tilt toward isolationism, the United States could find itself at war. I certainly do not hope for war. I simply make a sobering observation: Every total war in U.S. history has occurred during a Fourth Turning, and no Fourth Turning has yet unfolded without one. America's objectives in such a war are likely to be defined very broadly.

At the end of the 2020s, the Fourth Turning crisis era will climax and draw to a close. Settlements will be negotiated, treaties will be signed, new borders will be drawn, and perhaps (as in the late 1940s) a new durable world order will be created. Perhaps as well, by the early 2030s, we will enter a new First Turning: Young families will rejoice, fertility will rebound, economic equality will rise, a new middle class will emerge, public investment will grow into a new 21st-century infrastructure, and ordered prosperity will recommence.

During the next First Turning, potentially the next "American High," millennials will move into national leadership and showcase their optimism, smarts, credentials and confidence. Sometime in the late 2030s, the first millennial will be voted into the White House, prompting talk of a new Camelot moment. Let a few more years pass, and those organization-minded millennials may face a passionate and utterly unexpected onslaught from a new crop of youth.

Welcome to the next Awakening. The cycle of history keeps turning, inexorably.

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