



THE
FOURTH
TURNING

An American Prophecy

WILLIAM STRAUSS
AND NEIL HOWE

Previous Books by William Strauss and Neil Howe

13TH GEN! ABORT, RETRY, IGNORE, FAIL?

GENERATIONS: THE HISTORY OF AMERICA'S FUTURE

Also by Neil Howe (coauthored with Peter G. Peterson)

ON BORROWED TIME: HOW THE GROWTH IN

ENTITLEMENT SPENDING THREATENS AMERICA'S FUTURE (1988)

Also by William Strauss (coauthored with Lawrence Baskir)

CHANCE AND CIRCUMSTANCE: THE DRAFT, THE WAR,
AND THE VIETNAM GENERATION (1978)

The Fourth
Turning

An American Prophecy



William Strauss
and Neil Howe

BROADWAY BOOKS

New York

*To Janie and Simona, who share our time
And to Eric, Giorgia, Melanie, Nathaniel, Rebecca, and Victoria,
who, God willing, will share a time beyond*

*That which hath been is now;
and that which is to be hath already been;
and God requireth that which is past.*

—Ecclesiastes 3.15

Contents

1. Winter Comes Again

Part One. *Seasons*

2. Seasons of Time

3. Seasons of Life

4. Cycles of History

Overview: Seven Cycles of Generations and Turnings

5. Gray Champions

Part Two. *Turnings*

6. The First Turning: American High (1946-1964)

7. The Second Turning: Consciousness Revolution (1964-1984)

8. The Third Turning: Culture Wars (1984-2005?)

9. Fourth Turnings in History

10. A Fourth Turning Prophecy

Part Three. *Preparations*

11. Preparing for the Fourth Turning

12. The Eternal Return

Acknowledgments

Notes

CHAPTER 1



Winter Comes Again

AMERICA FEELS LIKE IT'S UNRAVELING.

Though we live in an era of relative peace and comfort, we have settled into a mood of pessimism about the long-term future, fearful that our superpower nation is somehow rotting from within.

Neither an epic victory over Communism nor an extended upswing of the business cycle can buoy our public spirit. The Cold War and New Deal struggles are plainly over, but we are of no mind to bask in their successes. The America of today feels worse, in its fundamentals, than the one many of us remember from youth, a society presided over by those of supposedly lesser consciousness. Wherever we look, from L.A. to D.C., from Oklahoma City to Sun City, we see paths to a foreboding future. We yearn for civic character but satisfy ourselves with symbolic gestures and celebrity circuses. We perceive no greatness in our leaders, a new meanness in ourselves. Small wonder that each new election brings a new jolt, its aftermath a new disappointment.

Not long ago, America was more than the sum of its parts. Now, it is less. Around World War II, we were proud as a people but modest as individuals. Fewer than two people in ten said yes when asked, Are you a very important person? Today, more than six in ten say yes. Where we once thought ourselves collectively strong, we now regard ourselves as individually entitled.

Yet even while we exalt our own personal growth, we realize that millions of self-actualized persons don't add up to an actualized society. Popular trust in virtually every American institution—from businesses and governments to churches and newspapers—keeps falling to new lows. Public debts soar, the middle class shrinks, welfare dependencies deepen, and cultural arguments worsen by the year. We now have the highest incarceration rate and the lowest eligible-voter participation rate of any major democracy. Statistics inform us that many adverse trends (crime, divorce, abortion, scholastic aptitudes) may have bottomed out, but we're not reassured.

Optimism still attaches to self, but no longer to family or community. Most Americans express more hope for their own prospects than for their children's—or the nation's. Parents widely fear that the American Dream, which was there (solidly) for their parents and still there (barely) for them, will not be there for their kids. Young householders are reaching their midthirties never

having known a time when America seemed to be on the right track. Middle-aged people look at their thin savings accounts and slim-to-none pensions, scoff at an illusory Social Security trust fund, and try not to dwell on what a burden their old age could become. Seniors separate into their own Leisure World, recoiling at the lost virtue of youth while trying not to think about the future.

We perceive our civic challenge as some vast, insoluble Rubik's Cube. Behind each problem lies another problem that must be solved first, and behind that lies yet another, and another, ad infinitum. To fix crime we have to fix the family, but before we do that we have to fix welfare, and that means fixing our budget, and that means fixing our civic spirit, but we can't do that without fixing moral standards, and that means fixing schools and churches, and that means fixing the inner cities, and that's impossible unless we fix crime. There's no fulcrum on which to rest a policy lever. People of all ages sense that something huge will have to sweep across America before the gloom can be lifted—but that's an awareness we suppress. As a nation, we're in deep denial.

While we grope for answers, we wonder if analysis may be crowding out our intuition. Like the anxious patient who takes seventeen kinds of medicine while poring over his own CAT scan, we find it hard to stop and ask, What is the underlying malady really about? How can we best bring the primal forces of nature to our assistance? Isn't there a choice lying somewhere between total control and total despair? Deep down, beneath the tangle of trend lines, we suspect that our history or biology or very humanity must have something simple and important to say to us. But we don't know what it is. If we once did know, we have since forgotten.

Wherever we're headed, America is evolving in ways most of us don't like or understand. Individually focused yet collectively adrift, we wonder if we're heading toward a waterfall.

Are we?

IT'S ALL HAPPENED BEFORE

The reward of the historian is to locate patterns that recur over time and to discover the natural rhythms of social experience.

In fact, at the core of modern history lies this remarkable pattern: Over the past five centuries, Anglo-American society has entered a new era—a new *turning*—every two decades or so. At the start of each turning, people change how they feel about themselves, the culture, the nation, and the future. Turnings come in cycles of four. Each cycle spans the length of a long human life, roughly eighty to one hundred years, a unit of time the ancients called the *saeculum*. Together, the four turnings of the saeculum comprise history's seasonal rhythm of growth, maturation, entropy, and destruction:

- The *First Turning* is a *High*, an upbeat era of strengthening institutions and weakening individualism, when a new civic order implants and the old values regime decays.
- The *Second Turning* is an *Awakening*, a passionate era of spiritual upheaval, when the civic order comes under attack from a new values regime.
- The *Third Turning* is an *Unraveling*, a downcast era of strengthening individualism and weakening institutions, when the old civic order decays and the new values regime implants.
- The *Fourth Turning* is a *Crisis*, a decisive era of secular upheaval, when the values regime propels the replacement of the old civic order with a new one.

Each turning comes with its own identifiable mood. Always, these mood shifts catch people by surprise.

In the current saeculum, the First Turning was the *American High* of the Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy presidencies. As World War II wound down, no one predicted that America would soon become so confident and institutionally muscular, yet so conformist and spiritually complacent. But that's what happened.

The Second Turning was the *Consciousness Revolution*, stretching from the campus revolts of the mid-1960s to the tax revolts of the early 1980s. Before John Kennedy was assassinated, no one predicted that America was about to enter an era of personal liberation and cross a cultural divide that would separate anything thought or said after from anything thought or said before. But that's what happened.

The Third Turning has been the *Culture Wars*, an era that began with Reagan's mid-1980s Morning in America and is due to expire around the middle of the Oh-Oh decade, eight or ten years from now. Amid the glitz of the early Reagan years, no one predicted that the nation was entering an era of national drift and institutional decay. But that's where we are.

Have major national mood shifts like this ever before happened? Yes—many times. Have Americans ever before experienced anything like the current attitude of Unraveling? Yes—many times, over the centuries.

People in their eighties can remember an earlier mood that was much like today's. They can recall the years between Armistice Day (1918) and the Great Crash of 1929. Euphoria over a global military triumph was painfully short-lived. Earlier optimism about a progressive future gave way to a jazz-age nihilism and a pervasive cynicism about high ideals. Bosses swaggered in immigrant ghettos, the KKK in the South, the mafia in the industrial heartland, and defenders of Americanism in myriad Middletowns. Unions atrophied, government weakened, third-parties were the rage, and a dynamic marketplace ushered in new consumer technologies (autos, radios, phones, jukeboxes, vending machines) that made life feel newly complicated and

frenetic. The risky pleasures of a “lost” young generation shocked middle-aged decency crusaders—many of them “tired radicals” who were then moralizing against the detritus of the “mauve decade” of their youth (the 1890s). Opinions polarized around no-compromise cultural issues like drugs, family, and “decency.” Meanwhile, parents strove to protect a scoutlike new generation of children (who aged into today's senior citizens).

Back then, the details were different, but the underlying mood resembled what Americans feel today. Listen to Walter Lippmann, writing during World War I:

We are unsettled to the very roots of our being. There isn't a human relation, whether of parent or child, husband and wife, worker and employer, that doesn't move in a strange situation. We are not used to a complicated civilization, we don't know how to behave when personal contact and eternal authority have disappeared. There are no precedents to guide us, no wisdom that was not meant for a simpler age.

Move backward again to an era recalled by the oldest Americans still alive when today's seniors were little children. In the late 1840s and early 1850s, America drifted into a foul new mood. The hugely popular Mexican War had just ended in a stirring triumph, but the huzzahs over territorial gain didn't last long. Cities grew mean and politics hateful. Immigration surged, financial speculation boomed, and railroads and cotton exports released powerful new market forces that destabilized communities. Having run out of answers, the two major parties (Whigs and Democrats) were slowly disintegrating. A righteous debate over slavery's westward expansion erupted between so-called Southrons and abolitionists—many of them middle-aged spiritualists who in the more euphoric 1830s and 1840s had dabbled in Transcendentalism, Utopian communes, and other assorted youth-fired crusades. Colleges went begging for students as a brazen young generation hustled west to pan for gold in towns fabled for their violence. Meanwhile, a child generation grew up with a new regimentation that startled European visitors who, a decade earlier, had bemoaned the wildness of American kids. Sound familiar?

Run the clock back the length of yet another long life, to the 1760s. The recent favorable conclusion to the French and Indian War had brought eighty years of conflict to a close and secured the colonial frontier. Yet when England tried to recoup the expense of the war through taxation, the colonies seethed with a directionless discontent. Immigration from the Old World, emigration across the Appalachians, and colonial trade arguments all rose sharply. As debtors' prisons bulged, middle-aged people complained of what Benjamin Franklin called the “white savagery” of youth. Middle-aged orators

(peers of the fiery young preachers of the circa-1740 Great Awakening) summoned civic consciousness and organized popular crusades of economic austerity. The youth elite became the first to attend disciplined church schools in the colonies rather than academies in corrupt Albion. Gradually, colonists began separating into mutually loathing camps, one defending and the other attacking the Crown. Sound familiar again?

During each of these periods, Americans celebrated an ethos of frenetic and laissez-faire individualism (a word first popularized in the 1840s) yet also fretted over social fragmentation, epidemic violence, and economic and technological change that seemed to be accelerating beyond society's ability to absorb it.

During each of these periods, Americans had recently achieved a stunning victory over a long-standing foreign threat—Imperial Germany, Imperial New Spain (alias Mexico), or Imperial New France. Yet that victory came to be associated with a worn-out definition of collective purpose—and, perversely, unleashed a torrent of pessimism.

During each of these periods, an aggressive moralism darkened the debate about the country's future. Culture wars raged, the language of political discourse coarsened, nativist (and sectional) feelings hardened, immigration and substance abuse came under attack, and attitudes toward children grew more protective.

During each of these periods, Americans felt well-rooted in their personal values but newly hostile toward the corruption of civic life. Unifying institutions, which had seemed secure for decades, now felt ephemeral. Those who had once trusted the nation with their lives were growing old and dying. To the new crop of young adults, the nation hardly mattered. The whole *res publica* seemed on the verge of disintegrating.

During each of these previous Third Turnings, Americans felt as if they were drifting toward a cataclysm.

And, as it turned out, they were.

The 1760s were followed by the American Revolution, the 1850s by Civil War, the 1920s by the Great Depression and World War II. All these Unraveling eras were followed by bone-jarring Crises so monumental that, by their end, American society emerged in a wholly new form.

Each time, the change came with scant warning. As late as December 1773, November 1859, and October 1929, the American people had no idea how close it was. Then sudden sparks (the Boston Tea Party, John Brown's raid and execution, Black Tuesday) transformed the public mood, swiftly and permanently. Over the next two decades or so, society convulsed. Emergencies required massive sacrifices from a citizenry that responded by putting community ahead of self. Leaders led, and people trusted them. As a new social contract was created, people overcame challenges once thought insurmountable—and used the Crisis to elevate themselves and their nation to

a higher plane of civilization: In the 1790s, they triumphantly created the modern world's first democratic republic. In the late 1860s, wounded but reunited, they forged a genuine nation extending new guarantees of liberty and equality. In the late 1940s, they constructed the most Promethean superpower ever seen.

The Fourth Turning is history's great discontinuity. It ends one epoch and begins another.

History is seasonal, and winter is coming. Like nature's winter, the saecular winter can come early or late. A Fourth Turning can be long and difficult, brief but severe, or (perhaps) mild. But, like winter, it cannot be averted. It must come in its turn.

Here, in summary, is what the rhythms of modern history warn about America's future.

The next Fourth Turning is due to begin shortly after the new millennium, midway through the Oh-Oh decade. Around the year 2005, a sudden spark will catalyze a Crisis mood. Remnants of the old social order will disintegrate. Political and economic trust will implode. Real hardship will beset the land, with severe distress that could involve questions of class, race, nation, and empire. Yet this time of trouble will bring seeds of social rebirth. Americans will share a regret about recent mistakes—and a resolute new consensus about what to do. The very survival of the nation will feel at stake. Sometime before the year 2025, America will pass through a great gate in history, commensurate with the American Revolution, Civil War, and twin emergencies of the Great Depression and World War II.

The risk of catastrophe will be very high. The nation could erupt into insurrection or civil violence, crack up geographically, or succumb to authoritarian rule. If there is a war, it is likely to be one of maximum risk and effort—in other words, a *total war*. Every Fourth Turning has registered an upward ratchet in the technology of destruction, and in mankind's willingness to use it. In the Civil War, the two capital cities would surely have incinerated each other had the means been at hand. In World War II, America invented a new technology of annihilation, which the nation swiftly put to use. This time, America will enter a Fourth Turning with the means to inflict unimaginable horrors and, perhaps, will confront adversaries who possess the same.

Yet Americans will also enter the Fourth Turning with a unique opportunity to achieve a new greatness as a people. Many despair that values that were new in the 1960s are today so entwined with social dysfunction and cultural decay that they can no longer lead anywhere positive. Through the current Unraveling era, that is probably true. But in the crucible of Crisis, that will change. As the old civic order gives way, Americans will have to craft a new one. This will require a values consensus and, to administer it, the empowerment of a strong new political regime. If all goes well, there could be a renaissance of civic trust, and more: Today's Third Turning problems—that

Rubik's Cube of crime, race, money, family, culture, and ethics —will snap into a Fourth Turning solution. America's post-Crisis answers will be as organically interconnected as today's pre-Crisis questions seem hopelessly tangled. By the 2020s, America could become a society that is *good*, by today's standards, and also one that *works*.

Thus might the next Fourth Turning end in apocalypse—or glory. The nation could be ruined, its democracy destroyed, and millions of people scattered or killed. Or America could enter a new golden age, triumphantly applying shared values to improve the human condition. The rhythms of history do not reveal the outcome of the coming Crisis; all they suggest is the timing and dimension.

We cannot stop the seasons of history, but we *can* prepare for them. Right now, in 1997, we have eight, ten, perhaps a dozen more years to get ready. Then events will begin to take choices out of our hands. Yes, winter is coming, but our path through that winter is up to us.

History's howling storms can bring out the worst and best in a society. The next Fourth Turning could literally destroy us as a nation and people, leaving us cursed in the histories of those who endure and remember. Alternatively, it could ennoble our lives, elevate us as a community, and inspire acts of consummate heroism—deeds that will grow into mythlike legends recited by our heirs far into the future.

“There is a mysterious cycle in human events,” President Franklin Roosevelt observed in the depths of the Great Depression. “To some generations much is given. Of other generations much is expected. This generation has a rendezvous with destiny.” The cycle remains mysterious, but need not come as a total surprise. Though the scenario and outcome are uncertain, the schedule is set: The next Fourth Turning—America's next rendezvous with destiny—will begin in roughly ten years and end in roughly thirty.

How can we offer this prophecy with such confidence? Because it's all happened before. Many times.

Theories of Time

From the Grim Reaper of the Christians to the blood-drenched Kali of the Hindus, mankind has traditionally viewed time darkly. Time, we realize, must issue in our dissolution and death. Its passage is destined to annihilate everything familiar about our present—from such trivial pleasures as a morning cup of coffee to the grandest constructions of art, religion, or politics. “Time and his aging,” observed Aeschylus, “overtakes all things alike.”

Over the millennia, man has developed three ways of thinking about time: chaotic, cyclical, and linear. The first was the dominant view of primitive man, the second of ancient and traditional civilizations, and the third of the modern West, especially America.

In *chaotic time*, history has no path. Events follow one another randomly, and any effort to impute meaning to their whirligig succession is hopeless. This was the first intuition of aboriginal man, for whom change in the natural world was utterly beyond human control or comprehension. It is also how life and time appear to a small child. Yet pathless time has also become a supreme spiritual goal, the “knowing beyond knowing” of many Eastern religions. Buddhism teaches that a person reaches nirvana by ritually detaching himself from any connection to the meaning of space or time or selfhood. Over the last century, various strains of chaoticism have gained influence in our own society—from the Just Do It popular culture to the de-constructive nihilisms of academe.

The practical shortcoming of chaotic time is that it dissolves society's connective tissue. If cause and effect have no linkage in time, people cannot be held morally accountable for their choices. Nothing would legitimize the obligations of parents to children or neighbors to community. This is why no society or religion has ever given more than a very limited endorsement to chaotic time—not even Buddhism, in which all who fail to reach nirvana remain subject to the orderly reign of karma.

Cyclical time originated when the ancients first linked natural cycles of planetary events (diurnal rotations, lunar months, solar years, zodiacal precessions) with related cycles of human activity (sleeping, waking; gestating, birthing; planting, harvesting; hunting, feasting). Cyclical time conquered chaos by repetition, by the parent or hunter or farmer performing the right deed at the right moment in the perpetual circle, much as an original god or goddess performed a similar deed during time's mythical first circle. Eventually, great cycles came to mark the duration of kingdoms and prophecies, the coming of heroes and shamans, and the aging of lives, generations, and civilizations. Cyclical time is endless, yet also endlessly completed and renewed, propelled by elaborate rituals resembling the modern seasonal holidays.

Unlike chaotic time, cyclical time endowed classical societies with a prescribed moral dimension, a measure by which each generation could compare its behavior with that of its ancestors. Those who believed in cycles could engage in what anthropologist Levy-Bruhl calls a “participation mystique” in the divine recreation of nature's eternal round. The power that this concept has exercised on mankind is conveyed by the colossal monuments to recurring time (the obelisks, pyramids, ziggurats, and megaliths) so many archaic societies left behind. Yet even as belief in cyclical time overcomes the chaotic primitive view, it leaves less room for what modern people think of as originality and creativity. “For the traditional societies, all the important acts of life were revealed *ab origine* by gods or heroes. Men only repeat these exemplary and paradigmatic gestures *ad infinitum*,” observes religious scholar Mircea Eliade. “This tendency may well appear paradoxical, in the sense that the man of a traditional culture sees himself as real only to the extent that he ceases to be himself (for a modern observer) and is satisfied with imitating

and repeating gestures of another.”

So what's the alternative? Enter the third option: *linear time*—time as a unique (and usually progressing) story with an absolute beginning and an absolute end. Thus did mankind first aspire to progress. In Greco-Roman civilization, the cyclical view of time was punctuated by inklings of human improvement. The Greeks sometimes hoped that Promethean reason might deliver mankind from perpetual destitution, while the Romans believed that a powerful polity could endow its citizens with a glorious destiny. Most important, the rise and spread of the great Western monotheisms inspired the hope that mankind was fated for more than just fortune's wheel. The Persian, Judaic, Christian, and Islamic cosmologies all embraced the radically new concept of personal and historical time as a unidirectional drama. Time begins with a fall from grace; struggles forward in an intermediate sequence of trials, failures, revelations, and divine interventions; and ends with redemption and reentry into the Kingdom of God.

Linearism required hundreds of years to catch on, but when it did, it changed the world. In medieval Europe, unidirectional time as outlined by the early Christians remained a relatively arcane idea, fully understood by only a small clerical elite. But in the sixteenth century, the Reformation and the spread of the printed Gospel ushered in a new urgency (and popular application) to linear history. Ordinary people began speculating about the historical signs of Christ's Second (and final) Coming and inventing new sects according to their expectations about this. Two centuries later, the Enlightenment transmuted Christian linearism into a complementary secular faith, what historian Carl Becker called “the heavenly city of the eighteenth-century philosophers”—the belief in indefinite scientific, economic, and political improvement.

By the late nineteenth century, with the Industrial Revolution roaring at maximum speed, the Western dogma of history-as-progress reached its apogee. Either as a religious credo, a positivist dogma, or an evolutionary science, it was not to be questioned. The 1902 edition of *The Cambridge Modern History* explained: “We are bound to assume as a scientific hypothesis on which history is to be written, a progress in human affairs. This progress must inevitably be towards some end.” “Progress was Providence,” was how Lord Acton later described the prevailing Victorian view. “Unless there was progress there could be no God in history.”

England's first New World settlements began as an outpost of radical Calvinism and the radical Enlightenment. Not surprisingly, America has come to embody the most extreme expression of progressive linearism. The first European explorers often saw in this fresh land mass—this New Atlantis, El Dorado, or Utopia—an authentic opportunity to remake man and therein put an end to history. Successive waves of immigrants likewise saw themselves as builders of a millennial New Jerusalem, inaugurators of a revolutionary Age of Reason, defenders of “God's chosen country,” and pioneers in service of a

Manifest Destiny. Early in the current century, Herbert Croly wrote of a “progressive nationalism” and James Truslow Adams of an “American Dream” to refer to this civic faith in linear advancement. Time, they suggested, was the natural ally of each successive generation. Thus arose the dogma of American exceptionalism, the belief that this nation and its people had somehow broken loose from any risk of cyclical regress.

Along the way, linear time has succeeded in suppressing cyclical time. Ages ago, cyclical time conquered chaotic time. But in recent centuries, the conqueror has in turn been chained and shackled. The victory of linearism was neither immediate nor absolute. For example, the core Christian ritual—the yearly celebration of a dying and reborn savior—still resembles the regenerative midwinter rituals of the archaic religions it superseded. But by degrees, cyclical time as a living faith has been pushed ever deeper into obscurity.

The suppression dates back to the early Christians who tried to root out calendrical paganism, denounced classical cycles, and pushed underground entire branches of nonlinear learning, such as the hermetic fields of alchemy and astrology. “Only the wicked walk in circles,” warned St. Augustine. At the dawn of the modern era, the assault grew more fierce. The Reformation not only triggered a renewed attack on pagan holidays (chopping down maypoles) but also popularized the calibrating clocks, calendars, and diaries that enabled people to employ time as an efficient means to a linear end—be it holiness, wealth, or conquest. More recently, the West began using technology to flatten the very physical evidence of natural cycles. With artificial light, we believe we defeat the sleep-wake cycle; with climate control, the seasonal cycle; with refrigeration, the agricultural cycle; and with high-tech medicine, the rest-recovery cycle.

Triumphal linearism has shaped the very style of Western and (especially) American civilization. Before, when cyclical time reigned, people valued patience, ritual, the relatedness of parts to the whole, and the healing power of time-within-nature. Today, we value haste, iconoclasm, the disintegration of the whole into parts, and the power of time-outside-nature.

Before, the dominant numerical paradigm for change was four, originally a feminine symbol in most cultures. In the great quaternities of seasons, directions, and elements, the fourth element always circles back to the others. Today, the dominant paradigm is three, originally a masculine symbol. In the great triads of Christianity and modern philosophy, the third element always transcends the others.

Before, people prized the ability to divine nature's energy and use it. Today, we prize the ability to defy nature's energy and overcome it.

Overcoming Linearism

The great achievement of linear time has been to endow mankind with a purposeful confidence in its own self-improvement. A linear society defines explicit moral goals (justice, equality) or material goals (comfort, abundance) and then sets out deliberately to attain them. When those goals are reached, people feel triumphant; when they aren't, new tactics are applied. Either way, the journey never repeats. Each act is original, granting a sense of authentic creativity unknown to those who reenact the past. In America, as Mark Twain observed, nothing is older than our habit of calling everything new.

Yet the great weakness of linear time is that it obliterates time's recurrence and thus cuts people off from the eternal—whether in nature, in each other, or in ourselves. When we deem our social destiny entirely self-directed and our personal lives self-made, we lose any sense of participating in a collective myth larger than ourselves. We cannot ritually join with those who come before or after us. Situating us at some intermediate moment eons away from both the beginning and the end of history, linear time leaves us alone, restless, afraid to stand still lest we discover something horrible about ourselves. Most Americans would agree with Mary McCarthy that “The happy ending is our national belief”—but few of us have any idea what we would do if we ever got there.

When things go well, this weakness is no problem. But when things go badly, the linear view can crack—exposing the horror of time as an unfamiliar void. The experience of World War I affected the entire Western world in precisely this fashion, casting a shadow of despair and relativism that loomed until the uplifting finale to World War II reenergized faith in the future. But today that faith is again in steep decline. *Progress* has acquired mostly pejorative connotations—of robotic technology, bureaucratic stat-ism, and jaundiced culture. It no longer describes where we wish history to go. The more we persist in believing time to be linear, the more we fear that the path to the future might now be linear *downwards*.

Many Americans have responded to this dimming faith in progress with aggressive denial. In every recent decade, the public has rallied around yet another manifesto of three-stage triumphalism. In 1960, it was Walt Rostow's *The Stages of Economic Growth* (culminating in a “takeoff” into a fabulous mass-consumption society); in 1967, Herman Kahn's *The Year 2000* (traditional, industrial, and then postindustrial societies); in 1970, Charles Reich's *The Greening of America* (Con I, II, and III); in 1980, Alvin Toffler's *The Third Wave* (First, Second, and Third Waves); and in 1992, Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* (a new take on G.W.F. Hegel, who carved all of history into threes). The linear school views all human history as akin to a ski jump: After crouching dumbly for millennia, mankind is just now taking off on its glorious final flight.

To linearists, the future can often be reduced to a straight-line extrapolation of the recent past. Because they don't see any bends or reversals in what has already happened, they can't see any in what will happen. “Trends, like

horses, are easier to ride in the direction they are already going,” writes *Megatrends'* John Naisbitt. It is likewise typical of linearism, new and old, to herald the imminent arrival of history's last act. Today's avid believers, just like the crowds who gathered around Reformation preachers, are apparently flattered into believing that they just happen to be alive at the moment of mankind's ultimate transformation.

Yet despite the undaunted linearism, even more Americans are reverting to the belief in chaotic time—the belief that life is a billion fragments, that events come at random, and that history is directionless. In pop culture, the past is mainly grist for Planet Hollywood artifacts, *Forrest Gump* morphs, and Oliver Stone infotainments. In politics and business, the past is little more than a tool chest of tactical images. In academe, many historians grimace at the suggestion that the past offers any lessons whatsoever. They see no intrinsic and unifying story, merely a grab bag of bygone details or footnotes to some passing social theory. Indeed, some historians now say there is no single history at all—just a multitude of histories, one for each region, language, family, industry, class, and race. Many academics see the past as subservient to politics, yet another weapon on the Culture Wars battlefield.

This scholarly rejection of time's inner logic has led to the devaluation of history throughout our society. At Ivy League universities, undergraduates are no longer required to study history as a separate field. In public school textbooks, tidbits about past events are mixed together with lessons about geography, politics, and the arts into a sort of social studies stew. Polls reveal that history is now the subject high school students find of least interest or worth. In pop parlance, *that's history* has come to mean “that's irrelevant.” Taught a lessonless past, today's students have trouble reciting even the core names and dates. Yet, if their teachers are correct, why should students care when the Civil War was fought? Does it really make any difference whether it started in 1861, 1851, or 1751? If time is chaos, an event like the Civil War could never happen again or could recur tomorrow. If time is linear, then the entire nineteenth century is of no more consequence than some discarded ballistic booster, its relevance fading with each passing year.

Americans today fear that linearism (alias the American Dream) has run its course. Many would welcome some enlightenment about history's patterns and rhythms, but today's intellectual elites offer little that's useful. Caught between the entropy of the chaoticists and the hubris of the linearists, the American people have lost their moorings.

There is an alternative. But to grasp it, Americans need to return to the insights of the ancient circle.

Nothing would be lost. We can retain our hopeful intuition of progress and our skeptical awareness of randomness. Yet at the same time we can restore the one perspective that we have too long suppressed and the insights that no other perspective can offer.

We need to realize that without some notion of historical recurrence, no

one can meaningfully discuss the past at all. Why even talk about the founding (or decline) of a city, a victory (or defeat) in battle, the rise (or passing away) of a generation, unless we accept that similar things have happened before and could happen again? Only through recurrence can time reveal the enduring myths that define who we are. When Aristotle said that poetry is superior to history because history only tells us “what Alcibiades did or had done to him,” he had in mind history as the mere compilation of facts. To matter, history has to do more. It has to reconnect people, in time, to what Aristotle called the “timeless forms” of nature.

We need to recall that time, in its physical essence, is nothing but the measurement of cyclically itself. Whether the swing of a pendulum, the orbit of a planet, or the frequency of a laser beam, the assumed regularity of a cyclical event is literally all we have to define what time is. Etymologically, the word *time* comes from *tide*—an ancient reference to the lunar cycle still retained in such expressions as “yuletide” and “good tidings.” Similarly, the word *period* originally meant “orbit,” as in “planetary period.” The word *annual* comes from *annus*, whose ancient root meant “circle.” The words *year* and *hour* come from the same root as the Greek *hows*, meaning “solar period.” The word *month* is a derivative of *moon*. Without cycles, time would literally defy any kind of description.

Most important, we need to understand that our modern efforts to flatten natural and social cycles often meet with only superficial success. Sometimes, all we do is substitute one cycle for another. When we dam a river or industrialize a society, for example, we might eliminate the cycle of floods or wars; then again, we might just ensure that the cycle is both less frequent and more devastating. Often, “progress” ends up generating entirely new cycles. Just ponder them all: business cycles, financial cycles, electoral cycles, fashion cycles, opinion cycles, crime cycles, traffic cycles, and so on. Ironically, linear time creates or deepens social cycles by disabling our natural capacity to achieve homeostasis by continual minor readjustment. Instead, readjustments occur in jumps—that is, in more powerful cyclical movements. The saecular cycle is a profound case in point: Relatively weak in traditional settings, it assumes its most potent form in modern societies that subscribe to linear time.

The society that believes in cycles the least, America, has fallen in the grip of the most portentous cycle in the history of mankind. Many Americans might prefer to think of their country as immune from nature or to think of their history as riding on such serendipities as a slim electoral margin, a barely won battle, an improbable invention, or an assassin's fateful marksmanship. Yet many such supposedly external factors are linked to cyclical change. And even when truly random events occur, our response is governed by circular rhythms that are beyond our power to eradicate. In an eloquent defense of the cyclical perspective on American history, Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. writes:

A true cycle ... is self-generating. It cannot be determined, short of catastrophe, by external events. War, depressions, inflations, may heighten or complicate moods, but the cycle itself rolls on, self-contained, self-sufficient and autonomous.... The roots of this cyclical self-sufficiency lie deep in the natural life of humanity. There is a cyclical pattern in organic nature—in the tides, in the seasons, in night and day, in the systole and diastole of the human heart.

Among today's historians, Schlesinger leads the courageous few who challenge the linear orthodoxy. He thereby joins a long and rich tradition of historians, philosophers, writers, and poets who have seen, in affairs of state and war, rhythms similar to what Schlesinger has seen in “the natural life of humanity.”

What are these rhythms? In traditional societies, they can assume any number of forms and periodicities. In modern societies, two special and related rhythms come to dominate all the rest. One beats to the length of a long human life. The Etruscans ritualized it and the Romans first gave it a name: the *saeculum*. Today, it loosely goes by the name of *siecle*, or “century.” In modern times, those who have glimpsed what Arnold Toynbee called history's “long cycle” have seldom strayed from the core logic of the *saeculum*: that cycles of human affairs are approximately the length of a long human life (or in the case of half-stroke cycles like the Kondratieff wave, half a human life).

The other rhythm beats to the four phases of a human life, each about twenty years or so in length. What the ancient Greeks called *genos*, and what we call the *generation*, has been known, named, and respected as a force in history by practically every civilization since the dawn of time. From the Sumerians to the Mycenaeans to the Mayans, archaic societies knew of few other ways to describe the passage of social time. In the Hebrew Bible, it was the “new generation ... who knew not the ways of the Lord” that periodically reenacted the enduring human drama of apostasy, punishment, repentance, and renewal. Over the ages, most of those who have pondered the underlying cause and motive force behind cyclical change—from Plato and Polybius to Toynbee and Schlesinger—have pointed to the generation.

The *saeculum* lends history its underlying temporal beat. Generations, and their four recurring archetypes, create and perpetuate history's seasonal quality. Together, they explain how and why cycles occur.

Cycles and Archetypes

During the Middle Ages, travelers reported an unusual custom among