

Cue the turning

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MADISON - In their provocative book [The Fourth Turning](#), authors William Strauss and Neil Howe suggest there is a predictable rhythm to social conditions and change, with alternating periods of progress, decay and renewal.

According to Strauss and Howe, each generation has distinct characteristics and archetypes that contribute to the perpetual change and occasional upheaval societies experience. Over the course of what they describe as a “natural century,” or roughly the length of a normal human life, there are four identifiable phases or “turnings.”

A first turning is marked by a **high**, that euphoric buzz that accompanies a recent overhaul of the social order. Faith in institutions is high, and society is confident of where it is headed collectively. These heady times are followed by an **awakening**, when institutions begin to be questioned and attacked in the name of personal autonomy. Just when society is reaching a high tide of public progress, people tire of communal discipline and long for more individual satisfaction and enjoyment.

Awakenings invariably produce an **unraveling**. Public institutions become weak and distrusted. Individualism flourishes. More than one observer has noticed that the early part of the 21st Century has [amounted to](#) a “[great unraveling](#).” After unraveling comes **crisis**. Fourth turnings are

[phoenix](#)

moments, when societies are reborn – as if arising from the ashes – and national identity is redefined. Institutions are torn down and rebuilt from the ground up in response to a perceived threat to the nation's very survival. Civic life revives, and a sense of community purpose reemerges.

America's last fourth turning began with the stock market crash of 1929 and climaxed with World War II, followed by a prolonged post-war high, closely tracing the telltale pattern Strauss and Howe identified. Highs follow crises when society senses it must coalesce and rebuild. Unravelings come on the heels of awakenings, when the social impulse is to fragment and enjoy.

As the title of their book implies, the U.S. is now entering a fourth turning. Our country has gone through this before . . . three times to be exact. The first was at the time of the nation's founding and culminated with the American Revolution. The second was the nation's reckoning with the scourge of slavery and the resulting Civil War. The third was the Great Depression and World War II. The impending crisis grows out of the chaos of economic globalization, the concentration of wealth and power in fewer and fewer hands, and global climate change.

Public institutions are in tatters, having fallen victim to the loss of civic consciousness that came with the great unraveling. The major political parties are canaries in the coal mine.

The Republican Party was established by radicals who sought to overthrow morally bankrupt institutions and remake the social order. It now works to ward off social change and protect the privileges of the high and mighty. The GOP once was the party of Abe Lincoln and Teddy Roosevelt and Dwight Eisenhower and devoted itself to creating opportunity for all. It now is dedicated to serving the rich.

The Democratic Party has spent an enormous amount of energy trying to make amends for being on the wrong side of history with respect to slavery, and even emerged as a force for considerable good under the leadership of FDR at a time of national and global crisis. But since then the Democrats have experienced their own great unraveling, to the point where it is known to most Americans simply as the party of more government and higher taxes. At a time when society has grown wary if not resentful of public authority and when once-stout public institutions are being torn to pieces, being the party of government is not solid ground to stand on. Today's Democrats are easy prey for opponents wishing to caricature them as a party that

takes from people who work and gives to people who don't.

Meanwhile, economic and environmental challenges and demand for social change are reaching a boiling point.

Another phoenix moment fast approaches.

Tags: Untagged