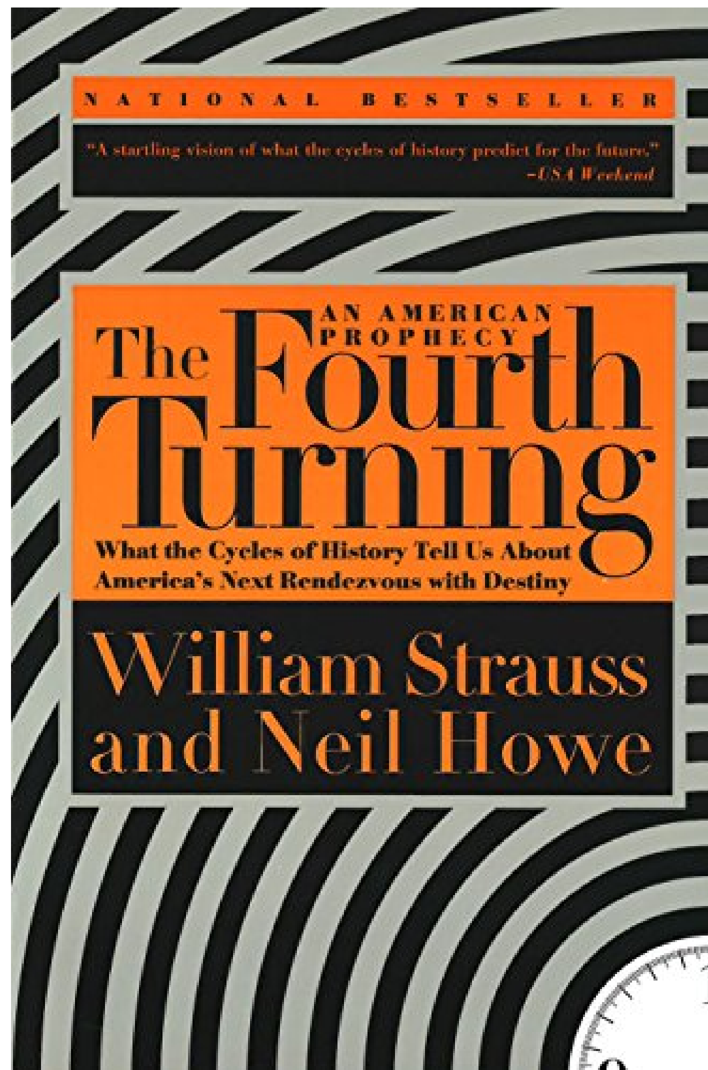
The Fourth Turning: What the Cycles of History Tell Us About America's Next Rendezvous with Destiny

by

William Strauss



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Synopsis

NATIONAL BESTSELLER • “A startling vision of what the cycles of history predict for the future.”—USA Weekend William Strauss and Neil Howe will change the way you see the world—and your place in it. With blazing originality, The Fourth Turning illuminates the past, explains the present, and reimagines the future. Most remarkably, it offers an utterly persuasive prophecy about how America’s past will predict its future.Strauss and Howe base this vision on a provocative theory of American history. The authors look back five hundred years and uncover a distinct pattern: Modern history moves in cycles, each one lasting about the length of a long human life, each composed of four eras—or "turnings"—that last about twenty years and that always arrive in the same order. In The Fourth Turning, the authors illustrate these cycles using a brilliant analysis of the post-World War II period.First comes a High, a period of confident expansion as a new order takes root after the old has been swept away. Next comes an Awakening, a time of spiritual exploration and rebellion against the now-established order. Then comes an Unraveling, an increasingly troubled era in which individualism triumphs over crumbling institutions. Last comes a Crisis—the Fourth Turning—when society passes through a great and perilous gate in history. Together, the four turnings comprise history's seasonal rhythm of growth, maturation, entropy, and rebirth.The Fourth Turning offers bold predictions about how all of us can prepare, individually and collectively, for America’s next rendezvous with destiny.

Look inside the book

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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 BEFOREThe 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 TimeFrom 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 deconstructive 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 LinearismThe 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 statism, 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 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 ArchetypesDuring the Middle Ages, travelers reported an unusual custom among illiterate villagers in central France. Whenever an event of local importance occurred, like the marriage of a seigneur or the renegotiation of feudal dues, the elders boxed the ears of a young child to make sure he remembered that day—and event—all his life.In today's world, the making of childhood memories remains a visceral practice. Grand state ceremonies box the ears with the thunder of cannons, roar of jets, and blast of fireworks. Teenagers' boom boxes similarly etch young aural canals with future memories of a shared adolescent community. Like medieval French villagers, modern Americans carry deeply felt associations with what has happened at various points in their lives. We memorialize public events (Pearl Harbor, the Kennedy and King assassinations, the Challenger explosion) by remembering exactly what we were doing at the time. As we grow older, we realize that the sum total of such events has in many ways shaped who we are.Exactly how these major events shaped us had much to do with how old we were when they happened. When you recall your personal markers of life and time, the events you remember most are suffused with the emotional complexion of your phase of life at the time. Your early markers, colored by the dreams and innocence of childhood, reveal how events (and older people)

shaped you. Your later markers, colored by the cares of maturity, tell how you shaped events (and younger people). When you reach old age, you will remember all the markers that truly mattered to you. Perhaps your generation will build monuments to them (as today's seniors are now doing with the new FDR and World War II monuments in Washington, D.C.), in the hope that posterity will remember your lives and times in the preliterate way: as legends. It is through this linkage of biological aging and shared experience, reproduced across turnings and generations, that history acquires personal relevance.Human history is made of lives, coursing from birth to death. All persons who are born must die, and all who die must first be born. The full sweep of human civilization is but the sum of this. Of all the cycles known to man, the one we all know best is the human life cycle. No other societal force—not class, not nationality, not culture, not technology—has as predictable a chronology. The limiting length of an active life cycle is one of civilization's great constants: In the time of Moses, it was eighty to a hundred years, and it still is, even if more people reach that limit. Biologically and socially, a full human life is divided into four phases: childhood, young adulthood, midlife, and elderhood. Each phase of life is the same length as the others, capable of holding one generation at a time. And each phase is associated with a specific social role that conditions how its occupants perceive the world and act on those perceptions.A generation, in turn, is the aggregate of all people born over roughly the span of a phase of life who share a common location in history and, hence, a common collective persona. Like a person (and unlike a race, religion, or sex), a generation is mortal: Its members understand that in time they all must perish. Hence, a generation feels the same historical urgency that individuals feel in their own lives. This dynamic of generational aging and dying enables a society to replenish its memory and evolve over time. Each time younger generations replace older ones in each phase of life, the composite life cycle becomes something altogether new, fundamentally changing the entire society's mood and behavior.History creates generations, and generations create history. This symbiosis between life and time explains why, if one is seasonal, the other must be.Americans' chronic failure to grasp the seasonality of history explains why the consensus forecasts about the national direction usually turn out so wrong.Back in the late 1950s, forecasters widely predicted that America's future would be like Disney's Tomorrowland. The experts foresaw well-mannered youth, a wholesome culture, an end of ideology, an orderly conquest of racism and poverty, steady economic progress, plenty of social discipline, and uncontroversial Korea-like police actions abroad. All these predictions, of course, were wildly mistaken. It's not just that the experts missed the particular events that lay just ahead—the Tet Offensive and Apollo 11, Watts and Kent State, the Summer of Love and Watergate, Earth Day and Chappaquiddick. It's that they missed the entire mood of the coming era.Why were their predictions so wrong? When the forecasters assumed the future would extrapolate the recent past, they expected that the next set of people in each phase of life would behave just like the current occupants. Had they known where and how to look, the experts could have seen history-bending changes about to occur in America's generational lineup: Each generation would age through time as surely as water runs to the sea. Over the ensuing two

decades, the current elder leaders were due to disappear, a new batch of kids to arrive, and the generations in between to transform the new phases of life they were entering.This dynamic has recurred throughout American history. Roughly every two decades (the span of one phase of life), there has arisen a new constellation of generations—a new layering of generational personas up and down the age ladder. As this constellation has shifted, so has the national mood. Consider what happened, from the late 1950s to the late 1970s, as one generation replaced another at each phase of life:In elderhood, the cautionary individualists of the Lost Generation (born 1883-1900) were replaced by the hubristic G.I. Generation (born 1901-1924), who launched America into an expansive era of material affluence, global power, and civic planning.In midlife, the upbeat G.I.s were replaced by the helpmate Silent Generation (born 1925-1942), who applied their expertise and sensitivity to fine-tune the institutional order while mentoring the passions of youth.In young adulthood, the conformist Silent were replaced by the narcissistic Boom Generation (born 1943-1960), who asserted the primacy of self and challenged the alleged moral vacuity of the institutional order.In childhood, the indulged Boomers were replaced by the neglected 13th Generation (born 1961-1981), who were left unprotected at a time of cultural convulsion and adult self-discovery. Known in pop culture as Generation X, its name here reflects the fact that it is literally the thirteenth generation to call itself American.Viewed through the prism of generational aging, the mood change between the late 1950s and the late 1970s becomes not just comprehensible, but (in hindsight) predictable: America was moving from a First Turning constellation and into a Second. Replace the aging Truman and Ike with LBJ and Nixon. Replace the middle-aged Ed Sullivan and Ann Landers with Norman Lear and Gloria Steinem. Replace the young Organization Man with the Woodstock hippie. Replace Jerry Mathers with Tatum O'Neal. This top-to-bottom alteration of the American life cycle tells much about why and how America shifted from a mood of consensus, complacency, and optimism to one of turbulence, argument, and passion.What about the most recent twenty years? The most prevalent late-1970s forecasts of late 1990s America assumed that the trends of the 1960s would continue along a straight line. This led to predictions of an acceleration of government planning, ongoing protests against social conformity, more God-is-dead secularism, delegitimized family life, less emphasis on money and weapons in a “postmaterialist” age, and spectacular economic growth that would either allow unprecedented leisure—or plunge the planet into a huge ecological catastrophe.None of that came to pass, of course. But in their triumphal enthusiasm, virtually all the late-seventies forecasters made a more fundamental error: Whether their visions were Utopian or apocalyptic, veering toward Epcot Center or Soylent Green, they all assumed that America was heading somewhere in a hurry. No one imagined what actually happened: that through the 1980s and 1990s, while different societal pieces have drifted in different directions, America as a whole has gone nowhere in particular.As before, these forecasters missed the target because they failed to look at life-cycle trajectories. They failed to realize that all the generations were poised to enter new phases of life—and that, as they did, people up and down the life cycle would think and behave

differently. In elderhood, the confident G.I.s were due to be replaced by the more hesitant Silent, who would prefer a more complex, diverse, and individuated social order. In midlife, the conciliatory Silent were ready to give way to the more judgmental Boomers, who would enforce a confrontational ethic of moral conviction. In young adulthood, the passionate Boomers were set to vacate for the more pragmatic 13ers, whose survivalism would be born of necessity. In childhood, the neglected 13ers were about to be replaced by the more treasured Millennials amid a resurgent commitment to protect and provide for small children. As a result of all these life-cycle shifts, the national mood would change into something new. Back in the 1970s, the experts could have envisioned what this mood would be. How? By looking at an earlier Awakening era with a similar generational constellation and by inquiring into what happened next.And what about today? Forecasters are still making the same mistakes. Best-selling books envision a postmillennial America of unrelenting individualism, social fragmentation, and weakening government—a nation becoming ever more diverse and decentralized, its citizens inhabiting a high-tech world of tightening global ties and loosening personal ones, its Web sites multiplying and its culture splintering. We hear much talk about how elder life will improve and child life deteriorate, how the rich will get richer and the poor poorer, and how today's kids will come of age with a huge youth crime wave.Don't bet on it. The rhythms of history suggest that none of those trends will last more than a few years into the new century. What will come afterward can be glimpsed by studying earlier Unraveling eras with similar generational constellations—and by inquiring into what happened next.To do this correctly, we must link each of today's generations with a recurring sequence of four generational archetypes that have appeared throughout all the saecula of our history. These four archetypes are best identified by the turnings of their births:A Prophet generation is born during a High.A Nomad generation is born during an Awakening.A Hero generation is born during an Unraveling.An Artist generation is born during a Crisis.Each archetype is an expression of one of the enduring temperaments—and life-cycle myths—of mankind. When history overlays these archetypes atop the four turnings, the result is four very different generational constellations. This explains why a new turning occurs every twenty years or so and why history rolls to so many related pendular rhythms. One turning will un-derprotect children, for example, while another will overprotect them. The same is true with attitudes toward politics, affluence, war, religion, family, gender roles, pluralism, and a host of other trends.Dating back to the first stirrings of the Renaissance, Anglo-American history has traversed six saecular cycles, each of which displayed a similar rhythm. Every cycle had four turnings, and (except for the anomalous U.S. Civil War) every cycle produced four generational archetypes. We are presently in the Third Turning of the Millennial Saeculum, the seventh cycle of the modern era.By looking at history through this saecular prism, you can see why the American mood has evolved as it has during your own lifetime. Reflect back as far as you can and recall how the persona of people in any phase of life has changed completely every two decades or so. Every time, these changes have followed the archetypal pattern. Consider the generational transitions of the past decade, which are once again proving

the linear forecasters wrong.As the Silent have begun reaching retirement age, national leaders have shown less interest in making public institutions do big things and more interest in making them flexible, fair, expert, nuanced, and participatory. Why? The elder Artist is replacing the elder Hero.As Boomers have begun turning fifty, the public discourse has become less refined and conciliatory and more impassioned and moralistic. Why? The midlife Prophet is replacing the midlife Artist.As 13ers have filled the “twentysomething” bracket, the pop culture has become less about soul, free love, and feeling at one with the world and a lot more about cash, sexual disease, and going it alone in an unforgiving world. Why? The young-adult Nomad is replacing the young-adult Prophet.As Millennial have surged into America's elementary and junior high schools, family behavior has reverted toward greater protection. Why? We are now raising the child Hero, no longer the child Nomad.When you compile these four archetypal shifts through the entire life cycle, you see how America's circa-1970s constellation has transformed into something new, from top to bottom, in the 1990s. That is why the nation has shifted from a mood of Awakening to one of Unraveling. When you apply this secular logic forward into the Oh-Oh decade and beyond, you can begin to understand why a Fourth Turning is coming and how America's mood will change when the Crisis hits.Rediscovering the Seasons“The farther backward you look, the farther forward you are likely to see,” Winston Churchill once said. The challenge is to look at the future not along a straight line, but around the inevitable corners. To know how to do that, you have to practice looking at how the past has turned corners.In American schools, where most of us first learn history, our teachers and books seldom if ever discuss events from a seasonal perspective. Recall those pictures of U.S. presidents that line so many classroom walls: Were you ever taught to link the mood and events of those presidents' youth eras with the mood and events of their terms of leadership? Recall the usual litany about the rise of the modern West over the five centuries from Columbus to Apollo 11: Were you ever taught about the ebbs and flows within each of those centuries of supposedly monotonous progress? Recall all the lessons you heard about the American Revolution, Civil War, and the Great Depression and World War II: Were you ever taught anything more than bits and pieces about the decades that preceded those Crises, that is, about the 1760s, 1850s, and 1920s? Did you ever study the public mood in those other Third Turnings? Or what premonition (if any) people had about the Crisis about to hit? Probably not.If you learned history in the usual linear style, you probably felt a void. Perhaps you yearned for a more personal connection with the past and future, a path through which you could attach a larger drama to your own life experience. Perhaps you yearned for a closer connection to the ancestral wisdom gained by real people who struggled to build the civilization you inherited. Perhaps you yearned for a feeling Americans haven't known in decades: to be active participants in a destiny that is both positive and plausible.You are about to embark on a new journey through modern history. There is much to learn—but before embarking, there are some things to unlearn.You should try to unlearn the linear belief that America (or the entire modern world) is exempt from the seasonal cycles of nature. As you become acquainted with the saeculum, you will meet a very different view, one

arising with the ancients—the view that the rhythms of social change are reflected in the rhythms of biological and seasonal nature. In their search for deeper meanings, the ancients translated events into myths and heroes into archetypes, players in a recurring drama in which new civic orders (or values regimes) are perpetually created, nurtured, exhausted, destroyed—and, in the end, regenerated. In the ancient view, this cycle repeats, pursuant to the same beat, in a history without end. Time can bring an upward spiral of progress or a downward spiral of decline, much like the processes of natural evolution.Try to unlearn the linear need to judge change by one-dimensional standards of progress. Because nature was more central to their cosmology than to ours, the ancients understood some things better than we moderns do. They knew that natural change is neither steady nor random. They knew that nature neither guarantees progress nor precludes it. They knew that the oscillations within a cycle are greater than the differences across a full cycle. They knew that one year's (or one saeculum's) winter is more like the prior winter than like the autumn that came right before it. They knew that a Fourth Turning is a natural season of life.Try to unlearn the obsessive fear of death (and the anxious quest for death avoidance) that pervades linear thinking in nearly every modern society. The ancients knew that, without periodic decay and death, nature cannot complete its full round of biological and social change. Without plant death, weeds would strangle the forest. Without human death, memories would never die, and unbroken habits and customs would strangle civilization. Social institutions require no less. Just as floods replenish soils and fires rejuvenate forests, a Fourth Turning clears out society's exhausted elements and creates an opportunity for fresh growth.Finally, unlearn the linear view that positive change always comes willingly, incrementally, and by human design. Many Americans instinctively sense that many elements of today's Unraveling-era America—from Wall Street to Congress, from rock lyrics to pro sports—must undergo a wrenching upheaval before they can fundamentally improve. That instinct is correct. A Fourth Turning lends people of all ages what is literally a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to heal (or destroy) the very heart of the republic.With all that unlearned, you can relearn history from the perspective of seasonality.This is a book that turns history into prophecy. It takes you on a journey through the confluence of social time and human life. In Part One (“Seasons”), you will acquire new tools for understanding self, family, society, and civilization. You will learn about the cycles of life, generational archetypes, turnings, and history. In Part Two (“Turnings”), you will revisit post-World War II American history from the perspective of turnings and archetypes. You will gain a new insight about why the first three turnings of the current Millennial Saeculum have evolved as they have. You will read why this saecular journey must culminate in a Fourth Turning and what is likely to happen when it does. In Part Three (“Preparations”), you will explore what you and your nation can do to brace for the coming Crisis. Given the current Unraveling-era mood of personal indulgence and public despair, now may seem like a hopeless time to redirect the course of history. But you will learn how, by applying the principles of seasonality, we can steer our destiny. There is much that we can accomplish in a saecular autumn, many steps we can take to help ensure that the coming spring will herald glorious times ahead.An appreciation

for history is never more important than at times when a saecular winter is forecast. In the Fourth Turning, we can expect to encounter personal and public choices akin to the harshest ever faced by ancestral generations. We would do well to learn from their experience, viewed through the prism of cyclical time. This will not come easily. It will require us to lend a new seasonal interpretation to our revered American Dream. And it will require us to admit that our faith in linear progress has often amounted to a Faustian bargain with our children. Faust always ups the ante, and every bet is double or nothing. Through much of the Third Turning, we have managed to postpone the reckoning. But history warns that we can't defer it beyond the next bend in time.As Arthur Wing Pinero has written, “The future is only the past again, entered through another gate.” Increasingly, Americans are sensing that the next great gate in history is approaching. It's time to trust our instincts, think seasonally, and prepare. Forewarned is forearmed.PART ONESeasonsCHAPTER 2Seasons of TimeIn the pre-Roman centuries, Italy was home to Etruria, among the most mysterious and exotic of ancient civilizations. The Etruscans were unrelated to other Italic peoples and may have come from Lydia, in present-day Turkey. Their alphabet resembles ancient Greek but defies translation. To understand their rituals, modern historians have little more than rumors handed down by raconteurs, plus artifacts dug from tombs. From these clues, historians have concluded that the Etruscans were an unusually fatalistic people who looked upon time as the playing out of an unalterable destiny. According to legend, an old sibyl issued a prophecy that their civilization would last for ten lifetimes, at which time finem fore nominis Etrusci: Etruria was doomed.Around the time this prophecy was issued, perhaps in the ninth century B.C., the Etruscans invented the ritual with which they came to measure the portents of their prophecy. No one knows its Etruscan name, but by the time the Romans adopted the ritual, it was known as the saeculum. The word carried two meanings: “a long human life,” and “a natural century,” approximating one hundred years. The word's etymology may be related to the Latin senectus (old age), sero (to plant), sequor (to follow), or some lost Etruscan root. Much of what we know about the saeculum comes from Varro (Augustus's librarian) via Censorinus, a Roman historian of the third century a.d. By then, Etruria had become a distant memory to a Rome that was itself weakening.In De die natale, an essay on time and history dedicated to a friend on his birthday, Censorinus described “natural saeculae” as “very long spaces of a human life defined by birth and death” and explained how the Etruscans measured them:Although the truth is concealed in the darkness, in any civilization which has natural saeculae the books there are seen to teach the rituals of the Etruscans, in which it is written that the beginnings of saeculae are brought forth in this way: Among those who are born on the day on which a city or civilization is founded, the one who lives the longest completes, with the day of his death, the standard measure of the first saeculum, and among those alive in the city on that day, the one who lives the longest completes the second saeculum.Although he furnished the traditional numbers for the first six Etruscan saeculae (which averaged 107 years), Censorinus admitted that these calculations must have encountered many practical difficulties. Who kept track of “the one who lives the longest”? How

did the various Etruscan towns, founded in different years, agree on a common system of reckoning? Censorinus reported that the Etruscan priests confirmed the dates by noting comets and “strange lightning” in the heavens. We know little for certain except that the Etruscans considered the natural human life span to be the central unit of their history and destiny.Like all ancients, the Etruscans were well aware of the annual cycle of the sun and seasons—of spring, summer, autumn, and winter. Gripped by prophecy and superstition, they also believed that Etruria's history was progressing through a similarly seasonal cycle of history—of growth, maturation, entropy, and death. Of these two cycles, one lasted a year, the other too long for a mortal to imagine. Perhaps the Etruscans felt they needed an intermediate measure of time, a natural cycle between the other two. If so, they made the obvious choice: the human life, with its natural progression from springlike growth to summerlike maturation to autumnlike entropy to winterlike death.The saeculum served a mnemonic purpose as well. The Etruscans are believed to have been an affective people, attuned more to the personal than the abstract, alert to the energies of youth and the wisdom of age, and (as D. H. Lawrence observed) fascinated with the biology of human procreation. For them, history meant more if somebody were still alive who could personally remember it. Upon the death of the last person who recalled a given event, Etruscans were inclined to move on to fresh memories of newer events. The saeculum became their way of recording history from the inside out—as people actually lived it and remembered it —not from the outside in, as the scribblings of priests in a king's court.In the end, Etruria's ten-saeculum prophecy proved alarmingly correct: The last vestiges of their culture were buried under the advance of Rome during the reign of Augustus, nearly one full millennium after the Etruscan year zero.The Romans had their own mythical prophecy. When Romulus founded Rome, he supposedly saw a flock of twelve vultures, which he took to be a signal that Rome would last twelve units of time. Eventually, the early Romans (who turned to Etruscan learning on such matters) came to assume that the vulture omen must refer to twelve saecula. This assumption was confirmed by a set of prophetic books presented by an old sibyl to Tarquin, the last king of Rome who was himself Etruscan. Thereafter, these Sibylline Prophecies were kept under close guard in the Temple of Jupiter, to be consulted only at moments of crisis and doubt.As their city prospered and conquered, the Romans became obsessed with the saeculum as a rhythmic measure of their destiny. Not long after their republic was founded in 509 B.C., Rome instituted the tradition of saecular games. These three-day, three-night ludi saeculares combined the athletic spectacle of a modern Olympics with the civic ritual of an American July Fourth centennial. Held about once per century, these extravaganzas were timed to give most Romans a decent chance of witnessing them at some point in their lives. By the second century B.C., the first Roman historians routinely employed the saeculum (or saecular games) to periodize their chronicles, especially when describing great wars and new laws.When Augustus established the empire, popular optimism about putting an end to chronic political disorder expressed itself in Virgil's poetic hopes that an aging Rome could “reestablish its youth” and give birth to a new saeculum aureum, another “age of gold.” After Augustus, emperors typically

claimed that their ascendancy to power heralded a new saeculum, a dawning age that would rejuvenate a vast empire gradually shuddering into decadence and ruin. During the late Republic, writers explicitly referred to their own era as Rome's eighth saeculum. A century later, after a round of civil wars, Lucan and Juvenal assumed they were living in the ninth.Why were the Romans so fascinated by the saeculum? It wasn't just an odd way of groping toward 100 years as a convenient round number. Censorinus himself raised and dismissed this possibility, noting that the Romans always distinguished between a civil saeculum (a strict 100-year unit of time) and a natural saeculum (the stuff of life, history, and imperial destiny). A more probable explanation is that the Romans were impressed by a strong 80 to 110 year rhythm that seemed to pulse through their history. During the Republic, this rhythm appeared in the timing of great perils and Rome's subsequent eras of renewal and innovation (the struggle to found the Republic, the do-or-die wars against the Veii and the Gauls, the catastrophic Great Samnite War, the disastrous invasion of Hannibal, and the Gracchi reforms and slave revolts). During the Empire, the saecular pattern arose after fearful episodes of civil strife or barbarian invasion (the founding of the principate under Augustus, the early-second-century recovery under Trajan and the Antonines, the early-third-century recovery under the Severii, and yet a later recovery under Diocletian and Constantine).Ultimately, even the Eternal City was fated to meet a crisis from which it could not recover. In one of history's more bizarre coincidences, the vulture augury proved to be even more accurate than the original Etruscan prophecy. Rome fell to the Visigothic chieftain Alaric in a.d. 410, exactly thirty-seven years before the twelve hundredth anniversary of its legendary founding, ninety-seven years for each of the twelve vultures seen by Romulus. As Europe plunged into the Dark Ages, St. Augustine launched his City of God attack on the cyclical futility of the imperial City of Man. Yet even if the Etruscans and Romans vanished from history, the saeculum did not. A millennium later, it appeared again, boosted by Renaissance philosophers who rediscovered the classical insight of cyclical time. In due course, modern man redefined the practice of saecular games—in the form of major wars and new balances of power that have recurred roughly once every hundred years.Although the Etruscans were unique among archaic peoples for using the length of a long human life as the central unit of time, many other ancient cultures reached similar conclusions about the seasonality of their world. They saw the same natural elements as the Etruscans did, and they too noticed great circles in the seas, skies, and animal life. They reached these conclusions by instinct, not by science. Even so, these beliefs became the stuff of powerful myths and enduring religions. Along the way, ancient cyclical visions pointed toward the saeculum, even if they did not always identify it. Whatever its influence over the ancient world, the saeculum was destined to become even more potent in the modern world, where it would underlie a recurring cycle of history.The Wheels of TimeLate each December, many Americans place large circles of sculpted evergreens over their front doors. Most of us think of this year-end wreath as a Christmas decoration, but the ritual is originally pagan. It dates back to the Roman Saturnalia and totems used by other ancients to protect themselves from winter. Consider the natural symbolism: The wreath's circle symbolizes an

eternity of unbrokenness; its evergreens, the persistence of light and life through the death and darkness of winter; its location on the home portal, the conviction that the family will survive; its postsolstice timing, an acknowledgment that the days of greatest cold must now yield to warmth and promise of spring. Another year-end practice—the New Year's Eve party—resembles not just the Saturnalia, but also the Babylonian Zagmuk, Persian Sacaea, and other annual festivals of wildness and social inversion.As the year turns, many of our later holidays also have roots in the ancient ritual year, whose spring festivals celebrated newness, fertility, and creation; whose midsummer bonfires honored kings and staved off witches; whose autumnal rites extolled the bounty and thanked the earth; and whose winter festivities marked great moments of discontinuity, from death to rebirth. The ancients did not fear the seasons of nature (or history) changing as much as they feared them stopping, leaving the world in a perpetual state of cold or hot (or anarchy or despotism).The ritual year endures in modern America, especially around the time of the "winter break" between the old year and the new. The baby Jesus symbolizes hope for the soul, while the New Year's baby symbolizes hope for the world. In the week between the two holidays, many modern Americans feel unfocused, much like the ancients did after the solstice. Now as then, the break passes. Spurred along by seasonal rites, the year resumes its circular voyage. The original purpose of these solstitial rituals was less to congratulate the seasons than to propel them on, to help nature complete what ancient cultures deemed a wheel of time.The quaternal round of annual seasons was one of many wheels of time ritualized by the ancients. The shortest were governed by the sun and moon, each traversing its own circular pattern of waxing, fullness, waning, and disappearance. Of intermediate length were the cycles of life—animals and humans, priests and kings, dynasties and civilizations—each possessing an orderly morphology of growth and decline. The longest cycles were abstract periods of universal creation and destruction, ranging from the Hebrewdom (1,000 years) to the Mayan pictun (8,000 years), to the inconceivable Buddhist kalpa (4,320,000,000 years). The 12,000-year "great year" or yuga was especially popular in the Babylonian, Hindu, and Hellenistic world, since it roughly coincided with an astronomical cycle today known as the precession of the ecliptic.Whether Eastern or Western, whether as short as an hour or as long as a kalpa, whether measures of real or of eternal or of sacred time, the ancient ritual cycles nearly always manifested the same attributes:Each cycle is represented by a circle, symbolizing perfect and unbreakable recurrence.Nearly every primitive or archaic society came to see sacred time as rounded. In ancient India, Hindus and Jainists described it as a yantra (circle) or chakra (disk), the Buddhists as a mandala (wheel of law or life). To the ancient Chinese, the principle of stability underlying all change, tai chi, was drawn as a circle. Likewise, the ancient Greek word kyklos meant both "cycle" and "circle." On the temple to Athena at Athens was inscribed the epigram "All human things are a circle"—a sentiment echoed by Greco-Roman philosophers from Aristotle to Marcus Aurelius. Ancient Babylon and Egypt gave birth to the zodiacal great year, which inspired the wheels of time and fortune so popular among later Christian and Islamic writers. In Europe, the Celtic god Mag Ruith (wizard of the wheels) set time in motion, while

Germanic tribes symbolized time as a ring, emphasizing its power to bind and constrain. Mayan calendars were circular, while natives in the North American plains referred to the year as a sacred hoop.Two particular symbols of circular time are nearly universal. One is the looping serpent, a sign of evil in the Judeo-Christian tradition but believed by many ancient societies to be a benign chthonic force of nature. Supposedly immortal, the snake periodically renews itself by shedding its skin, just as time sheds years. Another is the traditional circle dance—the European carole, the Punjabi bhangra, the South American cueca, the Balkan kolo—with which communities greet a new season of nature or life. The human ring, like the wedding ring, symbolizes the unbreakable continuity of time.Each circle is divided into phases—sometimes two, nearly always four.When the ancients contemplated time's circular voyage, they were impressed by how every extreme is defined, balanced, and necessitated by its opposite. As the day turned, light alternated with dark. As the year turned, hot and dry alternated with cold and wet. As the saeculum (or its equivalent) turned, peace alternated with war. The ancient Chinese called this the reciprocal interaction of yin (passivity) and yang (aggression). The ancient Greeks called it the dynamic pulsation of philia (love and harmony) and neikos (strife and separation). The Jainists believed that time's wheel oscillates between utsarpini (ascending motion) and avasarpini (declining motion), literally, “up serpent” and “down serpent.” The ancients believed that each cyclical extreme, mirroring the hopes and fears of the other, helps generate the other. The night longs for the day, the day for night. In war, people yearn for relief from strife, leading to peace. In peace, people yearn to champion what they love, leading to war.Overlapping with two-phase time, and surpassing it in popularity among the ancients, was fourfold time. Some ancient religions deified the number four: The holy mandala of the Hindus was typically drawn into four quadrants; the Pythagoreans held the tetrad sacred. Whenever the ancients described the physical universe in its totality, they regularly turned to a fourfold division of directions, colors, elements, humors, winds, and planets, even a supposed fourfoldedness of rivers, trees, cities, and mountains of aboriginal space. Quaternities of time were likewise common. Usually, the ruling prototype was the fourfold seasonality of annual time: spring to summer to fall to winter. Similar quaternities were also applied to days or nights (the Romans' four vigilia), to months (the four phases of the moon), and to people (the four phases of life).When the ancients speculated on universal time, quaternities turned up constantly. The Hindus and Buddhists divided their yugas into four phases of declining virtue. The Persians believed that the twelve thousand years of earthly time were divided into four eras of three thousand years each. The Babylonian and Hellenistic “great year” was subdivided into four “seasons.” Ancient Greek myth told of four ages, each corresponding to a metal (gold, silver, bronze, and iron), a concept echoed in the Hebrew prophet Daniel's “four ages of man” and in the Christian Book of Revelations. Among American native peoples, from the Maya to the Dakota, fourfold time is nearly universal.Like the yin and yang of two-phase time, four-phase time alternates between opposite extremes (spring versus autumn, summer versus winter). Yet along with the solstices, the four-part wheel includes transitional equinoxes, eras of developmental change that allow for a richer metaphor of organic

growth and decline. Time's circle moves not only from cold to hot to cold but also from growth to maturity to decay to death.Each season thus assumes a unique identity, which attaches meaning to the spring or autumn of a life or empire. China was said to have four types of ruling houses, each associated with its own season, element, emotion, geographic direction, and color. According to Han Dynasty historian Tung Chung-shu, rulers are supposed to administer punishments and rewards with regard to the suitability of the season. “The ruler's likes and dislikes, joy and anger, are equivalent to Heaven's spring, summer, autumn, and winter… When Heaven brings forth these four qualities seasonably, the year is fine; when unseasonably, it is bad.” “In general,” summarizes Tung's translator, “pardon, benevolence, and generosity should be manifested in spring and summer to foster the expansive processes of growth; punishments, severity, and strict justice in autumn and winter to aid the tightening up processes of nature.”Each circle of time has a great moment of discontinuity.In the ancient view, a new round of time does not emerge gradually from the last but only after the circle experiences a sharp break. In the lunar cycle, this break occurs during the three nights of darkness; in the annual cycle, during the natural death of winter; in the social cycle, after the death of a father or ruin of a village or, by extension, after the death of a king or ruin of a dynasty. In their great year cycle, the Hellenics called this discontinuity the ekpyrosis, when all things, even human souls, are destroyed in fire. Thus cleansed, nature and history can begin again.Classical cultures developed elaborate rituals to usher in each new circle, just as their mythical gods and heroes and prophets had presumably done at the beginning of time. All over the world, time's rite of passage required three steps. First, rituals of kenosis (emptying)—fasting, sacrificing, or scapegoating—purified the community of sins committed in the last circle and thereby allowed a new circle to begin. In the typical new year celebration, the ancients assumed that an aboriginal god or king had once died for precisely this purpose and that a sacrifice (literally, a “making sacred”) had to be reenacted before each new circle could start. The second step was a liminal, chaotic phase in which the old circle was dead but a new circle not yet born. In this phase, all rules were breakable: The dead could awaken, insults go unpunished, and the social order be inverted, as in the traditional twelfth-night Feast of Fools. The third step required rituals of plurosis (filling)—feasting, celebrating, and marrying—to propel the new circle to a happy and creative beginning. In the modern Christian world, this discontinuity is ritualized each year in the atavistic gestures of emptying and filling that extend haphazardly from Christmas and New Year's through Mardi Gras and Lent.Each circle requires that time be restarted, at the moment of each creation.When a month is over, we push the day back to the first. When a year is over, we push the month back to the first. But is there ever a time when we should push the year back to the first? The ancients thought so. Whenever heroic or prophetic deeds occurred, they often moved all measures of time back to the number one. Their calendrical dates typically denoted numbered years of a particular reign or generation or dynasty. Most modern religions (Christianity, Judaism, Islam) are so firmly wed to the concept of linear time that they do not welcome the concept of periodic new beginnings. But modern revolutions, on occasion, have

attempted to restart (and purify) time. On September 22,1792, the new French Assembly proclaimed “Year One of the Republic” and introduced an entirely new calendar, which lasted only thirteen years. In 1871, the revolutionary leaders of the Paris Commune shot the hands off church clocks to express their release from ancestral time. In our own century, Benito Mussolini ordered 1922 to be hailed as “Year I” (in Roman numerals) of his self-proclaimed Fascist Era.In popular parlance, Americans often set fixed boundaries between eras of active historical remembrance and eras of diminished relevance. We describe the last half-century as a “postwar” era, part of a circle of time that began with the civic heroism of countrymen still alive. Prior events feel substantially more distant in the national memory.Each circle is presumed to repeat itself, in the same sequence, over a period of similar length.Periods repeat—celestial ones exactly, social ones approximately. In ancient Greek, the word periodos meant “a going around, a cycle.” Nearly all non-Western cultures accept the periodic regularity of time. In the West—from the Stoics to the Epicureans, Polybius to Ibn Khaldun, Machiavelli to Vico, Yeats to Eliot, Spengler to Toynbee—circular time has been a perennial theme. As the philosopher R. G. Collingwood remarked, “The historical cycle is a permanent feature of all historical thought.”There are many cycles of time, each with a different periodicity. Each cycle measures hours or days or years or great years of human activity according to its own particulars. This prompts the question: Through the millennia, which wheel has dominated the others as a marker in people's personal and social lives?Among traditional societies, where behavior is prescribed by ritual time, any circle may be as useful as any other. Some activities are governed by rules for the day, others by rules for the month, season, year, reign, dynasty, and so on. When an unnatural intervention occurs (say, a solar eclipse or an untimely royal death), people engage in purification rites to push the distended circle back to its natural groove, after which time is presumed to keep turning as before. As a society modernizes, however, one circle gradually emerges as paramount over all the others: This is the circle of the natural human life span—what the Etruscans defined and the Romans knew as the saeculum.Why should the saeculum be so special? One reason is that the natural life span is probably the only circle that mankind can neither avoid nor alter. The planetary rhythms of light, heat, and precipitation can be mutated or circumvented by modern technology and global markets. The political rhythms of dynastic change can be twisted or frozen by ideologies and nation states. The natural human life cycle and its seasons, by contrast, remain relatively invariant.Yet a more important reason is that as modern people exercise their freedom to reshape their natural and social environment, often in efforts to escape circular time, their innovative energy typically reflects their own life-cycle experiences. Thus, for example, a modern generation impressed young by the need for peace (or war or justice or art or wealth or holiness) is empowered to change society's direction accordingly as it assumes leadership. Later on, another generation may choose to reverse this direction, giving rise to a history that beats to the rhythm of a life span. In a traditional society, no group possesses such freedom or power. The liberation of the life cycle thus points to a central irony in the development of saecular rhythms: The life span plays a dominant role in the rhythm

of history precisely when modern society has largely abandoned cyclical time in favor of linear time.The Saeculum RediscoveredAfter Rome fell, the idea of the saeculum lay dormant in the Western world for roughly a thousand years. Although linear time was always implicit in medieval Christian dogma, it lent little direction to the daily affairs of the nobles, burghers, and peasants. In the Augustinian lexicon, the word saeculum lost its meaning as a specific length of time and came to refer to unbounded biblical time, as in saecula saeculorum, or “endless ages.” Dates referring to the linear Christian drama (the years Anno Domini) became the exclusive province of monastic chroniclers. For everyone else, the ancient circles persisted—in the quaternity of the cross, the circularity of halos, and the annualized rituals of Christ's birth, death, and resurrection.This changed with the Renaissance, when the elites of Western societies began to perceive themselves as rational and self-determining actors capable of altering the destiny of civilization. With the advent of the Reformation, laypeople felt the rush of events as a preliminary to Christ's return. Before that millennial event, they had reforms to fight for, fortunes to work for, ideals to be martyred for, and signs of grace to pray for. As time became more linear, history became more urgent. Right at this threshold of modernity—when Columbus was voyaging, da Vinci painting, and princes nation building—the saeculum reentered Western culture. In the romance languages, the word became vulgarized into the derivatives still used today: the Italian secolo, Spanish sigh, and French siecle. All these new words retained the old Latin term's dual meaning: an era measured by one hundred years and a long human life. From centurio (the rank of a Roman officer who commanded one hundred soldiers), Renaissance humanists invented an additional word: centuria. Initially, it meant one hundred years, but soon it acquired a life-cycle connotation as well.The 1500s became the first hundred-year period to be proclaimed a century and the first to be affixed a century number. In 1517, Erasmus exclaimed “Immortal God, what a century I see opening up before us!” As scholars searched for an event that would mark the beginning of a new century, the philosopher Campanella found it in the discoveries of Galileo. Following the Gregorian calendar reform of the 1580s, Protestant historians busily categorized Western history into centuries. The epochs that interested them were antiquitas and modernitas. What lay between they called the medii aevi, a medieval period in which time seemed directionless and of less consequence.During the seventeenth century, while calendars and almanacs began referring routinely to hundred-year civil centuries, contemporary writers invented references to such natural centuries as the prior “century of Spanish gold” or the current “grand century of Louis XIV” At the century's end, poetic celebrations of time's rebirth were observed in courtly circles—as with John Dryden's “Secular Masque” of 1700 (“'Tis well an old age is out, And time to begin a new”). On the eve of the French Revolution, the thought of another century's end engendered fanatical optimism and grim pessimism. Others sensed an end-of-century awareness of completion, finitude, exhaustion, escapism, and resignation—what scholars came to define as afin-de-siecle mood that has periodically reappeared in Europe since the Renaissance. When Madame de Pompadour's “apres nous, le deluge ” augury did indeed come to pass, people realized that yet another century (an ancien regime that had also

been an age des lumieres) had indeed passed into history.After Napoleon, ruminations on the meaning of the historical century assumed romantic overtones. Gustav Rumelin wrote that the word itself had come to mean “a mystical, sublime, almost natural measure of formidable distances of years.” Ralph Waldo Emerson described each century as “loaded, fragrant.” Sentimental interest in the manners and mores of “lost centuries” clashed with the new belief in progress to produce a true fin-de-siecle distemper between 1880 and 1914. The actual phrase was popularized in 1888 when a play with that title opened in Paris. References to “decadence” and “degeneration” became commonplace—as did yearnings for an elan vital a release from time's prison. Never before had the Western world talked so much about a saecular calendar that seemed to be running down. The French essayist and critic Remy de Gourmont attributed this to modernity itself: “We think by centuries when we cease to think by reigns.”During and after the ensuing world war, historians regarded the quiet months of 1914 as the fin of one siecle and the assassination of the Austrian archduke as the commencement of the next. Before long, the word started marching forward again, now dressed in the uniform of collective action—whether as Mussolini's “century of fascism,” Henry Luce's “American Century,” or Henry Wallace's “century of the common man.” More recently, as people have watched the modern mass man of that century's dawn transform into the postmodern demassified man of that century's twilight, many have wondered if yet another epoch of civilization might be growing old.Meanwhile, Western scholars began to see siecle-lzngth rhythms in many corners of their past. The markers weren't exactly a hundred years long and didn't necessarily correspond to hundred-year breakpoints in the Christian calendar, but they were increasingly regarded as building blocks of the modern European experience. As Antoine-Augustin Cournot observed during the 1870s, “The ancient Romans did not fix the return to their secular games with such a degree of precision; and when we talk of the siecle of Pericles, of the siecle of Augustus, of the siecle of Louis we mean that it has to do with siecles in the Roman sense, not with centuries.” Cournot's siecle, of course, was the saeculum.After the mass violence of the twentieth century's second quarter, Arnold Toynbee perceptively noted that “mankind's built-in measure of time is the average duration of an individual human being's conscious life.” But there was more to it than just that. He made this observation while writing an opus in which he reached a chilling conclusion: Over much of human history, siecles have shown a recurring alternation between peace and war.The Saeculum of War and PeaceIn the late 1960s, when young anti-Vietnam protesters were chanting “ain't gonna study war no more,” one of their elderly supporters, a retired University of Chicago history professor named Quincy Wright, was systematically doing just that. Having watched his own Lost Generation get thanklessly chewed up by World War I, Wright had crusaded in vain for the U.S. Senate to ratify the League of Nations. In the 1920s, as Europe festered with new enmities, he began his epic Study of War, a consortium of over fifty separate research projects that he completed in 1942, at the depth of America's fears about a second world war that was proving to be much costlier than the first.In his Study, Wright observed that war waging occurred “in approximately fifty-year oscillations, each alternate

period of concentration being more severe." Wright uncovered this pattern not only in modern American and European history but also in Hellenistic and Roman times, and noted that others had glimpsed it before him. He attributed this pattern mainly to generational experience. "The warrior does not wish to fight against himself and prejudices his son against war," he observed, "but the grandsons are taught to think of war as romantic." While Wright also pondered over more epochal "long-wave" cycles of warfare, his saecular rhythm has drawn the most interest from later historians.Despite its apparent periodicity, Wright remained convinced that war could be avoided through rational peacekeeping. By the time he died in 1970, however, his hopes were crumbling under the powerful insights of his scholarship. The United Nations (whose creation he had encouraged) had become a helpless bystander. The most rational planners any war scholar could want had somehow plunged America into a demoralizing conflict in Southeast Asia, right on the cusp of the "minor war" quadrant of his cycle.Only a few years after his book appeared, Wright's timetable was corroborated by a famous British contemporary, Arnold Toynbee. In A Study of History, best known for its theory of the rise and fall of civilizations, Toynbee identified an "alternating rhythm" of a "Cycle of War and Peace." Punctuating this cycle were quarter-century "general wars" that had occurred in Europe at roughly one-century intervals since the Renaissance. Toynbee identified and dated five repetitions of this cycle, each initiated by the most decisive war of its century:The overture began with the Italian Wars (1494-1525).The first cycle began with Philip IPs Imperial Wars (1568-1609).The second cycle began with the War of Spanish Succession (1672-1713).The third cycle began with the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1792-1815).The fourth cycle began with World Wars I and II (1914-1945).In addition to these five modern centuries, Toynbee identified similar cycles spanning six centuries of ancient Chinese and Hellenistic history, all situated in what he called "break-up" eras of great civilizations. Everywhere, he found the span of time between the start of one general war to the start of the next to have averaged ninety-five years with a "surprising degree of coincidence" across the millennia.Underlying this periodicity, noted Toynbee, were "the workings of a Generation Cycle, a rhythm in the flow of Physical Life," which had "imposed its dominion on the Spirit of Man." Like Wright, he linked this to the gradual decay of the "living memory of a previous war." Eventually, he observed, the veterans' heirs who "know War only by hearsay" come into power and resume the original war-prone pattern of behavior. Also like Wright, Toynbee diagnosed "supplementary wars" at the midway point of each cycle. Early in his career, Toynbee believed that "human control… can diminish the discord and increase the harmony in human life." In old age, he grew more fatalistic—and came to feel transcendence through religion might be a worthier goal than control over worldly affairs.Toynbee added an important new dimension when he subdivided the war cycle into four periods and distinguished between the "breathing space" after a big war and the "general peace" after a small war. Yet he was wrong to imply that no wars occur during these intervening quarter-century eras. Plainly, some wars, at least minor wars, have occurred during practically every quarter century of European (and American) history. To account for these, L. L. Ferrar Jr. reconstructed Toynbee's

four-phase war theory and replaced the breathing space and general peace eras with what he calls “probing wars.” Richard Rosecrance similarly posited a four-part war cycle, which alternates between bipolar eras of war and multipolar eras of “power vacuum.” Although he doesn't specify the periodicity of this cycle, he notes that “one of the tragedies of western international history has been that this cycle has been repeated time and time again.”

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What people say about this book

John Johnson, “The predictions were wrong, but reading about history from the viewpoints of different generations is very interesting. This book builds on the theory that history is cyclical, repeating after four 'turns,' each lasting 20-25 years. The first turn is the high, a period of relief after a crisis has ended. The second turning is an awakening, when people start to get back to reality after the high. The third turning is an unraveling, in which people are unhappy with the way things were in the previous two turnings and are now becoming pessimistic about the future. Finally, the fourth turning is a crisis; some unexpected major event that will involve everyone and completely change the way people think from before the crisis occurred to after it ends. Then the cycle begins again with a new high.Each turning is led by a generational archetype, also cyclical. The high is led by an Artist generation. The awakening by a prophet generation. The unraveling by a nomad generation. And last, the crisis by a hero generation. The artists of the high are coming to adulthood after a crisis has ended and enjoy their adult years in the best times. As the prophets enter adulthood, they begin to see a more realistic world with problems to come. The nomads enter adulthood in a time when attitudes are beginning to change for the worst and optimism is fading. And then a major crisis occurs, which the hero generation must solve and the cycle is ended.The authors use historical events in American history to prove the theory. The American Revolution ended almost exactly 80 years before the Civil War ended, and the Civil War ended close to 80 years before World War II ended. So, from that, the authors predicted the next major crisis would occur sometime near 2005, except that is actually less than 70 years after World War II started. Makes sens to the authors. I see some problems with this theory. First, the author ignores some major crises that occurred at the 'wrong' time. The War of 1812 saw the fledgling United States go into its first test and emerge victorious, solidifying itself as a young country, capable of fighting for itself. World War I saw a new country joining allies overseas and emerging as a new world power. The Vietnam Conflict saw American citizens rise up in protest of a war for the first time. Each of those easily fits the qualifications the authors gave for a major crisis; the crisis involved everyone, and the country went into the crisis much differently than it emerged from that crisis after it was over.What I liked about this book was the authors took important events throughout history and explained them from the point of view of four different generations; the children, the young adults, the mid-life adult leaders, and the elderly. I have never looked at history this way and I found it very interesting. I believe if the authors had written the entire book this way instead of trying to force it into a theoretical cyclical construct it would have been a much better book, and the authors' predictions about the future might have been more accurate.Strauss and Howe predicted in 1997 that the next major crisis would start somewhere near 2005. You could say that the attack of Sept 11, 2001 was that crisis, but other than the timing, it doesn't really fit the rest of the requirements. While it did involve everyone, at least in our way of thinking about the safety of our country, that really didn't last long and did not change our way of life much at all,

even for a short time, except maybe our air travel. And they gave descriptions of the coming generations. While the authors gave fairly accurate descriptions of the baby boomer and generation X generations, they missed badly when talking about the Millenials and Centennials. That's understandable, though, because the oldes Millenials were still teenagers and the Centennials were not quite born yet when the book was written.So I don't believe the cyclical history is quite right, but I did still like the book because of the way history was described from the points of view of various generations. Very interesting."

Sonny Laskin, "Prescient of Crucial Urgency to the Present. I read this book because I am a big proponent of economic influenced cycles, particularly Elliot wave, Kondratieff and Martin Armstrong. So, this book was on my bucket list of books to read. This book has a more eastern atavistic view on how to view history in terms of cycles and circularly instead of linearly, a more western based perspective. Particularly odd considering the authors William Strauss and Neil Howe are American WASPS. You would think they be more biased to a Western based linear approach but I am pleasantly surprised they see history as an Asian would in a cyclical perspective. Their seasonal theory posits that history goes through cycles of seasons as like nature goes through them (spring, summer, fall and winter). This explains a lot of my prior cyclical readings to economic and political cycles reappearing and now I know that the cause is the season reappearing and not just some magical mathematical based cyclical number reappearing after 80 years based on the number PI. This has more clarity and sense to me than nature based on a mathematical formula derived from PI. Who knows maybe they are both correct and integrated into Nature?Now to the major relevancy of this book being crucial to read in our current time. This book predicted the financial crisis of 2008 and in the book it calls it the Great Devaluation. It was off by three years as the book predicated the fourth turning starting in 2005. The morphology of a fourth turning seems to be on course as predicated by prior fourth turnings. A fourth turning morphology starts with a major financial crisis type event and climaxing with a war type denouement some 15-20 years later. So, fifteen to 20 years after the crisis of '08 comes our next war climax in 2023 to 2028. This gives us ample time to prepare. I for one am buying gold and bitcoin in my financial portfolio to prepare for the coming war crisis. I am specifically an archetype nomad 13er Generation X member and would probably live through the ekpyrosis into our new golden age HIgh, probably starting in the late 2020s/2030s. Hopefully my investments in bitcoin and gold payoff and the new civic order doesn't confiscate too much of my assets to pay off unpaid debts left over from our unraveling turning era. I also have noticed most major global wars are started from the left, as the conservatives or right want to keep the status quo. I think if we have a Democrat elected in 2020 a major global war might come sooner to us than if we re-elect Donald Trump in 2020, who is hesitant to start a war and is pulling troops out of the Middle East. Donald Trump and Barrack Obama might be the men blamed after this Crisis is done as the people who initiated this global war with their American troop withdrawals out of the middle east. Anyone else notice that these fourth turnings alternate

between external (global) and internal (civil) wars in the Anglo-American Saeculum? For example, a list of fourth turning Anglo-American fourth turnings are Wars of the Roses (1459-1487), Armada Crisis (1569-1594), Glorious Revolution (1675-1704), American Revolution (1773-1794), Civil War (1860-1865), Great Depression and World War II (1929-1946) and finally our Millennial Crisis (2008-2029). Notice they alternate between internal and external wars every fourth turning. Maybe our next Millennial Crisis won't be an external global world war III type event but instead be a domestic civil war inside the USA. Imagine the warring feud of Antifa and the far right turning into a domestic civil war if Donald Trump refuses to give up the Presidency if Donald Trump doesn't accept the 2020 election results of a Democrat winning. This would be similar to the 2000 election of George Bush but what if Al Gore hadn't conceded the election results and decided to pursue and start a civil war? Maybe that scenario wouldn't have been as effective a fillip in an unraveling turning as it would be more effective to come to fruition in a fourth turning Crisis? A paroxysm of rage due to the contested election in this divided environment could be the spark that starts the fire of civil war.Read this book for yourself and judge and think for yourself and come to your own conclusions on what our fourth turning will be like. You won't be disappointed. This book was written in 1997 and is eerie in its prophecies. We live in a winter Saeculum turning and a redux of these types of Nostradamus prophecy books are all the rage. But the difference of Strauss and Howe's book between a new age book written by Edgar Cayce or Nostradamus is they have the sociological generational facts and numbers to substantiate their prophecies."

mel pearson, "5 star, how History Repeats (high's - crisis). Excellent book , well written and relevant to modern times, through the eyes of history and psychology. We are now at our next crisis in our line of history !Would recommend reading."

MR M HALL, "Everyone should read this. The current political and social climate we find ourselves in is not only predicted by this book but it's fully explained. Books like this one should be thought in schools to help prevent the mistakes on the past."

Peter Bjørn Hansen, "Interesting, vague, but compelling. While it is doubtful to say that this works is scientific, not least to its use of "prophesies" as a description of what one generation can expect from the next, it is nevertheless a compelling hypothesis that adolescents and adults absorb inputs and mold themselves around the world they come to inhabit, and that this likewise forms their outlook of the future and thus future society.Should you dismiss this approach to historical understanding and prediction, you will at least be delighted in a fairly broad treatment of the last few centuries of Western history (though American-centric and obviously heavily pop-cultural in its treatment of recent times), that shaped societies into what led us to be here today."

Eddy, "WOW. why history repeats, this book explains a lot."

The book by William Strauss has a rating of 5 out of 4.6. 3,553 people have provided feedback.

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