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Bannon's Worldview: Dissecting the Message of 'The Fourth Turning'

By *Jeremy W. Peters*

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WASHINGTON — Stephen K. Bannon has great admiration for a provocative but disputed theory of history that argues that the United States is nearing a crisis that could be just as disruptive and catastrophic as the most seminal global turning points of the last 250 years.

This prophecy, which is laid out in a 1997 book, “The Fourth Turning,” by two amateur historians, makes the case that world events unfold in predictable cycles of roughly 80 years each that can be divided into four chapters, or turnings: growth, maturation, entropy and destruction. Western societies have experienced the same patterns for centuries, the book argues, and they are as natural and necessary as spring, summer, fall and winter.

Few books have been as central to the worldview of Mr. Bannon, a voracious reader who tends to see politics and policy in terms of their place in the broader arc of history.

But what does the book tell us about how Mr. Bannon is approaching his job as President Trump's chief strategist and what he sees in the country's future? Here are some excerpts from the book, with explanations from The New York Times.

'Winter Is Coming,' and We'd Better Be Prepared

History is seasonal, and winter is coming. ... The very survival of the nation will feel at stake. Sometime before the year 2025, America will pass through a great gate in history, one commensurate with the American Revolution, Civil War, and twin emergencies of the Great Depression and World War II. The risk of catastrophe will be high. The nation could erupt into insurrection or civil violence, crack up geographically, or succumb to authoritarian rule.

The “Fourth Turning” authors, William Strauss and Neil Howe, started using that phrase before it became a pop culture buzzword courtesy of HBO's “Game of Thrones.” But, as the authors point out, some winters are mild. And sometimes they arrive late. The best thing to do, they say, is to prepare for what they wrote will be “America's next rendezvous with destiny.”

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In an interview with The Times, Mr. Bannon said, “Everything President Trump is doing — all of it — is to get ahead of or stop any potential crisis.” But the magnitude of this crisis — and who is ultimately responsible for it — is an unknown that Mr. Trump can use to his political advantage. This helps explain Mr. Trump's tendency to emphasize crime rates, terrorist attacks and weak border control.

The 'Deconstruction of the Administrative State,' and Much More, Is Inevitable

The Fourth Turning will trigger a political upheaval beyond anything Americans could today imagine. New civic authority will have to take root, quickly and firmly — which won't be easy if the discredited rules and rituals of the old regime remain fully in place. We should shed and simplify the federal government in advance of the Crisis by cutting back sharply on its size and scope but without imperiling its core infrastructure.

The rhythmic, seasonal nature of history that the authors identify foresees an inevitable period of decay and destruction that will tear down existing social and political institutions. Mr. Bannon has famously argued that the overreaching and ineffective federal government — “the administrative state,” as he calls it — needs to be dismantled. And Mr. Trump, he said, has just begun the process.

As Mr. Howe said in an interview with *The Times*: “There has to be a period in which we tear down everything that is no longer functional. And if we don't do that, it's hard to ever renew anything. Forests need fires, and rivers need floods. These happen for a reason.”

'The American Dream Is Dead'

James Truslow Adams (wrote) 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 an American exceptionalism, the belief that this nation and its people had somehow broken loose from any risk of cyclical regress 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.

One of the authors' major arguments is that Western society — particularly American culture — has denied the significance of cyclical patterns in history in favor of the more palatable and self-serving belief that humans are on an inexorable march toward improvement. They say this allows us to gloss over the flaws in human nature that allow for bad judgment — and bad leaders that drive societies into decline.

Though he probably did not intentionally invoke Mr. Strauss and Mr. Howe, Mr. Trump was channeling their thesis when he often said during his campaign, “The American dream is dead.” One of the scenarios the book puts forward is one in which leaders who emerge during a crisis can revive and rebuild dead institutions. Mr. Trump clearly saw himself as one of these when he said his goal would be to bring back the American dream.

Conform, or Else

In a Fourth Turning, the nation's core will matter more than its diversity. Team, brand, and standard will be new catchwords. Anyone and anything not describable in those terms could be shunted aside — or worse. Do not isolate yourself from community affairs If you don't want to be misjudged, don't act in a way that might provoke Crisis-era authority to deem you guilty. If

you belong to a racial or ethnic minority, brace for a nativist backlash from an assertive (and possibly authoritarian) majority.

The authors envision a return to a more traditional, conservative social order as one outcome of a crisis. They also see the possibility of retribution and punishment for those who resist or refuse to comply with the new expectations for conformity. Mr. Trump's "with us or against us" attitude raises questions about what kind of leader he would be in such a crisis — and what kind of loyalty his administration might demand.

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