

IDEAS

The 1997 book that prophesied a revolutionary on the scale of Trump

Thinking of American history in terms of generations helps explain our current breakdown — and how long this new era may last.

By **David Kaiser** Updated March 21, 2025, 3:00 a.m.



EVAN VUCCI/ASSOCIATED PRESS

David Kaiser taught history at Harvard, Carnegie Mellon, the Naval War College, and Williams College from 1976 to 2013. He is the author of 11 books, including

“States of the Union: A History of the United States Through Presidential Addresses, 1789-2023,” and writes the blog historyunfolding.com.

In January 1997 I reviewed a new book for The Boston Globe: “The Fourth Turning: An American Prophecy,” by William Strauss and Neil Howe. The book broke US history down into 80-year periods, each of which included four “turnings” that were generally about 20 years long. They called the great crises of US history “fourth turnings”: the era of the American Revolution and the Constitution (1774-94), the Civil War (1860-65), and the Depression and the Second World War (1929-45). Doing the math, they predicted another such crisis in the first 15 years or so of the 21st century. In that crisis, as in the previous ones, new leadership would mobilize the nation to accomplish a great task and renew the bonds between the people and their government.

I, a historian, was one of very few professional academics who took an interest in what Strauss and Howe had to say, and I began using their framework in my own work. Their critical insight, the idea that set their work apart, was that even the most stable domestic and foreign orders and the values that underlie them will die off along with the generations that created them. That leaves an intellectual and even emotional vacuum that someone inevitably comes along to fill.

Events have now confirmed their predictions, even if they are not unfolding as inspirationally as Strauss and Howe expected. The United States is experiencing the climax of a crisis that will transform our country, its government, and its role in the world. And Strauss and Howe’s framework of generations and turnings still provides the best framework for understanding where we are.

We can understand this by analogy with the last crisis: the Depression and the Second World War.

How the New Deal order arose

The Civil War had created a new elite composed of Northern and Midwestern businessmen, and their views dominated the nation for more than 60 years. The Carnegies, Morgans, Rockefellers, Vanderbilts, and the rest built new industries and new infrastructure, paying immigrant labor subsistence wages. New ideas of economic justice arose during the Progressive Era, but corporate dominance survived into the 1920s.

By 1929, however, a new generation with different values was taking power, and under Franklin D. Roosevelt, they radically changed the role of the federal government. The New Deal strictly regulated the financial community, raised top marginal income tax rates well above 50 percent, made the government the employer of last resort, passed Social Security, regulated wages and hours, and recognized and defended the rights of labor. FDR also mobilized 10 million young Americans from the GI or “greatest” generation to fight and win the Second World War, and the United States emerged as the leading world power and the leader of new institutions like the United Nations after 1945. The GI generation, which included every president from John F. Kennedy through George H.W. Bush, generally remained committed to those principles for most of their adult lives. Faced after 1945 with the threat of communism around the world, they committed the United States to defending every bit of free territory.

But as their generation eventually fell from power, both the values of the 1933-93 era and the bond that Roosevelt and his successors forged between the government and the people eroded. Neither the silent generation (born 1925-42) nor the boomers had the same respect for authority or commitment to an egalitarian economy.

In 1996, Strauss and Howe looked forward to a catalytic event that would allow a transformative president to form new bonds with younger generations — particularly millennials, a term they had coined [in a 1991 book](#). In “The Fourth Turning,” they

listed a number of events that might trigger the next great crisis, just as the election of Lincoln triggered the Civil War and the stock market crash ushered in the Depression and led to FDR's victory.

We have experienced a few of the kinds of events they predicted — 9/11, the 2008 financial crisis, and the COVID pandemic — but successive presidents failed to deal with them effectively or use them to create a new national consensus.

The missed opportunities Trump exploited

George W. Bush after 9/11 explicitly proclaimed that the nation was in a crisis comparable to the Second World War. The United States, he explained again and again, had to go to war to remove dictators and spread democracy to protect us from nuclear terrorism and move the world into a completely new era. Bush invaded Afghanistan and Iraq to overthrow hostile governments, but he did not bring back the military draft to get the whole population involved in his crusade, and he cut taxes instead of raising them. Worst of all, his ambitious team ignored the problem of setting up new governments in nations of tens of millions of people. Both wars had become unpopular by the time Bush left office, and both ended in disastrous failure.

When Barack Obama took office in 2009 in the midst of the worst economic collapse in 80 years, a Time cover explicitly compared him to FDR in 1933. Roosevelt had immediately eased the citizenry's three biggest problems — bank failures, unemployment, and home foreclosures — with legislation targeted at those ills. He thereby increased his congressional majorities in 1934 and passed new measures, including Social Security. Obama accepted his advisers' view that the system remained fundamentally sound and that recapitalizing major financial institutions must be the country's top priority. He failed to mobilize the nation's anger against the financial interests responsible for the crash, as Roosevelt had. As a result, he lost his majorities in the House and later in the Senate, and with them went any hope of further

transformation or any renewal of the American people's confidence in their leadership.

So it was that Donald Trump, businessman and entertainer, easily defeated a field of Establishment candidates for the Republican presidential nomination in 2016 and narrowly beat the Democratic heir apparent, Hillary Clinton, in the general election. Trump was our first president with no experience in public service at all — a measure of how low the prestige of our governmental leadership had sunk. He argued that both party Establishments had betrayed average Americans. He spent much of his first term battling with the Establishment of his own party, and he too failed the test of the great crisis that struck his administration: the pandemic. That probably cost him his reelection. Joe Biden, however, lacked the energy to form a real bond with the American people and failed to deal with the inflation that made his administration unpopular. Kamala Harris lost a close but undisputed election to Trump, and the Republicans emerged with control of both houses of Congress.

Donald Trump now leads a coalition of interests that have long opposed key aspects of the post-1945 order. Much of the business community never completely accepted the New Deal, and in the 1970s it began a long counteroffensive that has undone the regulation of the financial community, rolled back the rights of labor, and built a network of think tanks and foundations dedicated to smaller government and free markets. The Federalist Society has recruited, trained, and helped put in place hundreds of new federal judges who would endorse that agenda. The religious right, angered by Supreme Court decisions on school prayer and abortion, is another major element of that coalition. The fossil fuel industry relies upon Trump to keep increasing its production, and the pro-Israel lobby has won him over to all-out support of right-wing Israeli governments. In a remarkable turnaround, the working class has become majority Republican. And Trump's coalition now includes a number of young tech billionaires from Silicon Valley who believe that they can use the computing power of AI to transform virtually every feature of economic life around the world. All these actors reject key aspects of the post-1945 order, and most have worked for decades to

overturn it. Now their time has come.

Trump and his coalition want to kill off the idea that the federal government should protect the environment, guard against monopoly, regulate financial markets, and protect the rights of labor. They want to deport millions of immigrants. They also are renouncing US responsibility for fighting famine and disease overseas or protecting an international order with stable frontiers and security for all nations and peoples, such as the Ukrainians. Trump's loyal, dedicated team — most of it relatively young — will never stand in his way. Elon Musk and his acolytes are trying to destroy the bureaucracy that FDR created.

Strauss and Howe anticipated that a boomer leader would eventually fill the vacuum left by the disappearance of the previous generation of American leadership. They could not anticipate either that Trump would be that man or exactly what he would do. Trump is clearly the most important American political figure of the 21st century thus far, with a devoted following that no one else has been able to match. He has taken advantage both of the Establishment's specific failures and of the general disregard for authority and precedent that has characterized the last 60 years of American life. He is now reshaping our government, our society, and our role in the world according to alternative values that various constituencies have been promoting for several decades.

This transformation is parallel to what happened under the New Deal, but we are now going in the opposite direction. The values of our mid-century order are being eclipsed. This is not where many of us wanted history to go, but I have learned not to argue with history.

Democrats tried for too long to live off the legacies of Franklin D. Roosevelt and Lyndon B. Johnson, even as they helped destroy the New Deal economic order. They now see Trump as a usurper promoting evil principles and threatening democracy. That is exactly how Republicans saw FDR. The battle between selfish greed on the one

hand and respect for the good of all on the other never ends.

The Republicans enjoy small congressional majorities, but Trump has unprecedented control over them. The Supreme Court will side with him on at least some key issues. Neither the media nor academia has nearly enough prestige to stand up to him successfully. Whether or not he does the United States and the world any good, he may keep more than half the country on his side just by making a series of decisive moves, as his three immediate predecessors failed to do. And the United States will probably emerge from the Trump era with a very different set of political and economic values, just as it did following the Civil War and the Second World War. History suggests that new values will prevail for decades.

History gives us every reason to believe that the nation will eventually change direction again, but this fourth great crisis in our national life seems to be ending with a Republican victory and the consolidation of a new Gilded Age. The generation that will effectively challenge it may just be beginning to be born.

[Show 14 comments](#)