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Are We Now in a Fourth Turning Crisis?

By Matt A. Mayer

Back in 1997, William Strauss and Neil Howe released *The Fourth Turning: An American Prophecy* that articulated a roughly 80-year generational cycle of history based on ‘four turnings’ dating back to the Wars of the Roses starting in 1459, climaxing in 1485. That initial crisis was followed by the Armada Crisis from 1569 to 1588, the Glorious Revolution from 1675 to 1689, the American Revolution from 1773 to 1781, the Civil War from 1860 to 1863, and the Great Depression and World War Two from 1929 to 1944.

Fourth Turnings always climax with an existential crisis that either destroys the country or results in its renewal.

Based on the 1944 climax, Strauss and Howe predicted the next Fourth Turning would occur sometime around 2005 when a ‘spark will ignite a new mood...confirming and deepening the Unraveling-era mindset...the spark might seem as trivial as a Tea party.’ That description describes the taxpayer tea party revolt that occurred in 2010, eventually leading to Donald Trump’s surprise election in 2016.

As I wrote in [US News & World Report](#) in February 2017,

‘Donald Trump’s election may be merely another chapter in this ongoing fight, but the sheer non-stop level of opposition beginning before the election and accelerating each passing week portends a deepening of the crisis...every action, no matter how small, is vigorously opposed and magnified far beyond reason. We have entered the era of inch-by-inch trench warfare.’

Three years later, we’ve been through the turmoil of non-stop investigations of President Trump that resulted in his impeachment by a purely partisan Democratic vote, followed by his acquittal by an equally partisan Republican vote. The ‘neutral’ mainstream media swung from 80 percent positive coverage of President Obama to 90 percent negative coverage of President Trump.

If you live in an urban center, you likely believe President Trump is a racist authoritarian who illegitimately holds the presidency. If you live in the suburbs and rural areas, you likely see him as a flawed man, but one who fights for the common man and America. Among highly educated Americans, he does little right; among lesser educated people, he does little wrong. As I noted in 2017, ‘All signs point to it getting much worse. We exited our past crises united once again and stronger for it in the long term. We may not be as fortunate this time, as each

side becomes more entrenched and convinced of its righteousness.’ Contrary to President Obama’s claim, we are, in fact, not one America, but a red America and a blue America.

Yet even given the hyper-partisanship of our era, there was hope that America could once again come together against a common enemy in a national crisis. In *The Fourth Turning*, a

‘...Crisis arises in response to sudden threats that previously would have been ignored or deferred, but which are now perceived as dire. Great worldly perils boil off the clutter and complexity of life, leaving behind one simple imperative: The society must prevail. This requires a solid public consensus, aggressive institutions, and personal sacrifice.’

Strauss and Howe included among possible crises one in which the ‘Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announce the spread of a new communicable virus’ that leads to draconian measures and death. With more than 988,000 confirmed infected and 55,000 dead, as well as a national economic shutdown, the Wuhan virus certainly qualifies as a crisis akin to the other existential crises America has faced.

During the crisis, ‘individuals will feel that their survival requires them to distrust more things. This behavior could cascade into a sudden downward spiral, an implosion of societal trust’ impacting financial markets and the economy. Since mid-March, more than 26.5 million Americans have filed for unemployment and the Dow Jones Industrial Average fell from 29,551 on February 12 to 23,800 last week, a decline of roughly 20 percent in just two months. Three years ago I wrote that ‘our trust in government, media and each other declines precipitously each passing year’. Since then, that decline has grown more severe.

As many lay dying and clinging to life, we’ve watched over the last two months as Democrats sought every opportunity to attack President Trump for his administration’s response to the Wuhan virus pandemic. It didn’t take long for them to call for investigations, with one Democrat even calling for President Trump to be deemed a war criminal. Aid packages for Americans and their decimated businesses were held up by Speaker Pelosi because she wanted to add long-sought progressive pet-projects into the legislation that had nothing to do with helping Americans. Unlike in past crises, our uber-partisanship prevented America from unifying or rallying around the flag.

More and more evidence emerges showing that the communist Chinese government is squarely to blame for the spread of the Wuhan virus. They lied to the rest of the world about its origin, communicability and nature, and, indefensibly, prohibited travel from Wuhan to other parts of China while allowing millions of infected Chinese to leave Wuhan for the West. Yet Democrats still defend China and attack President Trump. Many on the left see the pandemic as an opportunity to push aggressively for the wish list of their platform: the Green New Deal; Medicare-for-All; open borders; free college tuition, and countless other progressive policies.

This opportunistic battle of ideas in a time of crisis will only divide America even more. As I wrote in 2017, ‘Ultimately, can there be clear victory in a Civic War based upon ideologies that all fall within the four corners of a democratic free society? The very tenants of liberalism and progressivism have always been the antithesis of the principles of conservatism and libertarianism and vice-versa.’ Eventually Strauss and Howe noted, ‘a national election will produce a sweeping political realignment, as one faction or coalition capitalizes on a new public demand for decisive action...one party will decisively win the long partisan tug-of-war, ending the era of split government.’ In less than seven months, Americans will head to the polls to vote for who will be president for the next four years and which party will control the two houses of Congress.

Will the 2020 national election result in a decisive win by one party?

As China’s culpability for the global devastation grows, it appears our election will be framed not just by the Trump administration’s response to the pandemic and the condition of the economy come November, but also by who Americans see as better qualified to hold the Chinese government accountable for its acts and omissions. No one can seriously argue that President Trump hasn’t stood up to China during his presidency. Unlike every president before him, President Trump demanded China end its mercantile trade practices and theft of intellectual property by slapping China with enormous trade tariffs. Trump’s hard-nosed tactics finally brought China to the negotiation table where it agreed to new trade provisions. Against strong Chinese opposition, the president instituted a travel ban from China early in the pandemic.

In contrast, as vice president in the Obama administration, Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden did little to hold China accountable for its trade practices. Vice President Biden even famously declared in Iowa, ‘China is going to eat our lunch? Come on, man. I mean, you know, they’re not bad folks, folks. But guess what? They’re not competition for us.’ As CNN pointed out:

‘Biden, as a senator from Delaware, voted to grant China permanent normal trading relations during the Clinton administration — a move that unleashed the Asian giant’s economy but also added to the rush of US manufacturing jobs abroad. That gives Trump the chance to argue Biden was complicit in the “American carnage” that resulted, in an effort to undercut the Democrat’s strong blue-collar support.’

He also described Trump’s China travel ban as xenophobic, which won’t age well given that many experts believe that act saved countless American lives. Biden’s controversial son, Hunter, snagged a \$1.5 billion investment from a Chinese company following an official government visit to China when Biden was vice president.

If the November election becomes a fight over who can protect America best from China, it may very well become the decisive election that leads America out of the current crisis. Trump, given his struggles with suburban white women due to his style, has every incentive to make the election a national security one over China. With the pandemic, it will be harder for the Democrats to make the election about Trump’s personality. Doing so will seem trivial when so many have died and lost their jobs, kids have been kept out of school, and drastic changes will be made to how we do normal everyday things.

Strauss and Howe conclude their book by saying ‘American society will be transformed into something different...something better, a nation that sustains its Framers’ visions with a robust new pride...or it may be something unspeakably worse.’ The ‘Crisis resolution will establish the political, economic, and social institutions with which our children and heirs will live for decades thereafter.’ A landslide election isn’t beyond the realm of possibility.

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