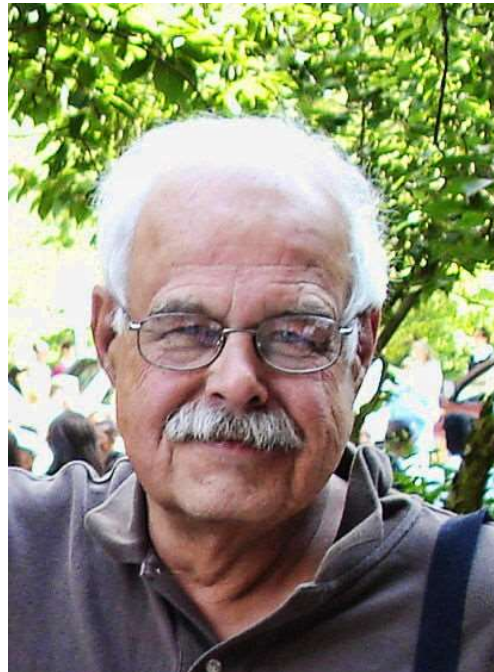


Hall: We're in the Fourth Turning



Spencer Hall Hall is a retired Navy commander and the retired assistant vice president of facilities at Virginia Tech.

Courtesy of Spencer Hall

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Picture America as a pseudo iceberg floating in the ocean. Twenty-five percent of the iceberg is above water — this represents our society, our family, our life, and we know it well. The other 75% of the iceberg is below water, unseen and unknowable. Every 80 years or so a crisis occurs; the iceberg becomes unstable and it rotates. Our current 25% rolls into the water and a new 25% surfaces. We adapt to a whole new America. This crisis is called a “Fourth Turning,” and we are beginning one right now.

In the late 1980s, William Strauss and Neil Howe, prominent scholars in history, economics and law, began research examining generations from 1730 to 2050 and the influence each had on our social, economic and governmental functions. The book “Generations,” outlining the results of their study, was published in 1991. In 1997 they published their second book, “The Fourth Turning,” a profound reflection on trends in America and a prediction of what we might see as future generations progress through history.

Every 20 years, or thereabouts, the oldest generation dies and new generations move up into elderhood, midlife and young adulthood. And the newest generation is born. Each of these 20-year periods Strauss and Howe call a “turning.” In the first, second and third turnings, life expectations change and social order realigns. The Fourth Turning is a crisis. It occurs about every 80 years — a period equivalent to the average lifespan, and a complete turnover of all four generations. We are entering such a crisis now.

Strauss and Howe state: “The Fourth Turning is an era in which America’s institutional life is torn down and rebuilt from the ground up, always in response to a perceived threat to the nation’s very survival. Civic authority revives, cultural expression finds a community purpose, and people begin to locate themselves as members of a larger group. In every instance, Fourth Turnings have eventually become new founding moments in America’s history, refreshing and redefining the national identity.”

America’s first Fourth Turning occurred from 1773 to 1794. We started as an English colony, declared our independence, fought a war and emerged a new Republic with a new government and a new Constitution.

The second Fourth Turning occurred between 1860 and 1865. America started as a united country, fought a civil war, and established that our government was strong enough to prevent its own dissolution. The result was a redefined government and a new national identity.

The third Fourth Turning was 1929 to 1945, beginning with the Great Depression and ending with World War II.

The Depression was so damaging that for the first time ever the Federal government had to become directly involved with individual citizens. President Roosevelt and his New Deal put people back to work with government jobs and government money, in arenas from industry to the arts. America emerged reimaged with a large, diversified federal government intertwined in the everyday lives of its citizens. This model continues today.

Three things hold true across each of these Fourth Turnings. One: Nobody saw the crisis coming. Circumstances at the time precipitated it. Two: The movement was not universally popular. A relatively small number of individuals was convinced that the country needed to change in a big way. Three: Afterwards the United States came back better and stronger.

What about the Fourth Turning evolving now? We see unrest and instability all around us. We know our iceberg is rotating. At some point soon we will see our old 25% submerge and a new 25% — a new America — rise to the surface.

In “The Fourth Turning,” Strauss and Howe predicted a climax coming around 2020 and ending around 2026: “Sometime before 2025 America will pass through a great gate in history” and “the very survival of the nation will feel at stake.” Outlandish at the time, their theory feels prescient today. A coronavirus pandemic sweeps the planet, and Americans lack affordable health care. An ever-growing divide separates the rich from the poor; our youth drown in unmanageable educational debt. Across the country, tens of thousands march against systemic racism, under-representation and their inability to influence their own futures. America has become internationally irrelevant.

In “Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation” (2000), Strauss and Howe predicted an all-out war between the millennial generation (those born between 1980 and 1998), who want the iceberg to rotate, and Boomers (born 1946 to 1964), who want the iceberg to remain stable. They foretold that “the nation could erupt into insurrection or civil violence, crack up geographically, or succumb to authoritarian rule.”

Let us see how this Fourth Turning plays out.