ON THE EARTHEN FLOORS OF THEIR ROUNDED HOGANS, Navajo artists sift colored sand to depict the four seasons of life and time. Their ancestors have been doing this for centuries. They draw these sand circles in a counterclockwise progression, one quadrant at a time, with decorative icons for the challenges of each age and season. When they near the end of the fourth season, they stop the circle, leaving a small gap just to the right of its top. This signifies the moment of death and rebirth, what the Hellenics called ekpyrosis. By Navajo custom, this moment can be provided (and the circle closed) only by God, never by mortal man. All the artist can do is rub out the painting, in reverse seasonal order, after which a new circle can be begun. Thus, in the Navajo tradition, does seasonal time stage its eternal return.

Like most traditional peoples, the Navajo accept not just the circularity of life, but also its perpetuity. Each generation knows its ancestors have drawn similar circles in the sand—and each expects its heirs to keep drawing them. The Navajo ritually reenact the past while anticipating the future. Thus do they transcend time.

Modern societies too often reject circles for straight lines between starts and finishes. Believers in linear progress, we feel the need to keep moving forward. The more we endeavor to defeat nature, the more profoundly we land at the mercy of its deeper rhythms. Unlike the Navajo, we cannot withstand the temptation to try closing the circle ourselves and in the manner of our own liking. Yet we cannot avoid history’s last quadrant. We cannot avoid the Fourth Turning, nor its ekpyrosis. Whether we welcome him or not, the Gray Champion will command our duty and sacrifice at a moment of Crisis. Whether we prepare wisely or not, we will complete the Millennial
Saeculum. The epoch that began with V-J Day will reach a natural climax—and come to an end.

An end of what?

The next Fourth Turning could mark the end of man. It could be an omnipresent Armageddon, destroying everything, leaving nothing. If mankind ever extinguishes itself, this will probably happen when its dominant civilization triggers a Fourth Turning that ends horribly. But this end, while possible, is not likely. Human life is not so easily extinguishable. One concept of linear thinking is the confidence that we possess such godlike power that—at the mere push of a button—we can obliterate nature, destroy our own seed, and make ourselves the final generations of our species. Civilized (post-Neolithic) man has endured some five hundred generations, prehistoric (fire-using) man perhaps five thousand generations, and Homo erectus ten times that. For the next Fourth Turning to put an end to all this would require an extremely unlikely blend of social disaster, human malevolence, technological perfection, and bad luck. Only the worst pessimist can imagine that.

The Fourth Turning could mark the end of modernity. The Western secular rhythm—which began in the mid-fifteenth century with the Renaissance—could come to an abrupt terminus. The seventh modern saeculum would be the last. This too could come from total war, terrible but not final. There could be a complete collapse of science, culture, politics, and society. The Western civilization of Toynbee and the Faustian culture of Spengler would come to the inexorable close their prophesiers foresaw. A New Dark Ages would settle in, until some new civilization could be cobbled together from the ruins. The cycle of generations would also end, replaced by an ancient cycle of tradition (and fixed social roles for each phase of life) that would not allow progress. As with an omnicide, such a dire result would probably happen only when a dominant nation (like today’s America) lets a Fourth Turning ekpyrosis engulf the planet. But this outcome is well within the realm of foreseeable technology and malevolence.

The Fourth Turning could spare modernity but mark the end of our nation. It could close the book on the political constitution, popular culture, and moral standing that the word America has come to signify. This nation has endured for three saecula; Rome lasted twelve, Etruria ten, the Soviet Union (perhaps) only one. Fourth Turnings are critical thresholds for national survival. Each of the last three American Crises produced moments of extreme danger: In the Revolution, the very birth of the republic hung by a thread in more than one battle. In the Civil War, the union barely survived a four-year slaughter that in its own time was regarded as the most lethal war in history. In World War II, the nation destroyed an enemy of democracy that for a time was winning; had the enemy won, America might have itself been destroyed. In all likelihood, the next Crisis will present the nation with a threat and a consequence on a similar scale.

Or the Fourth Turning could simply mark the end of the Millennial Saeculum. Mankind, modernity, and America would all persevere. Afterward, there would be a new mood, a new High, and a new saeculum. America would be reborn. But, reborn, it would not be the same.

The new saeculum could find America a worse place. As Paul Kennedy has warned, it might no longer be a great power. Its global stature might be eclipsed by foreign rivals. Its geography might be smaller, its culture less dominant, its military less effective, its government less democratic, its Constitution less inspiring. Emerging from its millennial chrysalis, it might evoke nothing like the hope and respect of its American Century forbear. Abroad, people of goodwill and civilized taste might perceive this society as a newly dangerous place. Or they might see it as decayed, antiquated, an old New World less central to human progress than we now are. All this is plausible, and possible, in the natural turning of saecular time.

Alternatively, the new saeculum could find America, and the world, a much better place. Like England in the Reformation Saeculum, the Superpower America of the Millennial Saeculum might merely be a prelude to a higher plane of civilization. Its new civic life might more nearly resemble that “shining city on a hill” to which colonial ancestors aspired. Its ecology might be freshly repaired and newly sustainable, its economy rejuvenated, its politics functional and fair, its media elevated in tone, its culture creative and uplifting, its gender and race relations improved, its commonalities embraced and differences accepted, its institutions free of the corruptions that today seem entrenched beyond correction. People might enjoy new realms of personal, family, community, and national fulfillment. America’s borders might be redrawn around an altered but more cogent geography of public community. Its influence on world peace could be more potent, on world culture more inspiring. All this is achievable as well.

If the Fourth Turning ends triumphantly, much of the modern world may follow the same saecular rhythm and share in the same saecular triumph. And if that happens, many might hope that the world could achieve an “end of history,” a destination for mankind that Francis Fukuyama describes (with some irony) as “an end of wars and bloody revolutions” in which, “agreeing on ends, men would have no large causes for which to fight.” Is such an outcome possible? Probably not. A Fourth Turning triumph of such colossal dimensions is much more likely to produce a very magnificent, but very impermanent, First Turning. The saeculum would endure. Indeed, the more magnificent the High, the more powerful would be resulting generational tectonics. The Millennials would be resplendent—and expansively hubristic—as world-shaping Heroes. Young Prophets would later trigger an Awakening to match, and the circle would continue.

We should not feel limited, but rather empowered by the knowledge that
the Fourth Turning's ekpyrosis can have such decisive consequences. By lending structure to life and time, the saeculum makes human history all the more purposeful. A belief in foreseeable seasons and perceptible rhythms can inspire a society or an individual to do great things that might otherwise seem pointless. There is nothing ethically inhibiting in the notion that our behavior is, in some fundamental sense, a reenactment of the past. To the contrary: The ancients understood that to participate in cyclical time is to bear the responsibility for participating well or badly.

Were history pure chaos, every expression of human will could be undone at any time. Were there no intelligible connection between past intention and future result, we could do nothing to assist our children or posterity. We might as well drain the treasury, ruin the atmosphere, ravage the culture, and consume the seed corn of civilization.

Were history purely linear, humanity would also find itself degraded. Even the most noble of societies would become no more than a means to an end. Generations not present at the end of time would become mere building blocks, their members mere sacrifices on the altar of progress. Along the great highway of history, nothing would be eternal. The only free choice anyone might make would be to speed or slow a foreordained juggernaut. As linear history develops ever narrower standards of perfection, any generation not measuring up to that standard must look on itself (and be looked on by others) as a bad seed, useless to humanity except as a source of harm. The same would be true for any individual. Recent Western experiments with totalitarian regimes provide an object lesson: Societies that deify history's destination typically have no respect for the moral autonomy of the people making the journey.

When history is viewed as seasonal, by contrast, each generation can discover its own path across time, its own meaningful linkage to ancestors and heirs. Whoever we are—G.I.s, Silent, Boomers, 13ers, Millennials—we can locate our rendezvous with destiny, seize our script, make of it what we can, and evaluate our performance against the legendary myths and traditional standards of civilization. The seasons of time offer no guarantees. For modern societies, no less than for all forms of life, transformative change is discontinuous. For what seems an eternity, history goes nowhere—and then it suddenly flings us forward across some vast chaos that defies any mortal effort to plan our way there. The Fourth Turning will try our souls—and the saecular rhythm tells us that much will depend on how we face up to that trial. The saeculum does not reveal whether the story will have a happy ending, but it does tell us how and when our choices will make a difference.

Over the last century, the faith in progress has suffered many blows, perhaps none so devastating as Friedrich Nietzsche's early and devastating critique. Nietzsche believed that delusions about never-ending progress toward an unattainable standard had become a root malady of the Western psyche. This delusion, he believed, constituted a cruel vehicle of self-loathing, a spawning ground for hypocrisy, and a cage around the authentic human spirit. His invented prophet, Zarathustra, identifies the problem as "the spirit of revenge" against "time and its 'It was'"—meaning a resentment against history itself, against a one-way pilgrimage whose lofty goals keep proving mankind's actual condition to be one of contemptible insignificance. As an alternative, Zarathustra teaches the doctrine that every event is perpetually reenacted, that everything anyone does has been done before and will be done again forever. Every act therefore becomes an end in itself as well as a means to an end. Zarathustra calls this "the eternal return," the opportunity afforded everyone to share fully in what it means to be a human being.

The saeculum provides this same opportunity. Regardless of generation, every person who lives into deep old age experiences each of the four seasons of life once—and each of the four turnings of history once. The intersection of these two quaternities does more than just make our own generation unique among the living: It bonds us with every fourth generation that came before or will come after. We reenact the legends of our ancestors, just as our progeny will someday reenact our own. Through this, the depth and breadth of the human spirit expresses itself and endures over time.

Linear time tempts us moderns to believe that we are immeasurably better or contemptibly worse than our ancestors. By appealing to our pride or despair, unidirectional history relieves us of the challenge of proving ourselves worthy of their example. Yet relieved of the challenge, we are also relieved of the fulfillment. Commenting on the manners of Rome during the early empire, the great historian Tacitus disagreed with moralists who argued that the civic virtue of a great society can only change in one direction. "Indeed, it may well be that there is a kind of cycle in human affairs," he wrote, "and that morals alternate as do the seasons. Ancient times were not always better: Our generation too has produced many examples of honorable and civilized behavior for posterity to copy. One must hope this praiseworthy competition with our ancestors may long endure." And, two millennia after Tacitus, so must we share this hope.

Each of us communicates across a vast reach of time. Think back to your childhood. Recall the oldest person who influenced your life—maybe a grandfather, maybe an elderly neighbor. The distance between that person's birth year and the present is your memory span back in time. Now go in the other direction. Project the probable life span of the youngest person whose life you will someday influence—most likely, your youngest grandchild. If you are young, assume that at age thirty-five you will bear your last child, who also will bear a last child at thirty-five, who will in turn live to be eighty-five. The years between the present day and your last grandchild's death mark your memory span forward.

Now add these two periods together to calculate your total memory span,
linking the lives of those who touched you with the lives of those who will be touched by you. For the authors of this book, the spans extend from 1881 to 2104 (Strauss) and from 1888 to 2114 (Howe)—223 and 226 years, respectively. That's longer than the American nation has been in existence. The memory spans of long-lived members of the Gilded Generation (John D. Rockefeller, Mother Jones, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.) extended from before the American Revolution through the present day. A child born in 1997 will anchor a memory span reaching from around the 1930s to the 2150s, a future remote beyond comprehension.

Or is it?

When you think of time seasonally, in terms of turnings, those vast spans of time become comprehensible, meaningful, shared. No matter what your age or generation, you knew or will know loved ones whose lives will cross nearly three full saecula. Together, you will experience three Fourth Turnings, three Crises, three ἐκπυρῶσες. A memory span of this length is a fundamental vantage on history that you share with all Americans who ever lived or ever will live. It connects you personally with the ebb and flow of the lives of remembered ancestors. It acquaints you with the lives your own children and grandchildren are likely to lead.

If the saeculum continues, a girl born today will come of age just before the Fourth Turning’s Crisis climax, enter midlife during the ensuing High, and reach old age during an Awakening. In all likelihood, she will live to glimpse another Unraveling. If health and history treat her well, she could (as a centenarian) witness another Crisis catalyze on the eve of the twenty-second century. She will have much to tell her youngest grandson—who, if he survives that circa-2100 Crisis, can teach the saeculum’s lessons to his own grandson who, in time, could grow old as another in a long line of Gray Champions.

Perhaps that latter grandson will become a late-twenty-second century historian who will write a complete chronicle of American civilization, which by then will stretch back over ten saecula. Come the 2190s, he will be as far away from the 1990s as we today are from George Washington’s presidency. Every schoolchild will know what happened next, from the Oh-Ohs to the 2020s, as the Fourth Turning unfolded—but academics will surely debate how and why it came to pass. In his history, this great-great-grandson of today’s baby girl will reflect on what the Fourth Turning came to mean for his own time and generation.

His history is not yet written. What will it be?

To every thing there is a season,
and a time to every purpose under heaven:
a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what which is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
a time to get, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to cast away;
a time to rend, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silent, and a time to speak;
a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time of war, and a time of peace.

—Ecclesiastes 3:1-8