

# Politics in a New Key: Breaking the Cycle of U.S. Politics with a Generational/Developmental Approach

Ken White<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Some common, mental models shape how people in the US perceive political changes over time. The one-dimensional pendulum swing model and the two-dimensional cyclical model are prevalent. When generational differences are mapped onto such political change cycles, they orient to cohorts or age groups. This leads to viewing generational cohorts as experiencing one- or two-dimensional cycles without deeper scrutiny. Cohort differences that surface in the Generations Salons that I and others conducted in California suggest a different, three-dimensional model may be more representative of the potential for societal change in the US. Using a musical metaphor, that model is explained in terms of different political “keys” and the value of distinguishing among them as time passes. It also underlies a speculation about a “politics in a new key,” which might prove more useful.

Summary-level reporting of the action research conducted with the Generations Salons supports the three-dimensional model. We expect new politics to emerge from the Millennial cohort coming of age now, yet it will not be without the support and wisdom of the cohorts that came of age before it. This must be the case if the burden of expectations we place on the Millennials will indeed pave the way for transformative change in US society. Intergenerational support of Millennials is essential. This initial research and application suggests the potential for the generational/ developmental approach as a wellspring for transformational—and practically successful—political work. It begs the question: What will you do to help?

**Keywords:** Archetypes, developmental, generational, mental models, Millennials, political change, transformational.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ken White, born in 1961, came of age straddling the uneasy divide between Baby Boomers and Gen Xers, exemplified by a high school record collection that included both the Grateful Dead and The Clash. Ken has spent the last two decades looking for—and toward—the future of democracy, a journey that has taken him down many roads less traveled, and introduced him to a host of remarkable thinkers and doers at groups like Oxfam America, Common Cause, Post Carbon Institute, Chaordic Commons, Annenberg Institute for School Reform, Coalition of Essential Schools, and Institute for Defense & Disarmament Studies. He is indebted to them all. A graduate of Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government's mid-career program, Ken has been privileged to have spent much of his career enhancing opportunities for citizens and communities. Contact: <http://kenwhite.us/contact.htm>.



## Stuck in Time

*“Why are there no young people in the room?”*

Like many activists, I’ve heard that *cri de coeur* (and its companion questions about women and people of color) many times—too many times—at political events. Looking around at this gathering of mostly earnest, progressive Baby Boomers, there seemed to me a blindingly obvious rejoinder: “Because they have a different model of political action!”

I fell into a conversation with the fellow sitting next to me about the apparent age divide, and he invited me to join a group of theorists and activists exploring ideas for “changing the political conversation.”<sup>2</sup> Over the next several years, as part of a series of “Political Salons,” this group explored (among other things) whether a generationally-based conversation could help point us toward a transformation in our political advocacy efforts...and in US political culture.

My interest in the potential for generational and developmental theory to make practical contributions to political action (and to help us improve the quality of our civic environment) grows out of 15 years as a professional political advocate, working almost entirely in the US.<sup>3</sup> I have worked with a political group whose average member age was over 70, as well as with high school and college organizing efforts, and with every age group in between. Not surprisingly, I have observed obvious differences in the “mental models” the various age groups bring to politics, based simply on their respective stages in life. But there also seem to be differences based on “generational cohort”—the group of peers you travel through life with, and with whom you share a broad range of experiences and perspectives.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> This San Francisco Bay Area group (called the Praxis Tank for Progressives) grew out of a 2002 conversation initiated by Dean Elias, Kathleen Taylor, and Peter Dunlap (among others), driven by the question: “How can we change political culture?” In the years since, the group has hosted more than a dozen “Salons” where practical approaches to political work are “tried out” by a wonderful group of engaged (and engaging) political activists and activists-to-be from a variety of backgrounds, ages, and perspectives. The group was an essential proving ground for some of the concepts explored in this article, as well as in Peter T. Dunlap’s book, *Awakening Our Faith in the Future: The Advent of Psychological Liberalism* (Routledge, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> This article draws specifically on US examples and theory—the only political culture I know well enough to write about. The specifics of both the theory and practice may not apply to any other culture or nation. However, it would be fascinating to learn if the general idea (and similar practices) of generational difference and potential alignment could be helpful elsewhere.

<sup>4</sup> A “generational cohort” is an often-self-defined group of peers with whom you identify, and with whom you move through various stages of life. Perhaps the most famous of these cohorts is the Baby Boomers, now in their mid-40s through mid-60s. In their youth, the Boomers catalyzed one of the most turbulent periods in American history, and now in their generative years they are trying to redefine aging. The difference between a “cohort” and an age group is that cohorts move together through time, while age groups are defined by characteristics that are common to a certain stage in life. For example, the basic characteristics of age groups like teens and 20s are intuitively obvious. It seems most everyone goes through adolescent turbulence in their teens; most everyone begins to take the future more seriously when they reach their 20s. Similarly, most everyone, upon reaching their 40s, begins to take dietary fiber more seriously; most everyone who enters their 60s begins to take their legacy more seriously; and so on. It is perhaps less obvious that different generational cohorts, as they move through these stages of life, will

I have also seen—and experienced—the suffering that comes with putting oneself into the political arena, and the chronic pain that can arise from confronting one of the most complex and convoluted challenges imaginable: changing the way we agree, collectively, to live together as a society. And I wondered if a generational/developmental perspective might help explain the sense of “stuckness” that so many of us experience in political involvement (as well as the sense of potential that arose from the more recent Obama campaign). It seemed worth exploring:

- If each of the generational cohorts understands and engages differently with politics;
- How the older generational cohorts could better understand, engage with, and support the rising Millennials (now in their pre-teen to post-college years);
- If the Millennials (together with the other generational cohorts) can translate the potential synergies among their differences into new forms of leadership and activism.

This article documents our experience working with a generational/developmental approach toward that goal. It begins with an introduction to the theory and “mental models” of political action, followed by a brief overview of the “Generations Salons” and how those events played out, and concludes with reflections and implications. This initial research and application suggests the potential for the generational/developmental approach as a wellspring for transformational—and practically successful—political work.

## Political Mental Models

The Millennials, often touted as the next “Greatest Generation,”<sup>5</sup> may actually have the potential to be that...and more. But if we simply slot them into a Greatest Generation role, and if we assume that the best way to develop their potential is to set them on well-worn political pathways—defined (and confined) by the “mental models” we bring to political activism—they may not have the oft-touted, but rarely-defined “transformative” effect. The limiting factor may not be the Millennials; instead, it could be the mental models we all use (mostly unconsciously) to help us make sense of the world.

In politics, American mental models tend to involve defined movement within clearly delineated boundaries. We often describe our experience of social and political change over time using metaphors that imply regular, rhythmic motions, such as ebbs and flows, or cycles, where lasting change occurs at a slow pace, if at all. Although these “back and forth/round and round” metaphors are not the only ones we use when thinking about politics, they are embedded in the language of political discourse as “pendulum swings” and the like. Beneath these descriptions are “mental models”—conscious or unconscious shorthand representations of reality that help us orient ourselves, make sense of reality, take action, interpret outcomes, and plan for the future.

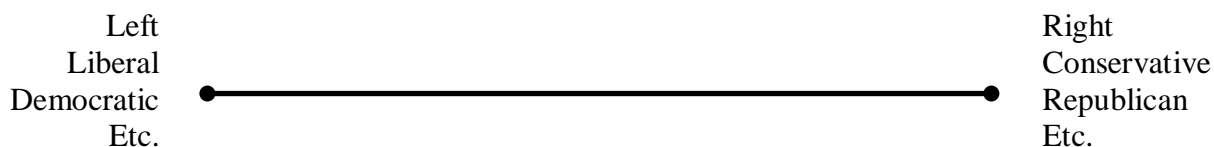
---

have different perspectives and worldviews from other cohorts that have moved through these same life stages. So, for example, although the Baby Boomers will experience many of the same life stage changes in their 60s that members of the “Greatest Generation” experienced in their 60s, the Boomers will also have some unique perspectives and experiences based on their shared history as a cohort.

<sup>5</sup> The “Greatest Generation” refers to Americans who came of age in the Great Depression and World War II years, and reinvigorated the US democracy and economy in a time of peril.

## One Dimension: The “Pendulum Swings Both Ways” Model

One simple but powerfully attractive way of thinking about American politics describes change as something that happens in a single dimension (Figure 1). Trends and preferences swing back and forth along a single straight line with more-or-less metronomic cadence: Democratic-Republican, liberal-conservative, etc. Beyond providing a pleasing sense of continuity and predictability, the one-dimensional model provides the comfort of boundaries and limits to extremism.



**Figure 1. One Dimensional “Pendulum” Mental Model of US Politics**

In this model, the length of the line—the total distance between the poles of “right” and “left” or “Democratic” and “Republican”—is fairly short, and the gravitational pull of the center is assumed to be quite strong. Extremists can never force things too far out of balance, and good old common sense keeps the majority opinion clustered around the midpoint...and along the line itself. Political action in this model consists of trying to get enough people and power to move, for as long as possible, toward your preferred end of the line.

More durable progress, in this model, comes only through slow, gradual migrations of the widely accepted midpoint itself along the line. Of course, the migration can go in either direction. So, from a one-dimensional perspective, “progress” can be defined as movement of the center toward either the “liberal” or “conservative” pole (or whatever terminology is used). Those on either side of a debate (and in this model, there is really only room for two sides of any debate) can always identify opportunities for what each perceives as the potential for long-term gains, achievable by moving the middle in their preferred direction.

Presumably, this combination of predictability, “boundedness,” and possibility of gradual progress makes the linear model acceptable to people and groups pulled toward the poles, as well as comforting to those drawn to the middle. The model “works” because it provides a stable framework for political activism. At the same time, it offers a sense of safety from erratic or dramatic shifts that might go “too far” in either direction along the line. In this model, the pendulum does not swing so far in one direction or the other that it can “break the frame” of the accepted consensus, and the majority of Americans can imagine themselves and their compatriots as clustered somewhere close to the center. Thus, this model generally “makes sense” to those who favor the relative security of slow, ordered change (or little change), as well as those pushing for relatively modest, incremental improvements.

Further, there is no need to make real distinctions among different generations, or among generational cohorts moving through time: although “young lions” eventually replace “old bulls,” the lions and bulls share fundamentally the same viewpoints at their respective ages. Both the model and the basic methods of political change hold constant, even if the personalities, parties, etc., shift over time. Political advocates need not look for and use differences among

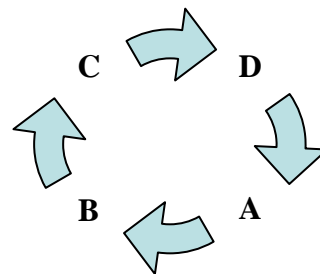
generations or cohorts, but simply “train up” rising young leaders in the received wisdom of the particular political viewpoint. This model seems to fit quite nicely with the recent spate of “Generation X” Fundamentalist Christian parents sending their kids to summer camps that inculcate the 1980-90s Evangelical model of public activism, as well as the tendency among “Baby Boomer” Progressives to want young people to re-create the 1960s political culture and organizing methods. And, perhaps, the not-so-surprising outcome of many of the Millennial young people (politely) rejecting both of those models.

## Two Dimensions: The “What Goes Around, Comes Around” Model

A more complex version of the linear view uses a two-dimensional cycle (Figure 2) as a metaphor. In this model, “everything has its season,” and every action leads—eventually—to an opposite reaction. Political trends and preferences may seem to come and go, but underneath it all, there is a predictable rhythm. This is roughly the political equivalent of “just stick around, bell bottoms will be back in style again in 30 years or so.”

As an example, the excesses of a Republican Congress give way to a rebirth of liberal activism, which then leads to the election of a Democratic President, who joins with a Democratic Congress to implement activist policies, which in turn triggers a conservative backlash, and so on and so on through time.

Like its one-dimensional cousin, this model has an appealing sense of stability, and even order. The downside of predictability is (seeming) inevitability: A causes B, which leads to C, and then on to D, which brings us back to A. Although there is room in this model for some gradual “progress,” the opportunities for enduring change in this cyclical model may seem in some ways more limited than in the linear world. Unintended consequences are not only unavoidable, they are expected.



**Figure 2. Two Dimensional  
“Cyclical” Mental Model of US**

Carrying around this rather grim, Sisyphusian sense of how politics works may contribute to the burnout and disenchantment that so often claims political activists. Since you can’t freeze time, whatever progress you make is subject to—at best—only partial reverses as the wheel turns. And since the wheel won’t rotate all the way back for a couple of generations, well, political activism might seem pretty disheartening. However, this model does offer opportunities for some forms of progress, in three ways:

1. “Move the center.” As in the linear model, the center can and does gradually shift over time, taking the entire “cycle” along with it. And, as in the linear model, different people can and do define “progress” as movement in any direction, so change can and does happen—but so, of course, can reversion.

2. “Get what you can get, and then fight a rear-guard action against revanchism.” Most relatively mainstream groups profess to believe that their time will eventually come. And when

their moment arrives, they'll struggle to implement as many legal, structural, and procedural modifications as they can, and to make their moment last. This mental model might help explain some of the excesses that inevitably occur when an ideology, party, or generational cohort takes power: if a group's members believe (consciously or not) that their time in power will be brief and their gains reversible, it seems sensible to push their agenda as hard as possible for as long as possible. When their opponents retake power, they would quite logically fight to prevent their changes from being dismantled, while rebuilding their team and re-tooling for the moment when they can (finally!) reclaim power.

3. "Plan for the next war." From a cyclical viewpoint, progress can be made if groups avoid getting caught in the one-dimensional trap of building a Maginot Line to fight the last war. Instead, there is potential to create an insurgency that will replace the current order more quickly and more effectively this time around. This leads to strategies like "working smarter" and developing new, more conditions-sensitive leadership.

Although this model and its methods are not incompatible with the *language* of transformation, paradigm shifts, etc., the reality of using this mental model may well be (for very good and compelling reasons) that truly transformational change hovers chimerically on the horizon, while the stern tasks of grinding out progress and preventing losses predominate.

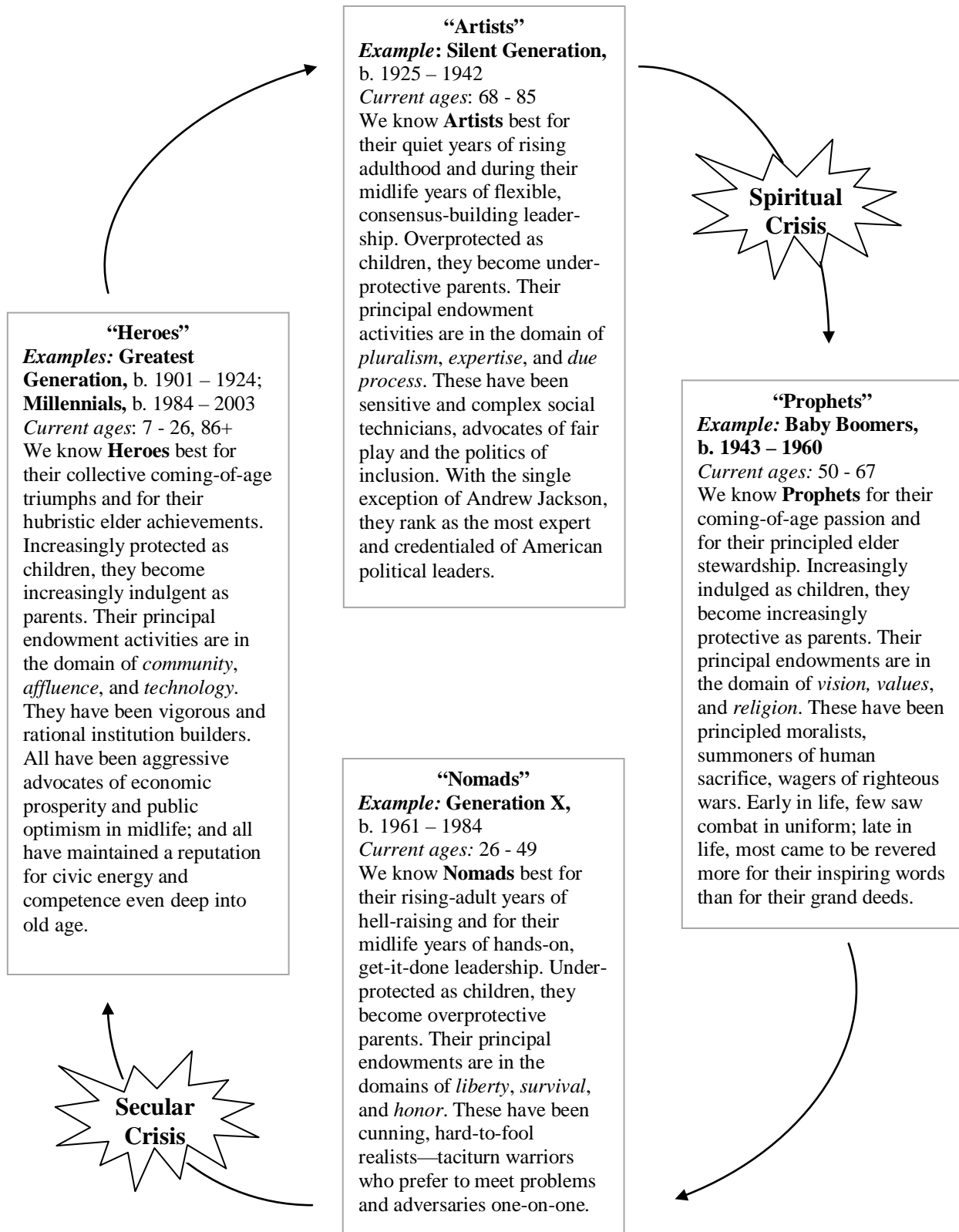
## Two Dimensions: The Strauss & Howe Model of American Political Cycles

One of the most compelling examples of the cyclical model of American democracy comes from William Strauss and Neil Howe (1991, 1997). In *Generations, Fourth Turning*, and subsequent writings,<sup>6</sup> they posited that four generational archetypes (Heroes, Artists, Prophets, and Nomads—see Figure 3 for details) recur over and over in the US, in predictable generational cycles of roughly 20 years. They assert that each of these generational cohorts reacts both to the cultural climate created by the preceding generations, and to the larger climate (e.g., global, technological, etc.) in ways that are broadly predictable, based on their place in the generational archetype cycle.

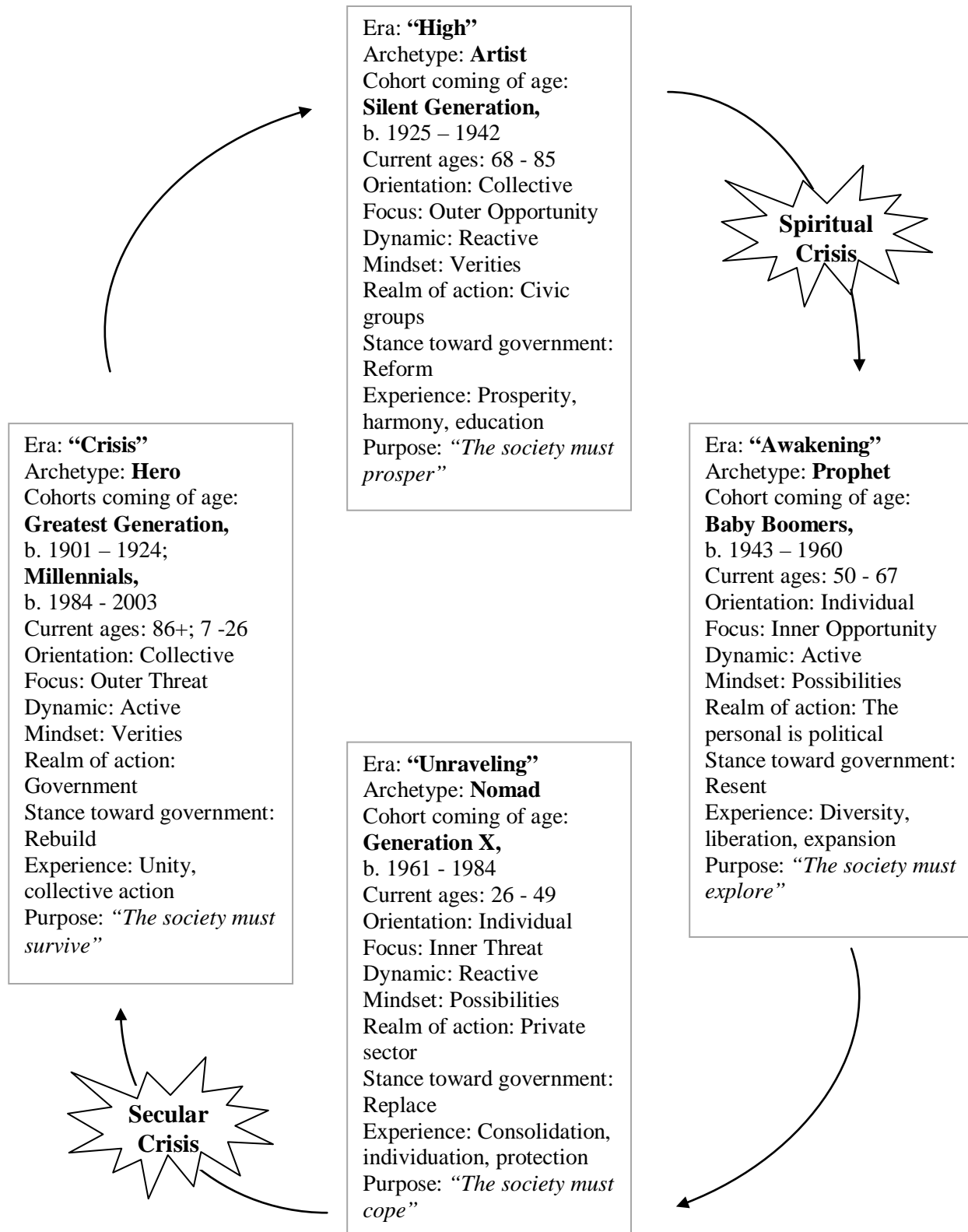
Further, Strauss and Howe posit that there are also cycles in the types of challenges facing American society, which correspond to the archetypes of the generational cohorts leading the response to these circumstances. So, they argue, a "Hero" cohort like the Greatest Generation faces (or raises up) a "Secular Crisis" like WWII, during which Americans must band together to overcome. The resolution of the "Crisis" Era leads to a "High" Era of broad consensus and repressed conflict dominated by "Artists," such as the late 1940s through the early 1960s when the Silent Generation came of age in the time of the GI Bill and *Father Knows Best*. Following this, the rising "Prophet" generation then initiates a "Spiritual Crisis" that leads to an "Awakening" Era, as the Baby Boomers did when they called into question the core values of American society during the 1960s and 1970s. In turn, "Nomads" like "Generation X" endure an "Unraveling" Era, like the crime-obsessed, me-first, "Greed is Good" era of the 1980-1990s, which leads to the next "Secular Crisis" and "Crisis" Era, and the rise of another "Hero" cohort,

---

<sup>6</sup> For example, see [www.fourthturning.com](http://www.fourthturning.com).



**Figure 3. Two-Dimensional Generational Archetypes in Current American Life**  
 (from Strauss & Howe’s *Fourth Turning*, (1997, pp. 95-97) and other sources)



**Figure 4. Characteristics of Generational Archetypes and Corresponding Eras Leading up to the Present, and Projected into the Future**  
 (extrapolated from Strauss & Howe’s *Fourth Turning* and other sources)

projected to be the Millennials. Figure 4 extrapolates further from the basic Strauss and Howe model, suggesting ways that generational cohorts and the corresponding eras might be distinguished.

As these cohorts move through time, each appears to have quite distinctive ways of expressing values and principles, favored forms of action, preferred realms for intervention, etc. For example, the Silent Generation populated many of the large national civic groups like the ACLU and the League of Women Voters; whereas many Gen Xers have turned their successful private sector experiences to re-tooling the nonprofit world.

Although careful to avoid determinism, Strauss and Howe suggest that there is some predictability in the general contours and broad trends of American life. Quite wisely, they do not say how those trends will actually play out in each generational cohort or particular period in the future, just that certain patterns will reappear, predictably, time and again. The Strauss and Howe model picks out of the seemingly chaotic noise of the American Experience an *underlying rhythm and a simple melody*. The task of political advocates, it follows, is to dance to the pulse of the times by understanding the characteristics and configurations of both the rising generation and the generations currently in power, as well as the prevailing—and rising—mood of the country. A kind of “musical sensitivity” helps political advocates get ahead of trends by getting a feel for the (approximate) future, and gives them an edge in the three core political activities of the two-dimensional, cyclical model: shifting the center; fighting rear-guard actions; and building for the next war.

Of course, this model has its weaknesses. Beyond its limitations as a hugely broad-brush approach, the Strauss and Howe model begins to show cracks when the authors extend it back into pre-American Revolution “Anglo-American” history. Although on the surface their evidence seems intriguing, this reach into history may be more confusing than illuminating, for reasons outlined later in this article. Similarly, any attempt to project this kind of American particularism too far into a future seems unwise. We appear headed toward an era of greater interdependence, and we may be poised for some unimagined leaps forward (or backward) into dramatically different ways of life.

Finally, the reference to “Anglo-American” history points to the absence, in Strauss and Howe’s theory, of the experiences and impact of the many immigrants not “assimilated” into Anglo-American history and culture, as well the many people in the US who do not conform to the majority culture. But although Strauss and Howe look primarily at “Anglo-American” culture, similar distinctions seem to crop up outside of the mainstream culture as well. For example, some commentators have suggested familiar-sounding contrasts between the “Civil Rights Generation” (Baby Boomer) and the “Hip-Hop Generation” (Gen X) among African-Americans (see, for example, Goff, 2008; Kitwana, 2003), and interesting differences among different generations of gay men have also been proposed. Their theory does not address at all recent immigrants and their families (about 10 percent of the US population), who seem likely to be influenced as much (if not more) by their experiences outside of American culture as by their US-born generational cohorts.

## Three Dimensions: The “Singing in a Higher Key” Model

The “cyclical model” above has both a stable rhythm (a new generational cohort appears every 20-25 years) and a predictable, repetitive melody. Viewed from above (as in the two-dimensional model shown in Figure 2), it portrays a harmonious repeating cycle over time.

But what if those patterns that Strauss and Howe observed were plotted in three dimensions, adding a developmental axis (Figure 5)? Would the American historical cycles (and the cycles in “Anglo-American” history before them, and those of the potential future beyond) reveal a different kind of pattern? Would this perspective suggest the potential for more enduring change, perhaps even societal transformation? Could this kind of “perspective shift” help us imagine politics being sung in a “higher key?”

Imagine trying to record on paper the output of a musician playing four notes over and over again, but without using the standard musical staff (the grid of lines used for writing music). Even if the musician changed to a different key, the pattern of the written notes would look the same, without the context of a grid to indicate pitch and direction. From this sort of two-dimensional perspective, a “do-re-mi-fa-do-re-mi-fa” melody would look just like an “mi-fa-la-ti-mi-fa-la-ti” melody or a “la-ti-do-re-la-ti-re-do” melody.

Add the staff, however, and the notes from the different melodies would appear in different places, making changes in key obvious, as well as any differences in the notes and patterns, and the direction of the music. From this three-dimensional vantage point, a similar quantitative melody (four notes in a repeating, cyclical pattern) would have a *large qualitative difference*.

In the first iteration of their theory, Strauss and Howe suggested a timeline of “cycles” that began around the time of the exploration and colonization of North America—a time of tremendous religious, political, scientific, philosophical, psychological, and societal upheaval. The Scientific Revolution, the Reformation, the American Revolution, all created conditions that made possible profound, fundamental changes in how individuals and societies perceived themselves and their relationships to each other.

Arguably, these were times of developmental shifts in both individuals and societies (and the governments created by these people, as in the emergence of American democracy). In these conditions, it seems plausible that a new societal “cycle” (like the melody in the example above) might have begun, perhaps replacing an earlier one, or—more probably—overlying and building upon an earlier one. So, although the basic pattern of the cycle could appear to remain the same, the new cycle might instead be repeating in ways that corresponded with the new, more complex challenges that people and the society were experiencing. The cycle may have “changed keys” from the previous one, even though the basic patterns may have remained similar. In this way, although the cyclical patterns the American colonists inherited from the generational cohorts of medieval England (and Europe) might appear to roughly correspond in *archetypal form*, the old and new patterns might, upon closer examination, have a very different *context and content*.

However, trying to capture that difference in a two-dimensional model would probably result in these quite different cycles looking—and being represented—much the same. Even though a profound change may have shifted the society from an older, stable, medieval, monarchic “A-B-C-D-A-B-C-D” cycle to a newly stable, modern, democratic “C-D-E-F-C-D-E-F” cycle, the two-dimensional Strauss and Howe perspective would not capture this upheaval (e.g., compare the “Two Dimensional” model of Figure 2 with the “Three Dimensional” model shown in Figure 5). That type of “developmental shift” might best be represented in the “widening spiral” model shown in Figure 5, where although the cyclical pattern is repeated, it repeats at a level that encompasses a wider range of experience, and a greater degree of complexity and challenge.

Although it required a dramatic shift in individual and collective perspective to move from living as monarchic subjects whose sole duties were fealty, to becoming democratic citizens facing far more complex demands, a “two-dimensional” model cannot and does not account for this kind of change. In the Strauss and Howe world, a cohort of medieval serfs in 16<sup>th</sup> century England are of the same “archetype” as Internet-buzzing Americans of the 21<sup>st</sup> century—and that same archetype is projected to return again in the 23<sup>rd</sup> century. Although it is true we still read Shakespeare and the Bhagavad Gita because some aspects of human nature and experience remain timeless, in many other important ways, people and the societies we create have evolved to levels of far greater complexity.

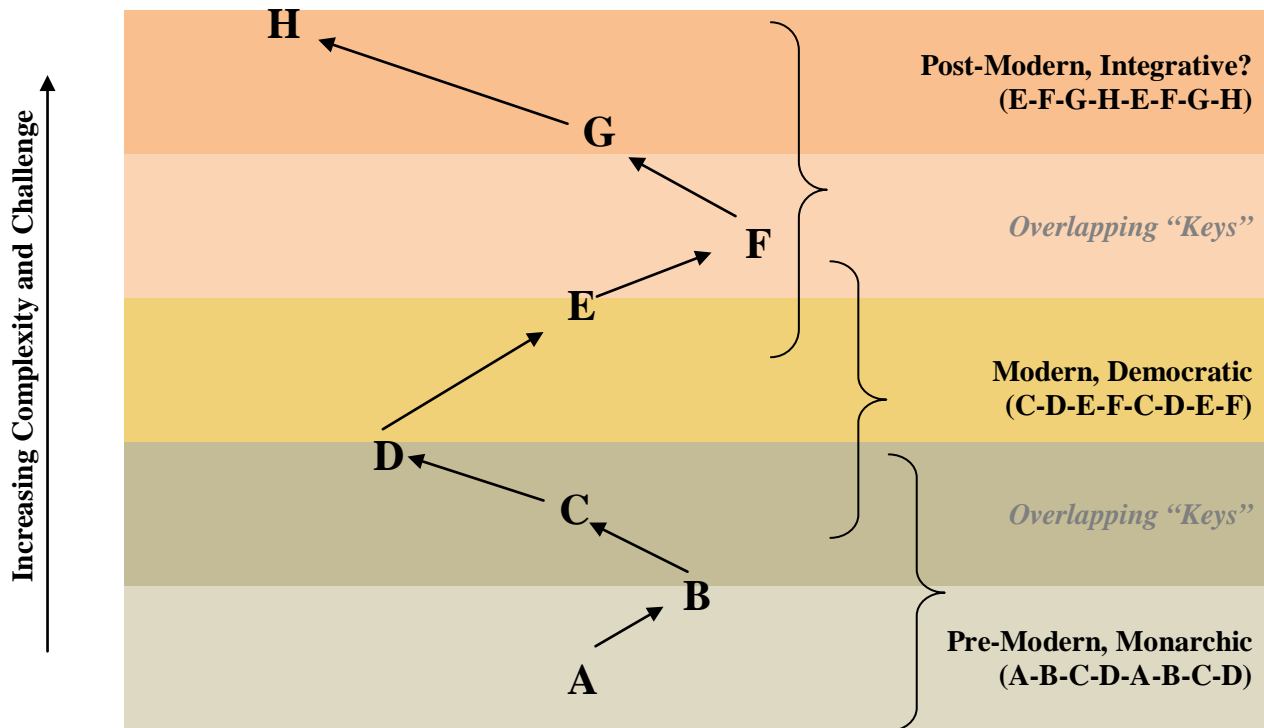


Figure 5. Three-Dimensional “Spiral” Mental Model of U.S. Politics

This, it seems, highlights the weaknesses of employing just a two-dimensional representation of both "Anglo-American" and American historical cycles, and of projecting too far forward into the future. First, as many have argued, the American Revolutionary period corresponded with a (however imperfectly realized) developmental shift for individuals, societies, and governments. So whatever relationship there may be among generational cycles going back into "Anglo-American" history and forward into the future, although the "melodies and rhythms" may be similar, they may actually be "played" in different developmental "keys." That is, a Hero generation might have appeared every 80 years or so in Medieval England, just as a Hero generation might have appeared every 80 years in the post-Revolutionary US. However, the US Heroes of the 18<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries would face much denser (intellectually, emotionally, psychologically, etc.) challenges than those that faced their 14<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century English counterparts. The modern, US Heroes (or any other generational cohort of the modern United States) would have to "sing" a similar song, but in a "higher key" that corresponded to the greater level of complexity and challenge in the world around them

Second, viewing the generational cycles through a two-dimensional lens limits the potential for imagining a developmental shift upward (as well as the tragic possibility of a developmental shift downward). Lasting change, in this view, can only occur by "moving the center." Third, understanding the generational cycles as two-dimensional limits considering the potential for developmental growth *within* the cohorts and cycles, where each cohort might attempt to build on the advancements of previous cohorts, without falling prey to the pitfalls created by the previous generations' efforts—and thereby repeating the inevitable cycle.

### Three Dimensions: Accounting for Generational Cohorts

So, then, what advantages would a three-dimensional model offer (Figure 5)? First of all, as George Box famously noted, all models are wrong, but some models are useful.<sup>7</sup> The three-dimensional model's usefulness lies not in how well it corresponds to reality (like the other models, probably not so accurately), but in whether it enables us to think differently about the potential for political change, and our ability to help catalyze that change.

In political advocacy, the three-dimensional model has the obvious appeal of allowing a greater amount of progress in more dimensions—people and cohorts (as well as movements and political parties) can grow not only within their existing contexts, but also grow into more complex, nuanced modes of understanding and acting. The three-dimensional model suggests a more open pathway of possibility.

At the same time, it does not completely break with the one- or two-dimensional models. Instead, it builds on the familiar "moving along the line" and "things go in cycles" orientations, by adding another dimension. As an extension of already-established patterns in the political culture, the three-dimensional model offers a progressive, logical pathway to a different way of

---

<sup>7</sup> There are, of course, other "three-dimensional" models of politics. Most, however, are static, and simply create models with two (or sometimes more) axes that locate political opinions, parties, and ideologies in spatial relationship to each other. Some of these axes include "liberal-conservative," "libertarian-communitarian," "cosmopolitan-nationalist," "individual-group," etc. Although useful for mapping, these essentially static models alone offer little insight on pathways toward change and progress over time.

understanding politics, which (seemingly) could be quite accessible to those comfortable with the one- and two-dimensional models. The changes in this model grow out of the received tradition of values, patterns, and structures, and continue along a roughly similar (although widening and rising) circular pathway. The model has the added advantage of not requiring *everyone* to rise to some new level; it also suggests that simply changing and growing *within* a generational cohort (or party, ideology, etc.), can also contribute to the general progress.<sup>8</sup>

Exactly what all these changes might look like, and how it would happen, of course, are at this point speculative. Of course, it's tremendously tempting to load up the rising generation with a wheelbarrow-full of familiar issues, policies, and positions. However, assuming that "the future will be just like the present, only more so," would be more in line with the one- and two-dimensional models, and might close out the range of possibilities by focusing on the *content* before first understanding the *context*. And the context that came to light through working firsthand with members of the various generational cohorts revealed some unexpected information to me and my colleagues.

### **Action Research: The Generations Map Themselves**

At first, I was tempted to "map" various developmental theories and stages onto Strauss and Howe's archetypes and cycles. This yielded some intriguing possibilities, but it seemed unwise to force too much of an "apples and oranges" comparison. Although (for example) the Greatest Generation and the "Secular Crisis" it survived in some ways appear to match the characteristics of a "Red/BLUE" ("Spiral Dynamics") or "Imperial II" (Kegan) orientation, the nuances of reality cautioned against simply slapping a developmental stage label onto an entire generational cohort and/or moment in history.<sup>9</sup>

Besides, each generational cohort, in conjunction with the other generational cohorts alive at the time, will face challenges at a multitude of developmental levels, and each has the option of responding at a multitude of levels. For example, the Depression and WWII presented both a survival threat (severe poverty and world war) and an existential threat (responding to the Fascist manifestation of evil) to the Greatest Generation. For very good reasons, most Americans chose to subsume the latter in the interest of solving the former, and focused on the formidable challenges of rebalancing the economy and "making the world safe for democracy." The Cold

---

<sup>8</sup> This explicitly developmental perspective on change is quite often absent from existing political advocacy efforts. Some advocates measure effectiveness by results, regardless of motivations; support for a goal is their desired outcome, not necessarily transformation. Other political advocates see success as changing the perspectives and worldviews of others, leading to alignment in both philosophy and action. The three-dimensional model opens the possibility for a "both/and" approach, where both growth within an existing worldview *and* a movement to a new worldview can support a political development process.

<sup>9</sup> Many different developmental models appear, at least on the surface, to share similarities with the generational cohort cycles outlined by Strauss and Howe. Some of the most familiar, like those created by Robert Kegan (1991) and Clare Graves (whose model was extended and popularized by Beck and Cowan's (1996) *Spiral Dynamics*), have been applied in circumstances like this, as interest in adult development has increased. However, as Sara Ross (2008), among others, suggested, similarity on the surface often masks great difference at the core, and cross-comparisons often decrease specificity and increase the potential for misunderstandings.

War presented similar developmental challenges, but the Silent Generation, for both practical and preferential reasons, focused more intently on the existential threat of competing ideologies and the very real possibility of global annihilation.

Therefore, instead of creating a complex theoretical framework for our work with the “Generations Salons,” I decided to focus first on what was fairly obvious: people could self-identify easily into generational cohorts like “Baby Boomers” and “Gen Xers.” In our first attempts to use this conceptual framework with a group of politically engaged people, we chose not to present a theory to the group and then ask them to discuss the implications. Instead, we asked people, together, as generational cohorts, to create and weave together their own developmental narrative out of their individual and combined “political coming of age stories.” By sharing these stories across the generational cohorts, we hoped the developmental challenges and opportunities might become apparent.

Our intent was to create an opportunity for each generational cohort to claim its unique identity, and then encourage all the generational cohorts to fit their experiences into a larger story that defined “how we got here,” which would then imply the possibility of creating a different way of imagining “where we want to go next.”

Our hope was that a sense of the possibility for enduring change offered by the three-dimensional model would emerge as the groups created open-ended narratives of their own development as individuals, as generational cohorts, and as members of a larger society. Rather than seeing their primary tasks as “moving the center” or “holding the line,” we hoped they could discover a sense of progress, possibility, and opportunity. In particular, we hoped that by placing the Millennials at the “open end” of the narrative, the potential for leadership by this generational cohort (and the need for support from the other cohorts) might become a focal point of the conversation.

## **Theory in Action: A Conversation among the Generations**

The “Generations Salons” we hosted are part of an ongoing series of events developed by a San Francisco Bay Area group that formed in 2002 around the question: “How can we change political culture?” In the years since, the group has hosted more than a dozen Salons and workshops where practical approaches to political work are “tried out” by a wonderful group of engaged (and engaging) political activists and activists-to-be from a variety of backgrounds, ages, and perspectives. For these Salons, we tried to have at least three or more members of each current generational cohort (Silent, Boomer, Gen Xers, and Millennials) participating. We asked participants to gather in their generational cohorts and create a narrative of their individual and combined “political coming of age” stories. We then shared these stories among the generational cohorts, beginning with the oldest and moving thorough time to the Millennials, telling a collective story of “how we got here,” with the implied possibility of imagining “where we want to go next.” The general format follows.

1. A brief introduction of the context, the topic, the format, and the people.
2. Divide into four groups by generational cohort.

3. Ask each individual, and each cohort, to come back to the large group prepared to tell a story about some combination of these items (different variations of the below were tried at different Salons):

- Your experience when you felt your cohort “came of age” politically.
- Your generational cohort’s landmarks (events, people, milestones, reference points, zeitgeist, metaphors, etc.).
- What your generational cohort is passionate about.
- What you inherited from previous cohorts, both with gratitude and with regret.
- What you hope to pass on to the next cohort(s), and what you hope they will *not* inherit from you.
- Your best advice for the next generational cohorts(s).
- Your generational cohort’s task...and its burden.

4. Bring the separate cohorts together into a large group again, and ask the oldest (Silent) cohort to begin by telling their story. When the Silent Generation’s story reaches their “political coming of age moment,” they pass the narrative thread to the next-oldest cohort (Boomers), who repeat the process. The thread passes through the Gen Xers, and on to the Millennials, who are just now experiencing their “political coming of age,” and are only beginning to project themselves and our society into a possible future.

5. Invite reflection and conversation on what this experience evoked. For example:

- For the older cohorts, reflect on how the younger cohorts unfolded what you helped create, and your own role in that unfolding.
- For the younger cohorts, reflect on how the world created by the older cohorts influenced your own choices.
- How could we use this experience to change our political culture?
- What can the generational cohorts individually and collectively contribute to the rising Millennials and their potential for leadership?
- Do we want to help the rising cohort of Millennials repeat familiar patterns, or is there potential to move up to a higher level of development?

6. Invite actions to help “step into the future.”

From these Salons emerged dramatically different stories than those so often told at political gatherings based on ideology, issue, or political party. As the narration passed from one generational cohort to the next, we experienced the historical forces that had shaped us, and how our actions had shaped history, other generational cohorts, and our shared culture. This illuminated how differences and commonalities had emerged, and why they matter. This new perspective revealed the development of individuals and generational cohorts moving through time—and showed that political identities and worldviews are neither as fixed nor as exclusive as conventional political labels suggest.

The Millennials, in their turn, revealed their potential to shift toward a new and quite compelling future. We also saw how all the cohorts may have misunderstood what each could offer to help the Millennials seize this opportunity, and gained a quite different perspective on their capacity to re-think some aspects of their political identities and strategies.

## The Generations in Action and Reflection

At each of the Salons, the participants identified the need for more opportunities for members of *all* generational cohorts to experience their potential for growth and leadership, and particularly for engaging with the Millennial Generation. Each of the older cohorts—Silent, Boomer, and Gen X—recognized that they possess unique insights, knowledge, experience, as well as blind spots, all of which will influence the emergence of the Millennials. The older generations expressed an intense yearning for the younger generations to build on their triumphs. But the younger generations seemed to have more interest in learning from what the members of each cohort have learned in their passages through fire and from confronting their shadows.

Although common sense dictates that each generational cohort should pass on both values and lessons learned, the very human tendency is to emphasize hard-won victories and ignore difficult, unresolved issues. In turn, although successive cohorts ought to incorporate the wisdom proffered by their elders, they have often learned as much from what was kept in the dark as they did from what was held up to the light. This—along with the mental models that limit options for growth and development—may well contribute to our political system’s continual recycling of past mistakes, and the experience so many political activists have of “beating our heads against the wall” with familiar yet often-ineffective strategies. Our political development may be stunted and our options for action limited—in stark contrast with the perspective shifts and methodology changes (reflecting greater complexity and developmental growth) that have propelled advances in so many other areas like science, business, and technology, for example.

Since our political approaches rarely match the overt rhetorical language of politics (e.g., “New Ideas!”, “Moving Forward!”, “A Brighter Future!”), there must be some significant obstacles to developing alternative mental models and using a generational cycle of learning and growth as a springboard to political development outside of fora like our Salons. No doubt, many of those obstacles are “external,” perhaps the most significant being existential threats to security and prosperity (like the reaction to 9/11, the growing economic stratification/instability, and potential catastrophes from global climate change). Some of the “internal” ones seem equally intractable, like the re-emergence of right-wing extremism and religious beliefs that reject modernity (let alone postmodernity!) out of hand. And, of course, the existing mental models for political change (as described earlier), are difficult to supplant, if for no other reason than that they are familiar, and we seem to have constructed an entire political system on their basis.

Emerging from these Salons, however, is the potential for a new generational cycle, led by the Millennials, with the support and guidance of the older cohorts. As in the three-dimensional model shown in Figure 5, however, generational cohorts may have to learn to “sing” their particular notes in “higher keys,” replacing, for example, the expected “C” in the two-dimensional “C-D-E-F” cycle with a new, “G” note. Exactly what a “G” note might sound like, and how it would be “sung” are beyond the scope of this article. However, Table 1 lays out some speculative characteristics of a possible new kind of “Hero” archetype compared to that shown in Figure 4. Its members might “sing” this new note, if offered the right kind of support, and the freedom to express themselves.

After all, one cohort, acting alone (as the participants in the Salons pointed out), does not possess the capacity to undertake that kind of transformation. A generational cohort only just coming of age, like the Millennials, needs the received wisdom, values, and traditions of the previous generations to build upon, as well as the opportunity and resources to generate alternatives. The Millennials need members of the other generational cohorts to break out of the one- and two-dimensional models, and offer the rising generation a context in which a “higher key” becomes a real option.

From the evidence of these Salons, it appears that multi-generational, multi-perspective experiences could become the basis for long-term constituency building, as well as a platform for helping older generational cohorts find truly useful ways to participate in a different kind of political environment. We especially need to explore if and how this framework applies among a variety of people and communities, with particular attention to recent immigrants and their children.

**Table 1. New Hero Archetype Response in a New Key to a “Crisis” Era**

Characteristics	“Old Key” Response to Secular Crisis (Figure 4)	“New Key” Response to Secular Crisis
Era	“Crisis”	“Crisis”
Archetype	Hero	<i>New Hero</i>
Cohort(s) coming of age	Greatest Generation, b. 1901 – 1924	Millennials, b. 1984 – 2003
Current ages	86+	7- 26
Orientation	Collective	Transpersonal?
Focus	Outer Threat	Integration?
Dynamic	Active	Reflective Action?
Mindset	Verities	New Verities?
Realm of action	Government	New forms of governance?
Stance toward government	Rebuild	Reimagine?
Experience	Unity, collective action	Integration, interdependence, complexity?
Purpose	<i>“The society must survive”</i>	<i>“The society must evolve”?</i>

It also appears there may be some “generational tasks” appropriate for each of the generational cohorts (as sketched out speculatively in Figure 6) that can help to create this kind of context. It may be that the overarching purpose of these tasks is to support the Millennials in their potential to become transformational leaders. Obviously, the Millennials cannot accomplish this alone—they need to find ways to engage the entire society. So each cohort must embrace a leadership role. However, those leadership roles might be quite different from those we often assume—in particular those roles that have become associated with our cohort’s place in the generational cycle (as outlined in Strauss and Howe’s research).

## Supporting the Generational Leadership of the Millennials

So why are there no young people in the room? It may have something to do with the mental models employed—consciously or unconsciously—by whatever generational cohort(s) dominates a given political organizing effort.

If the older organizers of political activism hold the one-dimensional model, the only advice they can offer young people is: “Do what we did, but more effectively.” Since there are no essential differences among the generational cohorts in the one-dimensional view, the only changes that matter are the changes that happen to “it” (where “it” is a political party, Congress, society, etc.). So, although there may be some “fixes” that can be implemented that differ from the “fixes” of previous generations, these differ mostly at the level of tactics, rather than strategy. Certainly, these “fixes” don’t require much of a shift in our understanding of public life, and don’t offer much beyond the potential for incremental change.<sup>10</sup>

If the older generational cohorts—unconsciously or consciously—are using a two-dimensional model, they are likely conveying to the rising generation: “Here, kid—it’s your turn to push this rock uphill. It’s gonna run over you its way back downhill soon enough. But hopefully it will come to rest a little higher up the hill than the last time, so the next generation will have a slight head start compared to you and me.” As in the one-dimensional model the underlying “game” rarely changes, and the players themselves never have to change internally—they simply have to adapt to new circumstances. Working harder or smarter suffices for a strategy. Rethinking the premises, or “coloring outside the lines” (or even re-drawing the lines) are not really options. Everyone’s too busy trying to recapture the moment when the rock reached its apex, and then push as far beyond that point as is possible before gravity takes its toll.

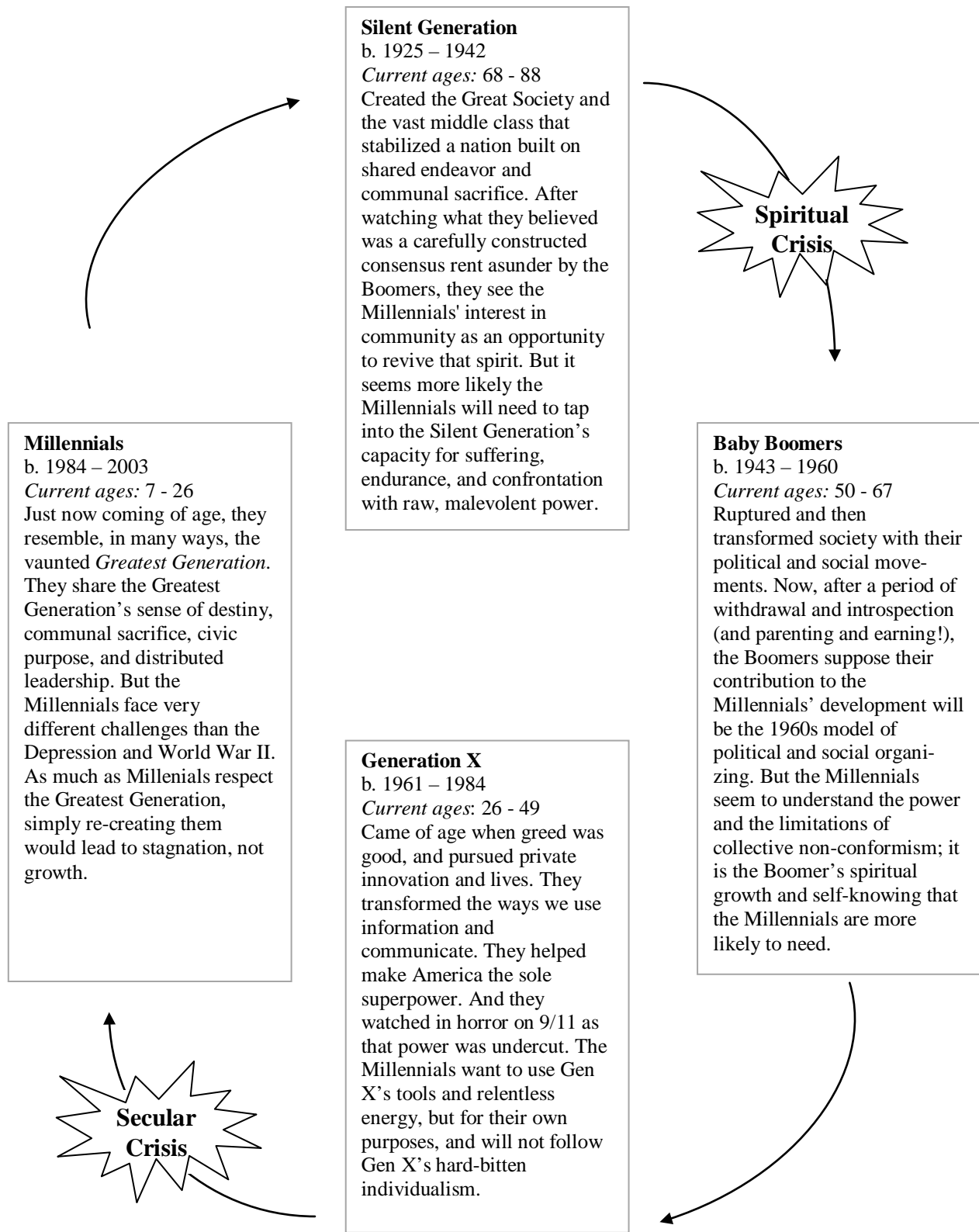
Either (or both) of these models might seem more “realistic” than a three-dimensional model that imagines political work shifting to a “higher key” in keeping with a higher level of complexity and challenge. But is it realistic to imagine that our political challenges can be solved, to paraphrase Einstein, from the same level of consciousness that created them?

Perhaps this is one of the reasons there are no young people in the room. With the heightened sensitivity and decreased habituation of youth, the Millennials may well sense the inadequacy of the political models proffered by their elders, even if they may not be able to articulate this directly. It could be that the rising generation’s experience of an ever-more complex world, demanding a “higher order” response, has attuned them to listen for a political melody in a “higher key.”

A column by Baby Boomer Thomas Friedman (2007, p. A23) epitomizes one of these generational disconnects. On a tour of colleges, Friedman found students “more optimistic and idealistic than they should be... [and] much less radical and politically engaged than they need to be.” After a few backhanded compliments about Millennial engagement with public service,

---

<sup>10</sup> The term “fixes” draws from Ron Heifetz’s (1994) distinction between technical challenges that require “fixes” (where “we” have the capacity to fix “it” without actually changing ourselves), and adaptive challenges (where “we” need to change ourselves, our perspective, our worldview, and our behaviors in order to have the capacity to meet the challenge).



**Figure 6. “Generational Tasks” to Support Millennial Transformational Leadership**  
 (from the “Generations Salons” and other sources)

Friedman lowered the boom (pun intended)

Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy didn't change the world by asking people to join their Facebook crusades or to download their platforms. Activism can only be uploaded, the old-fashioned way—by young voters speaking truth to power, face to face, in big numbers, on campuses or the Washington Mall. Virtual politics is just that—virtual. (Friedman, 2007, A23)

To which a Millennial might reasonably reply: “How do you know the world can't be changed through virtual activism? After all, no one has really even tried yet. And how's that whole “Fight the Power/March on the Capitol/Honk if You Oppose the War” thing working out for you guys? We respect your victories and your sacrifices, but the victories seem to get fewer and farther between, and toll more horrendous. Why are you so sure your way is the right or the only way?”

The Strauss and Howe model predicts that the current alignment of generational cohorts—if left unchanged—will contribute to the Millennials reverting to “saving the society” tasks reminiscent of the “Greatest Generation” (of course, events and circumstances may well dictate that these are exactly the kinds of tasks that need doing). Without a conscious effort, all of the generational cohorts will reinforce collectively the same patterns that have kept the US in its present cycle. For example, Baby Boomers—now peaking in terms of money, power, influence, and available time—carry a model of social change almost diametrically opposed to the emerging characteristics of the Millennials (see Figure 4 and the Friedman example above). The two cohorts agree only on an “active” orientation, but have been shaped by fundamentally different types of crises.

If the congenitally self-referential Boomers try to squeeze the Millennials into their model of political organizing, the outcome seems doomed from the start—virtually guaranteed to lead to a repetition of the “C-D-E-F-C-D-E-F” cycle. Gen Xers, raised to “just do it,” probably will want no part of mediating any dispute between the Boomers and the Millennials, but instead seem more likely to return to their private pursuits than to take public action in a divisive environment. And many members of the Silent cohort, who share the Millennials' attraction to collective action, seem unlikely to engage with anything that risks a return to the scorched-earth “culture wars” of recent decades.

That's the bad news. The good news?

At our Salons, the Millennials appeared to grasp that they have method, motive, and opportunity to lead in a decidedly new direction. What they lacked, it seemed, was a coherent vision, based on an understanding of how the past created the challenges they face, as well as generational, developmental, organizational, and political models appropriate for the new work they envision. They also didn't often have the older generational cohorts engaging with them in ways that consciously supported their transformational potential. In our Generational Salons, the Millennials turned to the older cohorts and asked: “How can you help?”

## Can Generational Cohorts Help Each Other...and Themselves?

In subsequent Salons, the generational experience has been raised time and again as a powerful reference point. Experiencing such stark differences among the generational cohorts confronted participants with the opportunity to uncover their unconscious mental models: the “right” way to take political action, theories of political change, even which political and non-political institutions most need “reforming.”

The disparate perspectives that emerged from each of the generational cohorts seemed to jolt many participants out of their comfort zones. Instead of seeing younger or older versions of themselves among fellow activists, and wondering why people who seemed to share their political views did such puzzling things, they began to grasp that their fellow activists neither began with the same assumptions nor arrived at the same conclusions.

As progressive, politically active folk, many of the Salon participants are accustomed to exploring differences based on culture, class, gender, etc., and even in many instances, developmental perspectives. They willingly (some even eagerly) participate in “processing” sessions, and are comfortable with group dynamics and the like. After years of reflecting on the obvious divides (e.g., class, ethnicity), many progressives seem almost comforted by exercises that cover this by-now familiar terrain.

The generational experience, in contrast, exposed a new realm of difference. However, we have yet to explore how to turn this observation into a more effective model of action. Perhaps this is a difference without a distinction. Perhaps we have accomplished nothing more than exposing a new vein of guilt-rich ore, which progressives can mine for solipsistic indulgence. Or, perhaps, the lessons of the Obama campaign (along with other models) offer a way of joining theory and reflection with action. And with that, perhaps, we can begin to find a way to rise out of the time-worn ruts that seem only to lead us back to where we began, neither appreciably wiser nor better off for the journey.

In every generation, it seems, self-appointed spokespeople try to convince their peers that a “defining moment” is at hand; that the future of (pick one or more: our party, our country, our world) depends on our urgent action. I’m no less prone to that; in fact, I’ll go one better. We may well face a defining moment not only for our generation, but for all four generational cohorts alive in the US today (and those yet to come). It will take all of us—harmonizing and counterpointing, listening and rethinking—to support the Millennials in singing the familiar, sweet song of freedom in a new key. And so, again: “How can you help?”

## References

- Beck, C. & Cowan, C. (1996). *Spiral Dynamics*. London: Blackwell.
- Friedman, T. (2007). Generation Q. *The New York Times*, 10 October Retrieved October 10, 2007 from [<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/10/opinion/10friedman.html>]
- Goff, K. (2008). *Party crashing*. New York, NY: Basic Civitas Books.
- Heifetz, R. (1994). *Leadership without easy answers*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
- Kegan, R. (1992) *The evolving self*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Kitwana, B. (2003). *The hip-hop generation: Crisis in African-American culture*. New York: Basic Civitas Books.
- Ross, S. N. (2008). Using developmental theory: When not to play telephone games. *Integral Review: A Transdisciplinary and Transcultural Journal for New Thought, Research, and Praxis*, 4(1), 31-46. Retrieved from <http://integral-review.org/documents/Ross,%20Using%20Developmental%20Theory,%20Vol.4%20No.1.pdf>
- Strauss, W. & Howe, N. (1991). *Generations: The history of America's future*. New York: Morrow.
- Strauss, W. & Howe, N. (1997). *Fourth turning*. New York: Broadway.