

# The Fourth Turning & The Resilient Leader

*A Strategic Guide for Families, Local Leaders,  
State Executives & Corporate Strategists*

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*Leadership is not about the next election; it's about the next generation.*

— Simon Sinek

## Executive Summary

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Every eighty years, American civilization undergoes a convulsive transformation. The Founding, the Civil War, the Great Depression and World War II — each arrived on schedule, each dissolved the assumptions of the era before it, and each demanded that leaders adapt or be swept aside. Historians Neil Strauss and William Howe mapped this pattern with rigorous precision and predicted that the next such Crisis would arrive in the 2020s. The evidence suggests they were right.

This white paper does three things. First, it summarizes the Strauss–Howe generational theory and presents the evidence that we have crossed from the Unraveling into the Crisis — the Fourth Turning. Second, it documents the institutional stress fractures already visible in our financial system, our public health infrastructure, our geopolitical order, and our democratic norms. Third, and most importantly, it offers concrete, historically grounded resilience strategies for four levels of leadership: the family, the local community institution, the state executive, and the Fortune 500 strategist.

The reader who finds problem-identification easy and solution-generation hard is correct that pointing at cracks is insufficient. This paper is oriented toward action. The historical record is clear: the units that navigated the last Crisis were not the ones with the most resources — they were the ones with the deepest relationships, the most practical capabilities, and the clearest sense of purpose. Those conditions can be built. This paper shows how.

## Part I: The Strauss–Howe Framework

### The Four Turnings: A Recurring Pattern

In their landmark 1991 work *Generations: A History of America’s Future, 1584 to 2069*, Neil Strauss and William Howe identified a recurring eighty-to-one-hundred-year cycle in Anglo-American history. Each cycle — which they called a saeculum, from the Latin word for a long human life — comprises four roughly twenty-five-year seasons, each with a distinct social mood and generational character.

Turning	Season Analogy	Social Character	Last Example
First Turning: The High	Spring	Strong institutions, collective confidence, civic optimism	Post-WWII boom, 1946–1964
Second Turning: The Awakening	Summer	Spiritual rebellion, cultural experimentation, challenge to norms	The 1960s–1970s counterculture
Third Turning: The Unraveling	Autumn	Individualism ascendant, institutional erosion, cultural fragmentation	The 1980s–2000s
Fourth Turning: The Crisis	Winter	Existential threat, institutional collapse and reconstruction, collective action	The Depression & WWII, 1929–1945

Strauss and Howe were not fatalists. They did not predict specific events — they predicted a social mood, a generational alignment, and a historical pressure that makes certain kinds of crises more likely to erupt and more likely to escalate than they would at other points in the cycle. The theory has predictive value not because history repeats, but because the generational memory that shapes institutions expires on roughly the same biological schedule each time.

*“Their critical insight was that even the most stable domestic and foreign orders and the values that underlie them will die off along with the generations that created them.”*

— Historian David Kaiser, *Boston Globe*, 2025

### Generational Archetypes

The theory’s second major contribution is its taxonomy of generational archetypes, each shaped by the era in which it comes of age. Crucially, at the onset of every Crisis in American history, the same four archetypes occupy the same four life stages — creating a predictable generational alignment that shapes the character of the response.

Archetype	Current Generation	Life Stage in Crisis	Historical Role
Prophet (Idealist)	Baby Boomers	Elder	Moral authority; declares the stakes
Nomad (Reactive)	Generation X	Midlife leader	Pragmatic executor; gets things done
Hero (Civic)	Millennials	Young adult	Collective soldier; rebuilds institutions
Artist (Adaptive)	Generation Z	Youth	Sensitive witness; reshapes culture after

This alignment has repeated across every major American Crisis. The generation that fought World War II — the “Greatest Generation” in Howe’s terminology — was a Hero archetype, just as Millennials are today. The pragmatic, skeptical adults who led the wartime mobilization were Nomads, just as Gen X is today. History does not repeat, but the generational music plays recognizable themes.

## Part II: Evidence We Are in the Fourth Turning

Skeptics of the Strauss–Howe framework sometimes dismiss it as pattern-matching after the fact. But the events of the past two decades constitute a striking convergence of the conditions the theory specifically predicted would mark the onset of the Crisis: a financial shock that exposed systemic institutional failure, a catalyzing event that demanded collective response and revealed coordination breakdown, and a geopolitical escalation that threatens the post-WWII order that the last Crisis created.

### 2008: The Financial Crisis and the Exposure of Institutional Rot

The 2008 financial crisis was not simply a market correction. It was a legitimacy event. The institutions Americans had been told to trust — major banks, ratings agencies, regulatory bodies, and the academic economic consensus — were revealed to have been operating on assumptions that were either false, captured, or both. The resulting bailouts, which socialized losses while privatizing gains, shattered the implicit social contract between large financial institutions and the public they nominally served.

The political consequences were immediate and durable. The Tea Party movement on the right and the Occupy movement on the left were, at their core, expressions of the same fury: that the institutions had failed ordinary people while protecting themselves. Trust in banks, Congress, the Federal Reserve, and financial media dropped to historic lows and has not recovered. The 2008 crisis did not cause the Fourth Turning — but it announced it.

#### By the Numbers: Institutional Trust Collapse

Gallup polling shows trust in the U.S. Congress has declined from 42% in 2001 to below 12% by 2023. Trust in banks fell from 53% pre-2008 to 27% by 2012 and has not returned to pre-crisis levels. Trust in the media, the medical system, and organized religion have each declined by double digits over the same period. Only the military and small business retain majority public trust.

### COVID-19: The Catalyzing Event

Fourth Turnings historically feature a catalyzing event — a Pearl Harbor, a Fort Sumter, a stock market crash — that transforms diffuse social anxiety into acute, collective crisis. COVID-19 served this function with brutal efficiency.

The pandemic did not merely kill people. It exposed, with clinical precision, every fault line in American institutional life. Public health agencies issued contradictory guidance. Supply chains, optimized for efficiency rather than resilience, collapsed for basic goods. School systems, largely unchanged since the Industrial Revolution, attempted to pivot overnight to digital delivery with devastating results for the most vulnerable children. Long-term care facilities — the architectural consequence of America's relationship with its elderly — became mortality zones.

At the same time, the pandemic revealed latent capacity for collective action: vaccine development timelines that would have been considered science fiction were achieved, mutual aid networks proliferated spontaneously in neighborhoods across the country, and remote work technology — long available but underutilized — was adopted at scale in weeks. The Crisis does not only destroy; it also accelerates latent possibility.

The political polarization the pandemic generated — over masks, vaccines, school closures, lockdowns — was itself diagnostic. A society in the High phase of a saeculum would have mobilized around a shared threat with relative cohesion, as it did after Pearl Harbor. A society in the Crisis phase fractures over the response because the underlying social trust required for coordinated action has already eroded. COVID did not create American polarization — it revealed how far it had already progressed.

## The Fracturing Geopolitical Order

The post-WWII international order — the system of alliances, institutions, and norms that the Greatest Generation built in the aftermath of the last Crisis — is under more sustained pressure than at any point since its construction. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 shattered seventy-five years of European security assumptions. China's accelerating challenge to American naval dominance in the Pacific has moved from theoretical to operational. Iran's proxy network has drawn American forces into active kinetic conflict across the Middle East.

What is significant from a Strauss–Howe perspective is not simply that these conflicts exist — geopolitical tension is perennial — but that the institutional frameworks designed to manage them are visibly straining. NATO faces internal coherence questions. The United Nations Security Council is deadlocked on every major conflict. The WTO dispute resolution system has been functionally paralyzed. The dollar's reserve currency status, the bedrock of American financial power, is being explicitly challenged by a growing coalition of nations seeking alternatives.

Each of the previous three Fourth Turnings in American history involved a major war. This does not make the next one inevitable — but it does mean that leaders at every level should be planning for a geopolitical environment that is significantly less stable than the one in which current institutions were designed to operate.

## Institutional Stress: The Visible Fractures

Beyond the headline crises, the stress is visible in the load-bearing institutions of daily American life:

- Higher education faces an enrollment cliff, a student debt crisis, and a growing public skepticism about its return on investment that is structurally different from previous generational critiques.
- The healthcare system consumes a larger share of GDP than any comparable nation while producing worse outcomes on most population health measures, and the rural hospital closure wave has left large regions without basic emergency care.
- Local journalism, the connective tissue of community civic life, has collapsed in thousands of American communities, leaving what researchers call “news deserts” where local government accountability has effectively ceased.

- The federal civil service, the administrative backbone of the regulatory state, faces a generational retirement wave and a recruitment crisis that threatens the basic competency of government at the moment it is most needed.
- Small business formation, a historic engine of economic mobility and community resilience, remains below its pre-2008 trend despite surface-level economic recovery.

*“The change coming will not be iterative. It will be radical transformations in the fundamental frameworks that define how our organizations function.”*

— James A. McPherson, The McPherson Group

## Part III: What You Can Do Now

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The historical record of the last Crisis — the Depression and World War II — yields a consistent finding: the individuals, communities, and organizations that navigated it best were not those with the most resources at the onset. They were those with the densest relationships, the clearest sense of purpose, the most practical capabilities, and the greatest willingness to subordinate short-term individual interest to collective resilience. None of those conditions require predicting the future with certainty. All of them are good practice regardless.

What follows is organized by the level of leadership and sphere of action, moving from the most intimate — the family — to the most strategic — the corporate boardroom. The principles at each level rhyme with each other because the underlying dynamic is the same: compress decision-making to the local, tighten interdependence, and convert anxiety into productive action.

## Level 1: The Father of a Family

The Depression-era family that fared best was not the one with the most savings — it was the one embedded in dense social networks and equipped with practical, transferable capability. Modern resilience for a family head follows the same logic, updated for contemporary conditions.

### Build Competence, Not Just Inventory

The instinct to “prep” — to stockpile goods — is understandable but incomplete. Goods deplete; skills compound. The more durable investment is in practical capability: basic medical knowledge, mechanical repair, food production at whatever scale your living situation allows, and financial literacy that is genuine rather than delegated. Every skill your household currently outsources entirely is a vulnerability. Identify the three most consequential and begin closing the gap.

### Strengthen the Internal Culture of Your Household

The families that held together during the Depression had strong internal culture — shared meals, shared purpose, honest communication about difficulty, and a shared story about who they were and what they stood for. Children who understood why things were hard coped better than those who were shielded from reality. Do not catastrophize, but do not sanitize either. Resilient families have honest internal communication and children who experience themselves as genuine contributors, not passengers.

Give your children real responsibilities — not performative chores but genuine contribution to household function. A child with real responsibilities develops identity, capability, and the neurological architecture of agency. These are protective factors that no amount of enrichment programming can replicate.

### Map and Cultivate Your Network

In the 1930s, social resilience was embedded in neighbors, extended family, religious congregations, and mutual aid societies. The modern equivalent requires deliberate construction. Map your actual network: who are the five households you could genuinely count on in a serious disruption? Who has medical training, mechanical skills, legal knowledge, agricultural capability? If you cannot name them, that gap is your first priority. Crisis periods reward relationships built before they were needed, not during.

### Reduce Fragility in Your Balance Sheet

Every financial crisis punishes leverage and rewards liquidity. This does not require predicting a crash — it requires acknowledging that being one disruption away from a cascade is a choice. Reduce debt exposure where structurally possible, maintain genuine emergency liquidity, and build income diversity where your circumstances allow. Your grandparents called this not spending what you don't have. The principle has not changed.

#### Historical Parallel: The 1930s Family

Sociologist Glen Elder's landmark longitudinal study of Depression-era children found that families which maintained structure, assigned children meaningful roles, and sustained social connections produced children who were more psychologically resilient, more educationally ambitious, and more economically successful in adulthood than those from families that either denied the difficulty or collapsed under it. Agency and structure, even under duress, are deeply protective.



## **Level 2: Local County Government & Chamber of Commerce**

The local level is arguably the most powerful sphere of action during a Fourth Turning, precisely because national institutions lose legitimacy while local ones can gain it rapidly by demonstrating competence and showing up. The county government and the Chamber of Commerce are the two institutions with the broadest legitimate convening authority at the community level. That authority is an asset that depreciates if unused.

### **Become the Connective Tissue**

The Chambers and county governments that mattered most during the last Crisis were the ones that convened — that brought farmers, banks, schools, employers, and social service providers into the same room before the emergency forced them there. Your highest-leverage action right now is to build the table. Identify the organizations in your county that have never been in conversation with each other but should be. Host the meeting. The convener of a productive network captures extraordinary influence at very low cost.

### **Map Your Real Economy**

During the WWII mobilization, local economies that knew their actual productive assets — who had trucks, warehouse space, trained machinists, cold storage — could mobilize fast. Do you know what your county actually produces? What skills exist in your workforce? What your critical supply chain dependencies are? What essential services have single points of failure? This is strategic intelligence that costs almost nothing to develop and is extraordinarily valuable when conditions deteriorate. Commission the inventory before you need it.

### **Invest in Workforce Pipelines Now**

Every major Crisis in American history produced a workforce transformation, and the communities that shaped that transformation were the ones with infrastructure already in place. The Chamber or county economic development office that builds a genuine school-to-career pipeline in 2025 will be seen as visionary by 2030. Partner with your community college. Work with your school district to establish career academies in your highest-demand sectors. Create the internship infrastructure. Fund the credential. The cost is modest; the return is generational.

### **Build Mutual Aid Infrastructure Before the Emergency**

Depression-era communities with food banks, credit unions, and mutual aid societies before the crash deployed them faster and more effectively than those that improvised. The 2025 equivalent includes emergency business continuity funds, workforce transition support systems, local food distribution networks, and housing assistance capacity. These are not charity programs — they are community resilience infrastructure. Build them when you don't urgently need them, so they function when you do.

### **Protect and Invest in Institutional Trust**

In an era of institutional erosion, the local institution that is visibly competent, honest about difficulty, and reliable in delivery is building a scarce and valuable asset. Do not over-promise. Communicate honestly about constraints. Show up when conditions are difficult. The local government or Chamber that maintains public trust through a turbulent period will have extraordinary authority to lead the recovery. Trust is the most durable competitive advantage available to a community institution.

### **Model to Study: Columbus, Ohio & JPMorgan Chase**

JPMorgan Chase partnered with Columbus business, education, and public sector leaders to build a regional talent pipeline aligned to employer needs — targeting the 60% of workers who will need upskilling by 2027. The model's core insight: no single institution has the resources or authority to solve a workforce crisis alone. The convener who builds the coalition captures the credit and shapes the direction. Your Chamber or county can play this role.

## **Level 3: Governor of a State**

Governors occupy a uniquely powerful position during Fourth Turnings. The historical record shows that state-level leadership often defines the era more than national leadership, because states are large enough to command significant resources but small enough to actually execute. The governors who shaped the New Deal were not passive recipients of federal direction — they were active architects of policy innovation. The same opportunity exists now.

### **Design for Antifragility, Not Just Resilience**

Nassim Taleb's concept of antifragility — systems that grow stronger under stress rather than merely surviving it — is the right design principle for state government in a Fourth Turning. Resilience means surviving the shock. Antifragility means emerging from it stronger. This requires diversified economic base, redundant infrastructure, workforce systems that can scale rapidly, emergency reserves that are genuinely maintained, and administrative capacity that is not dependent on a single vendor or a single federal program.

Audit your state's fragility profile: what are the single points of failure in critical systems? Which services would collapse if federal funding were interrupted? Which infrastructure systems are one extreme weather event from failure? The answers to these questions are your strategic priority list, not your campaign platform.

### **Make Workforce Development Your Signature Initiative**

Every major American Crisis produced a defining workforce investment: the Civilian Conservation Corps, the GI Bill, the wartime training programs that converted a civilian economy to military production in eighteen months. A governor who builds a genuine statewide skills pipeline — connecting high schools, community colleges, employers, and stackable credential pathways — is doing exactly what those programs did, adapted for an era of automation and AI displacement rather than industrial mobilization.

The political and economic return on this investment is extraordinary. Workforce development is one of the few policy areas where business, labor, education, and community interests authentically converge. It is also one of the most durable legacies a governor can leave: a well-trained workforce compounds in value for decades.

### **Play the Federalism Card Actively**

In periods of national institutional stress, states that assert their constitutional authority as laboratories of democracy gain power. Do not wait for federal direction on workforce, infrastructure, energy, or economic development. Build your own public-private partnerships. Design your own WIOA innovations. Create your own industrial policy where you have authority. The governors who shaped the New Deal brought proposals to Washington, not requests. The governors who will shape the next High will do the same.

### **Invest in Social Cohesion Infrastructure**

States with higher social trust recover faster from economic shocks — this is well-documented in the disaster resilience literature. The infrastructure of social cohesion — parks, libraries, community centers, local journalism support, civic association capacity — is not a luxury in a Crisis period. It is load-bearing. The temptation to make these the first budget cuts during a fiscal

squeeze should be actively resisted. They are among the highest-return investments a state can make.

### **Communicate with Radical Honesty**

The governors who lost public trust during the last Crisis were those who minimized real problems. The ones who built durable coalitions named the difficulty clearly and then provided a specific path forward. Your communications strategy should consistently be: clear-eyed about the challenge, specific about the response, and honest about uncertainty. In an era when public trust in institutions is at historic lows, a leader who tells the truth about hard things — and then delivers on their commitments — is building an extraordinary asset.

#### **Historical Parallel: FDR & the Governors**

Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal was not invented in Washington. It was assembled from state-level experiments that had already been tried — Wisconsin's unemployment insurance, New York's labor protections, California's agricultural programs. Roosevelt was a synthesizer and a federalist who gave national scale to what states had pioneered. The governors who had the courage to experiment before the crisis hit shaped the national response. The same opportunity exists for the governors of 2025.

## **Level 4: Vice President of Strategy, Fortune 500**

The corporate strategist faces the most complex version of this challenge because the Fourth Turning creates both existential threats to existing business models and extraordinary opportunities for organizations agile enough to recognize them. The companies that navigated the last Crisis best were not the ones that cut their way to safety — they were the ones that converted, that found the genuine intersection between their capabilities and the moment's demands.

### **Reframe Resilience as a Revenue Strategy**

The companies that thrived through World War II were those that converted their productive capacity to meet the national moment. Ford built bombers. General Electric built radar systems. The corporate identity that emerged from that conversion — of competence deployed in service of collective purpose — generated customer and employee loyalty that paid dividends for decades.

The contemporary question is not whether your company should build bombers. It is: what does the next five years urgently need that you are positioned to supply? Domestic manufacturing capability, digital infrastructure, healthcare delivery, workforce training, climate resilience — each of these represents a genuine market that is being created by Fourth Turning dynamics. Your scenario planning should explicitly ask: what is our conversion option?

### **Treat Your Workforce as a Long-Term Asset**

The Depression-era companies that maintained their workforces — even at reduced hours through work-sharing arrangements — emerged with intact institutional knowledge, fierce employee loyalty, and the ability to scale rapidly when conditions improved. The companies that gutted their workforces had to rebuild from scratch during the recovery at enormous cost, having lost years of compound organizational learning.

This is not an argument against necessary structural change. It is an argument for distinguishing between restructuring that builds long-term value and cost-cutting that is actually destroying it. Model both scenarios with genuine rigor, accounting for the full cost of workforce reconstitution, institutional knowledge loss, and brand damage in an era of radical transparency.

### **Scenario Plan for Discontinuity**

Most corporate scenario planning models incremental change —  $\pm 10\%$  on key variables. Fourth Turning dynamics are non-linear. The scenarios that matter are the ones that feel implausible until they happen: major regulatory restructuring of your industry, significant disruption to your supply chain geography, dramatic shifts in consumer values driven by generational succession, the possibility that core business model assumptions simply stop being true.

Commission scenarios that include these discontinuities. Stress-test your strategy against each. Identify which of your current capabilities retain value across multiple scenarios and which are scenario-dependent. The capabilities and relationships that are valuable across the widest range of futures deserve disproportionate investment. This is the analytical core of antifragile strategy.

### **Build Your Regional Anchor Identity**

The most durable large companies of the mid-twentieth century were those with genuine roots in place — that invested in the communities where they operated, trained local workers, and were

seen as of their region rather than simply located there. In an era of institutional distrust and growing economic nationalism, the company that can credibly claim regional identity and genuine community investment has a competitive advantage that cannot be replicated by marketing.

Engage with your local workforce pipeline. Fund your community college programs in your core skill areas. Show up at the Chamber table and the economic development conversation. The reputational capital built by genuine community investment is extraordinarily durable — and extraordinarily difficult for competitors without your local roots to replicate.

### **Invest in Organizational Sense-Making Capacity**

The report's point about cultural and historical imagination — the ability to understand complexity and read context — applies directly to the corporate strategy function. Most strategy teams are excellent at modeling spreadsheets and poor at understanding what is actually happening in the broader social and political environment. These are different cognitive skills, and the second has never been more valuable.

Build your team's contextual intelligence: hire people with backgrounds in history, political science, anthropology, and sociology alongside the economists and MBAs. Fund the internal research function that reads primary sources rather than only analyst reports. Bring in external perspectives from the government, the nonprofit sector, and the academic world. The organizations that saw around corners during the last Crisis had leaders who read widely and thought historically.

#### **Strategic Imperative: The BCG Reskilling Model**

Boston Consulting Group's research on workforce reskilling found that organizations treating it as a strategic imperative — led by the C-suite, with clear metrics and genuine manager accountability — achieved dramatically better outcomes than those that delegated it to HR as a program. In a Fourth Turning context, this is not primarily a talent strategy. It is a resilience strategy: the organization that can redeploy its existing workforce into new capability profiles is antifragile in a way that the organization dependent on external hiring is not.

## Part IV: The Common Thread

What unites the resilience strategies across all four levels of leadership is a single underlying principle: the conditions for navigating a Crisis successfully must be built before the urgency makes them obvious. Dense relationships. Honest communication. Practical capability. Long-term orientation. Willingness to subordinate short-term individual interest to collective survival and eventual renewal.

These are not exotic requirements. They are the practices that thoughtful leaders at every level have always known matter. What the Fourth Turning framework contributes is a sense of timing and stakes: these investments, which are always good practice, are now urgent in a way they have not been for eighty years.

Level	Immediate Priority	Build By 2027	Signature Outcome
Family	Practical skills & network mapping	Dense lateral relationships, financial resilience	Household that gains strength from disruption
Local Institution	Convening cross-sector table	Workforce pipeline & mutual aid infrastructure	Community with trusted, functional institutions
State Government	Antifragility audit	Statewide workforce & social cohesion investment	State positioned to lead national recovery
Fortune 500	Discontinuity scenario planning	Regional anchor identity & workforce as asset	Company that converts disruption into advantage

The Crisis does not reward prediction. It rewards preparation. The leaders who will be most consequential in the years ahead are not the ones who saw it coming most clearly — they are the ones who built, at every level, the relationships, capabilities, and institutional capacity to respond effectively when it arrived.

The two traits that James McPherson identifies as defining for Crisis-era leaders — the ability to understand complexity and the capacity to act — are cultivatable. History does not wait, but it rewards those who prepare.

*“This moment is not about surviving; it is about creating new paradigms and co-shaping the future. Those who lean into this era by anchoring strategy in societal rebuilding, tech-enabled reskilling, and intergenerational inclusivity will emerge stronger when the next High arrives.”*

— The McPherson Group, 2025



## About The McPherson Group

With a foundation in history and philosophy and over three decades of founding, leading, and consulting experience, The McPherson Group guides leaders through crises by helping them see their challenges as part of enduring human patterns. Drawing on historical case studies of crisis leadership, Aristotelian philosophical frameworks, and open and complex adaptive systems thinking, The McPherson Group helps leaders diagnose emergent threats, design responsive agile structures, and cultivate the situational awareness, self-regulation, and stakeholder connectivity required to transform disruption into renewal.

James A. McPherson holds a B.A. in Classics with honors from Johns Hopkins University (Maryland Distinguished Scholar), studied Leadership and Organizational Goals in Homer's Iliad as a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Lausanne in Switzerland, and completed his M.B.A. at Duke University with a concentration in Strategy & Decision Science. He is the author of *Generational Helots*, *Elephants Fleeing the Tsunami: Indications of the Fourth Turning* and is completing *Monarchy: Kingliness as a Character Trait* and *Throw Thunder: Lead Like Zeus*.

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