

# Politics in a New Key

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

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

And I wondered if the differences in the “mental models” of the various generations might be behind the sense of “stuckness” that so many of us experience in political involvement, as well as the sense of potential that arose from the Obama campaign. It seems worth exploring:

- If each generational cohort<sup>1</sup> understands and engages differently with politics.
- How the older generational cohorts could better understand, engage with, and support the rising Millennials (those now in pre-teen to post-college years).
- If the Millennials (together with the other generational cohorts) could transform their different perspectives and mental models from something that paralyzes into something that catalyzes.

After all, the Millennials, often touted as the next “Greatest Generation,” may have the potential to be just that...and perhaps even more. They appear to have the potential to be a transformational generation, one that helps shift our political and social systems to a new level. But if we simply slot these young people 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, we may actually impede their progress. The limiting factor may not be the Millennials themselves, it may well be the “mental models” all of use (mostly unconsciously) to help make sense of the world.

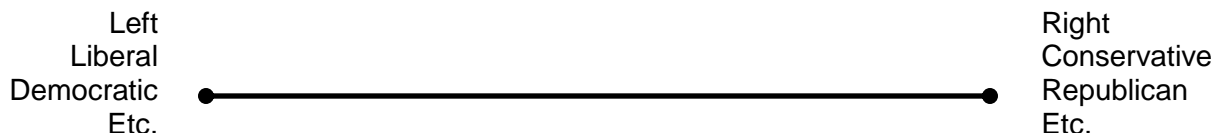
When it comes to politics, we often describe use metaphors that imply regular, rhythmic motions, such as ebbs and flows, or cycles, where lasting change occurs at a slow pace, if at all. Although these “back and forth/round and round” metaphors are not the only ones we use when thinking about politics, they come out in phrases like “pendulum swings.” Beneath these descriptions are “mental models”—conscious or unconscious shorthand representations of reality.

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<sup>1</sup> A “generational cohort” is a group of broadly similar people of similar age, who come to be known collectively as a certain generation, like the “Baby Boomers” or “Gen Xers” or “the Greatest Generation.”

### **One Dimension: The “Pendulum” Model**

One simple but powerfully attractive way of thinking about American politics describes change as something that happens in a single dimension (as shown in Figure 1) with a more-or-less metronomic cadence: Democratic-Republican, liberal-conservative, etc.



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

In this model, the length of the line—the 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 majority opinion clustered around the midpoint...and along the line. Political action 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” (or whatever terminology is used) pole. Those on either side of a debate (and in this model, there are really only two sides in any debate) can always identify opportunities for “moving the middle” in their preferred direction.

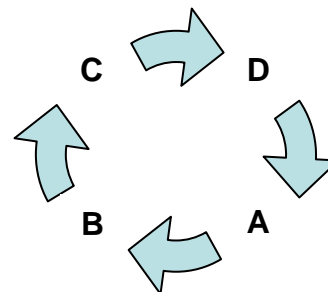
Presumably, this combination of predictability, reasonable boundaries, and some possibility for gradual progress makes the linear model acceptable to a good many Americans. It provides a stable framework for political activism, as well as a sense of safety from erratic shifts “too far” in either direction along the line. The majority of Americans can imagine themselves clustered somewhere close to the center. So it generally “makes sense” if you favor slow, ordered change (or little change).

Using this model, there’s no need to make distinctions among different generational cohorts: 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 simply “train up” rising young leaders in the received wisdom of the particular political viewpoint.

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

A more complex version of the linear view uses a two-dimensional cycle (as shown in Figure 2). In this model, 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. It’s roughly the political equivalent of “just stick around, bell bottoms will be back in style again in 30 years or so.”

So, the excesses of a Republican Congress give way to a rebirth of liberal activism, which 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.



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

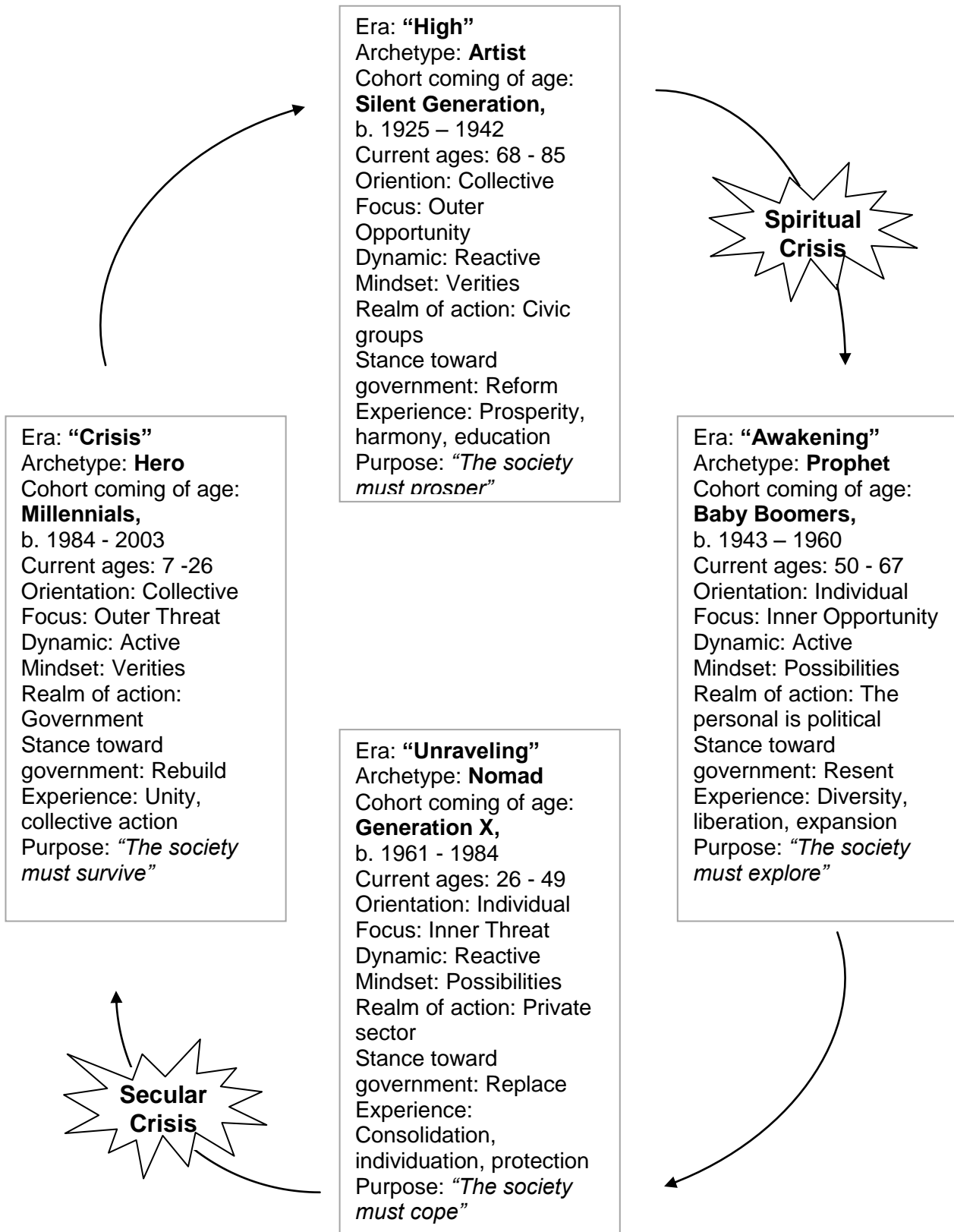
Like its one-dimensional cousin, this model has an appealing sense of stability. The downside of predictability is inevitability. Although there is room for some gradual “progress,” a grim, Sisyphean sense of how politics works may contribute to the burnout and disenchantment in politics. Since you can’t freeze time, any progress is subject to major reverses as the wheel turns...slowly...over decades and generations. However, this model does offer opportunities for some progress:

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. As in the linear model, different people can and do define “progress” (or reversion) as movement in a given direction.
2. “Get what you can get, and then fight a rear-guard action against revanchism.” Most mainstream groups believe their time will eventually come. And when their moment arrives, they’ll struggle to make their moment last. This might help explain some of the excesses that inevitably occur when an ideology, party, or generational cohort takes power: it seems sensible to push an agenda as hard as possible for as long as possible, before the wheel spins again. And when your opponents retake power, you rebuild and retool, and try to spin the wheel a little faster back in your direction.
3. “Plan for the next war.” From a cyclical viewpoint, it doesn’t make sense to simply “hold the line” when you’re out of power. Instead, you want to hasten the day when the wheel turns your way. This leads to strategies like “working smarter” and developing newer, sharper leadership...but still playing the same game.

Although you can talk about transformation, paradigm shifts, etc. while using this model the reality is (for very good and compelling reasons) the stern tasks of grinding out progress and preventing losses will take precedence.

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

One of the most compelling examples of the cyclical model comes from William Strauss & Neil Howe. In *Generations* and *Fourth Turning* and subsequent writings, Strauss & Howe proposed that there are four basic generational archetypes (Heroes, Artists, Prophets, and Nomads—see Figure 4 for details) that 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 (i.e., global, technological, etc.) in ways that are broadly predictable, based on their place in the generational archetype cycle.



**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)

For example, the “Greatest Generation” cohort, a “Hero” archetype, rose collectively in the 1930s and 1940s to overcome the challenges of a “Secular Crisis” (the Great Depression and World War II), during which Americans banded together to overcome. The Greatest Generation created a broad consensus and repressed internal conflict, but this legacy of conformism would consume the “Artists” (known as the “Silent Generation”) who came of age from the late 1940s through the early 1960s—the time of the GI Bill and *Father Knows Best*. The rising “Prophet” generation (the “Baby Boomers”) then initiated a “Spiritual Crisis” and ushered in an “Awakening” Era, by calling into question the core values of American society. In turn, the “Nomads” (known as “Generation X”) wandered the wastelands of the Culture Wars and endured an “Unraveling”: the crime-ridden, me-first, “greed-is-good 1980-90s. Which, in turn, led us back to the next “Secular Crisis,” (terrorism and global climate change) and the rise of another “Hero” cohort just now coming of age (the Millennials), who will meet a challenge that requires a collective response equal to that of the Greatest Generation.

And so, Strauss & Howe say, it goes: around and around, each cohort following the next, in a predictable, regular pattern. As these cohorts move through time, they appear to have quite different ways of expressing values and principles, preferred forms of action, preferred places to intervene, etc. For example, the Silent Generation populated many of the large national civic groups like the ACLU and the League of Women Voters; whereas Gen Xers turned to the private sector.

The Strauss & Howe model picks out of the seemingly chaotic noise of the American Experience an underlying rhythm and a simple melody. The task of political actors, then, is to dance to the pulse of the times, and listen for the prevailing—and rising—mood of the country. A kind of “musical sensitivity” can give a political actor 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. It’s hugely broad brush, and it shows cracks when the authors attempt to extend it back into pre-American Revolution “Anglo-American” history. Similarly, projecting this model too far into a future seems unwise. We may be headed for some unimagined leaps forward (or backward), so a model based on the past may be of little help for trying to shape the future.

Finally, the reference to “Anglo-American” history points to the absence, in Strauss & 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 & 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, and interesting differences among different generations of gay men have also been proposed. The theory does not address at all recent immigrants and their families, who make up about 10 percent of

the US population, who are likely as much (if not more) influenced by their experiences outside of American culture as by their US-born generational cohort.

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

The “cyclical model” from Strauss & Howe 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 displays a harmonious repeating cycle over time.

But what if those patterns that Strauss & Howe observed were plotted in three dimensions, adding the potential for growth and change over time? Would the American historical cycles (and those of the future) show 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 higher or lower key, the pattern of the written notes would look just the same without the context of the grid to indicate pitch. From this two-dimensional perspective, a “do-re-mi-fa-do-re-mi-fa” melody would look just like a “mi-fa-la-ti-mi-fa-la-ti” melody or a “la-ti-do-re-la-ti-re-do” melody.

Add a 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. From this three-dimensional vantage point, a similar quantitative melody (four notes in a repeating, cyclical pattern) would have a large qualitative difference.

Strauss & Howe suggest that the timeline of American “cycles” 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, etc. 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 enormous 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 might 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 now experiencing. The cycle may have “changed keys” from the previous one, even though the basic patterns may have remained similar.

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 & Howe perspective would not capture this upheaval (compare the “Two Dimensional” model of Figure 2 with the “Three Dimensional” model shown in Figure 5). That type of “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 higher level of complexity and challenge.

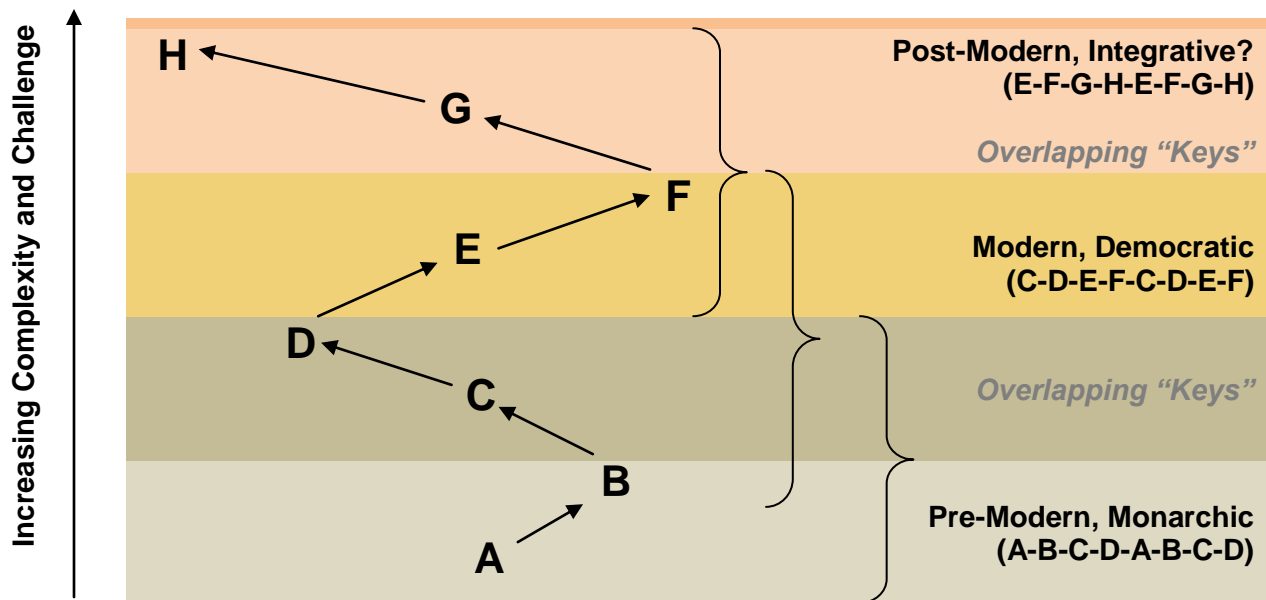


Figure 5. Three-Dimensional “Spiral” Mental Model of U.S. Politics

Although it required a dramatic shift in individual and collective perspective to move from living as serfs whose sole duty was fealty to a king, to becoming democratic citizens facing far more complex demands, the “two-dimensional” model cannot and does not account for this kind of change. In the Strauss & 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 projects to return again in the 23<sup>rd</sup> century.

This, it seems, highlights the weaknesses of employing just a two-dimensional representation of “Anglo-American” historical cycles, and of projecting too far forward into an increasingly complex future.

First, as many have argued, the American Revolutionary period corresponded with a (however imperfectly realized) shift for individuals, societies, and governments. So whatever the relationships 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 in different “keys.” All “Heroes” would “sing” a similar song, but some would sing in a “higher key” that corresponded to the greater level of complexity and challenge in the world around them

Second, a two-dimensional view limits the potential for imagining a shift upward (as well as the tragic possibility of a shift downward).

Third, a two-dimensional view limits the potential for growth *within* the cohorts and cycles, where people 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, why use a three-dimensional model (as shown in Figure 5) offer? First of all, as George Box famously noted, all models are wrong, but some models are useful. The three-dimensional model is useful not because it corresponds to reality perfectly, but because it can help us think differently about the potential for political change...and our ability to help catalyze 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 movements and political parties) can grow not only within their existing contexts, but also into more complex, nuanced modes of understanding and acting as well. The three-dimensional model suggests a more open pathway of possibility.

At the same time, the three-dimensional model does not completely break the familiar “moving along the line” (one-dimensional) and “things go in cycles” (two-dimensional) models, by simply adding another dimension. As an extension of already established patterns, the three-dimensional model offers a progressive, logical pathway that grows out of the received tradition of values, patterns, and structures, and continues 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.

Exactly what all these changes might look like, and how it would happen is speculative. It’s 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 from working firsthand with members of the generational cohorts revealed some unexpected information....

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

We hosted “Generations Salons” to experiment with this theory, and tried to include at least three members of each current generational cohort (Silent, Boomer, Gen Xers, and Millennials). Since people could self-identify easily as “Baby Boomers” or “Gen Hers,” etc., 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.”

We wanted to see if a sense of the possibility for enduring change offered by the three-dimensional model would emerge from this open-ended narrative. Rather than seeing their primary tasks as “moving the center” or “holding the line,” we hoped each cohort (and individual) could discover a sense of progress, possibility, and opportunity. In particular, we hoped that placing the Millennials at the “open end” of the narrative would highlight their potential for leadership (and the need for support from the other cohorts).

From these gatherings 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 shaped history, other generational cohorts, how differences and commonalities emerged, and why they matter. This new perspective revealed the development of individuals and generational cohorts moving through time—and showed us that political identities and worldviews are neither as fixed nor as exclusive as political labels suggest.

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

### **The Generations in Action and Reflection**

At these 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 not said as 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.

Since our political approaches rarely match our rhetoric (“New Ideas!”, “Moving Forward!”, “A Brighter Future!”, etc.), there must be some significant obstacles to developing alternative mental models (like the three-dimensional spiral) and using a generational cycle of learning and growth as a springboard to political development outside of places like the Generations Salon. 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, and the growing economic stratification/instability in the US, and potential catastrophes from global climate change). Some of the “internal” ones seem equally intractable, like religious beliefs that reject modernity 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 have built our political system on this basis.

It seems, from the Salons, there is the potential for a new generational cycle to emerge, led by Millennials, with the support and guidance of the older cohorts. As in the three-dimensional model shown in Figure 5, however, one cohort may have to learn to “sing” their particular notes in “higher keys.” Table 1 lays out some speculative characteristics of a possible new kind of “Hero” archetype, whose members might “sing” this new note, if offered the right kind of support, and the freedom to express themselves.

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

| <b>Characteristics</b>   | <b>“Old Key” Response to Secular Crisis (Figure 4)</b> | <b>“New Key” Response to Secular Crisis</b> |
|--------------------------|--|---|
| 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>           |

After all, one cohort, acting alone (as the participants in the Generations Salon 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. It needs 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 the Generational 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). 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. The overarching purpose of these tasks, it may be, 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.

### **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 older political activists hold the one-dimensional model, the only advice they can offer a young person is basically: “Do what we did, but more effectively.” Since there are no essential differences among the generational cohorts, the only changes that matter are the changes that happen to “it” (where “it” is a political party, Congress, society, etc.). So, although some “fixes” may differ from the “fixes” of previous generations, it’s mostly at the level of tactics, rather than strategy. Certainly, these “fixes” don’t require a shift in our understanding, and don’t offer much beyond incremental change.

If the older generational cohorts—unconsciously or consciously—hold a two-dimensional model, they may tell 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.” As in the one-dimensional model, the underlying “game” rarely changes, and the players themselves never have to change internally...they simply adapt to new circumstances. Working harder or smarter suffices for strategy; thinking or working differently is not an option. 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 it?

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. It could be that the rising generation’s experience of an ever-more complex world has attuned them to listen for a political melody in a “higher key.”

A recent column by Baby Boomer Thomas Friedman epitomizes one of these generational disconnects (Thomas Friedman, “Generation Q,” *The New York Times*, 10 October 2007). On a tour of colleges, Friedman finds 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, Friedman lowers 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.”

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?”

The Strauss & 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 6 and the Friedman example above). The two cohorts agree only on an “active” orientation, but have been shaped by fundamentally different types of crises.

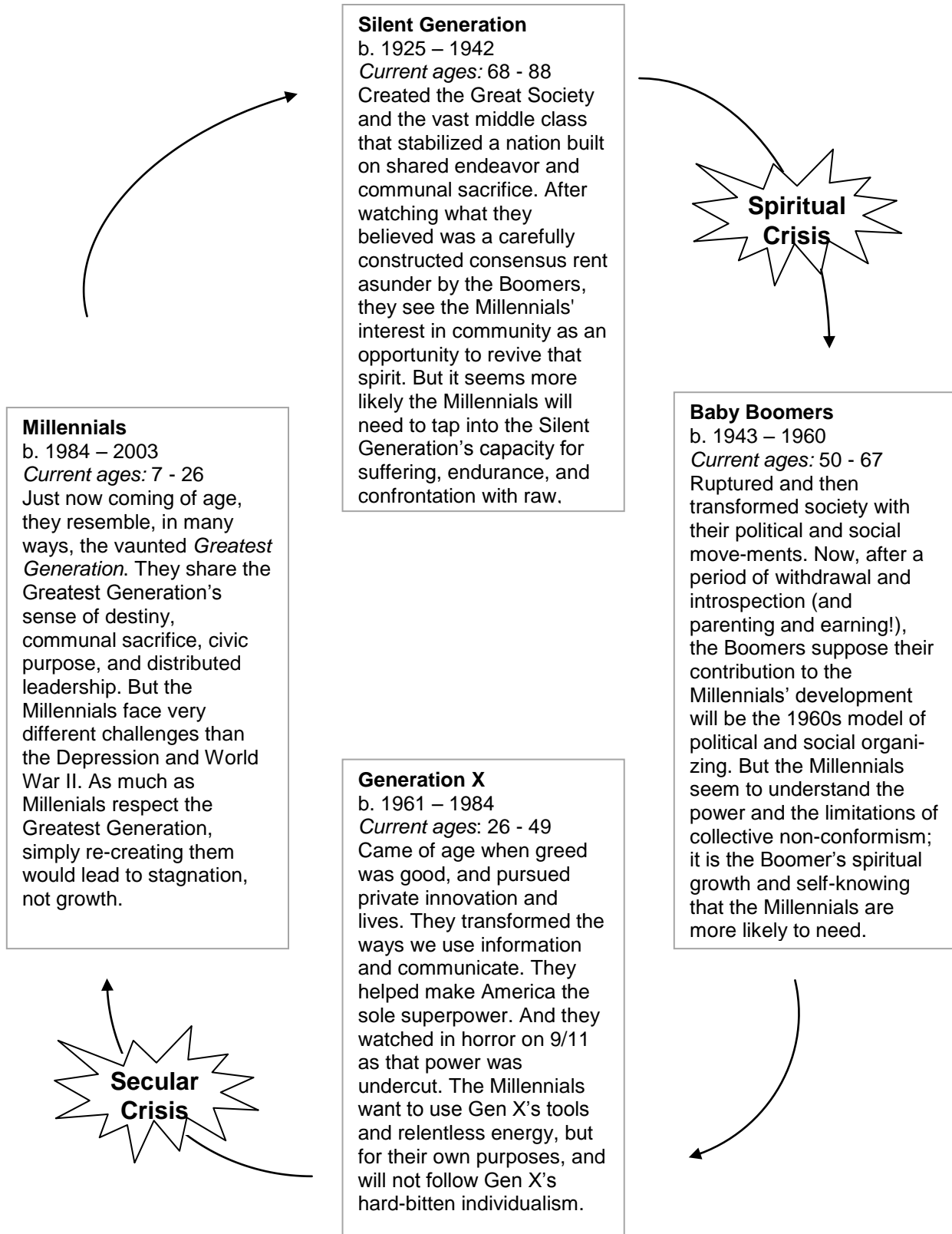


Figure 6. “Generational Tasks” to Support Millennial Transformational Leadership (from the “Generations Salons” and other sources)

If the 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.

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 support their transformational potential. In our Generational Salons, the Millennials turned to the older cohorts and asked: “How can you help?”

How can you help?