Cultural Daily

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Steve Bannon and the Extinction Level Event

Todd Alcott · Wednesday, March 1st, 2017

Imagine a boy. A teenage boy. A white teenage boy. A lonely white teenage boy.

He's smarter than everyone else. He can feel it. The boys on the football field, who carry their physicality with such ease, such carefree confidence, are no match for his keen, focused, analytical mind. Those boys, to him, are mindless meat, arrogant and conceited as they hog the attention of the student body, smiling and cocky.

Our lonely white teenage boy knows he's better than them. He knows he's better than all of them. All of them: the athletes, the teachers, the math nerds, the artistic types, the straight-a kids. And all the girls. Especially the girls.

One day, our boy finds a book that tells him, "You are better than them all. You are smarter and braver and more ideologically pure. And one day you will be in a position to make them pay for ignoring you."

There aren't many non-whites in his school, so he's never really thought about race before, but he learns from his book that he, as a white boy, is not a powerless lonely soul, but is, actually, one of the blessed people chosen by God to dominate not just the people from his school but the people of the world. Black people, says the book, are, by nature, slow and stupid and violent, and Muslims are hateful and intolerant and bent on world conquest, and, worst of all, mysterious Jewish overlords control all of them, all of them, playing the blacks and the Muslims and the unenlightened white people against each other while taking everyone's money.

Our lonely white teenage boy seethes and plots and plans. His entire life becomes a search for the scheme, the plot, the design, that will allow him to fulfill his dreams. He discovers a piece of writing that tells him, with cold mathematical certainty, that his time is coming, it is a statistical fact. Soon all the world will be on its knees before him, as the people who ignored him now tremble in fear before his harsh judgment.

Now imagine that lonely white teenage boy, all grown up, but completely unchanged inside. He hasn't grown out of his sick teenage fantasies of world domination. He is still seething, still brimming with hatred and fear and paranoia, still convinced that global civilization is a vast conspiracy to keep him from his due as a Child of the Sun. He's grossly overweight now, his face puffy and swollen and blotched with the alcohol he uses to cover the cracks between what how he sees the world and what it actually is.

Do you see him?

He's in the White House. His name is Stephen Bannon.

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When I was younger, when the internet was just a glimmer in Al Gore's eye, there was a theory that made its way around science circles: the ELE, or "Extinction Level Event." Every 65 million years, the theory went, the Earth underwent a profound change in its ability to sustain life. There were three completely separate ELEs, for instance, during the vast stretch of time we now casually refer to as "the age of the dinosaurs." A dinosaur from the Triassic, like the Stegosaurus, would have been considered a strange, mythical creature to the dinosaurs of the Cretaceous, 150 million years later. Twice between those two dinosaurs the Earth had undergone a wholesale die-off of vast numbers of species.

Scientists began to wonder: What will be the cause of the next ELE? Will it be another comet, like in the Cretaceous, or massive volcanic activity, like in the Triassic, or would it something else, something unpredictable?

What it took them a while to understand is that it is, of course, *us*, humanity, that is the next — current — ELE. *We* are the asteroid impacting the planet, wiping out such a gigantic portion of flora and fauna as to make our own continued existence untenable. We just can't quite see it yet.

Which is understandable. After all, it's not as though, in the Cretaceous, one day an asteroid hit the Earth at 9am and at 5pm all the dinosaurs dropped dead. The change took tens of thousands of years. Humans picked their knuckles off the ground less than 10,000 years ago, a flash of light in geological terms, and the Holocene Extinction is now well under way.

Here's the thing about Extinction Level Events: They're more common than you would think, they hit in varying degrees of severity, and when you say "it happens every 65 million years," you're using the Gambler's Fallacy, the idea that odds are somehow controlled by Time Itself, as though there is a God with one eye on the clock, waiting until just the right moment to once again put the whammy on Earth. It's a form of magical thinking to suppose that 65 million years is some kind of enchanted number that spells death for our fragile planet. But people think that way all the time.

So now we've got this angry, frightened teenage boy in the White House, Steve Bannon, who believes in a similar time-derived magic hoodoo theory about the United States. The theory is called "the Fourth Turning," and it says that, every 80 years ("or so" — magic-hoodoo theories are always vague and overlook any epochal changes that don't fall into the magic-hoodoo timeline) the United States undergoes a profound paradigm shift, brought about during a time of great conflict.

Because Bannon sees no great global conflict approaching to test his theory, he's decided he needs to make one himself. His favorite candidates for World War III are China and Iran, Iran because

it’s time that the Christian Army destroys Islam for good, and China because why not. When the dust clears from this global conflict, Bannon reasons, Donald Trump will be the new paradigm of the American presidency, to be placed alongside Washington, Lincoln and FDR. He’s found the perfect idiot to lead the country in Trump: a non-reading, non-thinking, easily-led, easily manipulated boob. How does one get Donald Trump to prosecute a plan as obviously dangerous and insane as “The Fourth Turning?” Easy: you tell him he’s very smart, very handsome, and that he’ll be remembered forever as a great man. Tell him those things and he will move heaven and earth for you.

What Bannon does not understand, of course, is that, like those long-ago scientists pondering the probable causes for “the next ELE,” it is not some vague, far-off conflict that will affect this epochal change in US history, but he himself. *He* is “the Fourth Turning,” because *he’s* decided that it needs to happen.

And, who knows, maybe there *will* be a paradigm-shifting change in US history. Maybe the cause of that will be World War III, instigated by Bannon. Or maybe there will be a different kind of paradigm shift. Maybe the paradigm shift Bannon will create is the end of the Republican Party as a viable political force, through the promotion of the absurd, malevolent, stupid, incompetent, thoroughly, manifestly unsuited Donald Trump as president.

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