

***The Storm Before the Calm***  
**My Takeaways from George Friedman's Prescient 2020 Book**  
**By**  
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As a minister, a major challenge for me these days is knowing how much and how little to talk about ... you know who. I consider it my job to help other concerned liberals cope with the disturbing sociopolitical reality we're facing as a nation and its impacts upon the entire world. At the same time, "you know who" already dominates our attention more than enough. Sometimes it feels like he's all anyone ever talks about.

Last Sunday I spoke about some coping mechanisms for life in general, including our current State of the Disunion, which were largely inspired by stoicism. Today, since I will be away and out of touch throughout February, and because I know that Donald Trump (there, I said it) will continue to dominate the headlines in ways we can't predict, I want to additionally leave you with reasons for hope that this storm will eventually end. Remember what I said about the American buffalo last week, how they're built to face life head-on and that they move into a storm to get through it faster? No matter what lies ahead, that may be our best strategy, too. Let's push forward together and get through this.

With this analogy in mind, the title of my sermon, *The Storm Before the Calm*, is apropos. Rather than being inspired by buffalo pushing through a blizzard, however, it's inspired by futurologist, political scientist, and author, George Friedman's 2020 book, *The Storm Before the Calm: America's Discord, the Crisis of the 2020s, and the Triumph Beyond*. Upon reading it, I was especially struck by two things: firstly, how prescient the book is regarding our current situation given that it was written before the 2020 election of Joe Biden. Yet Friedman predicted that, "In the 2020s, regardless of whether President Trump is reelected, indifference coupled with cynicism will dominate. The crisis of this decade will spring from very real problems but will also be a crisis of faith in the Republic itself."<sup>1</sup> And this is precisely where many of us are today, including people from around the world—worrying and wondering if our American democracy will survive.

Secondly, I was greatly encouraged by the feeling of hope reading this book has left me with. Once we get through this storm, there's a bright future ahead of us and our nation, or so Friedman predicts. But hope is not a passive feeling. It's not a mere wish for something better but a feeling that emerges only upon discovering sound reasons to believe things can get better. Social psychologist Erich Fromm compared hope to pregnancy. There are no guarantees how it will turn out, but a pregnancy gives good reason to believe a healthy and happy child will be born, which is enough to sustain our hope. "To hope," Fromm says, "means to be ready at every moment for that which is not yet born."<sup>2</sup>

*The Storm before the Calm* gives us sound reason to hope that the turmoil we're now facing, difficult a pregnancy as it is, will ultimately lead to a new and better life for us all. Since I don't wish to give a book report, I have decided it best to let Friedman himself do the

talking by reciting a few selections from his book that became the reasons for my feelings of hope. The following comments are a patchwork of those remarks, although I'll present them as a cohesive narrative. Perhaps they will inspire you to read *The Storm Before the Calm* for yourself. For now, please remember that when he speaks of Trump's presidency in the present tense, he's referring to his first term in office that began in 2016. With that said and with much gratitude, I present George Friedman:

"The United States is living through a difficult time. Americans are focused on Donald Trump's presidency. His enemies believe him to be corrupt and incompetent. His supporters regard him as the victim of an entrenched elite wanting to destroy him. Much of the tension focuses on Trump, as if he alone were the problem or the solution<sup>3</sup> ... This is a book that focuses on the underlying process in American history, explaining this moment we are in within the context of our broader history and putting the current passions into context. It will also explain the very real coming crisis of the 2020s–2030s and ultimately show how the United States will deal with the pain and confusion and emerge on the other side stronger and more dynamic.<sup>4</sup>

At the moment, a series of deep structural changes are taking place in the United States, and these changes are creating profound stresses. The federal government is undergoing a periodic shift in which its operations and traditional relationships to society are changing. That shift is driven by increasing failure in the system. Simultaneously, the economic system is undergoing a fundamental shift driven partly by an excess of money and limited opportunity for investment. This in turn results in a massive decline in productivity growth due to a falloff in innovation. Between these two stresses, and the pressure that emerged from the United States trying to find its balance in the global system, the glue that was holding American society together has weakened and will continue to decline throughout the 2020s. And regardless of who is president, fear and loathing will stalk the land for another decade.

This is not the first time this has happened, by any means.

If we step back and take the long view, there are two major cycles in American history, and by understanding these cycles, we can understand the situation in the United States today. One is the 'institutional cycle,' which has transpired approximately every eighty years. The first institutional cycle began with the end of the Revolutionary War and the drafting of the Constitution in the mid-1780s and ended in 1865 with the Civil War. The second institutional cycle ended eighty years later with the end of World War II. The strains of the next transition are becoming obvious now and will take place around 2025.

The second major cycle is the "socioeconomic," which has occurred approximately every fifty years. The last shift happened around 1980, when the economic and social dysfunction that began in the late 1960s culminated with a fundamental shift in how the economic and

social systems functioned ... The previous socioeconomic cycle changed in the early 1930s after the Great Depression started, and, before that, in the 1880s as the country refocused after the Civil War. We are now facing another period of social and economic instability that will conclude in the late 2020s.

In looking at these two major cycles, we see something we have not seen before. The current institutional cycle will conclude in a crisis around the mid-2020s, and the socioeconomic cycle will end in a crisis within a few years of that. This is the first time in American history that the two cycles will culminate so close together, practically overlapping. That obviously means that the 2020s will be one of the more difficult periods in American history, particularly when we consider the new and complex role the United States plays in the world—something that was not a factor during nearly all earlier cycles. The Trump administration, therefore, is only the precursor of this period and of what's to come. This is not about Donald Trump, positive or negative. He can be perceived as either bold and brash or incompetent and uncouth, but when we look beyond the details, he—and we—are simply passengers on the American roller coaster.”<sup>5</sup>

“In 2025, it will be eighty years since the end of World War II. In 2030, it will have been fifty years since Ronald Reagan came to power. I expected the 2020s to be a particularly tense period since [again] these two cycles, the socioeconomic and the institutional, have never bottomed out during the same decade, as they are doing now. There have been terrible moments in American history: the institutional shift ushered in by the Civil War, the socioeconomic shift driven by the Great Depression, and so on. I don't expect civil war and doubt there will be a depression, but still, we are in for a rough period.”<sup>6</sup>

“It should be remembered that each of these American socioeconomic cycles ended in a period of confidence and prosperity. The Civil War was followed by a tremendous growth period where thirty-five years later the United States was producing half of the manufactured goods of the world; World War II was followed by an unprecedented growth of a mass professional class; and the Cold War was followed by the tech boom that changed the world. I am not predicting doom. I am predicting an intensely difficult period of time between now and when the next phase of American history begins in the early 2030s—and the period of confidence and prosperity that will follow it.”<sup>7</sup>

“This crisis will last through to the 2020s. In 2024, a new president will emerge who represents the values of the declining era. The failure of his presidency will bring to power the rising class who will impose a new economic orthodoxy. And finally, in the 2030s (following the storms that began in 2016), a new cycle will emerge. Over the following few years in the 2030s, the political confrontation, social tension, and economic dysfunction will be solved. The cycle will have created a new era, different from the past but built on the same foundation of invention, and it will endure for another half a century.”<sup>8</sup>

“The American system ... is built on a weak presidency, coupled with a bully pulpit that allows presidents to appear more important than they are. History is patient, and that

patience will be needed until at least 2028, when a failing system will force itself to be replaced.<sup>9</sup>

“American society and the American economy have a rhythm. Every fifty years or so, they go through a painful and wrenching crisis, and in those times it often feels as if the economy were collapsing, and American society with it. Policies that had worked for the previous fifty years stop working, causing significant harm instead. A political and cultural crisis arises, and what had been regarded as common sense is discarded. The political elite insists that there is nothing wrong that couldn’t be solved by more of the same. A large segment of the public, in great pain, disagrees. The old political elite, and its outlook on the world, is discarded. New values, new policies, and new leaders emerge. The new political culture is treated with contempt by the old political elite, who expect to return to power shortly, when the public comes to its senses. But only a radically new approach can solve the underlying economic problem. The problem is solved over time, a new common sense is put into place, and America flourishes—until it is time for the next economic and social crisis and the next cycle.”<sup>10</sup>

“What has to be remembered is that the political strife and noise are simply the outer wrapping around deep social and economic dislocation. Politics isn’t the engine pushing the system. The system is pushing politics. Roosevelt and Reagan didn’t found their eras. The era was in crisis, and that crisis could not be solved in conventional ways. A break with the past was essential, and Roosevelt and Reagan presided over what was necessary. To date there have been five of these socioeconomic cycles. The first began with George Washington and ended with John Quincy Adams. The second began with Andrew Jackson and ended with Ulysses S. Grant. The third began with Rutherford B. Hayes and ended with Herbert Hoover. The fourth began with Franklin Roosevelt and ended with Jimmy Carter. The fifth began with Ronald Reagan and will end with someone whose name we don’t know yet, but he or she will likely be elected president in 2028. We have to remember that presidents are simply the street signs. The cycle is working itself out in the murky depths.”<sup>11</sup>

“It has been nearly forty years since the last cyclical transition occurred. In 1981, Ronald Reagan replaced Jimmy Carter as president, changing economic policy, political elites, and the common sense that had dominated the United States for the fifty years since Roosevelt replaced Herbert Hoover. If a pattern that goes back to the founding holds, the United States is due for its next socioeconomic shift in about 2030. But well before that, the underlying exhaustion of the old era will begin to show itself. Political instability will arise a decade or more before the shift, accompanied by growing economic problems and social divisions. When the crisis matures, it concludes with someone who will be regarded as a failed president and with the emergence of a new president who does not create the new cycle but rather permits it to take place. Over the following decade or so, the United States reshapes itself, and the new era emerges.”<sup>12</sup>

“Donald Trump’s election in fact signaled the beginning of the lead-up to the fourth institutional cycle and to the sixth economic and social cycle. The current institutional model has been increasingly unable to function successfully, and the key lies in redefining the relationship of the federal government to itself. The economic and social crises have created a massive decline in the condition of what had previously been a pillar of American society: the industrial workers. Because there has never been a period when both cycles reached their crises almost simultaneously, we can [once again] expect the 2020s to be an exceptionally unstable time.”<sup>13</sup>

“... there will be an increasing belief in the coming decade that the federal government is in the hands of conspirators ... This distrust will feed into the fear of economic interests generated by the socioeconomic cycle’s failure.”<sup>14</sup>

“The Trump election [in 2016] announced the coming end of this cycle, in an election that signaled both a radical shift and utter gridlock in the system<sup>15</sup> ... The 2024 election will be the critical one because it will elect the last president of the Reagan cycle...<sup>16</sup> And that will lead to the election of 2028 that will introduce radical new principles to American governance, both institutional and socioeconomic. The election will be politically decisive, bringing in a president by a significant majority as well as a supporting Congress. The last presidency of the Reagan era will act as a slingshot to the new period.”<sup>17</sup>

“America is a country in which the storm is essential to clear the way for the calm. Because Americans, obsessed with the present and future, have difficulty remembering the past, they will all believe that there has never been a time as uncivil and tense as this one<sup>18</sup> ... The permanent things in America’s founding—our rights and the Constitution—serve to drive both the prudence and the recklessness of the country. And it is the combination of these two things that has allowed the United States to evolve over nearly 250 years of stability and chaos. There is no evidence of it ending. The current storm is nothing more than what is normal for this time in America’s history and our lives.”<sup>19</sup>

Thank you, Dr. Friedman, for your brilliant, comprehensive, and encouraging explanation of where we’re at, how we got here, and the direction we’re heading. There is so much more to *The Storm Before the Calm* than you’ve heard today. I hope you’re inspired to read it for yourself. I’ve only shared enough to help you understand the theory and reasoning that has enabled its author to be so prescient regarding his predictions for our future—now our present—which is itself reason to hope they will be just as prescient regarding the next few years, and the shift to more functional, prosperous, and pleasant institutional and socioeconomic paradigms beginning by the end of this decade. Most important is his well-reasoned prediction that we will get through the storm that we’re now going through and must go through; and that, imperfect as it will be, at risk of changing metaphors, we can now see a bright light shining at the end of this long tunnel.

What seems like the end of something important right now, may be the birth pains of something new and better. It's going to be hard. It's going to be painful. And we cannot merely throw up our hands and wait for it to end. As what's happening right now in Minnesota demands of us, we ought to do what we can to support each other and to mitigate suffering, pain, and injustice, for that is part of what midwifing a promising future requires of us.

But this is the storm before the calm and the only way to get through is to go through it, together.

<sup>1</sup> Friedman, George. *The Storm Before the Calm: America's Discord, the Coming Crisis of the 2020s, and the Triumph Beyond* (p. 164). Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup> Fromm, Erich. *The Revolution of Hope: Toward a Humanized Technology*. Open Road Media. Kindle Edition.

<sup>3</sup> Friedman, *ibid.*, p. 1

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xv

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2-3

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xviii

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*