

Thomas Friedman's View of the Future of the US

By Michael Edesess

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Andy Rooney once said, "It's just amazing how long this country has been going to hell without ever having got there." Our country's roughly 30-year march to perdition is the subject of Thomas Friedman's and Michael Mandelbaum's new book, *That Used to Be Us*. Rooney may still be right, though – the authors identify, albeit not all that convincingly, a path to salvation.

In the tradition of previous Friedman books, the authors are addressing one of the leading burning issues of the day – in this case, whether America is in long-term decline.

Friedman, a *New York Times* columnist, and Mandelbaum, a political scientist at Johns Hopkins University, present their thesis in five parts. The march toward hell consumes parts I-IV of the book, and the authors finally don their rosy eyeglasses in part V, the last section. On balance, the ratio of bad news to good news isn't heartening; there's probably more hope to be found in Rooney's simple quote than in the book's entire final section.

Of course, Rooney may finally be proved overoptimistic – the reprieves of the past 60 years or so may turn out to have been just the ups and downs that complicate even the most inexorable downhill slide to nowhere. Consider, by way of parallel, the path toward what has been called the "oil endgame." The trajectory will be – indeed, has been – a highly volatile one; yet, because oil is a finite resource, the eventual conclusion is inevitable. If no adjustments are made, then, as Friedman and Mandelbaum say in a different context, nature and the market will each determine "in its own time and its own way ... when the music will stop, and when the adjustment to our lifestyle – which will be nasty, brutish, and long – will start."

Making the most of dull writing

An amazing thing about the book, given the high-wattage duo who authored it, is its writing, which is often dull, even dumb. Consider this sentence: "America has been the world's leading high-imagination-enabling society, and now it needs to become a *hyper-high-imagination-enabling society*." It's a sentence worthy of Heidegger, the most turgid of philosophers.

And yet, it all comes out all right – much more than all right – because Friedman is first and foremost a very fine journalist. (It's impossible to tell what precise parts of the book to credit to Friedman and what to Mandelbaum, but Friedman's mark is all over it.) You can





make silly-sounding pronouncements all you want like the one in the last quote, but if you don't substantiate them with convincing examples they won't mean much.

Friedman and Mandelbaum substantiate their proclamations with very appropriate examples. Each generalization they make is underscored with an expertly selected collection of experiences, examples, and quotes. By the time you read a whole section of the book, their generalizations don't seem the least bit fuzzy anymore.

The challenge

Friedman and Mandelbaum begin by outlining the challenge that America must meet, by – as they put it – updating its formula for success. This takes us back to that sentence, “America has been the world’s leading high-imagination-enabling society, and now it needs to become a *hyper*-high-imagination-enabling society.”

Friedman and Mandelbaum actually do manage to put some meat on this gobbledygook formulation. They cite startling examples and statistics to show how much things really have changed, even just since 2005, a mere six years ago, when Friedman published his most famous book, “The World Is Flat.” Facebook wasn't even in it. Facebook “didn't exist for most people ... ‘Twitter’ was still a sound ... and ‘Skype’ was a typo.” The number of cell-phone subscribers worldwide in 2002 was about a billion. In 2010 it had reached 4.6 billion; and, “about 23 percent of the global population uses the Internet today, up from 12 percent in 2002.” These are spectacular rates of change.

The new technologies are allowing just about every society on the globe to be a hyper-high-imagination-enabling society. Friedman and Mandelbaum say, “Within a few years, virtually everyone on the planet will have the tools and network connections to participate in the hyper-connected flat world.” These tools have enabled start-ups in India to launch what would have been a major company only a little while ago on a shoestring by using cloud computing services. They enable call-in centers to become intelligent and proactive by anticipating customers' needs *as they call in*. They enable Syrian revolutionaries to deliver cell-phone videos of a violent government crackdown to the international TV news network Al Jazeera from a web site “that probably cost only a few hundred dollars to create and operate and that no one knows who runs.”

The challenges to U.S. ingenuity and imagination are great – and yet, as most of the book describes, the U.S. has become burdened by enormous liabilities.

The downsides

Friedman and Mandelbaum catalog plenty of negatives about the condition of the U.S. today and hang them on a framework that holds together pretty well. Here's a non-exhaustive list:

- The U.S. secondary educational system is only around the 25th best in the world according to standardized international measures. The best countries develop, nurture, and respect top-grade secondary school teachers to a much greater degree than does the U.S. By comparison, “Ninety-three percent of U.S. public school students in the fifth through eighth grade are taught the physical sciences by a teacher without a degree or certificate in the physical sciences,” the authors note.
- Business takes no responsibility to improve social goals. Friedman and Mandelbaum quote author Dov Seidman: “We created a separate sphere ... an amoral space where as long as you were not breaking the law, your responsibility was to ‘shareholder value and pursuit of profit.’” Say Friedman and Mandelbaum, “Business leaders are less and less interested in the whole pie and more and more interested in their own slice.”
- Similarly, people operating in the public sphere – politics and media – high-five themselves on short-term scores achieved by pandering to people’s baser instincts, as if they were engaged in a wrestling match. A prominent former Congressman, Bob Inglis, the South Carolina Republican, is quoted as saying, “What is tragic right now is that we have people – leading people – who choose to leave audiences in ignorance or even encourage stupidity.” Republican Lindsay Graham warned his Democratic co-sponsors of a climate bill that they’d better negotiate fast because if Fox News got wind of it, “it’s gonna be all cap-and-tax all the time, and it’s gonna become just a disaster for me on the airwaves.” And, says Mike Murphy, the veteran Republican campaign director who headed John McCain’s 2000 presidential bid, “Our politics is almost like a parasite eating at the national interest for short-term gratification – so that your team can cheer and feel good for a few minutes.”
- We have corrupted the political system. Murphy tells a good story about advice he received from a wise old hand in the advertising business, noting that negative ads do work, but adding, “Do you know why McDonald’s never ran a negative ad against Burger King, saying their burgers were all full of maggots? It might have worked for a year or two but then no one would have ever eaten another hamburger... Never destroy the category.” But just when we need politics in America to be credible and constructive, “we’ve destroyed the category.” Between incessant negative ads, and the enormous recent increase in lobbyists and money swashing around the system that causes Congress to be “in danger of becoming a fund-raising organization that dabbles in legislation on the side,” people now hold politicians in historically low esteem.
- An ongoing war has been waged on math and physics. The war on math is fiscal. Republicans convinced themselves that you can cut taxes forever without causing a fiscal crisis, with no other rationale than a utopian belief system. Democrats – and some Republicans – raised pensions and other benefits for public workers based on purely aspirational assumptions about the size of the liabilities these increases

would cause. The war on physics seems to be based on a breakdown of trust in all expertise. Says one interviewee in the book, “There is really no debate about climate change in China. China’s leaders are mostly engineers and scientists, so they don’t waste time questioning scientific data.”

- The U.S. faces massive fiscal challenges, particularly in its entitlements programs, and especially Medicare. Says former U.S. comptroller general David Walker, “We are the only major industrialized nation that does not have a budget for how much public resources are allocated for health care. We are the only country that is dumb enough to write a blank check for health care. Everybody else knows that it can bankrupt you.” Medicare is barred by law from rejecting any treatment based on cost.
- Friedman and Mandelbaum – like many others – cite wealth inequality as a problem, but they also give a plausibly good reason *why* it is a problem. Quoting the Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz, they say that just when collective action is most needed to deliver education, research, modern infrastructure, and all the other public goods that are at the core of a successful society, there is an important segment of society – the rich – who don’t need the benefits of collective action, because they can create their own “subsociety” with its own collective goods. An important “imperiled value,” say Friedman and Mandelbaum, “is the sense that America is one nation, a single community to which all of us belong and in whose fate we all share.”
- And perhaps most important, say the authors, “the willingness of presidents to speak about and uphold the imperatives and responsibilities of public life became rare. After the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon ... President Bush vowed to go after the terrorists, and essentially left it at that. He never rallied Americans to even the most simple, necessary, and obvious collective action...” Says Harvard political philosopher Michael J. Sandel, “We have outsourced and confined to the military a concentrated expression of the civic ideals and patriotism that should be shared by all American citizens.” And observes Ronald Reagan’s former budget director David Stockman, “It has been so long since the two parties have worked together to take things away from people that they are out of shape.”
- To what underlying cause do Friedman and Mandelbaum attribute these liabilities, to which America has recently become heir? Basically, “to short-term gratification and get-it-now-while-you-can thinking, which alas is typical of the baby boom generation.”

“Unscathed by great disruptions,” say the authors, “unburdened by the necessity of great sacrifice, unpressured by the daily effort of confronting a huge global predator – and, in addition, hurried and besotted by new technologies and electronic markets that have



encouraged short-term thinking – the baby boom generation has in too many cases displayed too little fiscal prudence, too much political partisanship, and too short a sense of history to engage in the collective nation-building at home that America needs badly today.”

If so, this is going to be a difficult problem to fix: the sins of an entire generation.

The optimism

And yet, Friedman and Mandelbaum claim to be optimistic about America. As I said before, this optimism is less substantiated than their pessimism. It consists, in part, of citing the good qualities of America by way of a quote from management consultant Byron Auguste – the good qualities of America, he said, are “youth, openness, dynamism, the best minds from around the world ... unparalleled institutions of innovation ... Compared to the big developing countries, we have high social trust, low corruption, an historic link between effort and achievement, and democracy, as messy as it sometimes is.”

And also, in part, their argument for optimism derives from a few – but not enough to be convincing – anecdotal examples of people who are still making it in the United States, for example in small but innovative manufacturing operations.

They actually spend much of the section on “Rediscovering America,” where they are supposed to wax optimistic, on a chapter called “Shock Therapy” – which says that only some sort of political shock therapy will jar our system loose from the mire into which it has fallen. That shock therapy, they recommend, should take the form of a third-party candidate. Perhaps they’re right – somehow we need to get out of the bad patch that American politics is in.

America’s last historic big push in improving its infrastructure – “updating the American formula for success,” as Friedman and Mandelbaum would have it – was occasioned by fear of a big and mortal enemy: global Communism, as represented by the Soviet Union and Communist China in the 1950s. The excellent U.S. interstate highway system was funded by the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act of 1956. The National Defense Education Act of 1958, in the wake of the Soviet launch of Sputnik, the first man-made orbiting satellite, provided increased funding for educational institutions. Most of our collective actions were taken in the name of defense.

At the beginning of one of their chapters, Friedman and Mandelbaum quote Georgi Arbatov, the former head of the Russian Academy of Sciences, speaking to a U.S. audience on the occasion of the end of the Cold War: “We are going to do a terrible thing to you. We are going to deprive you of an enemy.”

Perhaps an enemy is needed to make the United States act collectively in its own interest. That enemy could have appeared on September 11, 2001, in the form of al Qaeda, but as



FM point out, after that event no sacrifice was asked of the American people as a whole, no tax was raised to pay for military action or strategically reduce our use of oil – on the contrary, an anti-tax mentality took hold with an iron grip.

If we can only take necessary collective action in response to an enemy as serious as the ones we faced in the 1950s, and before that in the 1940s, then there really is something to worry about. I hope someone can come up with a solution that is more convincingly optimistic than Friedman's and Mandelbaum's.

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