

The world view from CEO level; The World Is Flat A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century Thomas L. Friedman Farrar, Straus and Giroux: 496 pp., \$27.50

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

According to [Thomas L. Friedman Farrar], the leveling of the economic playing field began with collapse -- the fall of the Berlin Wall, which "was blocking our sight; our ability to think about the world as a single market, a single ecosystem, and a single community." Since 1989, the European Union has expanded from 15 to 25 countries and China has joined the World Trade Organization. Friedman recounts that he first realized the extent of these changes recently at the KGA Golf Club in southern India when his playing partner pointed at two shiny glass-and-steel buildings and declared, "Aim at either Microsoft or IBM." Friedman went on to meet numerous Indians whom he almost confused with Americans because they had taken on American-sounding names, were imitating American accents at Indian call centers or adopting U.S. business techniques at software labs. Similarly, Friedman depicts a booming China, whose increasingly educated workforce threatens U.S. economic power. Indeed, China has been running an annual trade surplus of \$150 billion, while buying up U.S. Treasury bills with its excess cash.

FULL TEXT

If globalization serves as a kind of secular religion for international elites, then Thomas L. Friedman is its high priest. Like a modern-day St. Paul, he travels constantly and tirelessly spreads the gospel about the glories of free trade. In his previous book, "The Lexus and the Olive Tree," the New York Times columnist and three-time Pulitzer Prize winner hailed globalization as a liberating force. In his important, provocative and infuriating work, "The World Is Flat," he has embarked upon a new mission.

Friedman presents a dire choice between redemption and perdition. Drawing on extensive interviews he has conducted mainly with corporate bigwigs, he argues that the conventional wisdom of the left -- that rapacious American imperialism is exploiting and impoverishing the Third World -- is nonsense. Instead, he contends that the United States must meet the mounting economic challenge from the Third World or fall by the wayside -- that globalization is no longer an exclusively U.S. game but has, in effect, gone global. For all his apocalyptic language, however, he never demonstrates that globalization will be the most significant force shaping the 21st century.

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whose increasingly educated workforce threatens U.S. economic power. Indeed, China has been running an annual trade surplus of \$150 billion, while buying up U.S. Treasury bills with its excess cash.

Where does this leave U.S. workers? Friedman sounds a Clintonesque call for reeducating workers, declaring that they "will have to upgrade their education and upgrade their knowledge skills so that they can occupy one of the new jobs sure to be created in the much expanded United States-China market." Academics such as social economist Juliet B. Schor may write about the overworked American, but Friedman will have none of it. He regards the performance of the once-proud U.S. Olympic basketball team, whose highly paid, self-indulgent NBA stars barely managed to bring home a bronze medal in 2004, as a metaphor for U.S. sloth generally.

Friedman contends that Americans in coming decades will have to cope with a kind of economic Darwinism: "You want constantly to acquire new skills, knowledge, and expertise that enable you constantly to be able to create value – something more than vanilla ice cream. You want to learn how to make the latest chocolate sauce, the whipped cream, or the cherries on top, or to deliver it as a belly dancer – in whatever your field of endeavor." Such folderol makes the Charlie Chaplin film "Modern Times" seem to depict a model of enlightened capitalism.

Indeed, though U.S. productivity has been rapidly increasing in recent years, Friedman depicts a nation of slackers and deadbeats who want to cop out of the economic rat race. He likens the economic perils facing the nation to the Sputnik crisis of 1957. In his view, we are falling behind China and India in producing engineers, investing too little in research and development and held hostage to a consumer culture.

What is required, Friedman suggests, is a "Great Society that commits our government to building the infrastructure, safety nets, and institutions that will help every American become more employable in an age when no one can be guaranteed lifetime employment. I call my own version of this approach compassionate flatism." Call it what you want, but this is a pipe dream. Friedman presents no cogent evidence that the government would be able to direct funds for research more efficiently or effectively than big business. The more likely prospect is that lawmakers would waste money by propping up sunset industries.

Friedman scants not only domestic but also international politics. What is missing, in other words, is context. Free trade has undeniably helped create prosperity and spur U.S. innovation, but he is so enthralled by the latest mantras about globalization from American or Indian CEOs that he glosses over power politics. Although he glancingly acknowledges that China might invade Taiwan, he never really grapples with the fragility of the world economy or the balance of power. Yet trade within Europe – and between it and America – was at an all-time high on the eve of World War I.

Perhaps Friedman's least persuasive argument is his contention that the United States is on the skids because of globalization. If the U.S. economy goes belly-up, the culprit is more likely to be the Bush administration's tax cuts and profligate spending, which have combined to produce deficits exceeding \$400 billion annually. Remarkably, Friedman barely discusses world leaders like President Bush. Instead, in a kind of debased Marxism, he focuses on autonomous economic forces. He believes that chief executives are the new titans bestriding the globe, while bemedaled generals, pinstriped diplomats and preening politicians are impotent and obsolete. His worship of CEOs seems peculiar at a moment when business icons such as American International Group's Maurice "Hank" Greenberg, an apostle of globalization and trade with China, continue to be exposed by the Securities and Exchange Commission for accounting shenanigans that allegedly inflated the value of company stock. It might be more persuasive to point not simply to economic gains but also to human rights activists or democratic politicians in the Third World who have toppled tyrants by emulating anti-Communist dissidents in the former East Bloc – not corporate heads who have always disdained basic freedoms and prefer to operate in authoritarian countries like

China, where they have a docile labor force at their disposal.

After years consorting with CEOs at such events as the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, Friedman seems to have become a captive of their world. With his extensive travels, sharp pen and inquiring mind, he could have written a canonic text about free-market capitalism at home and abroad. This is not it. *

Illustration

Caption: PHOTO: (no caption); PHOTOGRAPHER: Jonathan Twingley For The Times

Credit: Jacob Heilbrunn is a Los Angeles Times editorial writer and author of a forthcoming book on the history of neoconservatism.

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