

REVIEW OF *THE NEXT HUNDRED YEARS* BY GEORGE FRIEDMAN
(Anchor Books, 2010, paperback; © 2009)
September 20, 2011

As **Tom** Friedman suggested in the *NYTimes* of 8/31/11, “the single most important trend in the world today is the fact that globalization and the information technology revolution has gone to a whole new level.” Has technology taken on a life of its own? Is it moving faster and in a direction that common sense may dictate? If you disagree with his nomination, what is your pick for the most consequential trends right now that might defy human efforts at control or influence?

There has been a continuing escalation of technological change. Among the effects have been displacement of jobs; new approaches to education; Arab spring; view of the unemployed; population expansion in the world.

But the rate of population expansion seems to be slowing. The world is getting grayer. We’re having a Gray Tsunami, while the proportion of under-fives has dropped precipitously. The population is also moving into urban areas. How can we feed and take care of the world?

The burden of an older population has created pressure on Social Security and Medicare. It’s especially critical in Russia. Grays will vote for whatever they need. That’s why Social Security and Medicare have become a political third rail.

One of the problem’s with George Friedman’s demographic analysis, which foresees a shrinking population of laborers, is that his analysis doesn’t take into account different characteristics of populations around the world. What is the differing influence of under-fives in productive and nonproductive countries? It’s difficult to see where he’s coming from. The problem is dealing with the complexities of the world.

You can divide the various forces at work into social forces, economic forces, and political forces. The political forces would include forms of government and border issues. All these forces interact, and we have a combination of them working together. Some forces are more important in one country, other forces are more important in another.

Most significant in Friedman’s analysis is his failure to consider the role of women in various parts of the world. Declining birthrates lead to a myriad of changes in the role and influence of women. So many things go back to recent changes in the role of women. The ultimate revenge of the U.S. has been the role of women. The role of women in the Middle East will never be the same again.

The law of unintended consequences is far more important than it was even 10 years ago. Facebook and various social networks can have viral consequences. So events are harder to predict than they ever were.

As Donald Rumsfeld said, “Stuff happens.”

In Friedman's latest book, *The Next Decade* (Doubleday, 2011), he stresses the importance of the president of the U.S. in world affairs. By now it's almost a monarchial role. Do you think the emphasis on the individual is warranted?

It depends on the quality of the individual.

You might want to go back to Tolstoy's "great-man theory." He claims that it only "looks" like the great man is responsible for events, even if he ordered the event to happen. We give a lot of credit to individuals, but it's really forces beyond individual control that are responsible. Will a single individual ever again call the shots?

We're an immature country. We don't think things through, but we feel we have to act. We've only been around a couple of hundred years. We're a warlike country. Look at our sports obsession and its warlike terminology.

We have a predisposition to violent acts, but that's our culture as a frontier country. We're the only country with a constitutional protection for firearms. Judging from the decisions of the Roberts court, the British idea of unwritten constitution begins to seem appealing and more flexible.

We have an amendment process, so we can change the constitution, but a large proportion of the country has a frontier mentality.

Another thing that's missing from the book: There's no mention of the emergence of individuals who can make major changes, such as a Charlemagne or a Napoleon. Friedman just doesn't allow for such unexpected events.

Our media has an enormous power. You can't separate it from politics.

There are two theories of leadership:

- 1) I'm the leader, and I'll show you where to go.
- 2) I'm the leader, and you will show me where you want to go. I'll help you get there. Neither is right and both are right at the same time. Leaders will convince themselves that they're following path 2, when they're actually following path 1.

Is the economic situation so bad that cuts in the military make Friedman dead wrong?

We got in the Spanish-American War by manipulating facts.

Many parts of the world have no concept of democracy, so different parts of the world function differently. Consider the role of the leader in an oligarchy. Look at Libya.

Do you see more democracies developing?

It will probably happen, but only with lots of fits and starts.

It's more productive to look at it this way: Following the arguments is not important. It's the method of discourse.

We're trying to figure out our future. Many issues that consume us today are invisible when we step back. If you step far enough back, these issues don't matter.

In this country you have to have a vision of the future. In a participatory democracy, you have to negotiate.

Obama is a "psychic" leader; he appeals to the character of the country. He's brought to the surface deep divisions in the country.

Isn't the book a western view of the world? Are the differences so profound that you can only focus on what you know? If Friedman wrote from the Eastern view, what would he say?

Friedman is anachronistic; he's locked into the cold-war view.

Obama is the first president who doesn't come out of the European viewpoint. He grew up in Indonesia, and the Pacific Basin is where future world leaders will come from. His presidency will be a milestone, but as the first non-Eurocentric president, not as the first Black president.

This country will never give up its traditional role—we'll fight you if you mess with us.

We're 5 percent of the world's population but consume more than half of its energy. Whenever you threaten our supply, we'll go to war.

The New York Times speculates about the shift of energy sources to the Americas, in view of the discoveries off Cuba. What are the consequences if the Americas become the primary energy producers? Will we export it or keep it at home? Any and all of the above.

We tend to be a wasteful nation and the more we have, the more wasteful we'll become. And we'll be arrogant about it.

The next war won't be over oil. Most of the wars we've entered have occurred when we saw people being abused. It will tend to be that way in the future.

The shift in energy production could lead to further destabilization in the Middle East and the diminution of China's power. That could lead our economic power and strength to come back.

War by proxy is one danger. Azerbaijan and Armenia are in conflict right now. Russia is supplying Armenia and Turkey is supplying Azerbaijan. If a war gets started, we could get drawn in.

A total war is unlikely to be in the cards, but many civil wars are likely to break out.

Why should we go into any area of the world we choose? It goes back to the immaturity of the U.S. Look at the issues. How could we not be involved. We regard Iraq and Afghanistan as wars. The rest of the world does not. One interesting factor is that the media feel they have to respond to every issue. Media are primarily commercial in nature and respond in ways that draw viewers/readers.

Don't forget the role of the military/industrial complex. The whole thing is spread by those with wealth and power. The rest of us are sheep. We should pick out one area and do something about it. We need a leader with a good vision.

Friedman has a militaristic approach. He used the outdated concept that sea power decides who controls the world. Brazil is building a nuclear sub to protect its oil fields. Note that Friedman assiduously avoided the mention of nuclear weapons and their use.

We the people aren't involved, but we have a corrupt duopoly: our two-party system. Americans, when faced with a choice between two bad situations will opt for a third way. Do you see any hope for a third party?

Go to americansselect.org: From the website:

The goal of Americans Elect is to nominate a presidential ticket that answers directly to voters—not the political system.

American voters are tired of politics as usual. They want leaders that will put their country before their party, and American interests before special interests. Leaders who will work together to develop fresh solutions to the serious challenges facing our country. We believe a secure, online nominating process will prove that America is ready for a competitive, nonpartisan ticket.

Americans Elect is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that is not affiliated with any political party, ideology or candidate. It is funded exclusively by individual contributions—and not from corporate, labor, special interest, foreign, or lobbyist sources. And we intend to repay our initial financing so that no single individual will have contributed more than \$10K.

We have military bases in 184 countries—we can't not have a war. Too much of the economy is based on the military.

Calling politicians stupid is wrong. Most people don't really care. If more of us participated in politics

It's impossible to have a non-party system. We need to put money in education and find a way to control the media.

Some think we have lost our sense of right and wrong, even though we're the most church-going country.