

# Welcome to Flatland: The world wants your job and soon could have it

**N***ew York Times* columnist Thomas L. Friedman has a new book out: *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*. The book is meant as a wake-up call for those in this country who still assume that our role as the world's leading economic power is some kind of birthright that can be challenged but not overcome.



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Wrong, says Friedman. "The world is now flat," meaning that the communications and technology revolution has given hundreds of millions of people in countries like India and China a level playing field on which to challenge our economic hegemony.

Friedman's themes are not new. What has changed is his sense of urgency, echoed by Bill Gates' recent charge that America's high schools are essentially "obsolete." Aside from that, says Friedman, our young people are less ambitious and energetic as compared to young people in emerging economies, and we are producing too few engineers and scientists. Not only are foreign workers cheaper than American workers, they're also *better*.

Nervous? Friedman thinks you should be, again quoting Bill Gates to make his point:

"When I compare our high schools with what I see when I'm traveling abroad," says Gates, "I am terrified for our workforce of tomorrow. In math and science, our fourth-graders are among the top students in the world. By eighth grade, they're in the middle of the pack. By 12th grade, U.S. students are scoring near the bottom of all industrialized nations. . . . The percentage of a population with a college degree is important, but so are sheer numbers. In 2001, India graduated almost a million more students from college than the United States did. China

graduates twice as many students with bachelor's degrees as the U.S., and they have six times as many graduates majoring in engineering. In the international competition to have the biggest and best supply of knowledge workers, American is falling behind."

## The decline of the American Empire?

Back when President Ronald Reagan challenged the Soviet Union to drop its militaristic stance and join the global march toward open economies and democratic societies, some likened the Soviet Union to "a midget with one big muscle-bound arm," referring to the billions of rubles poured into the military while the rest of the Soviet economy fell further behind other nations.

The Soviet system finally collapsed under its own weight, succumbing to its systemic weaknesses. Will ours do the same? Of course not, some might argue. We still have the most powerful economy in the world and a politically healthy democracy.

That view may reflect today's reality, but it's tomorrow we need to be worrying about. Ironically, much of our attention has been focused on a terrorist mastermind hiding out in the mountains of western Pakistan, while the greater long-run threat to our survival and prosperity is probably in the economic arena.

To be sure, we have reason to fear the ultimate threat of nukes in the hands of terrorists, but there are many other serious threats to our future as a nation, and we're not responding very well.

We have stubbornly failed to muster the political will to develop alternative energy sources and promote energy conservation, and now we're paying the price at the pump and elsewhere. In time, we will likely pay a much bigger price for resisting, rather than leading, the efforts of other nations to curtail the volume of greenhouse gases and other pollutants being discharged into our atmosphere. How can we expect a rapidly growing polluter like China to address this issue if we, as the world's leading source of greenhouse gases, ignore it?

We have irresponsibly ignored the fiscal impact of our growing trade and budget deficits, creating a ticking financial time bomb that could, at worst, cause a collapse in the value of the dollar that would stagger our economy and drastically reduce our standard of living.

We continue to binge on consumer credit in a co-dependent relationship between lenders and debtors that would make our forbears cringe. In other words, as a nation we seem a lot more interested in consuming than producing. It's been a heck of a party, but eventually the tab must (and will) be paid.

## Slacker nation

As to the relative lack of ambition on the part of American's young people, I simply don't get it. My generation took it as a given that striving for success was a core task of adulthood that you began to prepare for in childhood. That may not be a perfect philosophy for a fulfilling life, but neither is a casual attitude toward the need to become a productive citizen in adulthood.

Equally disheartening is the politically charged and divisive debate over America's public schools. Those who claim public schools are doomed to fail because they are "a government monopoly" or the domain of "educrats" are equally admitting that a collective sense of civic responsibility for developing the potential of America's young people has been replaced by a self-centered disregard for the common good.

The reality is that there are thousands of good public schools across the nation. The problem is that there are not enough of them. The cause, I believe, lies more in our collective failure to work together at the state and local level to improve public education and strengthen the American family than in any failing of the mostly good and dedicated people who toil within our public school systems.

The world is now flat, warns Friedman. And if we don't get our act together, we're going to be flattened by it. ■