



New York: Ferrar,  
Straus and Giroux,  
2011

380 pages

\$28.00

## ***That Used to Be Us: How America Fell Behind in the World It Invented and How We Can Come Back***

by Thomas L. Friedman and Michael Mandelbaum

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This is a test. If anyone reads *That Used to Be Us: How America Fell Behind in the World It Invented* and finds shockingly new ideas and issues—well that means they are probably not well read or sufficiently informed to deal with the strategic issues facing the nation. Three-time Pulitzer Prize journalist Tom Friedman and Johns Hopkins foreign policy professor Michael Mandelbaum have rounded up the usual suspects to explain why America is becoming less competitive on the global stage and what to do about it.

Friedman and Mandelbaum posit the United States faces four key challenges—staying ahead of the Information Technology revolution; the federal deficit and unsustainable entitlement spending (read Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid); energy; and climate change. The authors also argue there are five key “pillars” for the foundation of a competitive America—public education; modernizing infrastructure; immigration; government research and development; and “necessary regulations on private economic activity.”

As a writer of global developments, Friedman earned a well-deserved reputation as an astute observer. He engagingly described the emerging post-Cold War world in two mega-selling books *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* and *The World is Flat*. This book is different. It purports to be prescription not just surveillance. That’s a problem. The journalist’s eye is less well suited to crafting strategy and offering sophisticated public policy analysis. Furthermore, there is scant evidence that Mandelbaum’s academic discipline provided any balance to the reporter’s notebook. Throughout *That Used to Be Us*, the authors’ choices of problems and answers seem largely intuitive. There is no rigorous method of analysis behind how they decided to fix all of America’s problems—beyond their own gut judgments.

Even the basic premise of the book—the “key” problems to be solved is a bit suspect. What seems to make these issues key is that they are all currently in the headlines. Sure, for example, energy policy is an issue *de jour*. But is ending our addiction to oil really the key to winning the future? What if there is a spectacular breakthrough in nanotechnology that dramatically reduces the size, power, and weight requirements for all the tools of modern life—revolutionizing “how” and what kinds of energy are required?

Nor do Friedman and Mandelbaum appear to understand how global change really happens. They see the world functioning in a linear fashion that can be managed mostly by sage governments and directive polices. Often,

world changing innovation does not happen on demand or by design. Again, energy offers a good example. The advance of the Industrial Revolution was heavily dependent on discovering new and more efficient sources of energy. The greatest boost occurred largely by accident—the result of a handful of entrepreneurs in Pennsylvania hawking a cleaner-burning lamp oil.

The pillars of progress also invoke head scratching. Why exactly are they the indisputable pillars of prosperity? Mostly, it seems, because the authors want government to play a greater role. The authors have a clear prejudice for “big” government—and that really skews how they see the world—often leading them to observations that are just not true. Take the case of government research and development (R&D). After the Cold War, the ratio of government to private sector flipped. Today, private sector R&D eclipses what the government spends—and the size of our economy has more than doubled since the end of the Cold War. Likewise, before the turn of the 20th century, government R&D had a negligible affect on economic growth. Arguably, the Cold War was an anomaly and not standard practice for ensuring the innovation that drives American prosperity. Other pillars look equally shaky on close inspection. A good percentage of the key 19th century infrastructure in the United States from roads, to canals, to railroads was built by the private sector.

As to what role national security plays in the prescription offered in *That Used to Be Us*—the answer is not much. In well over 300 pages of text, Friedman and Mandelbaum offer about one paragraph worth of ideas. “In the cuts in spending that America will have to make,” they conclude, “foreign policy cannot be exempt. Defense spending is invariably among the biggest item in the federal budget, and it too, will have to be reduced . . . they have become too expensive. We need these resources, in other words, for nation-building in America.” This amounts to little more than fuzzy math. Defense is hardly the heart of Washington’s fiscal problems. When Eisenhower complained about the Military-Industrial Complex, Pentagon spending was half the federal budget. Today it represents less than a fifth of what Washington shells out. Furthermore, as a percentage of spending our national wealth, defense (including the costs of operations in Afghanistan and Iraq) is about half the average of military spending during the Cold War. The armed forces are not the problem. In fact, gutting defense to reign in federal spending (an old Washington habit) actually exacerbates fiscal crisis because it allows politicians to ignore dealing with the hard issues—getting a handle on entitlement spending.

Also missing from Friedman and Mandelbaum’s glib treatment of national security is any consideration of the “opportunity costs” incurred by unpreparedness. It is much more expensive to rebuild a military than maintain one. It is also cheaper to deter war and dissuade competition than fight a real shooting conflict that emerges in part because potential enemies were allowed to lay their plans unchecked by any fear of American military might.

*That Used to Be Us* is strategist eye candy. It is a treasure-trove of slick ideas, easy button answers, and sweeping generalizations. Picking it apart ought to be good practice for serious security analysts. With that said, Friedman