

We've Reached Peak Tom Friedman

Contributed by Dan Bednarz
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Tom Friedman has convinced a vast swath of otherwise intelligent and well-educated Americans that he's a visionary. I propose this is so because he channels the thought patterns and emotional currents at the core of American conventional wisdom: economic growth and unrestrained technological progress are the natural state of the world -- with the stipulation that America must, naturally, lead the way. Friedman's greatest skill is catchy -- and often oddly phrased -- simplifications promoting our collective identity as the Exceptional Nation. Recently he, as we say in another context about petroleum, reached peak Friedman.

Before getting to that I note that Friedman's modus operandi is to tirelessly see "opportunity" in crisis. He ridicules those who see threats as lacking insight, entrepreneurial spirit, and innovative thinking. To do this, Friedman operates much like the fifties cartoon character Tom Terrific, who possesses a magical thinking cap that transports him out of any jam in which he finds himself. For example, Friedman is waiting for an entrepreneur in a garage to invent the next energy platform -- who cares about finite fossil fuels when the next Steve Jobs is all we really need? In fact, he recently suggested that Jobs -- because he's invented the iPod -- could rescue the Big-Three automakers. It's that simple; take it from Tom Terrific.

Much to Friedman's displeasure, however, financial, economic, and ecological realities (the latter of which he appears to be totally unaware) are undermining his belief that nature can be dominated by human ingenuity. These intertwined crises will, I suspect, elicit all manner of Tom Terrific articles from Friedman in the coming months; this will indicate, for an undetermined time, the undulating plateau of peak Friedman.

To step back for a moment, it's not as if he's been right about things all along. For several years observers have documented his blunders, erroneous predictions, biases, and logical incoherence, such as his penchant for mixing metaphors and invoking Friedman Units, (see his Wiki bio: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Friedman). Substantively, he does not analyze data; instead he is skilled at weaving anecdotes -- from CEO's, politicians, entrepreneurs, and his version of Joe-the-plumber: the omniscient cab driver -- into a "Truthy" narrative of the world. And on occasion his intellectual shortcomings, moral torpor and plain old viciousness are placed on display -- to silence from his peers. I call attention to his "Suck on this" (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HOF6ZeUvgXs>) interview with Charlie Rose, where he argues the 2003 invasion of Iraq was "worth it" to burst a "terrorism bubble" which he claims had developed.

I'm risking a call of peak Friedman on the basis of one data point: his New York Times column of November 16, in which he bares his impatience with the snowballing economic crisis. Again, he sees the solution as Tom Terrific simple:

Now is when we need a president who has the skill, the vision and the courage to cut through this cacophony, pull us together as one nation and inspire and enable us to do the one thing we can and must do right now:

Go shopping.

This is a perfect distillation of conventional wisdom. Virtually every economic and financial expert commenting on the current crisis is making the same observation that a return to consumption is what ails us. There disagreements are about how to return to growth, not over the viability of growth itself. Since 70% of our economic activity is consumption, there is an internal logic to Friedman's plea to go shopping. Moreover, his fundamental belief is that the American model of consumption is a universal ideal that must be assimilated into every other nation on the planet.

Of course, it is not at all acceptable from his perspective to ask whether it could be that "going shopping" is what got us into this situation. This would lead to questioning Friedman's commitments to globalization and an ever-expanding economy. Further, Friedman does not seem to grasp that many Americans are now suffering financially, are fearful about their future, and are incapable of going shopping to save the economy. Nor does he reckon with the emerging realization that our government is borrowing and printing money but not simultaneously creating wealth. It follows that he

will not consider the possibility that our way of life is too consumptive and we must make adjustments in accord with this empirical reality we cannot Tom-Terrific our way out of.

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