



Book Review:

The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century

By Robert Rader
CABE Executive Director

Thomas Friedman may consider this book to be a “brief history” of the Twenty-First Century, but his treatise on what is going on in the world is anything but brief. At 469 pages, Friedman has written a long, worthwhile tome on trends which are, and will continue to, affect how we will compete in this century.

Of course, the length of the book should not take away from some of the excellent content it contains, though I do believe the topic could have been covered in a shorter book.

Tom Friedman is the foreign affairs correspondent for the *New York Times*. His pieces appear twice a week in the *Times* and he has also written several bestselling books, including *From Beirut to Jerusalem* and *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization*.

Those familiar with Friedman’s work will see this as his attempt to “build on... and push the arguments forward as the world has evolved” since he wrote *The Lexus*. The book is built around his belief that the world is “flattening,” that is, that, because of a convergence of events, the world is shrinking, thereby enabling individuals to collaborate and compete globally from anywhere in the world.

The forces that have led to the flattening of the world have allowed India, China and other developing countries to become part of the global world marketplace. There has been a great increase in wealth in these countries and changes in other countries, including the U.S., but to keep up with the changes, we have to run faster and faster.

The Convergences

Friedman believes that there are 10 convergences that have changed the world:

1. *The fall of the Berlin Wall and the expansion of computer technology, particularly, the Windows operating system.* These events have opened up eastern Europe and Russia to capitalism as well as more modern ways of communicating. The changes were not limited to Europe; many countries and their millions of inhabitants, with all their pent-up energies were un-leashed, even as far away as India, Brazil and China. These energies are now engaged in the use of technology – from software development at much cheaper prices, to operating call centers.
2. *Netscape going public.* This “awakened” the world to the Internet and its vast possibilities.
3. *Work Flow Software.* The development of programs to use the Internet, for banking, other commercial applications and for communicating spread information as well as made life easier for millions of people.
4. *Open Sourcing.* This is the ability for anyone with a computer to obtain software for free and, in many cases, for communities of programmers to improve that software which was available— with the benefits going to uses, again, for free. It is surprising how many programs have been developed and are available at no cost.
5. *Outsourcing.* The ability to send information around the world in virtual real time, including some medical and accounting functions, as well as the work done at call centers, has changed how companies do business and the cost.
6. *Offshoring.* This is the manufacturing and other processes that are now being done in India and China, which used to be done in more developed countries, like our own.
7. *Supply-chaining.* This is the “Wal-Mart” idea of using technology to know more about what their
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customers want, keep their stores supplied with these items and get them to the customers faster than ever before.

8. *Insourcing*. Companies like UPS have started taking on some of the work of their customers and they do it more efficiently and in a less costly way than their clients.
9. *In-forming*. This is Friedman's way of discussing the creation and expansion of computer technology web search engines, like Yahoo and Google, to make more information available to everyone anywhere in the world at any time.
10. *The 'Steroids'*. This is what Friedman calls those technological "boosters", such as the ability to be wireless, mobile and virtual anywhere in the world, which boost the already enormous power of technology.

One of the points that Friedman makes, time and again, as he ties these changes in our world together, is the necessary understanding that there are countries like India and China that not only want to sell to the U.S. and compete with us, but are racing us to the *top*, not the bottom, of the economic (and quality of living) pyramid in the world. He writes that when he was a child, his mother would say 'finish your dinner, there are people in Europe and Asia who are starving. Now he tells his two daughters, to finish their homework, because there are people in Asia starving *for your jobs*.

Overall, he takes a positive view of most of the trends, though with some caveats. Americans will do well in this new world, *if we adapt, work hard and keep ahead of our competitors*. He generally subscribes to the economic theory that the world will

be a better place when each country manufactures what it is best at manufacturing, but that there will be inevitable stresses in economies as businesses and governments adjust and struggle in this new world.

Science and Math

I looked hard for anything specifically about public education (Friedman does mention that his wife teaches in a public school). He discusses the need to include character building and to turn on more kids to science and math. Most of what he writes about concerning education is how our universities are not graduating enough scientists and engineers. Friedman makes the important point that much of what is happening, such as this science and engineering concern, will not have immediate effects. But, he is worried about the effects over time (say, 15-20 years from now). He gives suggestions on how to proceed in these and other areas. Certainly our younger (k-12) students must be encouraged to study if we are to keep our technological and economic leadership positions. There is plenty in this book that will reinforce the notion that we cannot leave *any* of our children behind.

Friedman does a marvelous job tying together the great changes that we have seen over the last few years in how we communicate, work and live. He is a brilliant writer and this book will be helpful for anyone looking to make sense out of the first few years of the 21st Century.

However, my hope is that Friedman does not write a similar book at the end of the century. If four years was 469 pages, I suspect his 100 years' history will be over 11,000 pages.