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Friedman, George: The Next 100 Years—a Forecast for the 21st century

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Friedman, George: The Next 100 Years—a Forecast for the 21st century, Doubleday, 2009.

Historians who predict events more than a year or two ahead are on a very slippery slope. Most prediction tends to be linear: going in a straight line from here to there. This is why the popular press gets it wrong when they predict economic trends or predict our next conflicts; they see things continuing forever in economics (which is never so) and alternately underestimate our enemies until we are hit—and then overestimate their capability. Malcolm Gladwell's book, Tipping Point, does much better with prediction because he demonstrates the cyclical nature of events—which pile up unnoticed until they are at a point that tips, and a change swings in.

George Friedman seems to employ this methodology as well. He heads Strategic Forecasts (a company that forecasts political, social, and economic trends) and has taken on a century-long forecast that I have found surprising and fascinating.

He explains his methodology: "I have no crystal ball. I do, however, have a method that has served me well, imperfect though it might be, in understanding the past and anticipating the future. Underneath the disorder of history, my task is to try to see the order—and to anticipate what events, trends, and technology that order will bring forth." He knows that he will not get it all right, but expects his grandchildren to look at his book and find it "not half bad."

Friedman's method requires a keen knowledge of past history and an analytical grasp of what makes cultures tick. His description of the United States, for example, is that we are "headstrong, immature, and brilliant." We are like a giant adolescent, tromping on the neighbors' gardens. But we also have the goodheartedness of youth—and unlike many around the world, do not maintain century-long grudges.

Every prediction he has made arises organically out of prior historic patterns. For example, any good 19th century analyst could (and did) see that Germany, Russia, and the United States would be the giants of the 20th century and that conflict would arise. (Nobody noticed Japan, however, until they shocked the world by trouncing the great Russian Empire in the 1905 naval battle in the Pacific.)

The strength of this method rests in the reality that a country has a certain continuity of behavior and values, almost a DNA, in a way, that is shaped by its history, geography, and cultural programming. For example, Russia has a geography that has left it vulnerable to attack from all directions, and its foreign policy has always reflected that concern. Because of this reality, Russia's historic experience has been that a tough central government that can dominate both the country and its neighborhood is preferred by its people to a weaker, more participative democracy. We can see this reality in the number of Russians who profess to miss Stalin—the devil they knew rather than the devils (invasion or anarchy) they fear.

Looking at China the same way, Friedman sees that they have had the same experience—authoritarian centralized government produces prosperity whereas weak government leads to fragmentation and anarchy. But Friedman also looks at a growing differential in development between the coastal and interior parts of the country. This differential is already giving the Chinese government problems with internal unrest—and there is no relief in sight. He does not mention what I think is the largest impending problem in China, which is increasing desertification. Rivers that once helped feed China are drying up—and this alone could produce major famine and plagues. For these reasons, China, for all of its recent development, will not displace the United States as the world's superpower in this century.

India has the same internal contradiction: a flourishing rapidly-developing sector, but an interior of villages that remain feudal. Again, I feel that he misses the other issue—shortage of water and the poisoning of ground water with agricultural poisons that may well have an effect on birthrate.

Freidman mentions the global experience of population decline—a phenomenon that has finally reversed three centuries of population explosion. For example, three countries that played a large role in 20th century wars—Japan, Germany, and Russia, are all losing populations at an astonishing rate. This will inevitably play a role in their future power to impose their will on their neighbors.

Friedman's take on the "war on terror" avoids the panicky view of those who see Militant Islam as more powerful than it is. Militant Islam is no different than all of the terrorist groups that assassinated and frightened Europe in the 19th century. These terrorists have nothing to offer, and they eventually lose the support of people they need. This is already happening because Nihilism never has a following for long.

But in looking at the next 100 years, Friedman does see a continuing conflict that arises out of the fear of traditional societies over what they see as overwhelming technological and social changes affecting their world. The emancipation of women particularly frightens and angers those whose societies have been timelessly patriarchal. They will continue to fight these social changes, but will ultimately lose.

But new players will emerge to challenge our status as the single superpower—players who will form coalitions and take us on: Japan and Turkey, as an Asian coalition (he makes a surprisingly good case for this) and a new coalition that will take on the Russians, formed by Poland and an Eastern European bloc (that we will support). Fascinating stuff!

He predicts amazing technological breakthroughs as a result of space war (already in development) that will spin off as civilian technologies that will benefit us all. Yes, warfare is not just a dead issue, but is somehow ever with us—although no longer as deadly to civilians as 20th century war. Silicon Valley should read this with interest—as should we all.

The only prediction that he makes that does not convince me is that our final challenger in the 21st century will be Mexico. He bases this prediction on several things: first, a reminder that until the 1840s, Mexico appeared to be by far the dominant country in North America-and a desire to retain that role has never completely gone away. Second, he notes that the Mexican/American borderland is very different for Mexicans than for those living elsewhere in the United States where they have integrated well. Unlike other immigration situations experienced by the United States, the Mexican immigrants in the border regions have not integrated well; they go back and forth and may well, as they are approaching majorities, try to join Mexico or declare these areas independent (shades of Texas history).

I cannot conceive that a country as ill run as Mexico has always been could suddenly blossom into a powerful, technological superpower. It will take more than a century of development to get rid of the feudal underpinnings of much of Mexico. And even if it did, the migration of peasant workers to the United States would ultimately dry up as Mexico industrializes. I already see Mexican labor returning to Mexico from border regions—and I see those who stay becoming very American in culture.

With the exception of this final prediction, I find the rest of the book to be a very wise blueprint of what we may expect during the rest of this century. The methology and predictions make complete sense to me. Unintended consequences, he says, are what this book is all about.

"If human beings can simply decide on what they want to do and then do it, then forecasting is impossible. Free will is beyond forecasting. But what is most interesting about humans is how unfree they are. It is possible for people today to have ten children, but hardly anyone does. We are deeply constrained in what we do by the time and place in which we live. And those actions we do take are filled with consequences we didn't intend. When NASA engineers used a microchip to build an onboard computer on a spacecraft, they did not intend to create the iPod." Indeed they didn't. Surprise is what makes predictions so much fun.

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