

Book Review on
“The World is Flat”
“A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century”
by Thomas L. Friedman

(Review by Gary Tomlinson)
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When scholars write the history of the world twenty years from now, what will they say was the most crucial development? Will it be the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 9/11? Will it be the War in Iraq? Or will it be the convergence of technology and events that allowed India, China, and so many other countries to become part of the global supply chain for services and manufacturing, creating an explosion of wealth in the middle classes of the world’s two biggest nations and giving them a huge new stake in the success of globalization? And with this “flattening” of the globe, which requires us to run faster in order to stay in place, has the world gotten too small and too fast for human beings and their political systems to adjust in a stable manner? For the answers to these questions, I’ve chosen Thomas Friedman’s *The World is Flat – A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* for this month’s book review.

Friedman begins his book with a profound statement, “I think the world is flat.” He goes on to say that the global playing field is being leveled. He believes that the flattening of the world will soon connect all the knowledge centers on the planet together into a single global network which could usher in an amazing era of prosperity and innovation. Friedman believes we are entering a phase where we are going to see the digitization, virtualization, and automation of almost everything. The gains in productivity will be staggering for those countries, companies, and individuals who can absorb the new technological tools. He goes on to say that it’s not simply about how governments, business, and people communicate, but is about the emergence of completely new social, political, and business models. He believes this is inevitable and unavoidable.

Friedman believes the world has been flattened by the convergence of ten major political events, innovation, and companies. Flattener #1 happened on 11/9/89 when the Berlin Wall fell. This major event tipped the balance of power across the world toward those advocating democratic, consensual, free-market-oriented governance, and away from those advocating authoritarian rule with centrally planned economies. Flattener #2 happened on 8/9/95 when Netscape went public. Netscape wired the whole world together and sparked the Internet boom. Flattener #3 was the emergence of Work Flow Software. This allowed us to go from an Internet that just connected people to people, and people to their own applications, to an Internet that could connect any person’s software programs to any other person’s software programs. Friedman’s other Flatteners include Open-Sourcing, Outsourcing, Offshoring, Supply-Chaining, Insourcing, Informing, and what he calls The Steroids. As a result of these ten flatteners more products are being made cheaper, easier, more friction-free, and people have become more productive from more corners of the earth than at any time in the history of the world.

So if the flattening of the world is largely unstoppable, how does an individual get the best out of it? What do we tell our kids? Friedman says there is one message: You have to constantly upgrade your skills. There will be plenty of good jobs out there in the flat world for people with knowledge and ideas to seize them. So his advice to kids in this flat world is very brief and very blunt: “When I was growing up, my parents used to say to me, ‘Tom, finish your dinner – people in China and India are starving.’ My advice to kids is: Make sure you finish your homework – people in China and India are starving for your jobs.” Friedman says that being adaptable in a flat world, knowing how to “learn how to learn,” will be one of the most important assets any worker can have, because job churn will come faster, because innovation will happen faster.

Friedman, in this eye-opening, thought-provoking book explains how the flattening of the world happened at the dawn of the twenty-first century. He then goes on to say what it means to countries, companies, communities, and individuals; and how governments and societies can, and must adapt. This is an important book, so enjoy this month’s selection, *The World is Flat – A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* and share it with others in your life because as Alvin Toffler says; “*The illiterate of the 21st Century will not be those who cannot read or write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.*”