

Misguided Scheme from NYT's Friedman

Exclusive: New York Times columnist Thomas L. Friedman, who once dubbed himself a “Tony Blair Democrat,” is now a “Mike Bloomberg Independent,” as he seeks a “centrist” challenge to the two parties, even if it might lead to consolidated Republican control of the United States, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

If you relied on one signpost for where not to go, it might be the columns of New York Times star Thomas L. Friedman: If he's pointing in one direction, like some humorless Cheshire Cat, it's usually a safe bet that you should go the other way.

Sure, he's not always wrong. Sometimes, he does recognize the obvious. I suppose the world has gotten “flatter.”

But Friedman has been grievously wrong many other times at great cost to America and the world and his newest election scheme of pushing a “centrist” alternative for President could be just his latest catastrophic idea. It's also not the first time he helped mess up the selection of a new President.

In December 2000, Friedman praised Republican suppression of vote-counting in Florida because he put George W. Bush's fragile “legitimacy,” as a popular-vote loser being made President, above determining the actual will of the voters.

Then, in 2003, Friedman waved the United States into the unprovoked invasion of Iraq. It was time, he said, to “give war a chance.” As the ill-fated war dragged on, he kept insisting that the nation wait intervals of “six months” before judging the bloody mission to be a failure.

More recently, Friedman helped create the crisis with Iran by disparaging a Brazilian-Turkish breakthrough in 2010 that would have had Tehran's swap much of its low-enriched uranium for medical isotopes, a plan that is finally back on the table after two years of escalating tensions and higher-than-necessary gas prices.

Indeed, it's hard sometimes to comprehend the conscienceless egotism of Friedman who can be so wrong so often leaving hundreds of thousands dead and wasting trillions of dollars but who still pontificates about what Americans should do next.

Friedman's latest reckless scheme is to have some third-party candidate (his choice is New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg) compete in this fall's presidential

election as a way to “give our two-party system the shock it needs.”

By taking this stance, Friedman gets to position himself as champion of the trendy disdain for the two major parties. But Friedman’s idea is really just another dodge to avoid making the tough assessment about the truly serious political threat facing the nation, the reality of today’s Republican extremism.

The ‘Liberal’ Label

You see the key thing for Friedman and other “centrist” journalists is to avoid ever being pigeonholed as “liberal.” For Friedman, his status as an “independent” thinker is also crucial to his lucrative career as a best-selling author. To maintain this valuable financial perch in the middle, Friedman and other “centrists” routinely make “smart plays” for themselves even if they end up aiding and abetting many right-wing positions.

It was “smart” for Friedman to embrace Bush’s “legitimacy” in 2000, cheer the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and posture as a tough-guy on Iran now. And, it’s the “smart play” to take this stance on Election 2012, issuing a “plague on both your houses” commentary without having to confront the rabid elephant in the room, quite literally.

If Friedman had written a column about how the American voters must break the back of GOP extremism before any of the country’s pressing issues can be seriously addressed, he would have been denounced by the powerful right-wing attack machine as a Democratic “partisan,” not good for his next book tour.

So, instead of taking on right-wing extremism, which has taken over the Republican Party, Friedman pretends that the U.S. political crisis is just the lack of a reasonable person in the middle willing to debate the nation’s complex problems.

Thus, Friedman wants to see Mike Bloomberg starring in the presidential debates and raising the “hard choices.” Except that this scheme more likely would mean splitting the “responsible” vote, undercutting President Barack Obama and clearing the way for a victory by Republican Mitt Romney and the right-wing forces most opposed to what Friedman purports to want.

Losing Cellphone Service

Friedman starts off his Wednesday column complaining about the collapsing American infrastructure the “roller-coaster” asphalt around Washington’s Union Station and the shortcomings of Amtrak’s rail service to New York, even as he rode the more expensive, faster Acela train.

"I had so many dropped calls on my cellphone that you'd have thought I was on a remote desert island, not traveling from Washington to New York City," Friedman wrote. He also complained that when he got back to DC, the Union Station escalator was broken.

"Maybe you've gotten used to all this and have stopped noticing," Friedman told his readers. "I haven't. Our country needs a renewal. And that is why I still hope Michael Bloomberg will reconsider running for president as an independent candidate."

Friedman did acknowledge that "President Obama has significant achievements to his record. He has done a solid job stemming the economic crisis he inherited and a good job managing national security and initiating important reforms from health care to auto mileage standards.

"But with Europe in peril, China and America wobbling, the Arab world in turmoil, energy prices spiraling and the climate changing, we are facing some real storms ahead. We need to weather-proof our American house and fast in order to ensure that America remains a rock of stability for the world."

You might stop here and remember that the nation's predicament might have been a lot less severe if Friedman had lent his influential voice in December 2000 to demanding that all the votes in Florida be counted rather than worrying about Bush's "legitimacy" as Bush moved to steal the election. Back then, after Bush won some lower state court rulings blocking the recounts, Friedman expressed the view of many mainstream journalists, welcoming the likely declaration of Bush as the "winner."

"Slowly but surely, in their own ways, the different courts seem to be building a foundation of legitimacy for Governor George W. Bush's narrow victory," Friedman wrote. "That is hugely important. Our democracy has taken a hit here, and both Democrats and Republicans must think about how they can start shoring it up."

Of course, it didn't strike Friedman or his "centrist" colleagues that the best way for Bush or any other politician to have "legitimacy" would be to allow all the votes to be counted and declare the candidate with the most to be the winner.

Al Gore surely had faults but he was a serious public servant who had spent a career addressing the "big, hard decisions" that Friedman is now wringing his hands over. For example, Gore was deeply interested in global warming, alternative energy, a modern infrastructure, including mass transit like high-speed rail.

However, when Gore's election victory was being reversed by Bush and the Republicans in December 2000, Friedman was all atwitter about the harm to the nation if Bush's "election" wasn't viewed as "legitimate." [For details, see [Neck Deep.](#)]

The Bush Disaster

The ensuing eight years were a disaster for addressing those "big, hard decisions." By giving massive tax cuts to the rich, Bush turned a record budget surplus into a record deficit. He squandered a trillion dollars or more on wars, including an unprovoked invasion of Iraq. Bush disdained the science on global warming and took no action on that front. He encouraged Americans to buy gas-guzzling vehicles and to keep on spending as their personal debt exploded.

By further deregulating the financial industry, Bush positioned the U.S. economy on a giant bubble in the housing market. When the bubble burst, millions of Americans were thrown out of work and the world's economy was destabilized. At the end of Bush's eight years, problems, which might have been manageable if Gore had been allowed to become president, were now unmanageable.

One might think that Friedman would pause and express some self-criticism for his failure to understand the risks of a Bush presidency or the destructiveness of Bush's wars. But no. Friedman simply moves on as if it would be impolite of him to note the havoc that he has left in his wake.

During the run-up to war in Iraq, for instance, Friedman was smitten by British Prime Minister Tony Blair's glib oratory about forcibly planting seeds of "democracy" in Iraq. Friedman went so far as to dub himself a pro-war "Tony Blair Democrat." He also made the witty observation that it was time to "give war a chance" in Iraq.

Today, it might seem obvious that anyone foolish enough to call himself "a Tony Blair Democrat" after Blair has gone down in history as "Bush's poodle" or to twist John Lennon's advice to "give peace a chance" into its opposite should have the decency to just hang it up as a pundit. Instead, Friedman moves from one reckless point of view to the next.

His latest positioning on Election 2012 is another self-serving scheme as he strikes a "both-sides-are-equally-wrong" pose, sparing him the career risk of putting the blame where it primarily belongs, on Republican extremism.

If Friedman had any journalistic integrity, he would have declared that today's extremist Republican Party has become the chief threat to the nation's wellbeing and indeed the planet's survival. He would say that only the decisive defeat of this Ayn Rand radicalism offers a pathway to the future. However, to do that

would put his cherished (and profitable) status as a “centrist” in danger. So, he undertakes his “evenhanded” denunciation of both sides.

‘Hard Choices’

Friedman wrote: “This election has to be about those hard choices, smart investments and shared sacrifices, how we set our economy on a clear-cut path of near-term, job-growing improvements in infrastructure and education and on a long-term pathway to serious fiscal, tax and entitlement reform. The next president has to have a mandate to do all of this.

“But, today, neither party is generating that mandate, talking seriously enough about the taxes that will have to be raised or the entitlement spending that will have to be cut to put us on sustainable footing, let alone offering an inspired vision of American renewal that might motivate such sacrifice.

“Mitt Romney can’t do that because of his ludicrous opposition to any tax hikes. President Obama, who has a plan to cut, tax and invest, albeit insufficiently, could lead, but, for now, he seems preoccupied with some rather uninspiring small ball, preferring proposals like ‘the Buffett tax’ over comprehensive tax reform that would lower all rates, eliminate deductions and raise more revenue.”

So, Friedman’s electoral scheme also being promoted by other “radical centrists” like Matt Miller in the Washington Post proposes that Bloomberg jump into the race to push these supposedly courageous ideas.

(You might note that President Obama has spent months advocating for much of what Friedman is describing, including a major jobs program that would invest substantially in modernizing American infrastructure. Last year, Obama also pushed unsuccessfully for a “grand bargain” with Republicans that would have raised taxes and cut entitlement spending.)

But Friedman can’t be honest because it would endanger his “centrist” positioning. He also doesn’t think through what the likely outcome would be if Bloomberg entered the race and siphoned off enough “responsible” votes to elect Romney.

Instead, Friedman wrote: “Bloomberg doesn’t have to win to succeed, or even stay in the race to the very end. Simply by running, participating in the debates and doing respectably in the polls, 15 to 20 percent, he could change the dynamic of the election and, most importantly, the course of the next administration, no matter who heads it.

“By running on important issues and offering sensible programs for addressing them, and showing that he had the support of the growing number of Americans who

describe themselves as independents, he would compel the two candidates to gravitate toward some of his positions as Election Day neared.”

Sophomoric Thinking

This dreamy analysis might be understandable for, say, some freshman in a political science class, but it is dangerously sophomoric for one of the nation’s most prominent columnists. The more likely result would be that Bloomberg whether he quits the race after the debates or not would draw substantial votes away from the candidate closest to his positions, i.e. President Obama.

That would probably ensure the election of Romney, who has committed himself to seeking further tax cuts favoring the rich, repealing regulations on the banks, adopting a more aggressive foreign policy that would include boosting military spending, and savaging domestic programs (including money for Friedman’s beloved infrastructure).

Surely, under a Romney administration especially with continued Republican dominance of Congress there would be even less money to even out those bumpy roads around Washington’s Union Station or upgrade cellphone reception on Amtrak or for that matter, build new high-speed rail, invest in the nation’s crumbling infrastructure or confront existential issues like global warming, which Republican extremists don’t even think is real.

Friedman’s pitch for his “radical centrist” option is just another of his harebrained, self-serving and dangerous opinion pieces. We already have seen the dark places where some of his earlier ideas have taken the nation.

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush*, was written with two of his sons, Sam and Nat, and can be ordered at neckdeepbook.com. His two previous books, *Secrecy & Privilege: The Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq* and *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & ‘Project Truth’* are also available there.
