

# The Madness of NYT's Tom Friedman

**Exclusive:** Looking back at the Iraq War and other disastrous U.S. foreign policy choices, you might wonder about the sanity of American leadership. But if you read star columnist Thomas L. Friedman, you'll learn that it's the rest of the world that's crazy, as Robert Parry explains.

By Robert Parry

When ranking which multi-millionaire American pundit is the most overrated, there are, without doubt, many worthy contenders, but one near the top of any list must be the New York Times' Thomas L. Friedman with his long record of disastrous policy pronouncements including his enthusiasm for George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq.

Friedman, of course, has paid no career price for his misguided judgments and simplistic nostrums. Like many other star pundits who inhabit the Op-Ed pages of the Times and the Washington Post, Friedman has ascended to a place where the normal powers of gravity don't apply, where the cumulative weight of his errors only lifts him up.

Indeed, there is something profoundly nonsensical about Friedman's Olympian standing, inhabiting a plane of existence governed by the crazy rules of Washington's conventional wisdom, where when looking down on the rest of us Friedman feels free to cast aspersions on other people's sanity, like the Mad Hatter calling the Church Mouse nuts.

Friedman describes every foreign adversary who reacts against U.S. dictates as suffering from various stages of insanity. He accepts no possibility that these "designated enemies" are acting out of their own sense of self-interest and even fear of what the United States might be designing.

In last Sunday's [column](#), for instance, Friedman airily dismissed the leaders of Iran, Syria, North Korea, China and Russia as all operating with screws loose, either totally crazy or fecklessly reckless. North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un was a "boy king who seems totally off the grid." In Friedman's view, China is enabling North Korea's nuclear brinkmanship and "could end the freak show there anytime it wants."

Russia is aiding and abetting both the violence in Syria and the supposed nuclear ambitions of Iran. Friedman asks: "Do the Russians really believe that indulging Iran's covert nuclear program, to spite us, won't come back to haunt them with a nuclear-armed Iran, an Islamist regime on its border?"

To Friedman, Bashar al-Assad is simply “Syria’s mad leader,” not a secular autocrat representing Alawites and other terrified minorities fearing a Sunni uprising that includes armed militants associated with al-Qaeda terrorists and promoting Islamic fundamentalism.

You see, according to Friedman and his neoconservative allies, everyone that they don’t like is simply crazy or absorbed with mindless self-interest and it makes no sense to reason with these insane folks or to propose power-sharing compromises. Only “regime change” will do.

### **Who’s Detached from Reality?**

But the argument could be made that Friedman and the neocons are the people most disconnected from reality and that the New York Times editors are behaving irresponsibly in continuing to grant Friedman some of the most prestigious space in American journalism to spout his nonsensical ravings.

Looking back at Friedman’s history of recommending violence as the only remedy to a whole host of problems, including in places like Serbia and Iraq, you could reasonably conclude that he’s the real nut case. He’s the one who routinely urges the U.S. government to ignore international law in pursuit of half-baked goals that have spread misery over large swaths of the planet.

In 1999, during the U.S. bombing of Serbia, Friedman showed off his glib warmongering style: “Like it or not, we are at war with the Serbian nation (the Serbs certainly think so), and the stakes have to be very clear: Every week you ravage Kosovo is another decade we will set your country back by pulverizing you. You want 1950? We can do 1950. You want 1389? We can do 1389 too.”

Before George W. Bush’s invasion of Iraq in 2003, Friedman offered the witty observation that it was time to “give war a chance,” a flippant play on John Lennon’s lyrics to the song, “Give Peace a Chance.”

Yet, even amid his enthusiasm to invade Iraq, Friedman was disappointed by Bush’s clunky rhetoric. So, he hailed the smoother speechifying of British Prime Minister Tony Blair and dubbed himself “a Tony Blair Democrat.” Today, it might seem that anyone foolish enough to take that title after Blair has gone down in history as “Bush’s poodle” and is now despised even by his own Labour Party should slink away into obscurity or claim some sort of mental incapacity.

But that isn’t how U.S. punditry works. Once you’ve risen into the firmament of stars like Tommy Friedman, you are beyond the reach of earthly judgments and surely beyond human accountability.

When the Iraq War didn’t go as swimmingly as the neocons expected, Friedman

became famous for his repetitious, ever-receding “six month” timeline for detecting progress. Finally, in August 2006, he concluded that the Iraq War wasn’t worth it, that “it is now obvious that we are not midwifing democracy in Iraq. We are babysitting a civil war.” [NYT, Aug. 4, 2006]

At that point, you might have expected the New York Times to drop Friedman from its roster of columnists. After all, the Iraq War’s costs in lives, money and respect for the United States had become staggering. You might even have thought that some accountability would be in order. After all, advocacy of aggressive war is a war crime as defined by the Nuremberg Tribunal after World War II.

Yet, 12 days after his admission of Iraq War failure, Friedman actually demeaned Americans who had opposed the Iraq War early on as “antiwar activists who haven’t thought a whit about the larger struggle we’re in.” [NYT, Aug. 16, 2006] In other words, according to Friedman, Americans who were right about the ill-fated invasion of Iraq were still airheads who couldn’t grasp the bigger picture that had been so obvious to himself, his fellow pundits and pro-war politicians who had tagged along with Bush and Blair.

As I noted in an article at the time, “it’s as if Official Washington has become a sinister version of Alice in Wonderland. Under the bizarre rules of Washington’s pundit society, the foreign policy ‘experts,’ who acted like Cheshire Cats pointing the United States in wrong directions, get rewarded for their judgment and Americans who opposed going down the rabbit hole in the first place earn only derision.”

Instead of a well-deserved dismissal from the Times and journalistic disgrace, Friedman has continued to rake in big bucks from his articles, his books and his speeches. Meanwhile, his record for accuracy (or even sophisticated insights) hasn’t improved. Regarding foreign policy, he still gets pretty much everything wrong.

### **‘Crazy’ Enemies**

As for the supposed madness of America’s “designated enemies,” Friedman refuses to recognize that they might see defensive belligerence as the only rational response to U.S. hostility. After all, Iraq’s Saddam Hussein and Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi both accepted U.S. demands for disarmament and both were subsequently attacked by U.S. military force, overthrown and murdered.

So, who in their right mind would accept assurances about the protections of international law when Official Washington and Tommy Friedman see nothing wrong with invading other countries and overthrowing their governments? In view of this recent history, one could argue that the leaders of Iran, Syria and even

North Korea are acting rationally within their perceptions of national sovereignty and concern for their own necks.

Similarly, Russia and China have searched for ways to resolve some of these conflicts, rather than whipping up new confrontations. On the Iranian nuclear dispute, for instance, Russia has worked behind the scenes to broker a realistic agreement that would offer Iran meaningful relief from economic sanctions in exchange for more safeguards on its nuclear program.

It has been the United States that has vacillated between an interest in a negotiated settlement with Iran and the temptation to seek "regime change." Recently, the Obama administration spurned a Russian push for genuine negotiations with Iran, instead favoring more sanctions and demanding Iranian capitulation.

It should be noted, too, that the Iranian government has renounced any desire to build a nuclear weapon and that the U.S. intelligence community has concluded, since 2007, that Iran ceased work on a nuclear weapon in 2003, a decade ago. Friedman could be called irrational or at least irresponsible for not mentioning that fact. And you might wonder why his Times' editors didn't demand greater accuracy in his column. Is there no fact-checking of Friedman?

### **Seeking 'Regime Change'**

Of course, the Times and Friedman have a long pattern of bias on Iran, much as they had on Iraq. For instance, the newspaper and its star columnist heaped ridicule on Turkey and Brazil three years ago when those two U.S. allies achieved a breakthrough in which Iran agreed to ship about half of its low-enriched uranium out of the country in exchange for some medical isotopes. To Friedman, this deal was "as ugly as it gets," the title of [his column](#).

He wrote: "I confess that when I first saw the May 17 [2010] picture of Iran's president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, joining his Brazilian counterpart, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, and the Turkish prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, with raised arms, after their signing of a putative deal to defuse the crisis over Iran's nuclear weapons program, all I could think of was: Is there anything uglier than watching democrats sell out other democrats to a Holocaust-denying, vote-stealing Iranian thug just to tweak the U.S. and show that they, too, can play at the big power table?"

"No, that's about as ugly as it gets."

Though Friedman did not call Lula da Silva and Erdogan crazy, he did insult them and impugned their motives. He accused them of seeking this important step toward a peaceful resolution of an international dispute "just to tweak the U.S.

and show that they, too, can play at the big power table.”

In the column, Friedman also made clear that he wasn't really interested in Iranian nuclear safeguards; instead, he wanted the United States to do whatever it could to help Iran's internal opposition overthrow President Ahmadinejad and Iran's Islamic Republic.

“In my view, the ‘Green Revolution’ in Iran is the most important, self-generated, democracy movement to appear in the Middle East in decades,” Friedman wrote. “It has been suppressed, but it is not going away, and, ultimately, its success, not any nuclear deal with the Iranian clerics, is the only sustainable source of security and stability. We have spent far too little time and energy nurturing that democratic trend and far too much chasing a nuclear deal.”

Just three years later, however, it's clear how wrongheaded Friedman was. The Green Movement, which was never the mass popular movement that the U.S. media claimed, has largely disappeared.

Analyses of Iran's 2009 election also revealed that Ahmadinejad did win a substantial majority of the vote. Ahmadinejad, with strong support from the poor especially in more conservative rural areas, defeated the “Green Revolution” candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi by roughly the 2-to-1 margin cited in the official results.

For instance, an analysis by the University of Maryland's Program on International Policy Attitudes concluded that most Iranians voted for Ahmadinejad and viewed his reelection as legitimate, contrary to claims made by much of the U.S. news media. Not a single Iranian poll analyzed by PIPA whether before or after the election, whether conducted inside or outside Iran showed Ahmadinejad with less than majority support. None showed Mousavi, a former prime minister, ahead or even close.

“These findings do not prove that there were no irregularities in the election process,” said Steven Kull, director of PIPA. “But they do not support the belief that a majority rejected Ahmadinejad.” [For details, see Consortiumnews.com's [“Ahmadinejad Won, Get Over It!”](#)]

### **Bias Over Journalism**

During the Green Movement's demonstrations, a few protesters threw Molotov cocktails at police (scenes carried on CNN but quickly forgotten by the U.S. news media) and security forces overreacted with repression and violence. But to pretend that an angry minority disappointed by election results is proof of a fraudulent election is simply an example of bias, not journalism.

One can sympathize with those who yearn for a secular democracy in Iran as you may in other religiously structured states including Israel but a journalist is not supposed to make up his or her own facts, which was what the Times and Friedman did in 2009 on Iran.

Friedman's contempt for the Turkey-Brazil deal in 2010 also looks pretty stupid in retrospect. At the time, Iran only had low-enriched uranium suitable for energy production but not for building a nuclear weapon. If Iran had shipped nearly half that amount out of the country in exchange for the medical isotopes, Iran might never have upgraded its reactors to refine the uranium to about 20 percent, what was needed for the isotopes and which is much closer to the level of purity needed for a bomb.

There are other relevant facts that a serious analyst would include in the kind of column that Friedman penned last Sunday, including the fact that the United States possesses a military force unrivaled in world history and enough nuclear bombs to kill all life on the planet many times over.

Also relevant to the Iran issue, Israel possesses a rogue nuclear arsenal that is considered one of the world's most advanced, but Israel has refused to accept any international oversight by rejecting the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which Iran has signed and insists it is living by.

An objective or a rational observer would consider the unbelievable destructiveness of the U.S. and Israeli nuclear stockpiles as a relevant factor in evaluating the sanity of the supposedly "crazy" leaders of Syria, Iran and North Korea and their alleged accomplices in Russia and China.

But Friedman operates on a plane of impunity that the rest of us mortals can only dream about. Apparently once you have achieved his punditry status, you never have to say you're sorry or acknowledge countervailing facts. All you have to do is say that everybody else is crazy.

**Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).**

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## The Root of American Bullying

The issue of bullying in U.S. schools has attracted much attention of late. But the problem is not isolated to schools, with bullying evident in major

institutions, from the U.S. government in its foreign policy to Christian churches demanding obedience to the Bible, as retired Baptist minister Howard Bess explains.

By the Rev. Howard Bess

Bullying is now a major reason that American teenagers give for skipping school and eventually dropping out of high school. Students get bullied over race, sexual orientation, clothes, looks, handicaps, intelligence and economic class.

Yet, where can we find a voice of sanity that will publicly call for a halt in the practice of bullying? It is not the Christian churches. Indeed, many Christian pastors and fundamentalists practice the art of bullying themselves, demanding obedience to holy books and creeds.

I cringe every time I hear preachers and devout Christians declare "The Bible says" Rarely do they identify the author or the circumstance of the passage to which they refer. "The Bible says" is the sledge hammer of Protestant Christianity.

The message is all too plain: Get in line or you are headed for punishment, rejection or even Hell. It is the ultimate bullying tool because it is difficult for a parishioner to out-gun a holy god who has spoken with finality and without error. Dynamic and authoritarian preachers are especially good at Bible rhetoric that is calculated intimidation. Preachers may be the most skilled persons in our society in the practice of bullying.

And then there are the creeds, which were originally devised to force conformity to Christian belief. The creeds of Christianity have been and are regularly used as the club for bullying. Again, the message is clear: Agree or be denied ordination; agree or be silenced; agree or be censored; disagree and be labeled a heretic and be excommunicated.

Bullying also is practiced at the highest level of American civil society, with bullying a front-line tool of U.S. foreign policy. One could say that America in its world leadership role has refined and redefined the art of bullying.

We constantly send messages to the nations of the world: Behave and we will send you money; misbehave and we will place sanctions against you; get out of line too much and we have the power to crush you; dare rattle your own sword and we will station our battleships off your coast.

None of these public practices teaches our children the ways of peace. Then we seem surprised when we find bullying prevalent among our school children.

Teenage gangs are simply another manifestation of a bully system that pervades many of the most respected institutions of society.

While details change, the dynamics of bullying never change. The story line repeats itself over and over. A bully finds ways to intimidate others to establish control over them. The person who is the object of the bullying has three choices: submit, run away, or fight back. None of these standard responses produce good results.

I had a chance to reflect on the dynamics of bullying when the Palmer Arts Council in Alaska presented a play written by Brian Guehring, a teacher with degrees in children's theatre from Duke University and University of Texas. He wrote the play, "The Bully Show," for audiences of young people in grades 4 through 8. His goal was to educate teachers, administrators and students about the practice of bullying in the school setting.

A local fifth-grade teacher, a theater veteran, became the director. The play can be done with a three-person cast. An eighth grader, a sophomore and a senior were chosen for the parts. The play is interactive with the audiences and the cast developed excellent skills in handling unrehearsed and spontaneous responses from their young audiences.

In September 2012, The Arts Council presented "The Bully Show" 18 times at school sites. Nearly 5,000 students saw the production and teachers used the shows for classroom discussion. As an Arts Council board member, I traveled with the show and saw the production several times. I received a quick education in the dynamics of bullying.

In the play, the lead actor is the host of a television game show, called "The Bully Show." The host is presented as dedicated to bringing bullying among school children to an end. But she was very assertive in the way she ran her show. There was no doubt about who was in charge.

Near the end of play, she is confronted by an assistant producer for being a bully herself. When a closer look is taken, the game show host had used the very same tactics to gain the dominance and control that she found unacceptable in others. The confrontation between the game show host and her assistant was the high moment in the play; and it was my own moment of truth.

I, too, if placed in the right circumstance, can become a bully. Upon further reflection, I saw myself surrounded by bullying, living in a bully nation and part of a bully Christianity. What we see in our school children, they have learned from parents, government and church. Bullying is an American way of life.



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