

The Green Quotient

Q&A with Thomas L. Friedman



**“I want to redefine green as geostrategic, geoeconomic, capitalist, and the most patriotic thing you can do. My mantra is that green is the new red, white, and blue.”**

*Three-time Pulitzer Prize winner Thomas L. Friedman—noted columnist for the New York Times and author of the recent best-selling book The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the 21st Century—muses about his wide-ranging and global perspectives on green development.*

**What do you think is the biggest environmental problem in the world? Is it our own practices in the United States, or is it the more rapidly growing and industrializing countries like China and India?**

Well, it’s all of the above. My argument, very simply, is this is not your grandfather’s energy crisis. It’s not 1973. It’s not 1979.

Reason number one: we’re in a war on terrorism that the American people have fueled and financed by our energy purchases. We are doing the craziest thing in the world: we’re funding both sides in the war on terrorism. We finance the U.S. Army, Navy, and Marine Corps with our tax dollars, and we fund al-Qaida, Iran, Venezuela, and various hostile Islamist charities with our energy purchases.

Reason number two: the world is flat and 3 billion new players just walked onto the playing field, all with their own version of the American dream—a house, a car, a toaster, a microwave, and a refrigerator—3 billion people moving from energy lifestyles that have a low impact on the environment to energy lifestyles that have a high impact on the environment. If we don’t find an alternative source to fossil

fuels, we’re going to burn up, choke up, heat up, and smoke up this planet far faster than anybody realizes.

Reason number three: because of number two, green technology is going to be the industry of the 21st century. Now, China’s going to go green, not because they’ve got me, or you, or Rachel Carson. China’s going to go green, because China can’t breathe. They’re growing at 10 percent and they’re giving 3 percent back in the form of lost work days, health care issues, and brownouts and blackouts. So, China’s going to go green and, as it does, it will design low-cost, scalable solutions. If that happens, they will really become green innovators, and then they’ll come our way, and they’ll clean our clock on the leading industry of the 21st century.

Reason number four: people don’t see that we’re in a new strategic environment. We’ve had oil price spikes in the past. But we’ve never had a \$60 barrel of oil structurally as far as the eye can see that is generating a massive transfer of wealth to the worst regimes in the world to do the worst things. What we’re actually seeing at the metastrategic level is a countertide, a black wave of what I call petro-authoritarianism that is fueling and funding Russia, Venezuela, Burma, Nigeria, Iran, Saudi Arabia—you name it. That counterwave is making what we thought was the unstoppable wave of democracy and free markets unleashed by the fall of the Berlin Wall actually quite stoppable. This, to me, is the meta-geostrategic environment we’re in right now. We need to wake up to that, but what I find is that a lot of people in government, a lot of people in industry, haven’t really come to it yet.

**Buildings account for 36 percent of the United States’s total energy consumption, including 65 percent of its electricity use. What can we do to make green building development the rule and not the exception in the United States?**

The first change agent I’m rooting for is a gasoline tax that fixes gasoline prices somewhere between \$3.50 and \$4 a gallon,

with rebates for people who have to drive long distances and for people with low incomes. When you put gasoline in the \$3.50-to-\$4-a-gallon range, then you change consumer behavior. Change consumer behavior, and you force Detroit to massively transform its fleets, and then you’re headed down the innovation curve. When we do it, the whole world does it. I hope that will be the change agent, because with that tax, we capture the benefits for our deficit, for our schools, for our roads, for our transport system, for our health care.

If we don’t do it, then I’m rooting for the president of Iran. What I say to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is, “You go, girl! The crazier you get, the happier I am, because the crazier you get, the sooner we get oil priced at \$100 a barrel.” If we can keep oil prices that high for about six months, then the shift to sustainable, scalable alternatives will be unstoppable.

Secondly, if I could wave my magic wand, I’d have every single architecture student attend at least a year’s worth of courses on sustainable design and energy-conserving design so that it is embedded in every architect. Then, the first question they ask is, how do I design energy and mass out of whatever you’re asking me to build: a garage, a house, a high rise, an apartment block? If every architect thought that way, then I think you’d have a really scalable energy-saving solution. When you design energy and mass out of a building from day one, then you are doing the greatest thing you can do for the environment.

For me, it’s always one simple question: scale. When you get massive numbers of architects designing only green designs, and their clients demanding only green building designs, and corporations and their employees demanding to work only in green buildings, and consumers demanding only green cars and products, then it scales. Then the best of our system—which is all of this free-market experimentation—will just take over.

**Suburban sprawl is another reason for our wasteful energy consumption and environmental problems. Can we realistically contemplate a new live/work model—including more compact development—to reduce these problems?**

If I could wave my magic wand again, I'd have every real estate developer and local regulatory agency take a course called "Up, Not Out." Then, when they look at every question of land use and regulation, they will approach it with the mind-set of building up and not out. You get much more efficient energy usage out of the same footprint rather than starting ten new footprints out there. Then we'd stop the sprawl that means more energy use, more highways, more driving. We're really close. But we've got to change the market conditions so that all of these alternatives start to really scale in people's minds, because if they don't scale, they don't have an impact.

**Many cities in the United States—not just places like Portland, Oregon, and Seattle, Washington, but also cities like Scottsdale, Arizona, and Salt Lake City—are already mandating that their new public buildings be constructed according to green criteria.**

We not only need every architect to go to green school, we also need every public official and regulator to go as well so that they bring the hammer of a public policy to this.

**Will the real impetus for the mainstreaming of green buildings and more compact, energy-efficient development in the United States come only from government? What about corporations?**

I would say the business community is poised—for their own reasons right now—to really go down this road of green buildings, green appliances, green technologies, green building materials. Some of the most farsighted are already there.

I'm a big believer that you get real change in the world when the big players do the right thing for the wrong reasons. If you wait for all the big players to do the

right thing for the right reasons, you wait forever. So, if every shopping center or office building developer will go green because they think it's a great way to attract customers and lease their space, God bless them. I don't need them to do the right thing for the right reasons. I just need them to do the right thing. Wal-Mart now is really moving down this path of looking at much more sustainable criteria in how they source their products. When Wal-Mart makes a change like that, you've got to sit up and take notice.

**Wal-Mart has also opened two truly green supercenters—one in McKinney, Texas, outside Dallas and one in Aurora, Colorado, near Denver.**

If they change all their construction, imagine the footprint that has. Wal-Mart has been hammered recently, but they've got the whole green package.

**The shopping center industry can also be a change agent for more compact development.**

Absolutely. The most exciting thing going on there is that, basically, department stores are leaving because leases come up; there's consolidation in that industry. So, the industry is taking that empty space and building condos and office buildings.

**They are creating compact town centers with a broad mix of uses, yes?**

Right. I think that is the future of the shopping center industry in terms of where the whole energy question will mandate it to go. But it could also find a whole new lease on life by converting every shopping center into a town center with banks, and dry cleaners, government offices, residential, and office buildings. The infrastructure is already there. If I were an investor and I was looking at the shopping center industry, I'd be drooling right now.

**How would you convince the real estate industry to go green?**

You have some farsighted developers who are already listening to their tenants, who understand that being able to offer people a green building is an incredible branding opportunity that attracts younger workers in particular. But it's got to scale.

So, for the rest, I want to appeal to their profit motive. What would you rather do—compete with one another over the last scraps of open land around major cities, bid up the prices for those green spaces, or suddenly be able to look at a city and see it as a much richer supply to go up wherever your imagination will take you, and where your bankers will finance you? You know, when you go up, the risks are so much less, and it's a much more efficient opportunity. When you go out, you're competing for a much scarcer resource, having to pay a higher price for a much more risky return.

**What are some of the challenges you see to green going fully mainstream?**

The environmental movement. They got wrapped up in green as a personal virtue—"We are better because we are green"—and they've put off a lot of people, I think. That's why my whole goal for this year is to redefine green—to redefine it as not liberal, tree hugging, sissy, girly-man, and unpatriotic. I want to redefine green as geostrategic, geoeconomic, capitalist, and the most patriotic thing you can do. My mantra is that green is the new red, white, and blue. To name something is to own it. Right now the opponents have owned the word green. I want to retake it from them and redefine it in geopolitical, geostrategic, patriotic terms. Then it scales. **UL**

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(This month, *Urban Land* introduces "The Green Quotient." With green buildings nearing the tipping point of entering the mainstream and changing the built environment forever, Lockwood will interview leading and cutting-edge green thinkers, experts, and innovators on a wide variety of sustainability issues.)