**Thomas Friedman**

    The Soviet Union officially ceased to exist on New Years Eve of 1991, replaced in large by the Russian Federation. Such a transition as this was without precedent. The country itself was still overflowing with precedent, most of it terrible.

    In December of 2001, Thomas Friedman took a trip to Moscow in order that the American citizenry might be better informed regarding the nation with which it had previously been locked into a half-century struggle that had ended millions of lives and threatened a billion more. The resulting column began with two observations; it seemed that "sushi bars are opening all over (yes, from borscht to Big Macs to California-Kremlin rolls in one decade!) and so many people have cars now that traffic is permanently snarled."

    One could have perhaps ascribed such growth to the 1998 devaluation of the ruble, several years of significant increases in the price of oil and other Russian exports, or to the economic reforms that had been spearheaded largely by former Prime Minister Primakov a few years prior to Friedman's writing, but such things as those lack a certain thematic oomph. The Russians, Friedman explained, had finally gotten themselves a leader worth having in the transformative person of Vladimir Putin. "He's not a tougher Mikhail Gorbachev, or a more sober Boris Yeltsin," our columnist told us then. "He is Russia's first Deng Xiaoping - Mao's pragmatic successor who first told the Chinese that 'to get rich is glorious' and put in place the modernizing reforms to do it." If one was not already convinced that Putin is what Friedman said him to be, one had only to read the words that Putin would himself have written if Friedman were writing them for him, which is exactly what Friedman did:

That is Mr. Putin's basic message to Russians: ''For a decade, we've tried every bad idea, from default to devaluation to shock therapy. Now there's only one idea left: passing real reform legislation so we can get real investment to build a real modern economy. Because in this world, without a real economic foundation, you're nothing. So we're going to focus now on the only line that matters -- the line for money.''

    Having expressed the Russian president's views and intentions for him, the *New York Times*columnist was in the best position to summarize the significance of the fictional monologue he had just composed. And so he did that, too: "This is Putinism: From Das Kapital to DOScapital."

    It is fine to know such things or at least believe them, but faith without works is dead. Friedman therefore ends his column with the following call to action: "So keep rootin' for Putin - and hope that he makes it to the front of Russia's last line."

                                                                                                                          \*\*\*

    On New Years Eve of 1999, Boris Yelstin suddenly resigned, thereby elevating Vladimir Putin to the presidency of the Russian Federation. Within hours, Putin had signed into law his first decree, which protected Yeltsin and members of his family from any and all corruption probes.  
  
    Earlier that year, Yelstin had dismissed the nation's most highly-placed prosecutor, Yuri Skuratov, who himself had been investigating Yelstin and others close to him regarding various allegations of corruption; $600,000 had made it into the credit card accounts of the president's two daughters, for instance, having been put there by a Swedish firm which had previously won a lucrative government contract and afterwards had its offices raided by Swedish law enforcement.  
  
    A few days after the sacking, Russian state television ran a video clip of a man resembling Skurativ in bed with a pair of young whores. The following month, a press conference was held in which it was announced that the post-KGB intelligence agency, the FSB, had run an expert analysis on the tape and determined the man to indeed be the nation's former top prosecutor; it was also alleged that the prostitutes had been provided by leading figures of the Russian mafia. The press conference was presided over by two men: Interior Minister Sergei Stepashin and FSB chief Vladimir Putin.  
  
    On June 6th of that same year, Moscow-based journalist Jan Blomgren reported that top Kremlin leaders were planning to carry out a series of bombings in Moscow that would be attributed to Chechen terrorists.   
  
    On August 9th, Putin was elevated to one of the three First Deputy Prime Ministerships that existed under Yelstin, who let it be known that he intended Putin to eventually succeed him. A week later, Putin was elevated again, this time to the position of prime minister. Yevgeny Primakov, the extraordinarily popular and seemingly incorruptible former prime minister whom Yeltsin had fired from that position the previous May, was widely seen as the favorite to win the upcoming presidential election. In contrast, a major poll showed Putin receiving about two percent of the vote.  
  
    On September 9th, an explosion originating from the ground floor of an apartment building in Moscow killed 94 people and injured several hundred others. An anonymous call to thee Russian news agency Interfax characterized the strike as "our response to air strikes against peaceful villages in Chechnya and Dagestan;" the latter republic had been invaded by a small force of Islamist fighters led by Chechen militant and political figure Shamil Basayev during the previous month, prompting a successful military response by Russian forces. The apartment bombing was immediately attributed to Chechen terrorists.  
  
    On September 13th, another Moscow apartment was hit by a similar bomb, resulting in even greater casualties than the first. Gennadiy Seleznyov, speaker of the Duma, interrupted the legislative body's proceedings to announce that he had just been informed of another massive explosion that had destroyed a portion of an apartment building in Volgodonsk. No such attack had actually occurred.  
  
    On September 16th, another massive explosion destroyed a portion of an apartment building in Volgodonsk.   
  
    On September 22nd, residents of an apartment building in Ryazan called local police after noticing suspicious activity by three individuals who had arrived in a car with a partly-concealed license plate. A bomb squad discovered and diffused an explosive device which their gas sniffing equipment identified as employing hexagen, the same rare explosive used in the previous blasts. The surrounding area was evacuated for the evening; agents of the FSB arrived to pick up the explosives, which were packed into three large sugar sacks. On the following morning, government spokespersons announced that the Ryazan police had successfully prevented a terrorist attack.  
  
    Later in the day, police located the car, which had Moscow plates. Meanwhile, a long-distance telephone operator contacted police after overhearing a conversation in which the caller reported that local cops were sweeping the city; the voice on the other line provided the following advice: "Split up and each of you make your own way out." The number that had been called, it was discovered, was to the FSB offices in Moscow.  
  
    The three suspects were found and arrested within hours. All three of them were in possession of cards indicating their status as employees of the FSB, and all were soon released on orders from Moscow. The FSB announced that the foiled attack had in fact merely been a test conducted in order to determine the readiness of local investigators and congratulated the Ryazan police force for having passed with flying colors. Spokespersons for that agency claimed that the bags, now in FSB possession, had been filled only with sugar and dismissed the initial police tests indicating the presence of hexagen as an equipment malfunction.    
  
    On October 1st, Putin announced that Russian forces stationed in and around Dagestan had entered into Chechnya in an attempt to establish a buffer zone north of the Terek River by which to prevent further terrorist attacks originating from terrorists based in that country. As Russian attention came to focus more on the perceived military triumphs that would follow, and as Putin came to be most closely associated with those triumphs, the prime minister's popularity skyrocketed. Parliamentary elections in December saw major gains for those parties with whom Putin had publicly associated himself.  
          
    A few days after Putin's sudden elevation, the U.K.-based newspaper *The Independent*published excerpts from an interview with Sergei Stepashin in which the former interior minister and one-time prime minister - the same fellow who had presided over the sex tape press conference with Putin back in April - revealed that the plan to invade Chechnya "had been worked out in March" by key Kremlin figures including himself.  
  
    After easily winning the March 2000 presidential election, Putin set to work reorganizing Russia's institutions. He proposed that the Federal Council be "reformed" in order to provide himself with direct control of it, a move he described as being necessary due to widespread corruption within that governing body. In May of 2000, he successfully ended the independence of the nation's semi-autonomous state-level entities by dividing them into seven regional jurisdictions, each presided over in turn by one of his own appointees. By the end of the year, he had also managed to gain effective control over all three national television networks.  
  
    In December of 2001, Thomas Friedman travelled to Moscow and reported back that sushi restaurants had sprung up across the city and that more people seemed to own cars these days. He ascribed this economic resurgence to "Putinism."  
  
                                                                                                                           \*\*\*

    Thomas Friedman is among the most respected and widely-read American pundits working today, which is to say that he is among the most influential. His books crowd the bestseller lists. His lectures are much sought out and attended by the economic elite of every city on which he descends. If one goes home for Thanksgiving and waits around long enough, one will hear him praised by both elderly old Republicans and elderly old Democrats. If one meets one's girlfriend's upper middle-class father in his den or study, and if this room is composed largely of hardwood paneling or furniture or some such, one will find a copy of either *The World is Flat*or *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, though usually not both of them.

    Friedman's 2003 bestseller *Longitudes and Attitudes* - which is called that - begins, reasonably enough, with an introduction. The introduction is entitled, *Introduction: A Word Album*. You've probably heard of a photo album before, but what's all this about a word album?

    The columnist is happy to explain; the book is a composite of columns that he wrote mostly in 2001 and 2002, followed by a great deal of previously-unpublished notes from a similar timeframe. “My hope is that this collection and diary will constitute a 'word album' for the September 11th experience,” he writes. “There are many photo albums that people will collect to remind themselves, their children, or their grandchildren what it was like to experience 9/11. These columns and this diary are an attempt to capture and preserve in words, rather than pictures, some of those same emotions."

    This is the mentality of Friedman and his readership - that it would be reasonable to compose a personal photo album about September 11th and maybe keep it in a special drawer. Eventually, one's grandchild finds the album while looking for some plaything and, curious, begins flipping through the pages, asking what it all means. One tells him the story of how we had to run for shelter when the promise of a brave new world unfurled beneath a clear blue sky, perhaps with a romantic subplot thrown in. Afterwards, the child ambles off down the hall; one wonders if he understood it, the significance of it all. But then the child turns around, hesitates a moment, and says, "You were all so brave." Then he goes outside, possessed of new insights both simple and profound, regarding both his country and his grandparent. A single tear rolls down one's eye as one watches the child through the window, at play - or perhaps lost in thought? The credits roll.

                                                                                                                  \*\*\*

    Contempt for the media is now ubiquitous but largely misdirected to the extent that these criticisms are based on the view of the media as some sort of monolithic entity.

    The news media is the product of a million individuals, each subject to a million impulses. The cable TV news producer in the pink scarf doesn't understand what's to be debated on this  morning's program and doesn't care; she's in the green room talking to another girl from guest booking about the latter's old boyfriend and the former's pink scarf. The freelancer on deadline need not get the feature right if he can just get it done before the girl he's seeing arrives with a bottle of vodka. The publisher lives in the shadow of the father who bequeathed to him the most iconic paper in America; he knows that many see the paper's recent failures as deriving in part from his own; he knows what's said about him in the newsroom; he will prove his worth and his dynamism, he thinks to himself, when he gives William Kristol a column on the op-ed page. Maybe that was too specific.

    There is also, of course, the consumer. The woman who subscribes to *The New York Times*may or may not read the op-ed page, which is to say that she may or may not contribute to the paper's profitability - and thus its continued existence - based on what appears in that section. If she does read it, she is probably unaware that her favorite columnist has been demonstrably wrong about many of the most important issues facing both the U.S. and the world at large. The columnist's errors have been pointed out by several bloggers, but she has never heard of them, and at any rate does not bother with blogs as she subscribes to *The New York Times,*which is a very respected outlet and has been around for well over a century, whereas these blogs seem to have come out of nowhere. The columnist, she knows, has won several Pulitzers, has written a handful of bestselling books, is forever traveling to some far-off place. She has formed her foreign policy in large part from his writings as well as from the writings of other, similarly respected journalists, and she votes accordingly.

    When systems develop under a free society, no one is minding the store. Things happen because they happen, and things do not necessarily happen because they ought to, but rather because they do. The journalist is promoted to columnist, the consumer finds the columns to her liking, the columnist becomes more prominent, the publisher wants columnists of prominence, the editor is disinclined to cross the publisher and is most likely an idiot himself, the columnist writes more books, the consumer buys them, the columnist's prominence increases, and at some point we have entered into a situation whereby it is to the advantage of the publisher, the editor, and of course the columnist to maintain the status quo. Whether the columnist deserves any prominence whatsoever does not necessarily come up, particularly after such point as he reaches a critical mass of noteriety. Once a pundit is made, he is rarely unmade.

                                                                                                                \*\*\*

  Thomas Friedman is forever calling things things. He introduces his readers to the concept of 21st century trade thusly: "These global markets are made up of millions of investors moving money around the world with a click of a mouse. I call them the Electronic Herd, and this herd gathers in key global financial centers – such as Wall Street, Hong Kong, London, and Frankfurt – which I call the Supermarkets.” He elsewhere informs us that he is "a big believer in the idea of the super-story, the notion that we all carry around with us a big lens, a big framework, through which we look at the world, order events, and decide what is important and what is not."

   Friedman is correct that it is wholly necessary to conceptualize our data into understandable frameworks in order that we might better understand it. But the framework into which Friedman has forced the world is almost entirely dependent on wordplay, on convenient structural similarities between unrelated terminology, on rhymes and sayings. In 2000, the columnist composed a "super-story" regarding Colin Powell, whose nomination for secretary of state was expected to be confirmed later in the week.

One way to think about Mr. Powell is this: He spent thirty-five years of his life with America Onduty, as a military officer. But for the past two years he's been associated with America Online, as a member of the AOL corporate board. So which perspective will Mr. Powell bring to his job as Secretary of State – the perspective he gleaned with America Onduty during the cold war or the perspective he gleaned with America Online in the post-cold war?

        No serious discussion of Powell's record or policies follows; no new information is provided; it is never acknowledged that perhaps Powell is capable of thinking of the world in both the terms of a military officer and the terms of an information-age corporate advisory board member even though Powell has clearly served as both of these things. After all, Friedman has already coined the term America Onduty, contrasted it with the term America Online, and provided some allegedly clever distinction between the two mentalities represented thereby. We are informed, for instance, that those who fall under the category of 'America Onduty' enjoy the film *A Few Good Men*and see the world in terms of walls and nation states, because, you see, a character in that very film delivered some line to that effect and it seems to have made an impression on Friedman. Those associated with the 'America Online' mentality, by contrast, enjoy the film *You've Got Mail*because such people as these understand that the world is now integrated, and that the receiving of e-mail is a wonderful metaphor for the relatively recent dynamic whereby things occurring elsewhere now effect us all directly and with complete immediacy ("When a Russian financial crisis occurs, we've got mail"). Wrapping up the column, Friedman restates the question: "So which lens is Mr. Powell wearing – the one he developed with America Onduty, or with America Online?"

    Even such an insufferable framework as this would be of value to the extent that it truly assists in helping Friedman and his citizen-readers to understand Colin Powell and the mentalities that inform him, to draw useful conclusions from this understanding, and to make wiser and better-informed decisions in terms of the manner in which they vote, contribute, advocate, purchase, and otherwise interact with the various entities into which man's efforts are organized. If the public understanding is increased by dividing Powell's consciousness into that of America Online and some variant of that brand name and then characterizing in turn each of these mentalities by reference to concepts from popular films, then there's really no problem here other than that the whole America Onduty thing is gay.

    Suppose, however, that such frameworks as these do not seem to grant Friedman any particular insight into a particular subject, and in fact seem to lead him and his admirers astray. This might indicate to us that such frameworks are not actually useful, and that those who compose such frameworks may perhaps not be worth listening to, and that to the extent that they contribute to the national understanding they have damaged it in so doing, and that to this same extent they are responsible for the astounding errors that have been made in our country's recent past. Suppose all of that!

   Friedman's frameworks provides him with nothing. What he does is fine for writing a reader-friendly column in a pinch, but his cute semantic tricks do not translate into accuracy as much as we might hope that they would. He was not able to provide any useful predictions regarding Powell, for instance, although he certainly tried, announcing in another column that "it was impossible to imagine Mr. Bush ever challenging or overruling Mr. Powell on any issue." Moreover:

Mr. Powell is three things Mr. Bush is not - a war hero, worldly wise and beloved by African-Americans. That combination gives him a great deal of leverage. It means he can never be fired. It means Mr. Bush can never allow him to resign in protest over anything.

    Of course, Powell did indeed leave the administration under circumstances that we may ascertain to involve either firing, resignation, or some typically Washingtonian combination thereof - after having first been overruled by Bush on several decisions involving the most significant question of that presidency. To Friedman's credit, his failed prediction was based on the standard media narrative of the time as well as popular assumptions made solely on appearances, which is to say that it was sourced.

    Elsewhere in this column, Friedman notes that it "will be interesting to see who emerges to balance Mr. Powell's perspective." That person, who ended up not so much balancing Powell's perspective as smothering it in its crib, was Cheney. The vice president was not exactly a "war hero," "worldly wise," or "beloved by African-Americans," which is to say that he was in many ways Powell's opposite number - which is to say in turn that Friedman's assumptions regarding what sort of person would have the greatest degree of influence over Bush were not just wrong, but almost the exact opposite of the case.

                                                                                                                 \*\*\*

    As noted, Friedman wrote his sushi-oriented pro-Putin column in December of 2001. In March of that same year, Friedman had written another column on Russia in which he summarized our post-Cold War espionage efforts by way of the following framework:

What is it that we and Russians are actually spying on each other about? This whole espionage affair seems straight out of *Mad*magazine's [sic] "Spy vs. Spy" cartoon. The Russians are spying on us to try to find out why we are spying on them. I mean, to be honest, is there anything about the Russians today you want to know?

    Ha! Ha! I guess not!

    We are here confronted with one of two possibilities: either Friedman does not really mean what he appears to mean by this, or he does. If it is the former, then he is wasting our time with nonsense. If it is the latter, he is doing something even worse - he is telling everyone who will listen that it is wholly absurd for the U.S. intelligence community to be collecting information on Russia's government, its societal trends, and its military. In fact, he is indeed telling us the latter, as the next paragraph makes clear:

Their navy is rusting in port. Their latest nuclear submarine is resting on the bottom of the ocean. We know they're selling weapons to Iran and Iraq, because they told us. And their current political system, unlike Communism, is not exactly exportable - unless you think corruption, chaos, and KGB rule amount to an ideology. Khruschev threatened to bury us. Putin threatens to corrupt us.

    This person - this extraordinarily influential, respected, recognized, widely-read person - had decided that there was simply no good reason to continue spying on the Russians. Having made such an unusual assertion, Friedman next notes the following conundrum: "How you pull a country like Russia away from becoming an angry, failed state, acting out on the world stage, and make it a responsible member of the world community has no easy formula."

    We have here two assertions, then. Allow me to organize them into a list:

1. We have no good reason to be covertly gathering intelligence on Russia.

2. Unless it is somehow "pull[ed] away" from doing so, Russia is set to become "an angry, failed state, acting out on the world stage."

    Remember that these assertions are both made in the space of a single column.

    The especially attentive reader will perhaps have noticed something peculiar about the excerpt above, in which Friedman contrasts the Soviet era to our current one. "Khruschev threatened to bury us," he wrote. "Putin threatens to corrupt us." A few months later, of course, Friedman was hailing Putin as the impetus of positive reform for whom we all ought to be "rootin'."

    In 2008, the large, adversarial, and nuclear-equipped nation upon which we apparently need not bother to spy launched a military incursion into Georgia. Friedman responded with a column entitled "What Did We Expect?" that begins thusly:

If the conflict in Georgia were an Olympic event, the gold medal for brutish stupidity would go to the Russian prime minister, Vladimir Putin. The silver medal for bone-headed recklessness would go to Georgia’s president, Mikheil Saakashvili, and the bronze medal for rank short-sightedness would go to the Clinton and Bush foreign policy teams.

   The bronze medal winners, in this case, had advocated NATO expansion after the end of the Cold War, whereas Friedman and other leading foreign policy experts, Friedman explains, had opposed such a move on the grounds that it might antagonize the Russians without providing the West with any particularly crucial benefits.

The humiliation that NATO expansion bred in Russia was critical in fueling Putin’s rise after Boris Yeltsin moved on.

     Let's make a little timeline here:

**December 2001**: Friedman hails Putin as a great reformer for whom we all ought to be "rootin'."

**August 2008:**Friedman mocks two presidential administrations for having accidentally "fueled" Putin's rise to power, accusing the foreign policy teams in question of "rank short-sightedness."

                                                                                                              \*\*\*

    Vladimir Putin opposed all inquiries into the Ryazan "training excercise." Legislators belonging to his de facto political party, United Russia, each voted in favor of sealing all records pertaining to the incident for 75 years; two investigations proposed in the Duma were shot down by way of similar party-line votes. Two Duma members who had served on an independent committee created to look into the matter were likewise shot down by assassins in 2003. Ooooh, play on words! Sorry.

    After revealing that the basement of one of the bombed buildings had been rented by an FSB officer, and promising to reveal further information in court, lawyer Mikhail Trepashkin was arrested on charges of illegal firearm possession and revealing state secrets. Exiled tycoon and former Yeltsin administration official Boris Berezovsky held a press conference in London in 2002 during which he alleged that the bombings had been a false flag operation carried out to redirect public anger from Yeltsin and his inner circle towards Chechnya and to provide a justification for the re-taking of that territory.

    In 2002, Putin finally managed to implement his intended reworking of the Federation Council in order to strip it of its independence; earlier opposition was squashed when he threatened to open criminal investigations directed at certain key members. The elections of 2003 and 2004 were deemed by number of international monitors to have been the most undemocratic in post-Soviet history; these and other NGOs also complained of harassment by the authorities as well as by unknown parties. The nation's television networks remained under Kremlin control, and independent journalists critical of Putin and his allies began receiving unusually high numbers of death threats and deaths. The war in Chechnya was pursued with brutal enthusiasm, leaving some 100,000 people dead.

    In May of 2004, Thomas Friedman made the following awkwardly-worded announcement: "I have a 'Tilt Theory of History.'" The particular tilt theory of history in which he was apparently in possession had provided him with a framework by which to assess the past, present, and future of Russia:

Is Vladimir Putin's Russia today a Jeffersonian democracy? Of course not. But it is a huge nation that was tilted in the wrong direction and is now tilted in the right direction. My definition of a country tilted in the right direction is a country where there is enough free market, enough rule of law, enough free press, speech and exchange of ideas that the true agent of change in history - which is something that takes nine months and 21 years to develop, i.e. a generation - can grow up, plan its future and realize its potential.

    In 2007, Friedman finally noticed that Russia could no longer even be termed a democracy and promptly wrote a column to this effect. I will spare the reader a long account of the unseemly events that occurred within that nation between the time of Friedman's 2004 column and the 2007 column in which he finally admits to Putin's autocracy; suffice to say that the political situation in Russia continued to degenerate to such a great extent that even Thomas Friedman eventually managed to figure out that something was wrong.

                                                                                                            \*\*\*

    Friedman spent much of 2001 in contemplation of technology. *The New York Times*sent him off to the Davos World Economic Forum in January of that year; Friedman sent back a column entitled "Cyber-Serfdom," announcing therein that the internet would soon be replaced by the "Evernet," itself the next step in the trend towards greater connectivity. But was humanity walking the dog, or was the dog walking humanity? One might well ask!

    2005 loomed large. By that year, Friedman explained, "we will see a convergence of wireless technology, fiber optics, software applications, and next-generation Internet switches, IP version 6, that will permit anything with electricity to have a web address and run off the Internet - from your bedroom lights to your toaster to your pacemaker... People will boast, 'I have twenty-five Web addresses in my house; how many do you have? My wired refrigerator automatically reorders milk. How about yours?'” This thing that didn't end up coming anywhere close to happening was of great concern to the columnist. "I still can't program my VCR; how am I going to program my toaster?" Much of the column was presumably cribbed from an Andy Rooney monologue circa 1998.

    Later that year, there occurred an unprecedented alinear attack on U.S. commercial and military assets. This shifted Friedman's lens back towards the Middle East, where he would begin sifting the sand in search of super-stories. Our protagonist knew the Middle East well, having won two Pulitzers in recognition of the reporting he did from that region throughout the '80s. Back then, the system had identified him as worthy of advancement, and today it would call upon him to inform the citizenry's decisions on a matter of extraordinary importance. The future of the United States and that of several other nations was now, to some small but measurable extent, in the hands of Thomas Friedman.

                                                                                                                  \*\*\*

    It was a month into the war in Afghanistan. "A month into the war in Afghanistan," Friedman wrote, "the hand-wringing has already begun over how long this might last."

    Hand-wringing is something that old ladies do. They are always wringing their little hands, worrying themselves over some matter that is actually well under control. Friedman, confident that Colin Powell had things under control over at the White House, was not so neurotic as to concern himself with the potential length of a military intervention in such a place as Afghanistan. "This is Afghanistan we're talking about," he explained. "Check the map. It's far away."

    While others wrung their hands due to their misinformed takes on the situation, Friedman expressed doubts based on his knowledge of ongoing events - though not significant doubts, of which he had few. "I have no doubt, for now, that the Bush team has a military strategy for winning a long war," he explained, although one element of the plan did strike him as worrisome. "I do worry, though, whether it has a public relations strategy for sustaining a long war.” Obviously the Powell administration would win in Afghanistan, but would President Bush and his top advisors be too busy winning wars and otherwise attending to their duties to give any thought to influencing the opinion of voters?

    Just in case, Friedman utilized subsequent columns in defending the administration's aforementioned "military strategy for winning a long war":

Think of all the nonsense written in the press – particularly the European and Arab media – about the concern for 'civilian casualties' in Afghanistan. It turns out that many of those Afghan 'civilians' were praying for another dose of B-52s to liberate them from the Taliban, casualties or not. Now that the Taliban are gone, Afghans can freely fight out, among themselves, the war of ideas for what sort of society they want.

    As seen, Friedman in those days took to using the terms "civilian" and "civilian casualties" in scare quotes, as if such terminology does not really apply. As dead as these Afghans may be, they do not really mind being killed or maimed - this, at least, is how it "turns out," as if Friedman is suddenly privy to some new information that confirms all of this. In the space of two sentences, then, the most respected columnist in the country has attempted to imply the inaccuracy of demonstrably accurate and crucial elements of the question under discussion and has followed this up with a significant assertion regarding that question based on some unspecified new information that plainly doesn't exist. All of this is followed by an announcement that "the Taliban are gone."

                                                                                                                      \*\*\*

    In April of 2003, Friedman introduced a new framework by which the American people might better understand the events of the past few years:

Wars are always clarifying, and what this war clarified most was the degree to which there were actually three bubbles that burst at the beginning of the 21st century: a stock market bubble, a corporate ethics bubble and a terrorism bubble.

The stock market bubble we're all too familiar with. When it burst three years ago, millions of people all over the world were made more sober investors. The second bubble was the corporate governance bubble -- a buildup of ethical lapses by management that burst with Enron and Arthur Andersen, producing a revolution in boardroom practices.

    Bubbles being bubbles, and these bubbles having burst, Friedman determined that the problem represented by each bubble had thereby become less of a problem. The pertinent lessons had been learned, most especially by Friedman, who identified a common characteristic found among the three troublesome bubbles:

Like the stock market and corporate bubbles, the terrorism bubble was the product of a kind of temporary insanity, in which basic norms were ignored and excessive behavior was justified by new theories.

    Being temporary, the insanity was now presumably over. The bubbles had all burst.

    A column in which three bubbles burst makes for a fine column indeed, the number three being of special significance to the human mind: thesis, antithesis, synthesis; Father, Son, Holy Spirit; the tripod; primes. It generally takes three elements to establish a pattern, and thus it is that in comedy, one tends to find groupings of threes - one sees a pattern being formed but the pattern is disrupted just as it is about to be established for certain, and therein lies the humor. One lists this mundane thing, this other similar thing, and OH SHIT THIS FAR OUT THING YOU DIDN'T EXPECT!

    Three bubbles it is, then. And they must be bubbles, and the bubbles must be of a singular nature - each must have expanded by way of, in this case, "a kind of temporary insanity." Each must have done so in a similar time frame. Having been bubbles, each must have been expanding previous to their popping. Having popped, each must now be on the steep decline. The resulting framework dictates that the Enron scandal will be followed by a period of renewed responsibility in terms of corporate governance, that the "dot com crash" will prompt investors across the globe to reign in their exuberance, and that the worst of the terrorist strikes are now over.

    If we step outside the framework and into reality, we find that the world's markets continued to operate by way of the same complex amalgamation of investor confidence, concern, anxiety, and especially exuberance that had always determined such things. The "revolution in boardroom practices" was not so revolutionary as to prevent the nation's financial institutions from collapsing so magnificently as to entirely eclipse the petty Enron debacle. By any measure other than that of American media attention, terrorism increased in the years ahead.

  There is nothing wrong with frameworks. Our data must indeed be integrated into such things in order that we might make better use of it. It is of no help for us to know every little thing that ever happened throughout the Roman Empire if we cannot conceptualize these little things into larger groupings. And so we look at records of land sales and determine with confidence that at some point, a sizable portion of small landholders sold off their property to larger farming interests until such time as the cities were flooded with landless plebeians. We may call this a super-story if we're so inclined; looking back on the subsequent years of imperial affairs, we can even characterize this whole phenomenon as a bubble that eventually popped with the onset of urban food riots - but only if there were considerably fewer food riots afterwards.

    Let us say that I am a Roman pundit named Barriticus and I am living few years after the initial food riots have occurred. When I give my magnificent oration after first having made love to several high-born young ladies of the sort who hardly cut with water the wine they serve at table, would it be right for me to characterize the earlier food riots and the circumstances that led to them as being best thought of as a bubble that has popped? Only if there were good reason to do so, such as if the emperor had passed an edict barring small landholders from selling their plots or had arranged for sufficient levels of public grain distribution or both. If, on the other hand, I am unable to determine with any certainty that this phenomenon will not just repeat itself over and over again through subsequent years, then I ought not call it any such thing, as this would give a false impression to the citizenry about a matter of extraordinary importance; they will be left believing that the problem has been addressed and that they need not force the state's hand or alter their own individual plans for the future. That was kind of a strange example.

    Friedman fooled himself into expecting the worst of the terrorist phenomenon to be over because he was taken in by his own thematics. This de facto prediction did not derive so much from rigorous analysis as it did from the purely stylistic desirability of working three bubbles into a column instead of two or four, and similarly the rhetorical symmetry of describing all three of them as bubbles instead of making one of them a square and another the color blue and another a sex act of some sort.   
  
    It is not enough to be wary of forcing a story into an inappropriate framework to the detriment of accuracy; if one is to fulfill one's duty as a commentator, one must also be a competent observer of the world and its workings. It also helps if one is not so emotionally committed to some emotionally satisfying narrative that one is prevented from realizing that the narrative in question is ridiculous.   
  
    On May 30th, 2003, Friedman appeared on the Charlie Rose program to explain the wisdom of the administration's current strategy in the Middle East.

I think [the invasion of Iraq] was unquestionably worth doing, Charlie. I think that, looking back, I now certainly feel I understand more what the war was about . . . . What we needed to do was go over to that part of the world, I'm afraid, and burst that bubble. We needed to go over there basically, and take out a very big stick, right in the heart of that world, and burst that bubble. . . .   
  
And what they needed to see was American boys and girls going from house to house, from Basra to Baghdad, and basically saying: which part of this sentence do you not understand? You don't think we care about our open society? . . . .   
  
Well. Suck. On. This.   
  
That, Charlie, was what this war was about.   
  
We could have hit Saudi Arabia. It was part of that bubble. Could have hit Pakistan. We hit Iraq because we could. That's the real truth.

                                                                                                                    \*\*\*

     As preparations for the Babylon expedition were underway in February of 2003, Friedman once again found himself in Davos, Switzerland, where a meal taken at the Hotel Schweizerhof was interrupted by an intriguing discovery:

At the bottom of the lunch menu was a list of the countries that the lamb, beef and chicken came from. But next to the meat imported from the U.S. was a tiny asterisk, which warned that it might contain genetically modified organisms -- G.M.O.'s.

My initial patriotic instinct was to order the U.S. beef and ask for it "tartare," just for spite. But then I and my lunch guest just looked at each other and had a good laugh.

    It would seem that, despite the fact that the management of a hotel catering to an international clientele had decided to warn customers that some American meat is prepared in such a way as that they might prefer not to eat it, one could also find Europeans acting in an unhealthy manner:

But practically everywhere we went in Davos, Europeans were smoking cigarettes -- with their meals, coffee or conversation -- even though there is indisputable scientific evidence that smoking can kill you... So pardon me if I don't take seriously all the Euro-whining about the Bush policies toward Iraq - for one very simple reason: It strikes me as deeply unserious.

    It does not occur to Friedman that one may find similarly warning-marked menus in the U.S. and that Americans are themselves proverbial for their own unhealthy habits; he has found his anecdote, and thus European objections are "deeply unserious." Friedman does acknowledge that there exist sound reasons to oppose the upcoming military experiment, though he also adds an important qualifier:

As I said, there are serious arguments against the war in Iraq, but they have weight only if they are made out of conviction, not out of expedience or petulance - and if they are made by people with real beliefs, not identity crises.

   Later that year, Friedman appeared on NPR to give yet another live rendition of how the Middle East was this big bubble that we had to pop with a stick by invading Iraq:

And the message was, 'Ladies and gentlemen, which part of this sentence don't you understand? We are not going to sit back and let people motivated by that bubble threaten an open society we have built over 250 years. We really like our open society. We mean no ill to you, OK? But we are not going to sit back and let that bubble fundamentally distort our open society and imprison us.'

And that's what I believe ultimately this war was about. And guess what? People there got the message, OK, in the neighborhood. This is a rough neighborhood, and sometimes it takes a 2-by-4 across the side of the head to get that message.

    To Friedman's credit, he didn't start delivering deranged macho dialogues about how the U.S. was now going from house to house telling people to suck on things and hitting the Middle East upside the metaphorical head with a similarly metaphorical two-by-four until it appeared that the war had worked out well. During the run-up to that conflict, his commentary was notable for its equivocation; he dedicated one column to telling anti-war liberals why they might be wrong to oppose the war and the next column column to telling conservatives why they might be wrong to favor it.

    Still, one could watch him develop his Middle East as Bubble framework throughout the pre-war period. Liberals, he wrote, "need to take heed. Just by mobilizing for war against Iraq, the U.S. has sent this region a powerful message: We will not leave you alone anymore to play with matches, because the last time you did, we got burned." It's not clear to which period Friedman here refers in which the U.S. left the Middle East "alone" and was burned as a result. The U.S. was instrumental in reshaping the Levant by assisting in the creation of Israel in 1948, remaining heavily involved in that country's affairs forever afterwards; engaged in covert and entirely amoral operations in Iran throughout the 1950s, during which it assisted in the toppling of the country's democratically-elected president and supported the installation of the shah, whom it backed until the fellow's death; it sent Marines to Lebanon, funded Islamist fighters in Afghanistan, sold weapons to Iraq, and made secret deals with Iran throughout the 1980s; it jumped right into the fray when Iraq annexed the little kingdom of Kuwait and threatened to invade the theocratic monstrosity of Saudi Arabia; it enforced a strict regimen of economic sanctions against Iraq which is credibly estimated to have resulted in the deaths of over 100 of that country's children each day; two of its recent presidents maintained close, almost familial relations and lucrative business arrangements with the same royal family responsible for the de facto enslavement of Saudi Arabia's women, even as both harangued other nations with free female populations about human rights; and it has for decades maintained military bases across the region. Before all of this, America's closest allies in Europe ruled over the various Middle Eastern populations for generations and without anyone's consent. The Middle East had not been so much "left alone to play with matches" as it had been burned with cigarettes.

    As the war's fortunes ebbed and flowed, Friedman degenerated back into what might be politely referred to as "nuance." Liberal bloggers began to notice that Friedman's televised and print advice to the American people almost invariably involved waiting for another six months or so, during which time everything would presumably become apparent:

We’ve teed up this situation for Iraqis, and I think the next six months really are going to determine whether this country is going to collapse into three parts or more or whether it’s going to come together.

There's only one thing one can say for sure today: you won't need to wait much longer for the tipping point.

What we’re gonna find out, Bob, in the next six to nine months is whether we have liberated a country or uncorked a civil war.

I think we’re in the end game now. I think we’re in a six-month window here where it’s going to become very clear and this is all going to pre-empt I think the next congressional election - that’s my own feeling - let alone the presidential one.

This is crunch time. Iraq will be won or lost in the next few months.

During the next six months, the world is going to be treated to two remarkable trials in Baghdad. It is going to be the mother of all split screens. On one side, you're going to see the trial of Saddam Hussein. On the other side, you're going to see the trial of the Iraqi people. That's right, the Iraqi people will also be on trial - for whether they can really live together without the iron fist of the man on the other side of the screen.

    In 2006, Friedman finally got tired of waiting around and began calling for a military withdrawal from Iraq.

                                                                                                                 \*\*\*

   I'm running out of segues and paragraph transitions at this point. I'm also increasingly irritated by my own writing style.

    Here's some stupid thing that Friedman wrote back in 2002:

September 11 happened because America had lost its deterrent capability. We lost it because for 20 years we never retaliated against, or brought to justice, those who murdered Americans.

    This is nonsense. We bombed Libya and killed Gaddafy's two-year-old daughter in response to the country's apparent involvement in the Berlin disco attack that killed two U.S. troops. Those responsible for the World Trade Center car bombing in 1993 were caught, sentenced, and imprisoned. After the African embassy bombings, Clinton launched some 75 cruise missiles against targets associated with bin Laden. In fact, Friedman even notes this himself in the introduction to *Longitudes and Attitudes,*where he writes:

Osama bin Laden declared war on the United States in the late 1990s. After he organized the bombing of two American embassies, the U.S. Air Force retaliated with a cruise missile attack on his bases in Afghanistan as though he were another nation-state.

    Let's take a closer look at these two assertions:

...for 20 years we never retaliated against, or brought to justice, those who murdered Americans.

... the U.S. Air Force retaliated with a cruise missile attack...

...we never retaliated...

... retaliated with a cruise missile attack...

... never retaliated...

... retaliated...

    So, this other time, Friedman is chastised by a Chinese fellow for chastising the Chinese fellow about the extraordinary levels of pollution being produced by his fellow Chinese fellows. The Chinese fellow was of the position that China can hardly be blamed for following in the footsteps of those Western nations that had themselves dirtied the world via their own industrial transitions:

Eventually, I decided that the only way to respond was with some variation of the following: “You’re right. It’s your turn. Grow as dirty as you want. Take your time. Because I think America just needs five years to invent all the clean-power technologies you Chinese are going to need as you choke to death on pollution. Then we’re going to come over here and sell them all to you, and we are going to clean your clock — how do you say ‘clean your clock’ in Chinese? — in the next great global industry: clean power technologies. So if you all want to give us a five-year lead, that would be great. I’d prefer 10. So take your time. Grow as dirty as you want."

    This is basically the clever and nationalistically aggressive thing that Friedman wishes he had said to some Chinese guy he once met. Also notice how much longer this goes on than it should.

"How do you say 'clean your clock' in Chinese?" Yeah! Take that! Semper Fi!

    Which reminds me that Friedman once ended a column with the words "Semper Fi." I can't even remember which one now. I wish I had been there to see Thomas Friedman wrapping up his column with the words "Semper Fi" and maybe staring at the screen for a few moments afterwards and then sighing in satisfaction.

    Speaking of China, sort of, in 2000 Friedman decided that the regime would soon find itself threatened by a major unemployment crisis caused by an influx of American wheat and sugar into that country. In fact, American wheat and sugar failed to make any inroads whatsoever, while Chinese unemployment figures remained at generally low levels for about seven years.

    Here are some actual sentences Friedman has written:

All the shah’s horses and all the shah’s men, couldn’t put his regime back together again.

Well, there is one thing we know about necessity: it is the mother of invention.

What if it’s telling us that the whole growth model we created over the last 50 years is simply unsustainable economically and ecologically and that 2008 was when we hit the wall — when Mother Nature and the market both said: “No more.”

I confess. I’m a sucker for free and fair elections.

No, something is going on in the Middle East today that is very new. Pull up a chair; this is going to be interesting.

    This last example blows my little mind. Why the fuck would you tell your readers to "pull up a chair"? How is the reader supposed to react to the phrase, "pull up a chair?" "Okay, Tom."  
  
    Fuck Thomas Friedman and his readers. I'm going to serve all of my readers some imaginary tea. We're all going to have an imaginary underwater tea party and we're not going to invite Friedman or his degenerate little enablers at *The New York Times*. Would you like a cup of imaginary tea? If you do not take a cup of this tea I shall become ever so cross with you!