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OFF THE SHELF

A Call to Action, for Earth and Profit

By STEPHEN KOTKIN

IN his role as a cheerleader for globalization, Thomas L. Friedman has always been aware that there are environmental consequences. But now, with “Hot, Flat, and Crowded” (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, $27.95), he embraces going green not just as a national security imperative but also as an economic El Dorado.

Lacerating the ubiquitous, feel-good, magaziney “205 easy ways to save the earth,” Mr. Friedman, a columnist for The New York Times, exhorts sacrifice to stem rapidly accelerating biodiversity loss. He wants a green revolution as part of nothing less than “nation building” in America.

He also says that renewable energy driven by technology plays to American strengths: great laboratories and entrepreneurs, a start-up culture of risk and reward. If the United States gets serious, it will dominate, creating not just jobs but also whole new industries.

Mr. Friedman’s first book on globalization, “The Lexus and the Olive Tree” (1999), was translated into 27 languages; his second, “The World Is Flat” (2005), has sold more than two million copies. So “Hot, Flat, and Crowded” raises outsized expectations. Admirers and critics will have a field day with his take-no-prisoners punditry. Either you agree with him or you wear a dunce cap.

Our planet is becoming hot because flat (globalization, in Mr. Friedman’s lingo) is meeting crowded (ever more people are joining the resource-consuming middle class). As of 1950, all world economic activity was valued at $7 trillion, he says, but now that much in new growth takes place each decade. He quotes scientists and representatives of nongovernmental organizations, as well as some corporate executives, urgently warning of the need to avoid a doubling of carbon in the atmosphere over the next few decades — the course we are on.

Mr. Friedman has an unabashedly American-centric solution: the United States can regain its national purpose and save the world via green innovation. This can happen, he says, if Americans recognize — in the words of John Gardner, founder of Common Cause — “a series of great opportunities disguised as insoluble problems.” Overflowing landfills? Devise products with materials that are more easily reusable, and rack up profits.

The book opens self-referentially, quoting a reader commenting to the author about one of his columns. The content and method will be familiar to Mr. Friedman’s legions of readers: source, anecdote, pop metaphor. Repeat point. In italics. The unfamiliar reader should prepare for hyperbole, neologisms and aphorisms. “Affluenza.” “Code Green.” “The new Energy Climate Era (E.C.E.).” “We’ve already hit the
iceberg.” We’re “the proverbial frog in the pail on the stove” (boiled to death after failing to jump out because the temperature rose only incrementally). “We are the flood, we are the asteroid. We had better learn how to be the ark.”

Relentless, the text can also be trenchant. “Our addiction to oil,” he writes, “makes global warming warmer, petrodictators stronger, clean air dirtier, poor people poorer, democratic countries weaker, and radical terrorists richer.” The magnitude of the challenge requires government action, he argues, but government should act so as to spur the greater power of the marketplace. He notes that government shapes the market all the time — think home-mortgage tax breaks — and has long underwritten profligate oil consumption.

Instead, he argues, Washington should shift current incentives by making the cost of hydrocarbons higher, with new taxes (and a price floor), and by making the cost of alternative fuels lower, with tax breaks, until clean industries achieve scale and can compete without subsidies. To Americans who abhor talk of higher taxes, Mr. Friedman asks, would you rather shell out to the Saudi, Russian and Venezuelan treasuries, as you now do, or to the United States Treasury?

Mr. Friedman assures us that if America spends to get clean, others will follow suit — and not claim a license to continue polluting. In a chapter dedicated to China, he writes that a still-unclean United States would give China an excuse to repeat America’s dirty-fuels economic growth, and that if China does not go green, its “emissions and appetites will nullify everything everyone else does to save the earth.”

Finally, Mr. Friedman slams the climate-change skeptics, but also slyly observes that “if climate change is a hoax, it is the most wonderful hoax ever perpetrated on the United States of America.” By responding, America would become immensely more efficient, cleaner and leaner.

When the book tries to explain why this is not already happening, it is less compelling. “If the right things to do are so obvious to the people who know the most about the energy business,” Mr. Friedman asks, “why can’t we put them in place?” His too-pat answer: omnipotent old-industry lobbies and dumb political leaders.

“I am convinced,” he writes in populist guise, “that the public is ready; they’re ahead of the politicians.” So special interests and venal politicos make consumers live in supersized homes and drive gas guzzlers? Who’s reading all those easy-ways-to-go-green articles that he seems to regard as self-indulgent?

One up-and-running energy alternative supported by the government, corn-based ethanol, has costs that may exceed its benefits. But instead of confronting this apparent cautionary tale head on, Mr. Friedman questions biofuels in a mere footnote.

A few anecdotes are long enough to qualify as illuminating case studies, like one about GE Transportation’s energy-efficient locomotives, a hit in emerging markets. The book’s best example may be First Solar Inc., which was founded in Ohio and invented thin-film solar technology, which is cheaper to use and works in more varied climates than regular silicon solar panels. But First Solar found a more
hospitable public-policy environment and built its new factory abroad, in the former East Germany.

“A vision without resources is a hallucination,” goes a Pentagon saying quoted by Mr. Friedman, who adds that “right now we are having a green hallucination.” But he remains an optimist: the money is there to be made.