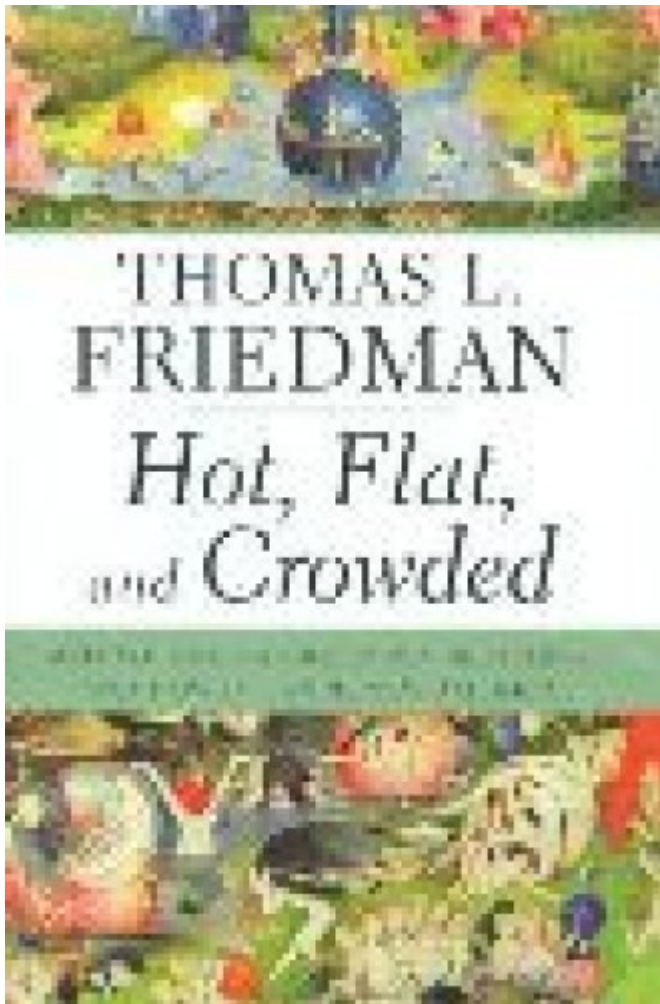


Hot, Flat, and Crowded: Why We Need a Green Revolution—and How It Can Renew America

reviewed by [Cindy Crosby](#) in the [February 24, 2009](#) issue

In Review



Hot, Flat, and Crowded: Why We Need a Green Revolution—and How It Can Renew America

Thomas L. Friedman

Farrar, Straus & Giroux

In the charming but apocalyptic movie *WALL•E*, Disney-Pixar spins the story of a cute robot set against a grim backdrop of a future Earth dominated by trash and pollution, uninhabitable for plants, animals or people. Unable to live in a world that can't sustain life, bored and bloated humans mark centuries on a sterile space station. The message is clear: We blew it when charged with caring for the planet, and once you blow it, it's tough to fix the mess you leave behind.

New York Times foreign affairs columnist Thomas Friedman believes we are on the brink of some *WALL•E*-sized trouble in our world. Blending soberness about the scale of the challenges ahead with an energizing optimism that change is possible, in *Hot, Flat, and Crowded* he outlines a course correction for the U.S. to take leadership of a "green revolution." If the U.S. does so, Friedman contends, it can jump-start the economy, forestall climate change, alleviate poverty, revitalize ecosystems and restore the nation's moral leadership. Big challenges.

It's tough to know what is more chilling as Friedman gives us the bad news—the tragic outline of where the U.S. went wrong after 9/11, our oil addiction, the rise of petrodictatorships, or the continuing loss of biodiversity and the influence of that loss on world poverty. All of these are interconnected, Friedman writes.

His bad news is balanced by the possibility of change. Friedman spends four chapters discussing what a system of clean power, energy efficiency and energy conservation would look like and how we might bring it about. Clean energy, he asserts, could be the next big global industry. "We could do for solar and wind what China did for tennis shoes and toys." Another benefit: a green agenda would create jobs as Americans retrofit their homes and make changes in the goods they use.

Published last September, on the eve of the financial meltdown and the U.S. presidential elections, the book conveys Friedman's faith in the marketplace and in the U.S. to lead out in making the changes. He believes that a combination of innovation, regulation and education is needed for a green agenda to work. To make innovation cost-effective, he proposes a number of options (taxes on "dirty" energy, for example) that will initially cost money but will eventually change the energy framework we live in.

Just as we need to develop a system for clean energy, Friedman urges us to develop a global strategy for the preservation of biodiversity. "Noah had one ark to save the

world's biodiversity in his day, and we need a million of them to save the biodiversity in ours." By arks, Friedman means ecosystems, each championed by a "Noah," or community representative. He emphasizes that a truly green agenda would mandate that these ecosystems make life better for people, as well as for flora and fauna.

A three-time Pulitzer Prize winner, Friedman has written four previous best sellers: *From Beirut to Jerusalem* (1989), *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (1999), *Longitudes and Attitudes* (2002), and *The World Is Flat* (2005). His conversational style allows him to convey complicated concepts and big-picture thinking in a way that resonates with the reader. Friedman has the ability to wrap his arms around the gigantic, seemingly Sisyphean task of changing the world and to convince readers that they can be a part of the change. He is a master of sound bites ("We have to go from 'this is the best we can do' to 'this is how we are going to do it best'"), although at 448 pages, *Hot, Flat, and Crowded* is a doorstop and requires some concentrated reading. Friedman's pragmatic solutions are infused with enthusiasm, vision and a passion that bubbles through so powerfully that one gets the feeling that if he were in the room, the roof might blow off.

The book is richer for Friedman's personal anecdotes and imaginary scenes, whether he's writing about sitting in a community meeting in Indonesia's Batang Toru forest or envisioning an energy-efficient future with household power from a "smart grid," cars that are "rolling energy units," and workplaces with "net zero" energy usage. Friedman also seems to enjoy educating his readers—explaining, for example, how our electricity is delivered and paid for.

Christians who are not persuaded about the value of a green agenda would do well to read Friedman on poverty. Ninety percent of the people living in extreme poverty around the world today are directly dependent on forests for their food, fuel, shelter and fresh water, Friedman writes (citing biodiversity expert Michael Totten), and most of these people live in rural areas. Not only is a green agenda crucial for poor people's basic needs, Friedman shows, good environmental practices reduce conflict within countries over water and natural resources, increasing chances for peace.

One of the difficulties of moving people toward a green agenda, Friedman notes, is that the people most affected by our decisions are not yet born. He calls for an ethic of stewardship and for people to think long-term. In order for life to remain—at the very least—the same for future generations, Americans will have to sacrifice and

make changes.

An additional chapter will be added to a forthcoming second edition of *Hot, Flat, and Crowded*. In an interesting integration of Internet and print, Friedman has invited readers to suggest what is missing from the book by leaving a note at the publisher's Web site. More than 200 ideas have already been suggested.

Toward the end of the book Friedman reminds us, "Green is a value that needs to be preserved in and of itself, not because it is going to make your bank account richer, but because it makes life richer and always has." Later he adds, "An ethic of conservation declares that maintaining our natural world is a value that is impossible to quantify but also impossible to ignore, because of the sheer beauty, wonder, joy, and magic that nature brings to being alive. . . . Without an ethic of conservation we will lose that which is priceless but has no price tag." Amen.