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Brian Keane

Posted April 17, 2009 | 01:42 PM (EST)


## The Flat Thinking of Tom Friedman

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Recently, *New York Times* Columnist Tom Friedman offered readers of *Newsweek* a surprisingly peculiar suggestion about how Americans should fight climate change. "My motto is change your leaders, not your light bulbs," said Friedman. Really? Is one of the most recognized thought leaders on energy and the environment actually implying that it's ineffective, or even pointless, for each of us to perform everyday actions that help save energy?

It doesn't make sense. I doubt that the venerable author of *Hot, Flat and Crowded* is saying it's okay to, for instance, let our Hummers idle for half an hour -- as long as it's while we're running into the polls to vote for the candidate who's promising fuel efficiency standards.

Given that Earth Day is upon us -- a time when we are supposed to strengthen our personal environmental efforts and accountability, and learn to become better stewards of the planet -- his 'leaders not light bulbs' notion is worth challenging.

For one, the idea that the single best solution to the U.S. energy problem is electing certain people to office is historically inaccurate. Ironically, Mr. Friedman references the ultimate example of consequence to this thinking in the same interview. He notes that President Reagan enthusiastically ended clean energy and efficiency initiatives made during the Carter administration. It was an unfortunate, but typical demonstration of how policies are often vulnerable to capricious political winds and public attitudes. So while smart government and sound policy are imperative to the environmental effort, they clearly do not form a panacea.

Yes, Americans must vote smart. But it's critical that more of us also start to spend money, use resources and simply live our lives in ways that best promote a healthy world for future generations. Collective actions are not empty gestures.

For one, an energy conscious consumer can become an energy conscious voter.

Two, the environmental benefits of being Energy Smart -- buying clean energy, conserving energy and being energy efficient -- are each of ours to deliver right now. We don't have to wait for government, utility companies and automobile manufacturers to provide us with the means to be greener this Earth Day. We can easily and effectively promote environmentalism and reduce our carbon footprint by cutting back our own energy waste.

For instance, each year Americans waste the amount of electricity equal to what's produced by 17 average sized coal-fired power plants through what's called phantom load, or vampire power. It's the energy our electronics consume when we think they're turned off. (Look at each item in your home or office that has a light indicating when it's "off." The reality is that those electronics are still consuming electricity. You can think of them as vampires.)

This kind of largely unheard of energy waste has millions of us contributing to countless tons of toxic emissions from coal-burning plants, which are pumped into the air just so our TVs and other toys can maintain a useless, constant energy draw.

However, anyone can also take the surprisingly effortless actions of using power strips to eliminate phantom load and reduce the CO2 emissions that have our names on them.

There are also literally hundreds of other easy ways to be green this Earth Day by reducing energy waste. The website, ClimateCulture.com, and the America's

Greenest Campus contest have information all about them.

The enormous potential for advancing environmentalism in the U.S. through cultivating energy-conscious consumer behavior must be taken advantage of. Particularly in efficiency, where people can save money and protect the planet.

Consumer research shows that when someone takes one basic Energy Smart action, (again, think light bulbs) that person is then more likely to make increasingly significant energy choices. When individuals put CFL bulbs in their homes, we should not think of that as an isolated gesture, but instead as the "gateway drug" to sustainability. In other words, someone who buys CFLs has made the connection that saving energy saves money and/or helps the environment. That person is then more likely to purchase other goods -- appliances, automobiles, homes, etc. -- with the same qualities. These products, and concepts, just need to be effectively marketed to American consumers.

Consider the potential of having sound energy policy and a consumer-driven approach to reducing our country's energy use. The result would be transformational. America could even reach the kind of "tipping point" described by another influential, contemporary thinker.

This Earth Day, let's, indeed, change our light bulbs and put in CFLs. Anything we can do to save energy in our day-to-day lives does have true environmental value. To say otherwise is just flat thinking.

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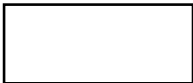
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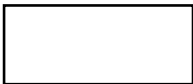
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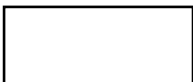
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Friedman never says "don't change your light bulbs." Mr. Keane conveniently builds a strawman argument which he carries through his piece, beating Friedman over the head with it. Friedman says changing your light bulbs IS NOT ENOUGH. We need to make many more hard decisions, such as new laws which change the ways utilities work and provide market signals to promote development of alternative energy technologies. He writes that "100 easy ways to be green" are not going to alleviate the serious energy issues in our world today--they're not enough by themselves. A real energy revolution is not going to be "easy."

He's right.

So change your bulbs AND advocate the energy revolution Friedman promotes.

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On the other hand, I have neighbors and relatives who feel offended they have to recycle their garbage, not red line their jet skis across our drinking water reservoir, while they routinely toss their fast food trash out the window on the interstate, and heehaw small cars with their monster trucks. I know what they

profess but have no clue what kind of afterlife they truly believe in. So, you're not going to get them to bother about quality of life for their great grandkids in an honest way, let alone the rest of the planet - not ever. They seem to feel that the right to trash the planet in the name of sloth, convenience, and good ole tom foolery is in the Bill of Rights, or ought to be. My take is that that sums up about 1/4th of we Americans. I think only laws and enforced infrastructure changes will improve their outward behavior.

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a) True, it'll take major infrastructural changes, vast wind farms, 100 million plug-in hybrid autos, residential high-rises in the downtown corridors of our cities , major investments in high-speed train systems, cogeneration, and the promotion of tidal, wave, and every other kind of sustainable energy source, along with massive global cooperation in order to really address global warming because it isn't going to be solved by planting a few trees and changing your incandescents to CFLs.

b) Nonetheless, investing a few hundred bucks in CFLs, LEDs, power strips, and weather stripping is easily doable by just about anybody, makes its own modest contribution to our energy woes that could easily be multiplied by 100 million if everybody actually cared, and has a payback period that makes the investment far better than anything your former financial advisor, cum newly unemployed, was ever likely to suggest to you. Or did your 401K really do that well last year? In heating zones 3, 4, and 5, i.e., most of the U.S., conversion to heat pumps or even 95% AFUE gas furnaces (considering this year's 30% tax credit for install) may be a total no-brainer. For those now with an old electric furnace, the return on investment is likely upwards of 30%.

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You can expect the Republicans in the Senate to fight a rearguard action to support shortsided industry leaders until they lose the ability to sustain a filibuster.

The cost to American industry can be seen in bathroom fittings. The US companies fought requirements for low water consumption, spending money on lobbyists. Other countries, especially the resource challenged Japanese, found ways to make the low water toilets work as well as our water guzzlers. The result is that our companies lost potential international markets and, since the Japanes toilets work better at low water levels, they have also lost some US market share.

Likewise, the US auto industry spent millions on lobbyists to oppose emissions restrictions, saying it was impossible without expensive addons like catalytic convertors (now targets of metal thieves). In the first year of the restrictions, Volvo met the restrictions with improved fuel injection and Honda met them with the stratified charge engine. These two approaches increased the efficiency of combustion and thus mileage, while the US approach actually added weight. Since other countries were introducing similar restrictions, the US companies would have lost market share anyway.

US Corporations need to take money from their budgets for lobbyists, advertising, and executive pay and apply it to engineering and even, gasp, basic research.. I cannot understand some of the actions of the Bush/corporate alliance unless they actually view pollution and inefficiency as positive characteristics.

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The Louisiana legislature found that the proper development of an advanced biofuel industry requires implementation of the comprehensive Field-to-Pump strategy:

- (1) Feedstock other than corn;
- (2) Decentralized network of small advanced biofuel manufacturing facilities;
- (3) Variable blending pumps, in lieu of splash blending, will offer the consumer E10, E20, E30 and E85; and
- (4) Hydrous ethanol.

Field-to-Pump is a unique strategy created by Renergie, Inc. to locally produce and market advanced biofuel (non-corn ethanol) via a network of small advanced biofuel manufacturing facilities. The purpose of Field-to-Pump is to maximize rural development and job creation while minimizing feedstock supply risk and the burden on local water supplies.

For more information, please feel free to visit the Renergie weblog at [www.renergie.wordpress.com](http://www.renergie.wordpress.com).

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Too many of our leaders think that top-down leadership is the only appropriate solution to our problems. To someone whose solution is a hammer, every problem is a nail. The zenith - or is it nadir? - of this hierarchical thinking is supply-side economics, whose disastrous end result currently tinkles down onto our heads in the form of the economic crisis. These "leaders" want to solve the problem by - no surprise - pouring trillions of dollars into the system at the top, not coincidentally into the pockets of the supply-siders who caused the mess in the first place. Tom Friedman is perhaps well-meaning, but he is one of them.

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Out of all the brilliance in Friedman's recent book, all you could comment on was "change your leader" and then dismiss the rest??

That book was published in July/08, as Americans were getting ready to go to the polls...and you DID change your leader and he HAS sent out a new energy (pun intended) into the world and inspired us all to make small and large changes...in every aspect of our thinking and doing lives.

Reagan ripped the solar panels off the White House roof, panels put there by Jimmy Carter.

Let's all be brave, make the changes necessary and stay the course!!

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"Is one of the most recognized thought leaders on energy and the environment actually implying that it's ineffective, or even pointless, for each of us to perform everyday actions that help save energy?"

Recognized for what? Being horribly, horribly wrong, and pushing plans that will kill millions of people? This guy married into money, has never actually worked for anything, and is wrong on almost everything he says. Thanks, but there's about 10,000 people I would say are leaders on energy and the environment

before Tom.

Even when he's right, he's right for the wrong reasons. He's a greedy, horrid individual with too large a megaphone.

Stop dropping this twit's name.

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