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Book Review: 'Longitudes and Attitudes'

by David Lundy

Thomas Friedman, *Longitudes and Attitudes: The World in the Age of Terrorism* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003 edition).

Pulitzer Prize-winning *New York Times* political columnist Thomas Friedman is currently better known for his best-selling *The World Is Flat* and earlier best-sellers like *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* or *From Beirut to Jerusalem*. However, the less celebrated *Longitudes and Attitudes* is important for people working in the Arab world to read. The book provides a fascinating glimpse into how the Iraq war and subsequent occupation of Iraq by Coalition forces has affected and changed American views on Arab civilization, and vice versa.

Longitudes and Attitudes is really a compilation of columns and diary entries relevant to the topic at hand: the world in an age of terrorism as seen through the prisms of both the Arab and the American. The entries are organized chronologically from those that precede 9/11 beginning with December 15, 2000 to those that follow it, up to April 20, 2003. Updated for this paperback edition is the period of time revolving around the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003. What is particularly compelling about the book is the shift of Friedman's attitude towards the US administration over the two and a half years and the fascinating observations

he makes about the Arab world in the course of his extensive travels within it.

Friedman is able to articulate the big picture incisively which makes for page-turning reading even if one might not always agree with his conclusions. Here are some examples:

- ♦ On Islam's difficulty in reconciling itself with the modern world:

What is different about Islam is that while there have been a few attempts at a reformation [adapting to modernity and pluralism], none have flowered or found the support of a Muslim state.

We patronize Islam, and mislead ourselves, by repeating the mantra that Islam is a faith with no serious problems accepting the secular West, modernity, and pluralism, and the only problem is a few bin Ladens. Although there is a deep moral impulse in Islam for justice, charity and compassion, Islam has not developed a dominant religious philosophy that allows equal recognition of alternative-faith communities. (p. 79)

- ♦ On Israel being pivotal to the outcome of the war on terrorism:

Israel's goal must be a withdrawal from those areas captured in the 1967 war; otherwise it will never know a day's peace, and it will undermine every legitimate US effort to fight terrorism around the globe. (p. 150)

Friedman's courage to call a spade a spade, to tell it like he sees it – a journalist's most important contri-

bution to reporting – makes for compelling reading.

- ♦ Here's a snippet on the way Arab regimes deal with extremists:

In February 1982 the secular Syrian government of President Hafez al-Assad faced a mortal threat from Islamic extremists. . . . Assad identified the rebellion as coming from Syria's fourth-largest city—Hama—and he literally leveled it, pounding the fundamentalist neighborhoods with artillery for days. Once the guns fell silent, he plowed up the rubble and bulldozed it flat, into vast parking lots. . . . Syria has not had a Muslim extremist problem since. . . . I tell this story because it's important that we understand that Syria, Egypt, Algeria, and Tunisia have all faced Islamist threats and crushed them without mercy or Miranda rights. . . . Once the fundamentalists were crushed by the Arab states, they fled to the last wild, uncontrolled places in the region—Lebanon's Beka Valley and Afghanistan—or to the freedom of America and Europe. (p. 40)

- ♦ Or on the USA getting blamed for all the world's problems:

Is it America's fault that the richest ruling family in the world, the Saudis, have citizens who are poor and frustrated? Is it America's fault that [South] Korea had the same per capita income in the 1950s as many Arab states but Korea has managed its development so much better since that it now dwarfs all Arab economies? (p. 49)

- ♦ On the censored press of the Arab world:

The newspaper *Al-Riyadh* recently published an article by a Saudi "professor" who alleged that Jews make a holiday pastry that requires them to "drain the

blood" from a young Christian or Muslim, but the editor of *Al-Riyadh* was not fired. Right now, the only way you get a free voice in most of the Arab press is by denouncing Israel and America or praising your regime. That distorts the whole political discourse. (p. 147)

- ♦ On American duplicity:

You're not going to get much support in Europe telling people, "You are either with us or against us in a war on terrorism, but in the war you care about—for a greener planet—America will do whatever it wants. (p. 287)

Like most public communicators, Friedman can turn a phrase aptly. Here are a few gems:

At its best, the Internet can educate more people faster than any media tool we've ever had. At its worst, it can make people dumber faster than any media tool we've ever had. (p. 169)

When Mr. Bush takes a war of choice and turns it into a war of necessity, people naturally ask, "Hey, what's going on here? We're being hustled. The real reason must be his father, or oil, or some right-wing ideology." (p. 292)

Arab media called the terrorists "martyrs". It was moral creative accounting:..... (p. 316)

Since the end of the cold war, anti-Americanism has overtaken soccer as the world's most popular sport. (p. 337)

In America, Muslims can enjoy a reasonably rapid transition to citizenship, but in Europe the melting pot often

doesn't get warm enough to melt, and Muslim immigrants are often left permanently out in the cold. (p. 354)

Some may feel that the biggest drawback to reading this book is that it is dated; while it is in parts, it is worrying that many of the attitudes and intractable tensions between the Middle East and the West have not changed all that much. In spite of Iran's new role in the

region, the invasion of Lebanon, the continuing Coalition presence and internecine terrorism within Iraq, the Danish furore, and 7/11, they still remain. This book reminds us that there is more than one way to look at our world. *Longitudes and Attitudes* is somewhat repetitious in its themes but it is refreshing to see a journalist of world renown seek to understand before being understood.