The biggest threat to America is Us

If we fail, China, Russia and Iran won't be to blame, argues NYT columnist Thomas L. Friedman

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Near the close of last Wednesday's Democratic presidential debate, Chuck Todd asked the candidates what he called 'a simple question.' In 'one word,' he asked, who or what is the biggest geopolitical threat to America today?

Reflecting on that moment, I asked myself what I would say. It didn't take long to decide. It's not China or Russia or Iran. It's us. We've become the biggest threat to ourselves.

China, Russia, Iran and even North Korea's 'Little Rocket Man' aren't going to take us down. Only we can take ourselves down.

Only we can ensure that the American dream — the core promise we've made to ourselves that each generation will do better than its parents — is not fulfilled, because we fail to adapt in this age of rapidly accelerating changes in technology, markets, climates, the workplace and education.

And that is nearly certain to happen if we don't stop treating politics as entertainment, if we don't get rid of a president who daily undermines truth and trust — the twin fuels needed to collaborate and adapt together — if we don't prevent the far left from pulling the Democrats over a cliff with reckless ideas like erasing the criminal distinction between those who enter America legally and those who don't, and if we fail to forge what political analyst David Rothkopf described in a recent Daily Beast essay as 'a new American majority.'

That's a majority that can not only win the next election but can actually govern the morning after, actually enable us to do big hard things, because we have so many big hard things that need to be addressed — and big hard adaptations can only be done quickly together.

Sounds naïve? No, here's what's naïve. Thinking we're going to be ok if we keep ignoring the big challenges barreling down on us, if we just keep taking turns having one party rule and the other obstruct — with the result that no big, long-term and well-thought-out adaptations get built.

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Indeed, this moment reminds me of something that Mark Mykleby, a retired Marine colonel, said in a book I co-authored in 2011 with Michael Mandelbaum, *That Used to Be Us: How America Fell Behind in the World It Invented and How We Can Come Back*:

'At no time in our history have our national challenges been as complex and long-term as those we face today.' But, he said, the most salient feature of our politics of late has been our inability 'to respond coherently and effectively to obvious problems before they become crises. … If we can't even have an "adult" conversation, how will we fulfill the promise of and our obligation to the Preamble of our Constitution — to 'secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity?' How indeed?

The big challenges ahead

Here are just a few of the challenges coming head-on:

First, if we have four more years of Trump, we'll probably lose any chance of keeping the global average temperature from rising only 1.5°C instead of 2°C — which scientists believe is the difference between being able to manage the now unavoidable climate-related weather extremes and avoiding the unmanageable ones.

Second, as Ray Dalio, the founder of the Bridgewater hedge fund, recently pointed out, there has been 'little or no real income growth for most people for decades. … Prime-age workers in the bottom 60 per cent have had no real (i.e., inflation-adjusted) income growth since 1980.' In that same time frame, the 'incomes for the top 10 per cent have doubled and those of the top 1 per cent have tripled. The percentage of children who grow up to earn more than their parents has fallen from 90 per cent in 1970 to 50 per cent today. That's for the population as a whole. For most of those in the lower 60 per cent, the prospects are worse.'

The anger over that is surely one of the things that propelled Trump into office and, if not addressed, could propel someone even worse, like Donald Trump Jr, in the future.

Third, the next four years will redefine relations between the world's two

biggest economies — the US and China. Either the US will persuade China to abandon the abusive trade practices it adopted to go from poverty to middle income and from a technology consumer to a technology producer, or we're headed for a world divided by a new digital Berlin Wall. There will be a Chinese-controlled internet and technology sphere and American versions — and every other country will have to decide whose to join. The globalisation that provided so much peace and prosperity for the last 70 years will fracture.

Fourth, technology is propelling social networks and cybertools deeper and deeper into our lives, our privacy and our politics — and democratising the tools for 'deep fakes,' so that many more people can erode truth and trust. But the gap between the speed at which these technologies are going deep and the ability of our analogue politics to develop the rules, norms and laws to govern them is getting wider, not narrower. That gap has to be closed to preserve our democracy.

Fifth, today's workplace is distinguished by one overriding new reality, argues Heather McGowan, an expert on the future of work: 'The pace of change is accelerating at the exact same time that people's work lives are elongating.'

Fortunately, the midterm elections showed us that there is a potential new American majority out there to be assembled to meet these challenges.

When the efficient steam engine was developed in the 1700s, McGowan explains, average life expectancy was 37 years and steam was the driving force in industry and business for around 100 years. When the combustion engine and electricity were harnessed in the mid-1800s, life expectancy was around 40 years and these technologies dominated the workplace for about another century.

So in both eras, notes McGowan, 'you had multiple generations to absorb a single big change in the workplace.'

In today's digital information age, 'you have multiple changes in the nature of work within a generation,' McGowan says. This dramatically increases the need for lifelong learning. 'The old model was that you learned once in order to work, and now we must work in order to learn continuously,' she contends. So we're going from a model of 'learn, work, retire' to a model of 'learn, work, learn, work, learn, work.'

A new social contract

In that kind of world the new social contract has to be that government

makes sure that the safety nets and all the tools for lifelong learning are available to every American — but it's on each citizen to use them. This moment 'is not about who to blame or what to bring back or what to give away,' concludes McGowan. 'It is about how to create a new deal that engages the American people to "take longer strides,"' as President John F. Kennedy said in seeking funding for NASA. But more of that striding will be on you for more of your life.

Fortunately, the midterm elections showed us that there is a potential new American majority out there to be assembled to meet these challenges. After all, it was the independent voters, suburban women and moderate Republicans — who shifted their votes to Democrats, because they were appalled by Trump's lying, racist-tinge nationalism and divisiveness — who enabled the Democrats to win back the House of Representatives. That same partnership could topple Trump.

If Democrats can choose a nominee who speaks to our impending challenges, but who doesn't say irresponsible stuff about immigration or promise free stuff we can't afford, who defines new ways to work with business and energise job-creators, who treats with dignity the frightened white working-class voters who abandoned them for Trump — and who understands that many, many Americans are worried that we're on the verge of a political civil war and want someone to pull us together — I think he or she will find a new American majority waiting to be assembled and empowered.

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Thomas L. Friedman became the New York Times's foreign affairs Op-Ed columnist in 1995. He joined the paper in 1981, after which he served as the Beirut bureau chief in 1982, Jerusalem bureau chief in 1984, and then in Washington as the diplomatic correspondent in 1989, and later the White House correspondent and economic correspondent.