

# The Marathon Mentality

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The gates opened and students flooded into the gymnasium. Everyone was ready for battle with sharpened HB number-twos in hand, graphing calculators in pocket, and anxiety in heart and mind. The invigilators stood at strategic spots, looking like underpaid prison wardens. The atmosphere was electric. We were about to take our Math 536 Final Exam, and for most of us, it would be the last time we'd ever write a high school test. The 536 exam would test much more than my ability to draw an ellipse or write an equation for a hyperbola; it would assess my study skills and academic mentality. I wondered whether I was ready not only for college classes and tests, but also for an overall college mindset.

I had always excelled in math class. A family friend taught me the times tables when I was only five. In the second grade I was placed, along with fifteen others, into an enriched class. In the seventh grade, I tied for second place in a province-wide math contest in Quebec. However, by tenth grade, I was a middle-of-the-pack student known more for my comic antics than my mathematical prowess. When I opened the exam booklet, the words and numbers appeared blurred, out of focus, as if they wanted to arrange themselves into some kind of indecipherable code. The sweat dripped from my body. I attempted one problem, got stuck, and went on to the next one, hoping for a “gimmie” that would boost both my confidence and my rapidly sinking grade. But there were no “gimmies.” I realized that nearly a decade of math excellence—algebraic *arête*, geometric greatness, Pythagorean perfection—had made me complacent, drained me of any semblance of study skills.

Thomas L. Friedman's “It's a Flat World, After All” resonates with my memory of that exam; taking it was like playing a high-intensity squash match inside a janitor's closet. Friedman delves deep into the oft-discussed phenomenon that is globalization, but he does so from a unique perspective. While many debates on the subject center on the pros and cons of globalization, or “flatism” as Friedman aptly calls it (142), “It's a Flat World, After All” looks at its causes and effects from an American perspective. Friedman urges the

American people to realize their faltering position within the new global landscape of ideas and technology. He speaks not from a eulogistic, post-mortem angle, but rather believes that it's not yet too late. Friedman urges a final attempt at salvaging what is arguably the centerpiece of Americana—its desire for global dominance. He directs our attention to the fact that the U.S. needs to reinvent itself if it wishes to retain the proverbial crown and participate in the new Google Universe.

And so this leads me to my question: have continuous comfort and success in the U.S. ushered in an ethos of complacency that is now causing us to fall behind?

On a personal level, my experience on the morning of the math exam mirrors the current, complacent (and therefore failing) position of the U.S. For years, I coasted through math class, relying on common sense and previously learned material without opening a book. And it sure seems that our comfort as Americans is catching up with us now, just as my comfort caught up with me then. Since the dawn of industrialization, the U.S. has worn the crown in all aspects of business, but with more on its plate than ever before, the Home of the Brave looks more like the Cowardly Lion.

But around the turn of the 21st century, the U.S. no longer maintained its position atop the world's power rankings. Friedman contends that September 11th was an indirect cause, or at least an exacerbation, of the world's "flattening." He writes of globalization: "It all happened while we were sleeping, or rather while we were focused on 9/11, the dot-com bust and Enron" (135). Later, Friedman recounts his feelings while visiting Bangalore, India. He remarks, "The longer I was there, the more upset I became—upset at the realization that while I had been off covering the 9/11 wars, globalization had entered a whole new phase, and I had missed it" (135). Evidently, Friedman believes that 9/11's effects were much more far-reaching than we originally thought. The U.S., by focusing almost solely on Homeland Security, airport safety, immigration laws, and anti-terrorism task forces, ultimately isolated itself from the rest of the world. While the U.S. remained stagnant, reeling in the post-apocalyptic shadows of 9/11, the rest of the world quickly moved into previously uncharted technological territory. True, the wheels of globalization were already in motion prior to 9/11, but in the wake of that tragic day, the disparity between America and the rest of the world became more pronounced than ever. But Friedman sees the dichotomy between America and the rest as *unnatural*, and he strives to arouse a similar sense of urgency within his readers.

But Friedman is missing a key component of the equation. His intense belief in raw talent causes him to pay too little attention to crucial aspects of that talent—human personality, or more precisely, character, which governs one’s ability to form associations, make deals, be persuasive. Character is the glue that can hold a nation together. Early in John Swanbeck’s *The Big Kabuna*, the young, unjaded Bob asks his business partner Phil, “How does a person attain character? Are you born with it? Do you have to go through certain things?” Phil responds much later in the film by telling Bob that to build character, you have to have regrets “tattooed on your face.” It seems that Bob, enamored with the supercharged personas of Larry and Phil, is more interested in building character than anything else, even as a fresh-faced newbie at Lodestar Lubricants. He understands the importance of a strong personality in the world of business.

In “Is Business Bluffing Ethical?” Albert Z. Carr develops an analogy between business and poker that highlights the people-to-people, game-playing side of business. Carr makes a convincing case for bluffing in the business game. He contends that “ultimate victory in business required intimate knowledge of the rules, insight into the psychology of the other players, a bold front, a considerable amount of self-discipline, and the ability to respond swiftly and effectively to opportunities provided by chance” (96). Improvising is a talent, developed through experience, that many people cannot bring to fruition. To play the game well and to stay within the implicit ethical parameters, one must combine character and the gaming spirit.

I believe that Friedman is secretly terrified that the U.S. is losing its character as a nation. While he writes of how technology and communications have leveled the global playing field, he tries to mask his fear that the U.S. has lost crucial aspects of its national character by disguising that loss with tangible, measurable concerns about jobs, education, facts, figures. While he may not be trying to instill fear within the general public, he is certainly stoking competitive fires, trying to reignite the collective penchant for wanting to be top dog. He conjures up images of war—the Cold War, the “9/11 wars”—to reawaken the competitive spirit (135). Max Weber, in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, writes that “there were complaints of a peculiarly calculating sort of profit-seeking in New England . . . as early as 1632” (211). He adds that “man is dominated by the making of money” and that “the capitalistic economy of the present day . . . forces the individual . . . to conform to capitalistic rules of action” (211). The American Way values competitive spirit above all else, and Friedman nourishes the common appetite to provoke a response.

In her essay “The Storied Character of Virtue,” Deirdre McCloskey calls for virtue and a solid moral foundation as she reminds us that a virtuous lifestyle is built through trials and tribulations. She likens the drive for any type of success to running a marathon. Running, like business, depends on a gradual accumulation of knowledge, experience, and character. Anybody can *want* to run a marathon, but few follow through because of the distance between *desire* and *doing*. She acknowledges that there are no set formulas for success, but she tells us that she learned “by watching [her] mother do carpentry or sewing or cooking or learning Greek irregular verbs, witnessing the virtues of hope and courage operating in them” (184). McCloskey makes me see that we need to re-learn how to learn. We as a nation have been too comfortable for too long, and this has caused us to lose sight of our once-heralded work ethic and determination. Now we have to play catch-up.

So why not apply this “Marathon Mentality” to the United States of America? Even Ted Williams, arguably baseball’s best batter ever, stayed “at batting practice until his hands bled” (McCloskey 184). Because the U.S. has sat atop the world’s leaderboard in so many different areas, it has never really mastered the art of playing catch-up. And now, with its character on the line, its future in the balance, America the Beautiful needs to polish up on its fundamentals and learn how to maintain itself instead of relying on its diminishing power within the shifting tectonic plates of “Globalization 3.0” (Friedman 137). Being at the top of the food chain is harder than being at the bottom because those below are hungry for your spot. Our national character has always been built on a relentless drive to continually be the best, and at the core of our inability to produce scientists and engineers is our “ambition gap” (Friedman 143). Friedman states, “We in America have all the basic economic and educational tools . . . but we have not been improving those tools as much as we should” (143). It is evident that the U.S. has never learned how to take care of itself, as it has never had to, and this has penetrated its economic, military, environmental, and diplomatic domains, while dealing a demoralizing blow to its image. Friedman quotes David Rothkopf, a former Clinton Commerce Department official, as saying that “the real entitlement we need to get rid of is our sense of entitlement” (143).

During the math exam, I looked at the clock and realized I only had thirty minutes left, and I had only done four out of twelve problems; of those, three were most likely wrong. If my math was right, that meant I had eight problems left and less than four minutes for each one. I began to scribble numbers and formulas, punching into my calculator until my index finger was nearly bleeding, desperately trying to pull some sort of miracle out of

nowhere. And before I could even say “factorial,” time was up, and I felt the air bleed out of me. There were only a handful of students left in the gym. Scenes played in my head of times I should’ve been studying but was off doing God-knows-what instead, and as I walked over to an invigilator to hand in my disgraceful exam, I was enlightened, humbled by my realizations: I needed to hit the books.

So does the U.S. of A, bless its soul. Because it really has been its soul and its character that have kept it going strong since 1776, and Thomas Friedman recognizes this, even if his reasoning is masquerading behind a thin veil of figurative language. If we can re-solidify crucial components of our national character—our competitive spirit and our stick-to-itiveness—we can re-establish ourselves at the top. But the problems—our “ambition gap,” our laziness, our obsolete high school system—need to be traced back to their roots (Friedman 143). All of these factors are entrenched in our double-edged sword of success that has revealed to us the thrill of victory too often, yet has seldom exposed us to the agony of defeat. We desperately need to relearn how to learn from experience, because coasting will not cut it anymore. I don’t think we are talking about engineers or scientists or intercontinental satellite conference calls anymore. This is a matter of character, competitive spirit and perseverance—three invaluable cornerstones that the U.S. is in dire need of restoring.

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