

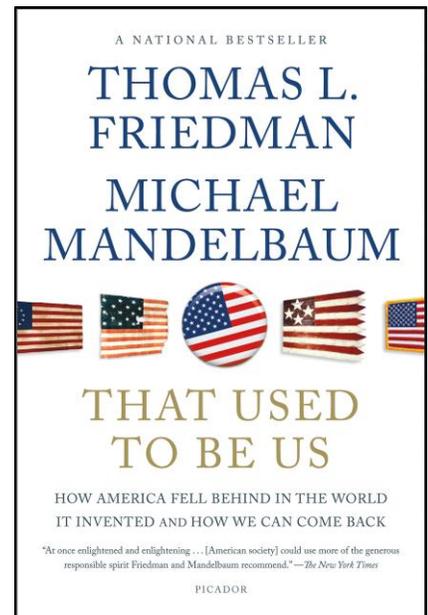
Reading Group Gold

That Used to Be Us

by Thomas Friedman and Michael Mandelbaum

From the skyrocketing federal deficit to plummeting rankings in education, America faces a turbulent future. How did we get to this point? What will it take to make our nation a beacon of innovation and prosperity once again? In *That Used to Be Us*, Thomas L. Friedman, one of our most influential columnists, and Michael Mandelbaum, one of our leading foreign policy thinkers, provide a searching, clear-eyed assessment of the situation, with bold solutions for getting the country back on track. Drawing on in-depth analysis from around the globe, their approach balances evidence from a variety of viewpoints, including the political, entrepreneurial, scientific, and technological sectors.

Despite America's woes, the authors argue, our nation's ideals remain strong—strong enough to propel us to a new era of reinvention. A wake-up call for every American, *That Used to Be Us* raises the most important questions of our time. We hope this guide will enrich your discussion of Friedman and Mandelbaum's inspiring action plan.



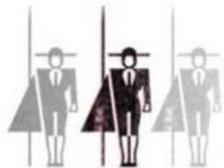
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Questions:

*Discussion Questions courtesy of Farrar, Straus & Giroux

1. The authors begin with recollections of their youth, capturing the economic and political climate of the 1950s and '60s. What does “that used to be us” look like in your family’s memories?
2. The book’s title comes from remarks President Obama delivered at the time of the 2010 midterm elections, when Republican victories changed the balance of power in Washington. Do you think the typical American voter realizes the importance of global competitiveness, particularly in the realms of technology and infrastructure described in the president’s quote?
3. When the authors describe the long-delayed escalator repair in their Washington Metrorail station, what bigger problems do they illustrate? If their story is symbolic, what does it say about the cause of the nation’s woes?
4. In chapter 3, “Ignoring Our History,” the authors identify five pillars that have supported America’s prosperity for more than 230 years: public education, renewal of infrastructure, keeping our doors open to high-aspiring immigrants, federal funding for research and development, and regulatory safeguards on private economic activity. How have these pillars benefited you? How would their erosion harm you?
5. Addressing the unemployment/underemployment crisis, the book emphasizes the need for an adaptable workforce that delivers nothing less than excellence—in which every worker is above average. In your field, what are the greatest challenges in keeping American workers continually trained in new skills and inspired to surpass average expectations?

6. In your opinion, what are the most powerful forces shaping the values of youth culture today? What would it take to reverse the widespread aversion to math and science? What is your twenty-first century version of Sputnik?
7. When the authors describe the war on math and physics, they capture a society that tried to defy prudent economic principles and ignored the “gravity” that would send the Clinton-era surplus tumbling down into deficit. Do you predict that the nation’s “Terrible Twos” are over? Where should federal spending priorities lie?
8. The authors point out that China’s recent achievements occurred despite the republic’s corruption, noxious pollution, and lack of political freedom. What does this say about global competition? Has democracy become an economic liability?
9. Chapter 14, “They Just Didn’t Get the Word,” describes such figures as Wendy Kopp, founder of Teach for America; Robert Stevenson, who found a way to keep Eastman Machine Company based in Buffalo; and scores of college students, military personnel, and other Americans who ignore naysayers and bring enlightenment to the world. What are the common threads in the book’s success stories? How could these people’s methods help you bring one of your ideas to life?
10. On the flip side, the authors admit that many of the achievements described in chapter 14 came from workers who care more about making a difference than making money. Is that a bad thing? Do low wages matter, as long as meaningful jobs are being created?
11. The authors remind us that tax-rate increases helped build the federal budget surplus, which began to grow in the late 1990s, while Bush tax cuts contributed to the current deficit. Property taxes and state income tax rates have also become a visible part of the equation as local governments try to cope with deficits. How has your tax bill fluctuated throughout your career? Would you be willing to pay higher taxes now, and if so, what would your top priority be in how that additional tax revenue is spent?
12. Discuss the third-party option, particularly a centrist third party that emphasizes moderate solutions. Have you ever voted for a third-party candidate? Is it possible to have a viable party in the twenty-first century that takes no extreme positions?
13. Discuss the book’s take on exceptionalism—the idea that America has an exceptional history and therefore an exceptional identity—described in chapter 16, “Rediscovering America.” Does exceptionalism help or hinder our success?
14. Revisit the Tocqueville letter that appears in chapter 15, “Shock Therapy.” If you were to envision a happy ending that defies Tocqueville’s dire observations, what would it look like? What would the ideal American future hold for the next generation?
15. Discuss *That Used to Be Us* in comparison to other books by Thomas L. Friedman or Michael Mandelbaum that you’ve read. How has their role as “frustrated optimists” evolved over the last decade?



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