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Thomas Friedman: Liberal sadist?

The acclaimed New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman has often voiced enthusiasm for violent destruction by the U.S. government. Hidden in plain sight, his glee about such carnage is worth pondering.

Many people view Friedman as notably articulate, while others find him overly glib, but there's no doubt that he is an influential commentator with inherently respectable views. When Friedman makes his case for a shift in foreign policy, the conventional media wisdom is that he's providing a sober assessment. Yet beneath his liberal exterior is a penchant for remedies that rely on massive Pentagon firepower.

And so, his July 27 column in the Times – after urging Americans “to thoughtfully plan ahead and to sacrifice today for a big gain tomorrow” – scolds the commander in chief for being too much of a wimp and failing to demand enough human sacrifice. Friedman poses a rhetorical question begging for a militaristic answer and then dutifully supplies one: “If you were president, would you really say to the nation, in the face of the chaos in Iraq, ‘If our commanders on the ground say we need more troops, I will send them,’ but they have not asked. It is not what the generals are asking you, Mr. President – it is what you are asking them, namely: ‘What do you need to win?’ Because it is clear we are not winning, and we are not winning because we have never made Iraq a secure place where normal politics could emerge.”

Such a line of reasoning points to sending still more U.S. troops to Iraq. The result, predictably, would be even more mass slaughter from various directions. But there's no reason to believe such a result would chasten Friedman, as long as the eminent pundit figures the Washington-backed killing is for a righteous cause. In recent years Friedman has expressed much enthusiasm – even relish – for launching and continuing wars underwritten by U.S. taxpayers.

During the last decade of the 20th century, Friedman was a vehement advocate of – in the words of a January 1998 column – “bombing Iraq, over and over and over again.” In early 1999, when he offered a pithy list of recommendations for Washington's policymakers, it included: “Blow up a different power station in Iraq every week,

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so no one knows when the lights will go off or who's in charge." Such disruptions of electricity would have deadly effects, from hospitals to homes where vulnerable civilians live. Evidently, Friedman could not let those considerations get in the way of his snappy prose.

But is it unfair to say that Friedman seems to get a charge out of urging systematic infliction of pain and death? Well, consider his fixation on four words in particular. During the spring of 1999, as the U.S.-led NATO bombardment of Yugoslavia went on, Friedman recycled his witticism "Give war a chance" from one column to another.

"Twelve days of surgical bombing was never going to turn Serbia around," he wrote in early April. "Let's see what 12 weeks of less than surgical bombing does. Give war a chance." (He used the same motto in a Fox News interview.) Another column included this gleeful taunt while vicariously threatening civilians in Yugoslavia with protracted terror: "Every week you ravage Kosovo is another decade we will set your country back by pulverizing you. You want 1950? We can do 1950. You want 1389? We can do 1389 too." As on so many other occasions, Friedman's pronouncements gave off more than a whiff of pleasure at the spectacle of other people's anguish.

"NATO began its second month of bombing against Yugoslavia today with new strikes against military targets that disrupted civilian electrical and water supplies" – the first words of the lead article on the New York Times front page the last Sunday in April 1999 – promoted the remarkable concept that the bombing disrupted "civilian" electricity and water, yet the targets were "military." Never mind that such destruction of infrastructure would predictably lead to outbreaks of disease and civilian deaths. On the newspaper's op-ed page, Friedman made explicit his enthusiasm for destroying civilian necessities: "It should be lights out in Belgrade: Every power grid, water pipe, bridge, road and war-related factory has to be targeted."

In autumn 2001, after the bombing of Afghanistan got underway, Friedman dusted off one of his favorite cute phrases. "My motto is very simple: Give war a chance," he told Diane Sawyer during an Oct. 29 interview on ABC Television. In November, his column was cracking the same rhetorical whip. "Let's all take a deep breath," he urged, "and repeat after me: Give war a chance."

That fall, Friedman proclaimed that he was crazy about the craziness of top officials in Washington who were capable of going a bit berserk with the USA's military might. During an Oct. 13 appearance on CNBC, he said: "I was a critic of [Defense Secretary Donald] Rumsfeld before, but there's one thing ... that I do like about Rumsfeld. He's just a little bit crazy, OK? He's just a little bit crazy, and in this kind of war, they always count on being able to out-crazy us, and I'm glad we got some guy on our bench that

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our quarterback – who’s just a little bit crazy, not totally, but you never know what that guy’s going to do, and I say that’s my guy.”

Friedman kept writing along those lines. “There is a lot about the Bush team’s foreign policy I don’t like,” he wrote in mid-February 2002, “but their willingness to restore our deterrence, and to be as crazy as some of our enemies, is one thing they have right.”

Last week, when Friedman’s column appeared in the New York Times on July 22, it mostly concentrated on denouncing Muslim “hate spreaders.” And the piece ended by declaring: “Words matter.”

If words truly matter, then maybe it’s consequential that some of Thomas Friedman’s words – including his flippant and zealous endorsements of mass killing – have the odor of sadistic cruelty.

This article is adapted from Norman Solomon’s new book

“War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death.”

For information, go to: www.WarMadeEasy.com