

OCTOBER 30

How I was wrong about Thomas Friedman

Last week my column was a parody of how Thomas Friedman writes about the global economy. Since then, I've learned that I was in error on a matter that shines some light on the worldview of the syndicated New York Times columnist and best-selling author. "Let's face it – at this point I'm a rich guy, and I work for a newspaper run by guys who are even richer than I am," the satirical version of Friedman said in my article. But actually, Friedman is not just "a rich guy."

Days ago I read a long feature story that appeared in the July issue of *The Washingtonian* magazine. It provides some background on the world of Thomas Friedman – and the personal finances that have long smoothed his path.

Much of Friedman's emphasis in recent years has revolved around economic relations. He's been a strong supporter of "globalization": the international trade rules and government policies allowing corporations to function with legal prerogatives that routinely trump labor rights, environmental protection and economic justice.

"Globalization" is largely about relations between the rich and the poor – and often that means the very rich and the very poor.

The lengthy profile of Friedman in *The Washingtonian* this summer had scant ink to spare for criticisms of Friedman's outlook – which corporate media outlets frequently hail as brilliant. But the article did include a telling comment about him from the renowned economist Joseph Stiglitz, who said: "Participation in the new world requires resources, computers, education, and access to those is very unequally distributed. He has this high level of optimism that means that anyone can do it if they just have will."

Stiglitz, a winner of the Nobel Prize in economics, added that Friedman has understated the impacts of "some of the forces of inequality." And Stiglitz pointed out that "globalization inherently increases the inequalities in developing countries."

Friedman's great wealth is a frame for his window on the world. *The Washingtonian* reports that "his annual income easily reaches seven figures." In the Maryland suburbs near Washington, three years ago, "the Friedmans built a palatial 11,400-square-foot house, now valued at \$9.3 million," on a parcel of more than seven acres near Bethesda

MEDIABEAT 2006 | NORMAN SOLOMON

Country Club and the Beltway.

Throughout his journalistic career, Friedman has been married to Ann Bucksbaum – heiress to a real-estate and shopping-mall fortune now estimated at \$2.7 billion. When the couple wed back in 1978, according to The Washingtonian article, Friedman became part of “one of the 100 richest families in the country.”

Does Friedman's astronomical wealth invalidate what he writes? Of course not. But information about the extent of his wealth – while not disclosed to readers of his columns and books – provides context for how he is accustomed to moving through the world. And his outsized economic privileges become especially relevant when we consider that he's inclined to be glib and even flip as he advocates policies that give very low priority to reducing economic inequality.

Supposedly rigorous about facts and ideas, Friedman has prostituted his intellect. During a CNBC interview with Tim Russert in late July, the acclaimed savant made a notable confession: “We got this free market, and I admit, I was speaking out in Minnesota – my hometown, in fact – and guy stood up in the audience, said, 'Mr. Friedman, is there any free trade agreement you'd oppose?' I said, 'No, absolutely not.' I said, 'You know what, sir? I wrote a column supporting the CAFTA, the Caribbean Free Trade initiative. I didn't even know what was in it. I just knew two words: free trade.’”

Friedman went on: “Why am I so obsessive about that? Because it is a free, open, flexible economy that means you really gotta compete, but that you really can compete and you can really be quick in responding. That, Tim, is the most important asset we have.”

Tim Russert didn't bother to pursue the fact that one of the nation's leading journalists had just said that he fervently advocated for a major trade agreement without knowing what was in it. “But beyond Russert's negligence,” David Sirota wrote at the time, “what's truly astonishing is that Tom Friedman, the person who the media most relies on to interpret trade policy, now publicly runs around admitting he actually knows nothing at all about the trade pacts he pushes in his New York Times column.”

It's reasonable to ask whether Friedman – perhaps the richest journalist in the United States – might be less zealously evangelical for “globalization” if he hadn't been so wealthy for the last quarter of a century. Meanwhile, it's worth noting that the corporate forces avidly promoting his analysis of economic options are reaping massive profits from the systems of trade and commerce that he champions.

“Thomas Friedman is arguably the world's most influential and popular foreign-policy thinker,” The Washingtonian reported. If so, he may be a prime example of the unfortunate effects of “globalization.”