



“How America Fell Behind in the World It Created and How We Can Come Back”: America has a huge problem. It faces four major challenges, on which its future depends, and it is failing to meet them. 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, analyze those challenges—globalization, the revolution in information technology, the nation’s chronic deficits, and its pattern of energy consumption—and spell out what we need to do now to rediscover America and rise to this moment.

From the following excerpt from the book:

“Biddle’s story captures so much of what is right about America today, so much of what is wrong, and so much of we have to do collectively to thrive in the world we invented. Biddle is the founder of MBA Polymers....”

Tianjin Again

While the military protects our country and Teach for America recruits people to work in the places most relevant to our future prosperity—our schools—neither does what is essential to sustain the American dream in the future: create thriving businesses and well-paying jobs. Fortunately, though, America’s private sector is also full of people who didn’t get the word. Although the government doesn’t always make it easy for them, luckily many of them are too dumb to quit. Here are the stories of two.

While Tom was standing in the lunch line at the Tianjin convention center in September 2010, an American man approached him, eager to share the story of his energy start-up. He was the kind of person you meet at such conferences, who are invariably full of ideas, Tom recalled. “They all start by saying, ‘Can I just take a minute and tell you about my invention? You see, I have this duck that paddles a wheel that blows up a balloon that issues methane that turns a turbine . . .’” Some of these ideas seem a little wacky, but what they show is how alive America is, how full of people eager to start things. The man who approached him in Tianjin had a real gleam in his eye, so Tom decided to schedule a lunch with him. His name was Mike Biddle, and he definitely did not get the word.

Biddle’s story captures so much of what is right about America today, so much of what is wrong, and so much of what we have to do collectively to thrive in the world we invented. Biddle is the founder of MBA Polymers, which has invented processes for separating plastic from piles of junked computers, appliances, and cars, and then recycling it all into pellets to make new plastic while using less than 10 percent of the energy required to make virgin plastic from crude oil. Biddle calls it “above-

ground mining.” In the last four years, his company has mined about 150 million pounds of new plastic from old plastic. Biddle’s seed money for the research on which his enterprise is based, which took seven years to develop, came from American taxpayers through federal research grants and private investors. Yet today only his tiny headquarters are in the United States. His factories are located in Austria, China, and Brit-

He would like to have a factory in America that would justify all those research grants, but that would require an appropriate energy bill. Why? Americans collect for recycling only about 25 percent of the plastic bottles they use for consumption. However, most of those used bottles—and nearly all the rest of our used plastics—either end up in landfills or are put out to bid. The highest bidders ship them overseas, mostly to China, where they get recycled into new plastics. In China, however, they often get recycled with crude, low-tech processes that damage the ecosystem and put workers’ safety at risk. Getting people to recycle regularly, and on a large scale, is a hassle. To overcome that, the European Union, Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea—and prospectively China in 2011—have enacted producer-responsibility laws. These laws require anything with a cord or battery—from an electric toothbrush, to a cell phone, to a laptop, to a washing machine—to be collected and recycled, under responsible environmental health and safety standards, at the manufacturers’ expense. These laws give Biddle and his process the assured source of the raw plastic junk he needs at a reasonable price—in Europe and Asia. (Because recyclers now compete in these countries for junk, the cost to the manufacturers for collecting it is steadily falling, so they don’t object to the law.)

“I am in the EU and China because the aboveground plastic mines are there or are being created there,” said Biddle, who won *The Economist’s* 2010 Innovation Award for Energy and the Environment. “We are leading the way in China. The Chinese government gives tours of our facility in Guangzhou . . . I am not in the U.S. The potential mines in America are hands-down the biggest in the world, but there is no national collection law that gives me the scale of raw material we need to make our process economically viable here.”

Biddle had enough money to hire one lobbyist to try to persuade Congress to copy the nationwide recycling regulations that Europe and Japan already have in place and China is drafting. The proposed

2010 clean-energy bill would have similarly required anything with a battery or cord to be recycled at the manufacturer's expense, but, in the end, there was no bill. It could not garner anything close to a majority in the Senate. So we Americans educated Biddle, we subsidized his technical breakthroughs, and now workers in other countries will get the jobs we paid to create.

"I am a Green and very much a free-market guy," said Biddle. "My bible is Ayn Rand. It is really hard for me to lobby for legislation [in America]. It is just not in my nature. But I cannot do my business if the rules aren't fair. I can beat anybody, and so can any American entrepreneur, if we have the same playing field. We've had oil subsidies because we thought it was important to have our own domestic oil supply; we have farm subsidies to be assured of our own food supply. Well, what about for technology? To get a technology launched we need the market-shaping rules. I don't want a subsidy. I want the market shaped the right way by laws, so that Americans will want to adopt this new technology that we invented . . . We all say we want high tech. Well, then create regulations and standards that will enable our high-tech innovators to create the jobs here."

Biddle paused for a moment. "Sometimes I feel like I have lost my country. It is just not that exciting to be an American right now. I come back and nothing works, and I have all this stuff in my way and I can't do business here. I find myself always on planes doing business in other countries—*because they get it*. If I took those hundred hours I have spent in D.C. lobbying and spent them in China lobbying Chinese officials, I have this feeling they would have listened. But [in D.C.], it is like talking to a brick wall." How can we be pessimists about a country that in the depth of the Great Recession produces a Mike Biddle—and all those like him who did not get the word? But how can we not be frustrated by a country that produces a Mike Biddle but then doesn't put in place the laws and regulations that will enable him to locate and expand his business here?