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Despite protest, Friedman delivers green message

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The green revolution sweeping across the globe seems more like a "green party" to columnist, author and Pulitzer Prize winner Thomas Friedman, who spoke to a captivated Salomon 101 audience Tuesday night about the causes of and solutions to global climate change.

"Have you ever been to a revolution where no one got hurt?"

But the revolution may be coming faster than Friedman thinks. In addition to the 600 audience members and two standing ovations that greeted him last night, a female student sitting in the front row jumped on stage and hurled a bright green pie at Friedman's face as he began his speech, covering him in a sweet paste before she dashed out of the auditorium with a male accomplice in tow and a police officer close behind.

Though initially startled, Friedman took the attack in stride, tasting the pie and leaving the room to wash up before quickly returning to deliver his lecture, titled "Hot, Flat and Crowded" after his upcoming book. He divided the lecture into sections that mirrored the book's chapters.

In chapters one and two, the New York Times columnist declared this past year the beginning of a new era, marked by a convergence of "individual flames that have come together into a fire."

"It's a perfect storm between global warming, what I call 'global flattening' ... and global population growth," said Friedman, whose book "The World is Flat" is an analysis of globalization. "We've gone from B.C.E. to C.E. to E.C.E. - the energy-climate era."

Friedman explained that temperature, access to information and population all reached "tipping points" in 2007, leaving the current generation to deal with a "monster truck with the gas pedal stuck."

Chapter three - titled "fill her up with dictators" - looked at the relationship between oil and freedom and the emergence of "petrodictatorships."

Friedman described current foreign and economic policy succinctly: "Maximize demand. Minimize supply. Buy the rest from the people who hate us the most."

He used two hands to graph the price of oil against the freedom of the people in the country selling it, which he argued is an "inverse correlation."

When the Soviet Union found itself sitting on a fortune of high-priced oil, Friedman said, it expanded its borders and influence across Europe. But when oil prices collapsed, the country couldn't sustain its expansion.

"It was \$14.50 per barrel oil that brought down the Soviet Union," Friedman said. He added that the

current situation in Iran and the extreme positions of its president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, operate on the same principles. "At \$25 a barrel, the Holocaust won't be a myth any more," he said, referring to the leader's public denial of the Holocaust. "That's nonsense you can only afford at \$100 a barrel."

The last "problem chapter" was titled "1.6 billion," a reference to the number of people in the world who are "energy poor." Friedman said sub-Saharan Africa produces as much energy in a year as China does in two weeks, a gulf that can be bridged through environmentally friendly technology.

"The world will not be flat until it's green," he said.

Friedman then followed his book in transitioning to solutions, laying out what needs to be done and the benefits of acting quickly and effectively.

The world will need to accomplish three goals to meet the challenges of the energy climate era: clean energy, efficiency in use and production and "an ethic of conservation," he said.

"We're going to get really super-efficient at raping the natural world," he said, adding that clean, cheap energy can become "a license to buy a Hummer and drive it through the Amazon."

Friedman touched on his skepticism of the "green revolution," calling it a "green party." In chapter seven, he rattled off a list of books he had found on a Google search for "easy ways to go green." After listing titles like "10 ways to save the Earth and money in under a minute" and "10 ways to green up your sex life: vegan condoms and solar vibrators," he told the audience "you'll know it's a revolution when it's like the IT revolution, and you either change or die."

"The scale of the problem we face is so staggering that these 101 ways are going to get us absolutely nowhere," Friedman said. "Was Paul Revere out there saying, '101 ways to defeat the Redcoats?'"

Another energy chapter called "Intelligent Design" followed, so titled because "I don't believe in evolution when it comes to green power."

"Today's energy system in America is exactly like the NCAA pool," Friedman said. "It's got 64 different power companies and systems, and whoever happens to have the most senators on their side, or the most lobbyists, gets to the top - that's how corn ethanol won."

Friedman argued against "another Manhattan Project," instead advocating an "intelligently designed" system relying on an energy market, which he said does not yet exist.

Using a thought experiment involving selling technology to President Ruth Simmons - who was in attendance - Friedman explained that the challenge of providing green technologies is that only new methods, not functions, can be offered.

"It's like sending a man to the moon when Southwest Airlines already flies there, and gives away free peanuts," he said.

Friedman concluded with a call to action and a warning about what will happen if it is ignored.

"We are so unserious about this green project when you think of the system we need and the scale of the challenge," he said, adding that if we fail, we may become a "Banana Republic."

Because of the pie-throwing incident, Friedman was only able to field four questions from the audience,

which stood up and applauded his speech.

One student asked whether Friedman really thought the "conservation ethic" he was looking for would be possible in countries like the United States or China.

Friedman suggested that after the current election, the prospects for such an ethic could improve. "We've just had a vice president who said, 'Conservation is for sissies' ... and a president who can't even get the word 'c-c-c-c-c-c-c-c-conservation' out of his mouth!" he said. "Imagine if we had a president who talked about it everyday."

Aside from the two dissenters earlier in the evening, most of the audience seemed to enjoy Friedman's speech, including Simmons, who remained in the front row even after the attack.

"I thought it was very provocative," she said. "He's written a good deal about green efforts, and there's some anticipation of his work."

Simmons said of the pie-throwing incident that she "didn't know what the statement was" and thought it was ineffective in addition to being inappropriate.

"We really very much defend the right of anybody to contest any speaker's opinions," she said. "But nobody here favors assault."

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