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Green technology will fuel our future, writer says

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Friedman

Thomas L. Friedman, best-selling author and Pulitzer-prize winning columnist from The New York Times, spoke about globalization, energy and green technology to a full auditorium at Brown University last night, garnering two standing ovations.

Friedman's message was that the federal government needs to put a price on carbon, set regulations and pour money into research and development and let American ingenuity meet the market force for clean energy.

This strategy would not only help the world avoid the worst of climate change, it will end our dependence on hostile foreign regimes that we rely for oil, he said, and reestablish America as "the beacon of progress, hope and inspiration."

"Everything that you would actually do in response to climate change would make you healthier as a country, stronger, more innovative, more energy secure," he said. "This is how you make America stronger. This is not just generating power in the sense of light, this is about generating power, period."

Friedman's appearance yesterday, on Earth Day, was sponsored by the Brown Environmental Initiative.

The United States has a chance to research, develop and sell clean energy technology in the form of solar, wind and transportation fuel before mega-economies such as China figure out that clean energy is the only way to grow and survive, Friedman said.

He spoke of the seemingly overnight emergence of entire cities in China and described United Nations population projections that estimate that there will be more than 9 billion people worldwide by 2053, growth that cannot be sustained the way we currently live.

"I do believe clean power is going to be the next great global industry, I know that for sure," Friedman

said. “What I don’t know is if we are going to dominate it.”

When asked which presidential candidate would do the best job, Friedman said he was not allowed to endorse candidates.

During his speech, he only made one reference to any of the three leading hopefuls, saying Sen. Barack Obama has “touched on a desire of nation building in America.”

What the next president needs to do, he said, is be willing to tell the country directly the price it will take to achieve energy independence and, therefore, global stability.

“It’s about looking the American people in the eye and telling them this is what it is going to cost,” Friedman said.

Government leadership is far more important than individual actions, he said, advising the public to “change your leaders, not your light bulbs,” in order to see major change.

States, like Rhode Island, can use tax breaks to lure clean-energy companies, positioning themselves to reap the benefits of the new green market.

“This is really an innovation problem,” he said. “If I were Rhode Island, what I would be looking to is creating the kind of islands of interdisciplinary collaboration between different companies in this area. Just as we created info-tech parks in the eighties to do IT [information technology], I would be creating green tech parks to do ET [energy technology] and I would be giving massive tax breaks to any company that wanted to come up here and set up ET jobs.”

Not everyone agrees with Friedman’s vision that innovation is the path to climate and energy salvation. Just seconds into his speech, he was interrupted by two environmental activists, who stormed the stage shortly after Friedman stepped up to the microphone, tossing two paper plates loaded with shamrock-colored whipped cream at him.

Friedman ducked, and was left with only minor streams of the sugary green goo on his black pants and turtleneck.

He stood in bewilderment and mild disgust as the young man and woman bolted from the stage and out the side door, throwing a handful of fliers into the air to relay the message they apparently were not going to deliver personally.

“Thomas Friedman deserves a pie in the face...,” the flier said, “because of his sickeningly cheery applaud for free market capitalism’s conquest of the planet, for telling the world that the free market and techno fixes can save us from climate change. From carbon trading to biofuels, these distractions are dangerous in and of themselves, while encouraging inaction with respect to the true problems at hand...”

After five minutes, Friedman returned to the stage undeterred, with only faint traces of the green cream on his clothing.

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