

## BOOK REVIEW

**George Friedman, 2020: The Storm before the Calm,  
Doubleday, New York, 256 pages,  
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For those familiar with his writings, George Friedman's name is synonymous with geopolitics. However, his latest book seems to more about the U.S. internal affairs than geopolitics. Being familiar with the concepts and the method he uses, as someone who has worked and been trained in his team of analysts, the book is not coming as a surprise: it is the deep structural socio-economic realities that shape the state, setting its priorities, considering its geopolitical imperatives. To me, the Romanian, the book taught me a great deal about the U.S. - to me, the geopolitical analyst, the book is a guide for understanding how institutional and structural cycles can affect national strategy.

For the European public interested in geopolitics the book is essential at least for two reasons. First, it discusses the political philosophy that keeps the United States together, underlining, beyond the geography, the specific American culture driving its global role. Second, it discusses how domestic forces shape political power for a nation state - in this case, the U.S., and how that shapes the relations it has with the world.

The book essentially brings up a model for socio-political analysis of the U.S., a country that, contrary to common beliefs, is very little known. In Europe, the

educational system makes it easy to gain knowledge on the middle ages or the antiquity, but you usually gain similar amount of knowledge about the history of the United States if you decide to enroll in special programs, focused on the history of the Americas. The U.S. is commonly thought about as a “new state”, while its institutional realities are little known. Its foreign policy, especially during the last few years, is tied to the president’s personality while the media, while helping shape the public opinion, is not doing much reporting on the deeper problems and specific aspects of the American life. Friedman’s book comes to address that perception and guide the reader into a better understanding of the United States.

Therefore, the first part of the book is about the founding of the United States. The second talks about the impersonal forces driving events, both internally and externally, for the United States. The third refers to the problems of the 2020s – and, while the book was finished last year and published in February, reading this particular part gives you an unsettling feeling of “*déjà vu*”, due to the current pandemic that generated the sanitary crisis worldwide, U.S. included. George Friedman forecasts that the 2020s and 2030s will have the U.S. experiment a “very real coming crisis”, out of which “pain and confusion” will drive restructuring, arguing that the experience will actually make the U.S. more dynamic.

In the first part of the book called “The Invention of America”, Friedman refers to the way the founding founders designed the United States to have an inefficient political system. “The Constitutional Convention invented the American government. It was an invention in two ways. First, it created a government where none had existed. Second, it created a machine, the machinery of government, which had sprung from the minds of the founders.” Adding that the founders “did not trust the people, because the people – in pursuing their private interests – might divert the government from common good”, Friedman explains why the machinery of government, while having to exist and function, had to be restrained. The combination largely made the passage of new laws very difficult, limited the powers of the president – who could not ever “become a tyrant” and limited Congress by the courts on

anything it could ever achieve. In short, the government had to be inefficient and do little, so that creativity be allowed in private life.

Friedman also points out the specificity of the United States by pointing the symbols the founding act brought, the Great Seal, all-visible on the one-dollar bill. By going into details on each of them, he points out that the founders had a clear vision for the new country. For example, the idea that the new American era was only natural for the Founding Fathers is confirmed by the third motto on the Great Seal – *Novus ordo seclorum*, which means a new order of the ages. In Friedman’s words, the founders “saw the founding of the United States as a new era, filled with unending effort, but effort shaped toward a prescribed and logical end”. All that is explained with regards to the founding of the United States refers to the reasons for which the country is a unique blend of innovation, business and war as the way for the nation to evolve, during each historical period.

The second part “American Cycles” looks at the fundamental, impersonal forces that drive the United States. It also explains how the American evolution is, in fact, set through two cycles: the institutional and the socio-economic cycles. It is in this chapter that George Friedman explains how the U.S. is tied to Europe and Asia and how the economic dependencies came to define immigration patterns which have evolved into social forces. As America developed, the institutional cycle and the socio-economic have always succeeded, one after another. Friedman explains how the South is different from the North, how the West different from the East, due to the way the colonies had been setting but also how transportation, including river trade and agriculture were developed in time, all of which has developed different socio-economic models, which have stood at the heart of the Civil War.

All this translates into tensions that transform into crisis when one institutional or socio-economic cycle ends and another one begins. But such crises, in the history of the United States have proven to be beneficial for the country’s advancements. “This tension has a virtue hidden within it. The tension within the country, the radical differences in culture and outlook, actually become a good driving the country forward but leaving some behind”, George Friedman’s write. As this part of the book takes us through the American history and

geography explaining patterns, it is underlined the foundational forward-looking national identity, considering the United States appears, in Friedman's words, an invented country in all aspects. Historically, the first institutional cycle began with the drafting of the Constitution and ended after the Civil War ended. The second cycle ended at the conclusion of World War II, when the United States also took on the role of global power. The socio-economic cycle has shifted in the 80s, considering technological innovation and businesses. George Friedman points out that "the strains of the next transition are becoming obvious now and will take place around 2025", as the United States is "facing another period of social and economic instability that will conclude in the late 2020s."

This is what the third part talks about "The Crisis and the Calm". George Friedman explains that the current decade is a critical historical moment in time: the institutional and the socio-economic cycle end at the same time. That makes for ampler crises than before, an amplification of usual instability due to existing structural differences and disruptions. He points out that "socioeconomic cycles are shaped by social and economic failure. Institutional crises are shaped by the wars the United States has been fighting. In the 2020, the two major cycles that have shaped the United States will intertwine and the sense of failure will be deep, even as the solution to the economic and social problems will be grinding through the system". By discussing the current political and economic problems that the United States is facing, the crisis of faith in the Republic is underlined to be most important. This last part is very vivid, considering all that happens now – the covid-19 sanitary crisis but also the U.S. efforts to limit its engagements abroad. George Friedman argues that while the 20s will be grim, the restructuring hard, as the United States gets into the 2030, common sense and rational governance will restore its dynamism again.

The polarization of the American society, the problems of the middle class, the ineffectiveness of expertise and technocracy as well as the demoralizing decline of the working class are all described in detail, which makes of this part a veritable analysis of the contemporary American society. In the same time, all the details offered makes it hard to believe common sense will prevail at the end of the coming crisis. To support that argument, George Friedman offers no other reason by that of cyclical evolution – in politics and economics both.

In a simple but not a simplistic way, this book explains the contemporary reality of the United States. It also gives away a method to look at a nation state's problems. The forecasting technique – looking through cycles, is blurred by hope and optimism, something that is not often found in George Friedman's writings. The book was to be released in an election year that was to show divisions, once again, in the American politics and social life. Instead, the book was released just before the covid-19 pandemic hit the world and is testing all countries abilities to cope with it, including that of the United States. But how the United States deals with the current and coming crises defines the world – which makes of this book a must read.