

Better world not likely

New York Times columnist sees an explosive Mideast getting worse in future

By J. PATRICK COOLICAN
Las Vegas Sun

Thomas Friedman is still a reporter at heart, using facts assembled and conversations recorded as clay, instruments of insight by which he crafts arguments. Unlike many commentators, he continues to travel with notebook in hand.

The New York Times foreign affairs columnist came equipped with alarming reporting for a packed Sunday lecture sponsored by the Saltman Center for Conflict Resolution at UNLV.

His argument points to an ever-more brutal confrontation with a violent strain of Islam, unless American thinking and policy change radically.

Consider the trends. Of the 280 million people in the Arab world, one-third are younger than 15. By 2020 that population will grow to between 410 million and 450 million.

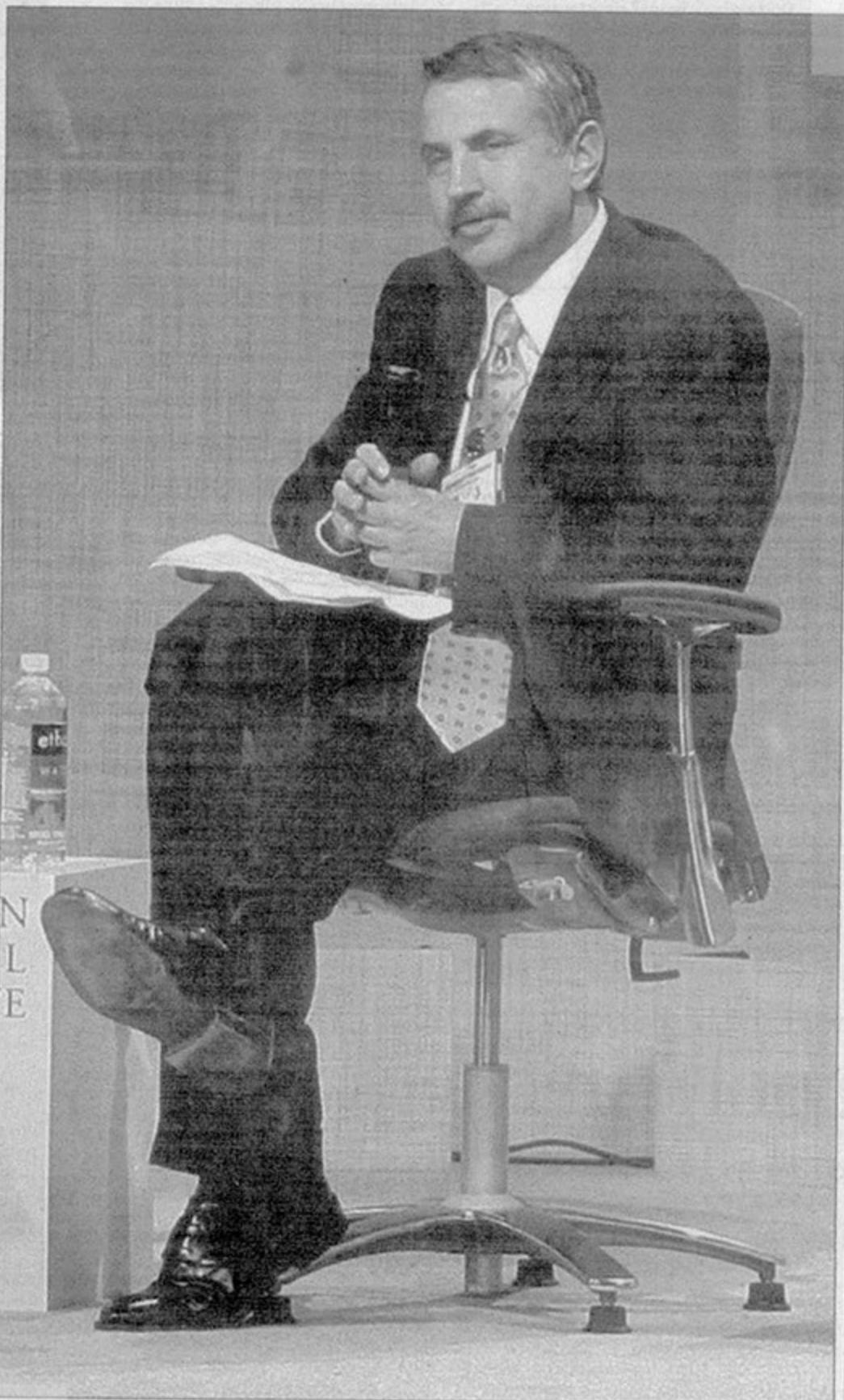
Yet many of them live at the bottom of the economic ladder. The gross domestic product of Spain is greater than the 22 Arab states combined. Sixty-five million Arabs are illiterate, two-thirds of them women. Just one of the Arab regimes has been elected in a free and fair election.

Friedman contends that this volatile mix will explode as children reach young adulthood, without the advanced education of their American, European and Asian counterparts. In their humiliation and search for meaning, they will fall into the arms of the radical imams, he said.

Declining oil revenue in Arab states will only add to swelling ranks of the indigent. "You will see a social explosion ... like nothing the world has ever seen," Friedman said.

Terrorists cannot be deterred, because "they hate us more than they love life," and are thus willing to destroy themselves in the hope of martyrdom. They exploit the trust required to maintain an open society — the trust that allows us to walk down a street freely because we do not fear bombs strapped to fellow citizens.

Any future terrorist incident in the United States that approaches the scale of 2001 will likely mean the end of America's open society as we know it, as security fears overwhelm our long-standing love of liberty, argued Friedman, who has won two Pulitzer Prizes for reporting and a third



ASSOCIATED PRESS FILE PHOTO

Thomas Friedman, The New York Times foreign affairs columnist, had an alarming report for a packed Sunday lecture sponsored by the Saltman Center for Conflict Resolution at UNLV.

for commentary.

Friedman said that these realities drove him to support the Iraq war.

He said he was torn, but favored hope over experience, envisioning Iraq as a model

for what the rest of the Middle East could become.

"It takes a village," he said of terrorism.

Healthy societies don't produce terrorism, and he hoped Iraq as a healthy society would

offer a road map to the rest of the region in pursuit of a real future. Although logical, he conceded that the idea was fundamentally irrational.

Instead of becoming a model of democratic plural-

ism, Iraq is now a spectacularly failed state, one of astounding carnage in the streets and in slums, in universities and health clinics and mosques.

Given his valuable journalistic real estate on the op-ed page of The New York Times and at the top of the best-seller lists, Friedman has faced intense criticism from war critics.

Friedman said he underestimated the incompetence of the Bush administration, which he called criminal. "He summoned us to D-Day, and he gave us the invasion of Granada," he said of President Bush.

Also, after a lengthy war with Iran, a war in Kuwait, a war with America and its allies, U.N. sanctions, and another war, Iraqi society was pulverized, he said, its people given over to tribal and sectarian huddles and a militia culture.

Finally, he said he underestimated the true violent nihilism of the forces arrayed against us. "Where is the Muslim Martin Luther King Jr.?" he said.

For Friedman, enough is enough. He has written, and he said in his lecture, that unless Bush engaged in a globe-trotting apology tour to enlist the rest of the world in our Iraq project, it is time to withdraw and set a price floor on gasoline, so we can begin weaning ourselves from our petro-addiction.

Few journalists in the West have more intimate knowledge of these unhappy facts than Friedman, who was the Times bureau chief in Jerusalem, as well as Beirut during the brutal civil war there. His book, "From Beirut to Jerusalem" won the National Book Award. He has seen atrocities on all sides of conflicts in the region.

Having studied both Hebrew and Arabic, the cultures flow through him, he said in a Sun interview after the lecture. This quality has allowed him to detect cultural subtleties and won him some trust despite being the Times' first Jewish bureau chief in a part of the world where anti-Semitism is rampant.

Friedman said he rarely contemplates his immense influence. Rather, "After a column I wake up in the morning and I'm in agony — did I get it right?"

J. Patrick Coolican can be reached at 569-3174 or at patrick.coolican@lasvegassun.com.