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Greening The American Dream

Modern America was born on the road, behind a wheel, and for most of the last century, the automobile represented what it meant to be American: going forward at high speed to find new worlds.

The car transformed America from a farm-based society into an industrial giant. Yet, the cars that drove the American Dream have helped to create a global ecological nightmare. While Europe's appetite for oil has been restrained by high petrol taxes, smaller cars and more efficient public transport, in America demand for oil has grown by 22 per cent since 1990.

The extraordinary worldwide rise of the middle class and the demand for an American lifestyle, of which car ownership is a key component, have fuelled a staggering boom.

The horrors of excessive energy consumption, climate change and population growth are detailed in a new book by Thomas L. Friedman. Friedman fears the worst, but unlike so many authors, he also hopes for the best. His book is not about slowing economic growth or a radical change in our lifestyles, but about harnessing American expertise, ingenuity and cash to find solutions to the energy crisis.

Friedman points out that the green economy is a chance to reassert American strength. "The ability to design, build and export green technologies to produce clean water, clean air and healthy and abundant food is going to be the currency of power in the New Energy Era."

Friedman's argument may sound Utopian, but his vision is to capture the best of American ambition in a sort of Puritan renewal: "We are all sailing on the Mayflower anew." America can be both rich and virtuous, by pouring imagination, energy and money into mass-produced technology that will improve daily life, while sustaining American primacy—the very ideas that motivated Henry Ford a century ago.

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