Thomas Friedman in his book "Globalization 3.0," contends people from far-flung places will become principal players in the global marketplace.

In his latest book, The World is Flat, Friedman describes the unplanned cascade of technological and social shifts that effectively leveled the economic world, and "accidentally made Beijing, Bangalore and Bethesda next-door neighbors."

Today, "individuals and small groups of every color of the rainbow will be able to plug and play." Friedman's list of "flatteners" includes the fall of the Berlin Wall; the rise of Netscape and the dotcom boom that led to a trillion dollar investment in fiber optic cable; the emergence of common software platforms and open source code enabling global collaboration; and the rise of outsourcing, offshoring, supply chaining and insourcing.

Friedman says these flatteners converged around the year 2000, and "created a flat world: a global, web-enabled platform for multiple forms of sharing knowledge and work, irrespective of time, distance, geography and increasingly, language." At the very moment this platform emerged, three huge economies materialized -- those of India, China and the former Soviet Union --"and three billion people who were out of the game, walked onto the playing field."

A final convergence may determine the fate of the U.S. in this final chapter of globalization. A "political perfect storm," as Friedman describes it -- the dotcom bust, the attacks of 9/11, and the Enron scandal -- "distract us completely as a country." Just when we need to face the fact of globalization and the need to compete in a new world, "we're looking totally elsewhere."