"That Used to Be Us" and "America Really Was That Great"
by Thomas Friedman and Michael Mandelbaum
Study Questions in Preparing for Socratic Seminar on June 25

"That Used to Be Us" and the summary article "America Really was that Great" examine the 21st century challenges that America must face and overcome in order to thrive domestically and maintain its position of global leadership. The following questions will help you focus on some important issues in the book and article. As you prepare for the seminar on Monday, June 25, think about your response to these questions. You certainly will identify other themes and issues that deserve discussion, and we ask you to bring them to the seminar as well.

1. What are the factors that brought about the new flat world? What are the four main challenges America faces (p. 17)? Are there other challenges you would add?

2. The formula for American success is supported by five pillars (p.34). Which do you think need the greatest attention and focus? What could “shock” America into returning to greatness (p. 331)?

3. What is American exceptionalism (p. 348)? In your opinion what makes America exceptional?

4. Friedman and Mandelbaum write that American power is “not simply a matter of will but of means” (p. 351). In this context, what is American power? What are good examples of American power?

5. In “America Really Was That Great,” the authors write that “The United States has not adapted its educational system to prepare Americans for well-paying jobs in a world economy shaped by globalization and the revolution of information technology.” Do you agree with this statement? What are the barriers in your school, school district, or college that keep students from acquiring the skills they need to find employment in a global marketplace? What initiatives are in place in your school district or college that help students acquire these important skills?

6. What are the most powerful forces shaping the values of the American youth culture today? Are these forces building the character our students' need for success in the 21st century?

7. Revisit the Tocqueville letter in chapter 15, “Shock Therapy” (p. 327). If you were to envision a happy ending that defied Tocqueville’s dire observations, what would it look like? What would the ideal American future hold for the next generation?