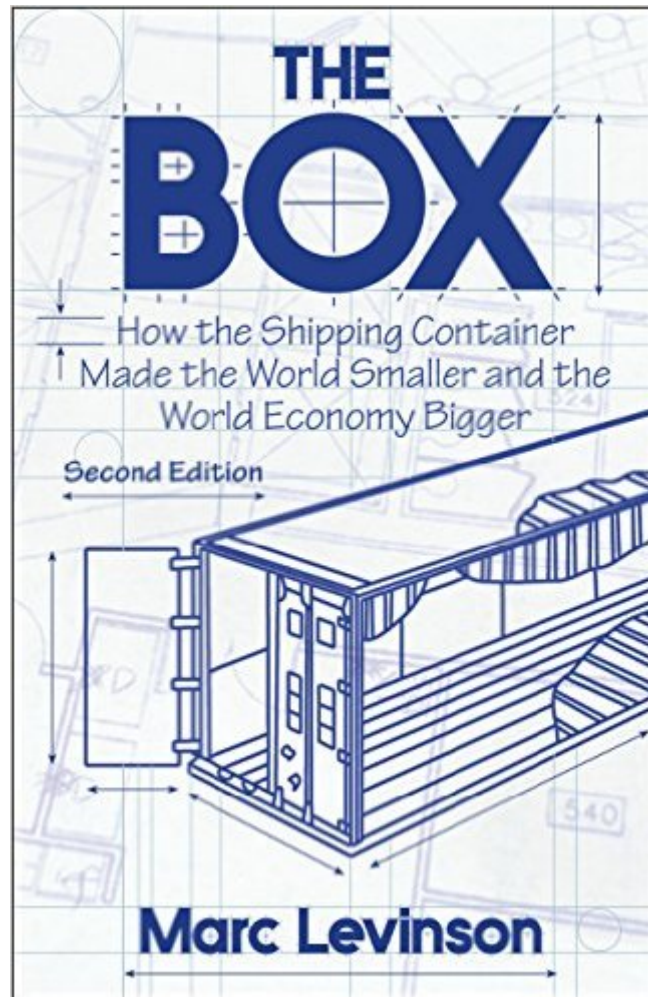


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# The Box: How The Shipping Container Made The World Smaller And The World Economy Bigger



## Synopsis

In April 1956, a refitted oil tanker carried fifty-eight shipping containers from Newark to Houston. From that modest beginning, container shipping developed into a huge industry that made the boom in global trade possible. *The Box* tells the dramatic story of the container's creation, the decade of struggle before it was widely adopted, and the sweeping economic consequences of the sharp fall in transportation costs that containerization brought about. But the container didn't just happen. Its adoption required huge sums of money, both from private investors and from ports that aspired to be on the leading edge of a new technology. It required years of high-stakes bargaining with two of the titans of organized labor, Harry Bridges and Teddy Gleason, as well as delicate negotiations on standards that made it possible for almost any container to travel on any truck or train or ship. Ultimately, it took McLean's success in supplying U.S. forces in Vietnam to persuade the world of the container's potential. Drawing on previously neglected sources, economist Marc Levinson shows how the container transformed economic geography, devastating traditional ports such as New York and London and fueling the growth of previously obscure ones, such as Oakland. By making shipping so cheap that industry could locate factories far from its customers, the container paved the way for Asia to become the world's workshop and brought consumers a previously unimaginable variety of low-cost products from around the globe. Published in hardcover on the fiftieth anniversary of the first container voyage, this is the first comprehensive history of the shipping container. Now with a new chapter, *The Box* tells the dramatic story of how the drive and imagination of an iconoclastic entrepreneur turned containerization from an impractical idea into a phenomenon that transformed economic geography, slashed transportation costs, and made the boom in global trade possible.

## Book Information

File Size: 4324 KB

Print Length: 531 pages

Publisher: Princeton University Press; 2 edition (April 5, 2016)

Publication Date: April 5, 2016

Sold by:Â Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B01772PS00

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #74,894 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #2 in Books > Engineering & Transportation > Engineering > Industrial, Manufacturing & Operational Systems > Industrial Design > Packaging #7 in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Engineering & Transportation > Engineering > Industrial, Manufacturing & Operational Systems > Industrial Design #10 in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Business & Money > Industries > Transportation

## Customer Reviews

In "On the waterfront," perhaps the saddest point of the film is where Fr. Barry eulogizes K. O. Duggan, killed off by the mob. But Marc Levinson has located a larger villain, the real force that killed off so many longshoremen's careers: the standardized shipping container. While a highly trained crane operator working today's docks earns \$120,000 a year, their numbers are few and few of them are former longshoremen or sons of longshoremen. And cargo handling costs have dropped over 90%. Yet this is only the start. The shipping container reduced spoilage, theft, insurance costs, delays, and the entire cost of going global. Levinson's well-researched treatment of a seemingly pedestrian subject works effectively to show that the world is not flat. The original dust cover of Friedman's best-selling book shows a tall-masted ship going over the edge of the 'flat' earth, confirming flat earth society members' discarded beliefs but distorting and mischaracterizing globalization. Levinson's rich, detailed, data-filled work shows the stark difference between Levinson's work with The Economist and Friedman's with The New York Times. Levinson uses a thorough, comprehensive economic and technological analysis, while Friedman flies around the world with a consistent "gee whiz" attitude of surprise. Levinson traces multitudes of disparate events and finds common links where Friedman finds common links and illustrates them with cursory events. Levinson is an economist; Friedman is a journalist. Friedman mixes metaphors and hyperbole; Levinson mixes in a wide range of colorful characters and challenges. Levinson is an editor; Friedman needs one. People who want to understand the recent history, impetus and infrastructure of globalization need to read "The box."

The first thing that struck me about the impact of the shipping container was the public policy impact on it. Before the shipping container, shipping, trucking, and railroading were heavily regulated by the ICC. Rates were set not only according to weight and distance, but also according to contents.

Thus, the cost of shipping 1000 pounds of tires would be different than, say, 1000 pounds of grain, and not just because of density differences. This apparently goes back to the complaints made by shippers in the late 19th century, and made sense to regulators in that era. Also, prior to the container, shippers were allowed to charge less than truckers because ships took longer. So if a ship already had a stated rate for, say, wheat, between two ports, truckers were not allowed to charge less (or something like that - Levinson didn't attempt to explain the intricacies of ICC regulation). Further, shipping between American ports was restricted to American flagged ships, and international shipping was heavily regulated and subsidized - to qualify for the subsidy, you had to use American built ships, and the subsidy supposedly helped make up for the more expensive American crew. One final government involvement in the era just prior to the shipping container's introduction: many of the ships currently in use in 1956 were WWII surplus ships, built on the cheap and available for next to nothing. It was relatively easy to get into the business, as very little capital was required, and ships could ply from port to port picking up freight as they went. Enter the shipping container, 1956. But wait: the container requires different infrastructure. The story of the shipping container is also the story of ports where governments chose to support the companies investing in the container.

It's hard now to imagine a world without marine shipping containers, but the first one was loaded onto a ship, the Ideal-X, just 50 years ago. Precisely, on April 26, 1956, in Newark, N.J. It turned the world upside down. It probably had as much to do with the success of Waikiki as the jet airliner, introduced in 1960. The story has a hero, Malcom McLean, and it plays out, for him and for many others, as tragedy. In "The Box," Marc Levinson makes business history read like a novel. Well, almost. Like many simple, everyday things, the shipping container is more complicated than it looks. Just how do you design a steel box that can hold 20 tons but also has to be picked up without being touched by human hands and moved from ship to truck in less than a minute? McLean, a North Carolina boy who founded a trucking empire in the days of heavy regulation in order to save \$3, took the plunger's approach. In the Pacific, Matson Navigation Co. was also interested in converting from expensive breakbulk cargo handling, but it took the systems approach. McLean beat Matson by two years, but Matson is still around (as the principal subsidiary of Alexander & Baldwin Inc.), while McLean's SeaLand survives today only as a subsidiary (a very large one) of a Danish business that didn't exist until 1973. McLean did not imagine he was going to restructure the world economy, but his idea did that, which is why this book deserves a wider audience than business histories usually get. The container killed off New York and London as important shipping ports. New York City now

handles only a little more cargo each year than Tanjung Pelepas, Malaysia, which did not exist in 1990.

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