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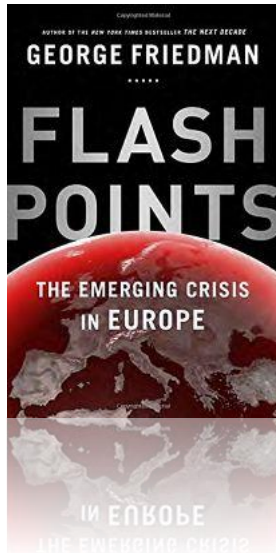


Obra Social "la Caixa"



Flashpoints: The Emerging Crisis in Europe

Friedman, George, (2015), Random House LLC, New York.



"Between 1914 and 1945 roughly 100 million European died from political causes: war, genocide, purges, planned starvation, and all the rest. That would be an extraordinary number of deaths anywhere and anytime. It was particularly striking in Europe, which had, over the course of the previous four hundred years, collectively conquered most of the world and reshaped the way humanity thought of itself."

"We are now living through Europe's test. As all human institutions do, the European Union is going through a time of intense problems, mostly economic for the moment. The European Union was founded for "peace and prosperity". If prosperity disappears, or disappears in some nations, what happens to peace?"

Summary

The geography of Europe prevents the continent being unified through conquest. This has allowed small nations survive for a long time. In fact, the map of Europe a thousand years ago is similar to the map of Europe today. Having co-existed for so many years, European nations have forged memories over the decades and centuries, which, according to George Friedman, have made trust and forgiveness almost impossible. In *Flashpoints*, Friedman discusses the cultural, political, and economic patchwork that has characterised Europe over the last five centuries. In his analysis, he focuses specifically on borders, given their roles as points of union and conflict in European diversity, and he pays special attention to the border that divides the European peninsula from the rest of the European continent – or the West from Russia. This is an immense area that includes countries such as Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuania, and over the last century great changes have been made to its borders. Other borders that have shaped European history include the boundary between France and Germany; the Balkans, which separate Central Europe and Turkey; the Pyrenean border between the Iberian Peninsula and the rest of Europe; and the English Channel, which separates the British Isles from the continent. The author notes that in the World Wars I and II, European borders became flashpoints whose conflicts grew in intensity and spread like fire.

Terrible memories and nightmares haunted the population after the devastation, and Friedman explains how Europe was rebuilt, albeit with difficulty, and regained its

sovereignty. From this chaos emerged a single phrase: 'never again'. An institution, the European Union, was created to bring nations together in such a way that the benefits would stop nations going to war. For Friedman, the fundamental question the world must ask is whether Europe has finally finished with wars and conflicts, or if this is only a seductive illusion and an interlude. In *Flashpoints*, a book that is ambitious in scope, but vague in analysis, Friedman attempts to answer this question through a thorough examination of European history over the last 500 years.

The conclusions contained in this book about the future of the European Union are fairly pessimistic, and largely influenced by a realist view of politics and author's personal experience (his family survived the Nazi concentration camps and escaped from Hungary to the United States after World War II). For Friedman, the idea that Europe has resolved its disputes through dialogue is fantasy. It did not happen in the past, and will not happen in the future. The dramatic differences between the standards of living and anxieties in the various parts of Europe (Germany and Austria, Northern Europe, the Mediterranean countries, and the countries bordering Russia) reveal lines that once again are fragmenting the continent. Moreover, the EU is unable to deliver on the promise of peace and prosperity on which the project was built. For this reason, for Friedman, conflict will return to Europe.

The author

George Friedman is an American political scientist. He is the founder and former head of intelligence, financial administrator, and CEO of Stratfor, a private firm specialised in global intelligence and based in Austin, Texas. Friedman has written several books, including: *The Next 100 Years*; *The Next Decade*; *America's Secret War*; *The Intelligence Edge*; *The Coming War with Japan*, and *The Future of War*.

Key ideas and opinion

In *Flashpoints*, George Friedman examines European exceptionalism, that is, the idea that Europe has resolved the obstacles on the path to peace and prosperity, something that the rest of the world has not yet achieved. His analysis is divided into three parts. The first part examines the reason why Europe was the place where the world was discovered and transformed. The second part explores why, despite the splendour of European civilization, the continent was plunged into a period of war for 31 years. Finally, Friedman reflects on the future of Europe and its potential points of conflict. In the author's opinion, **if Europe has finally managed to overcome its history of bloody fighting, this is major news. But if this is not true, we are facing something even more important with huge global implications.**

First part

In the sixteenth century, **Prince Henry of Portugal**, known as **Henry the Navigator**, started a school for navigators in Sagres, and its many students included Vasco de Gama, Ferdinand Magellan, and even Christopher Columbus. This was the beginning of **the great European adventure of exploration and world domination. Between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries Europeans managed to occupy or heavily influence almost the entire world.** More importantly, Friedman notes: Europeans transformed the world by ensuring that we all became aware of the existence of everyone else. The idea of a common civilization could not exist in a world where civilizations were unaware of the existence of others.

Why did such a revolution begin at a school in Sagres located at the furthest end of Western Europe? Friedman stresses that other civilizations could have launched similar revolutions. While Prince Henry was founding the school, China had built a fleet with the potential to sail the oceans and impose its will on the rest of the world. The Romans could have done the same. The necessary technology was not confined to the Europeans or the Portuguese. However, others failed to take the leap. Friedman argues that the reason why Portugal (and later Spain, France, Netherlands, and England) embarked on an adventure of such proportions **had much to do with the strategic position of Islam.**

Asia and Europe were united by land and sea. Ships brought spices from India, while silks from China were carried overland along the Silk Road. Both maritime and terrestrial routes ended in Constantinople, where another sea route began towards the Italian ports for distribution to European cities. But in the tenth century, a caliphate was founded in Egypt that aimed to control the spice route, and it became the only point where spices could pass through the Red Sea to the Mediterranean. The caliphate was, of course, Muslim; while Constantinople was Christian. When the Ottomans conquered Constantinople, they subjugated the Christians and became the dominant naval power in the eastern Mediterranean. With this new naval power, the Ottomans imposed high tariffs and barred Europeans ships from carrying spices. **The growing power of the Muslims combined with the rising price of spices were major forces behind the expeditions sponsored by Prince Henry.**

To understand the Portuguese plans to become a naval power it is important to take into account the **geopolitical situation in the Iberian Peninsula. After Spain expelled the Moors, it became a more powerful land power than Portugal.** Given the rivalry between both nations, and the importance of sea routes, Spain needed to become a naval power as well. **Portugal, unable to compete in land power with Spain given its smaller size, was therefore pressured into increasing its naval strength.** In 1498, Vasco de Gama reached Calicut on the Malabar Coast in southern India. He thus created a new route to India that bypassed the Ottomans and set the stage for European domination of India over the coming centuries. Columbus' subsequent voyage, in which he discovered a region that the world did not know existed, was even more important. This

discovery revolutionised European thought – and increased the desire for wealth and the conquest of new lands. **Friedman suggests that the wealth seized by Spain in the ‘New World’ gave her the power to attempt a unification of Europe. But her wealth was not enough,** and the inability of Spain to dominate and unify Europe then freed France, England, and the Netherlands to pursue their own imperial strategies. Friedman notes that these events constituted only a fraction of the European conquest of the world – but they nevertheless revealed **a fatal flaw: an ability to conquer the world, but an inability to mobilise that power to unify Europe.**

Three beliefs dominated the culture of the European peninsula at that time: firstly, the **world was the centre of the universe**; secondly, **Europe was the centre of the world**; and thirdly, the **church was the centre of Europe**. Christianity was closely linked to the European world conquest and was needed to motivate the conquerors and then subdue the conquered. In 1517, Luther nailed his ‘Ninety-Five Theses’ to the door of a church and so began the **Protestant Reformation**, which challenged the notion that Rome was the centre of Europe. Just 26 years later, in 1543, **Copernicus** demonstrated clearly that the Earth revolved around the sun and was not the centre of the universe – a revelation that led to a sense of human insignificance and challenged the teachings of many religions. Friedman emphasises that all of these events took place in the context of a technological revolution: **the invention of printing**. Everyone could now read the Bible in their own language. This simple fact undermined the authority of the priest more than any other event. Based on their own reading, individuals could now disagree about the Bible’s meaning. **These disagreements lead to a break with Rome, and a break between communities as the church in Europe began to fragment along national lines.** Friedman stresses that the ability to read in spoken languages created links between those who shared a common language – something that had not yet acquired a political meaning. Germany was the heart of the Reformation, but it also spread across northern Europe, the British Isles, and Scandinavia. The Reformation also led to the emergence of an intellectual movement: the scientific revolution, which placed consciousness and the individual at the centre of the moral and intellectual universe. As a result, the **Enlightenment** swept through Western Europe from the mid-seventeenth century until the late eighteenth century, and represented a revolution in human thought. The Enlightenment was based on reason, encouraged the development of meritocracies, and was the origin of European liberalism.

Second part

By the beginning of the twentieth century, Europe had achieved a revolution. It had succeeded in conquering the world and the mind. European empires extended across 40 million square kilometres and Europe had become the centre of economic, technological and intellectual progress. Moreover, **Europe had enjoyed almost a century of peace** – since 1815. It seemed unthinkable that this situation would change. But it changed – and suddenly. **In August 1914, Europe became a slaughterhouse.** By

1945 the death toll had reached 100 million, and the number of injured was uncountable. The entire continent was in shock following a destruction whose scale and speed was unprecedented. Yet **Friedman believes it was the virtues that led to European grandeur that also led to its destruction.** The enormous intellectual progress in science was motivated by a radical scepticism that defied moral limits. **The technologies that changed the world created previously unimaginable systems for killing. World domination led to constant conflict. And the principle of nationhood and the right to self-determination emanating from the Enlightenment evolved into an anger towards strangers.** World War I achieved few of the aims for which it was started. Germany failed to remove the threat of war on two fronts with France and Russia, and France failed to dismantle Germany. The result was utterly unexpected: **the collapse of four empires** – those of Germany, Austro-Hungary, the Ottomans, and Russia – and the emergence of numerous nations previously submerged within those empires.

World War I redefined the limits of what was reasonable in terms of revolution. It eradicated all imaginable limits to the number of victims. And it **undermined those institutions that could have controlled mass killings, such as the church and family, as well as common sense.** According to Friedman, **World War II was simply the continuation, expansion, and intensification of the First World War,** and it followed a very similar pattern: an insecure Germany, caught between France and the Soviet Union, attacked France. But unlike World War I, France collapsed in six weeks. Britain refused to make peace, and as Germany was unable to cross the Channel, it decided to eliminate the Soviet Union. Germany almost managed to achieve its aim, but the immensity of the European continent led to the destruction of Hitler's army. Germany declared war on the United States, which crossed the English Channel two years later and swept through the European peninsula. Germany collapsed and was occupied by America and the Soviet Union. Although for Germany the causes of the war were similar to those of the First World War, the results were much more catastrophic. However, events were even more catastrophic for the continent: **one in ten Europeans died between 1939 and 1945.**

Friedman notes that the end of a war usually brings hope. But this time, for most people, the end of the war led to the realisation of everything that had been lost. Europe was impoverished and its fate was now in the hands of its occupiers: America and the Soviet Union. **The borders between American and Soviet power in Europe became the new point of friction,** this time including a nuclear threat. The author emphasises that America had no direct interest in Europe, but aimed to prevent a single hegemon from unifying Europe. The US had learnt that the balance of power in Europe was no longer held within Europe itself, because since 1914, one power – Germany – had twice tried to dominate the continent. After the end of WWII, the Soviet Union adopted the role of Germany, and without the presence of the United States, it would have been able to conquer the continent, since no other force could hold the line. The Soviet Union was also able to weaken the rest of Europe through political influence,

something America was unwilling to tolerate. Yet **by the time the Cold War ended in 1991** with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Europeans had regained their pride and **learnt two valuable lessons. Firstly, the price of power was too high. And secondly, no matter how many states were included within Europe, it was possible to integrate them into a single entity – the European Union. This union was designed to achieve what others had failed to do: bring peace and prosperity to the continent and abolish European wars.**

Third part

The creation of the European Union, ironically, coincided with the start of the war in the Balkans and the Caucasus. Of course, Friedman notes, the Maastricht Treaty had no responsibility for the outbreak of these wars and none of the parties involved in the war were members of the union. But it is a fact that wars were being fought on the continent when the European Union was being created. Indeed, the author points out, **there have been more wars since the creation of the EU than between 1945 and 1992.** According to Friedman, many Europeans avoid this fact and argue that Yugoslavia did not reflect modern Europe, and that the Caucasus wars were not really in Europe. **History, says the author, has left Europe wanting to impress the world and demonstrate that it is extraordinary (apart from being responsible for imperialism and mass murder).** There is a widespread belief that Europeans have learnt the lesson that war is not worthwhile and so have managed to eliminate conflict. When prosperity returned, preserving the peace played a key role in the revival of the continent. For that reason, **it was important to deny that wars in the Balkans and the Caucasus were European.** However, they were. And they reflected the weakness of the European peace. Importantly, Friedman reminds us that the First World War started in the Balkans, and that Russia is conducting a counterinsurgency strategy against the Islamists in Chechnya and Dagestan. For the author of *Flashpoints*, denying these conflicts requires a constant redefinition of Europe. **It should be recognised that European wars did not end with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the formation of the European Union.**

It is true that no wars have taken place within the European Union, which is a powerful argument in favour of the positive role the EU can play in moderating the urge for conflict. **What will happen, however, if the EU fails, becomes fragmented, or effectively ceases to function?** According to Friedman, the EU is facing a crisis that it cannot easily manage. In fact, it is failing, and the question is whether it will be able to recover its former equilibrium. Friedman feels it will not, because the problems the EU is facing are structural. Therefore, **if it is true that European integration has abolished conflict, and that conflict will return without the EU – as is happening in the Balkans and the Caucasus – then the future of Europe will be very different from what many expect.**

This position is argued by pointing to the current flashpoints afflicting the continent: first, the absence of 'hard power'. Europe has lost its leading position in the world, but

it is still a commercial power. However, trade (part of what Europeans call 'soft power') depends on national security. The hard power that was previously provided by Europe's global economic base has gone. There are powerful nations such as China, Russia, and the United States that offer the same benefits as Europe, but the agreements signed with the EU entail more serious consequences for violations. This may not be critical now, but it will become more important in the future. **Being rich and weak is a dangerous combination. Europe lives in a world of wolves, according to the author.** Some countries such as Germany, France, or the United Kingdom may compete in this league, but the rest probably cannot.

In fact, Friedman emphasises, it is easy for any country to challenge Europe militarily. The most important conflict has already emerged, in **Ukraine**: a fight between the mainland and the peninsula for the border between them. The ruined Ukrainian economy, Germany's reluctance to challenge Russia, and the distance from the United States, offer Russia an advantage in its aspirations to expand its influence and control westward. Other **countries such as Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria have joined in the European belief that armies are somewhat archaic. However, as the Russian army moves westward, these countries must ask themselves how far Russia will go.** To Friedman, this question is answered with another question: how weak is Europe's eastern border? The weakness of NATO and the unresolved European economic crisis, have left these border states exposed to economic solutions that involve Russia – the world's eighth largest economy.

The **second flashpoint is the massive movement of people to Europe from North Africa and Turkey.** This flow, says the author, **has generated significant internal tensions and threatens to jeopardise free movement in Europe**: there are even countries, such as **Denmark**, that want to block the entry of Muslims. Another dimension of this reality is the **rise of far-right parties from Hungary to France.** These parties share a hostility to the European Union, strongly oppose immigration, and support the national interests of their countries, as opposed to the interests of the European transnational elite. None of these parties are in ruling positions, but some form part of coalition governments, and their importance is growing rapidly. The growing support for parties on the extreme right is just the tip of an iceberg: the romantic nationalism that explains a reluctance to transfer authority to multinational institutions cannot be underestimated.

At the moment, Europe's traditional flashpoints (the Rhine valley, English Channel, and the rest) remain fairly calm, although Franco-German tension is increasing. However, **Friedman shows concern regarding the definition of four areas within the EU: Germany and Austria; northern Europe; the Mediterranean states; and the border states.** The latter are under pressure from Russia, while the Mediterranean states face high unemployment. The states in northern Europe are better placed in the economic crisis, but Germany is the best placed. For the author, the **stark differences between these blocs represent the lines along which the EU is fragmenting back to the nation-**



state and back to the history that Europe wanted to overcome. Each region is experiencing a different reality, and these differences are irreconcilable. **Europe's problem, according to Friedman, is the same one that plagued it at its apex, the Enlightenment – namely, its desire to possess everything, even at the cost of its own soul. Today, the nations of the European Union want everything for free.** They want permanent peace and prosperity. They want to retain national sovereignty (but they do not want fully sovereign states that exercise their sovereignty). They want to be a single people, but do not want to share the same fate. They want to speak one language, but do not believe that this is synonymous with mutual understanding. They want to win, but without taking risks. They want complete security, but without defending themselves.