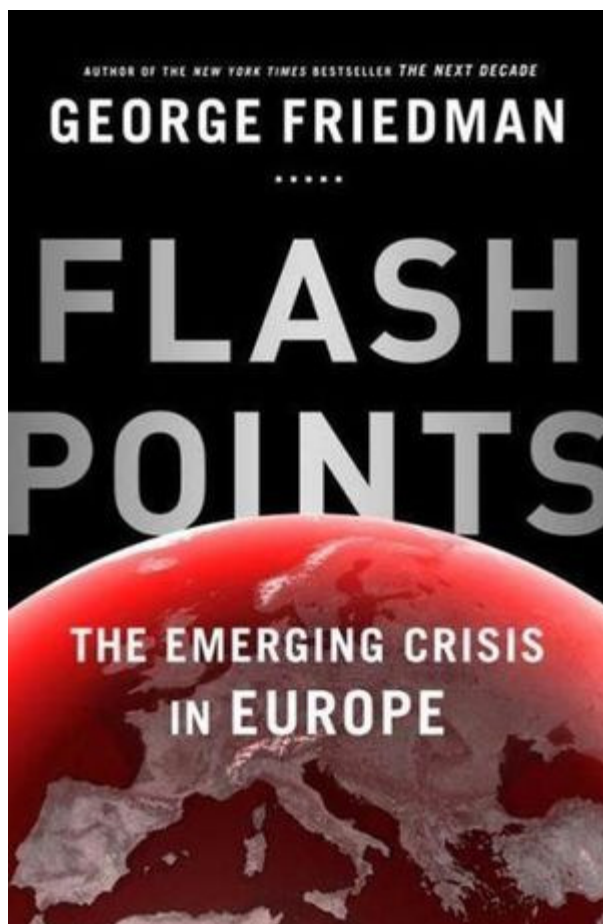


'Flashpoints' shows Europe's importance

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"Flashpoints: The Emerging Crisis in Europe" by George Friedman. New York, NY: Doubleday (a division of Random House), 2015. 288 pages, \$28.95.



We are now living through Europe's test," George Friedman asserts near the beginning of "Flashpoints: The Emerging Crisis in Europe," his new treatise on the dangers inherent in Europe's evolution as a major player on the world stage. "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? I note that unemployment in several southern European countries is now at or higher than the unemployment rate in the United States during the Great Depression."

"Flashpoints" is comprised of 16 chapters arranged in three major sections: "European Exceptionalism," "Thirty-One Years" and "Flashpoints." The book is solidly researched and represents a combination of in-depth historical exploration and superb critical analysis, heavily influenced by the author's personal and professional experiences. Friedman's prose has an air of credibility sometimes missing in comparable efforts,

which no doubt has a lot to do with his innate connection to the subject matter he wrestles with on several levels.

Friedman was born in Hungary; his parents survived the Holocaust. "On the night of Aug. 13, 1949, my family climbed into a rubber raft along the Hungarian shore of the Danube," Friedman recounts. "The ultimate destination of the journey was Vienna. We were escaping the communists. My parents were Jews and for them the movement of borders was like the coming of weather. They were born just before World War I. In 1918, the war ended and the structure of Europe cracked, wrecked by that war.

The author has a B.A. in political science from the City University of New York and a Ph.D. in government from Cornell. Before moving to the private sector in the 1990s, he taught political science at Dickinson University for more than 20 years. His previous books include "The Next Decade: What the World Will Look Like," "The Next Hundred Years: A Forecast for the 21st Century," and "America's Secret War: Inside the Hidden Worldwide Struggle Between the United States and Its Enemies."

Friedman takes the long view when it comes to deciphering the complex and interrelated dynamics shaping modern-day Europe. He seems to recognize implicitly that nothing is random; only by understanding the historical context can we begin to fathom, and more importantly predict, where the future of the continent is headed. When it comes to events unfolding across the Atlantic, as opposed to those happening between our own relatively young shores, the only way to truly explain the present is to exhaustively deconstruct the past. Or, as noted in *Publisher's Weekly*: "Friedman explores the darker implications of the individualism, intellectual inquiry, and innovation that led to Europe's greatness, showing how the culture that produced the Enlightenment descended into barbarity in the 31 years from the beginning of WWI to the end of WWII."

In essence, Friedman sees political and quasi-religious borders as the inevitable flashpoints for future conflicts between nations. Specifically, in Part 3, he devotes eight full chapters to discussing the problems that inevitably arise where nations and cultures geographically intersect. He also spends a considerable amount of time explaining how Russia factors into the equation, along with how unrest in the Middle East inevitably affects global stability in general and the European situation in particular.

Finally, Friedman examines the role the United States has played in exacerbating provincial conflicts over the last century. A common thread weaving its way through the tapestry is how a lack of understating and mistrust can breed unintended consequences and escalate small-scale disputes into far-reaching entanglements with implications that extend far beyond the immediate region.

"The Europeans conquered the world while conducting an internal civil war throughout the centuries," Friedman explains. "The European empire was built on a base of shifting sand. The real mystery is why European unity was so elusive."

The author then proceeds to shed some insight on the fundamental query he has just posed: "No continent is as small and fragmented as Europe. Only Australia is smaller, yet Europe today consists of 50 independent nations (including Turkey and the Caucasus, for reasons explained later). Europe's geography means it can't be united through conquest. It means that small nations survive for a very long time. The map of Europe in 1000 is similar to the map of 2000. Nations exist next to other nations for a long time, with long memories that make trust and forgiveness impossible. As a result, Europe has been a place where wars repeated themselves endlessly. The wars of the 20th century were different only in that this time technology and ideology led to a continental catastrophe."

My only real criticism of the book revolves around the amount of time the author spends on the past. While I understand a working knowledge of history is needed to make sense of current trends and accurately predict future challenges, at times I felt as though Friedman did not make the connection between the past and what we can expect over the next few decades as well as he could have. As a history lesson, "Flashpoints" is instructive and even poignant; as a roadmap for navigating the land mines that lie just around the corner, it leaves something to be desired. Ideally, I would like to see his next book focus more on how we can use the lessons of the past to avoid making analogous mistakes in the future.

All in all, I learned a great deal from reading "Flashpoints." What happens in Europe still matters – perhaps more now than at any time in recent memory. Friedman helped me to better understand the deceptively complex nature of events routinely featured on the nightly news. My sense is that you would be similarly enlightened. I recommend "Flashpoints" highly.

— *Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.*