

With the 'new world disorder' breaking out in many corners of the globe, two Los Angeles Times foreign affairs writers give their interpretations and predictions. Reviewer Ira Mehlman directs the Writers' Support Group for the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR).

Life In a World of Lots of Little Powder Kegs

A Book Review by Ira Mehlman

FLASHPOINTS: PROMISE AND PERIL
IN A NEW WORLD ORDER

by Robin Wright and Doyle McManus
Alfred A. Knopf (1991)
258 pp, \$24

In those euphoric days back in 1989, as the Berlin Wall and the communist system crumbled before our eyes, it is understandable how normally sober individuals could have gotten carried away in the excitement of the times. We watched as our most formidable adversary was stripped of its imperiousness and then simply ceased to exist. It all happened so fast and with such drama that none of us had the time to contemplate its ramifications.

The conservative pundit, Francis Fukuyama, went so far as to declare the end of history. The president of the United States asserted that a new world order had been established in which America was to return to the preeminence it enjoyed a half century earlier when the old world order was first established. A statesman like Churchill, were he still around, might have cautioned us to curb our enthusiasm. From our perspective three years removed from those events, we now know, paraphrasing Churchill, that 1989 was not the end of history, or even the beginning of the end of history. More aptly, it was the end of the beginning of the era in which mankind acquired the capacity to destroy itself utterly. The defeat of communism was indeed a monumental event, but it did not herald the start of a messianic age.

After living for so long with our finger on the nuclear trigger in preparation for the ultimate showdown with the Soviet Union, the first thing we saw was the infinite promise of a world that did not exist under the constant threat of instant annihilation. "There was much to celebrate," Robin Wright and Doyle McManus observe in their book entitled *Flashpoints*. "The end of the Cold War had plunged mankind into a period of change so pervasive that a half-century's assumptions about the shape of the world were suddenly obsolete. Almost overnight, old tyrannies dissolved and new vistas of freedom opened."

Unfortunately, while the world had changed dramatically, human nature had not. New vistas of freedom mean little to people for whom freedom and tolerance are alien concepts, and for whom mere survival is a more immediate challenge. Freedom, we quickly discovered, is a double-edged sword. It can permit humans to flourish and reach their fullest potential, but it can also present them with an opportunity to carry out their basest instincts. "For all the promise of a new era," write the authors, "the historic evolution seemed, rather abruptly to take a wrong turn. ... The much-heralded 'new world order' was more often than not characterized by new global disorder. Far from a halcyon new dawn, the transition to a new era brought one expected nightmare after another."

The western democracies' 45-year preoccupation with the military threat from the Soviet Union had allowed us to sweep aside the myriad other international problems that were, in reality, far more difficult to deal with. Though we had labeled it the "evil empire," we had reached a *modus vivendi* with the Soviet Union. We came to understand what made each other tick and just how far we could push one another. We were two different worlds, but we both had something to lose and we were not about to lose it over just anything.

Flashpoints, as its title suggests, examines the litany of conditions, tribal animosities, grievances, inequities and injustices that could lead to confrontation in the post-Cold War era. But more significantly, Wright and McManus illustrate again and again how little we understand about the brave new world in which we suddenly find ourselves living. We must completely change our way of thinking. We went from situations with an enemy we knew and understood to a world without established rules in which we must deal with faceless people who

may or may not mean us any harm, but who have nothing to lose and thus nothing to hold them back.

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Flashpoints is a sobering description of a chaotic world in which none of the old rules apply. In a remarkable chapter entitled "The Human Wave," Wright and McManus, foreign affairs reporters for the *Los Angeles Times*, take a macro look at the potential dangers of unbridled migration and its root cause — exploding populations — subjects many of their colleagues have been loath to touch. With the exception of the chapter devoted to "Global Plagues," the twin themes of population growth and mass movements of people are central to each of the flashpoints that are likely to touch off an explosion.

"The common denominator in both internal and international migrations is not political oppression or war, as in the past; this time around, the primary motive is economic misery. ... But unlike ... migratory swells of the past, these are occurring in a world that will run out of inhabitable frontiers in the twenty-first century," they contend. One might quibble about whether we have to wait for the 21st century, but the essential point is clear — that a world in which millions want to move, but have no place to which to move, is a powder keg.

Suddenly uprooted from their traditional cultures and support systems, the new migrants are destined to become an enormous alienated class without a stake in their new environments. Rural to urban migration in much of the Third World has already created 'hypercities' consisting of sprawling shanty towns that are largely ungovernable. A billion people are expected to follow this path during the 1990s. The result is informal sectors in many countries that have developed into de facto states-within-states, and that are powerful enough to rival established governments for dominance. "Long-term, they represent a challenge to the Modern Age's emphasis on order — in organizing the form of

human settlements, in regulating the norms and conduct of human life, in providing standards for commerce, education, development or political intercourse."

The ordered terror of mutually assured destruction may soon seem like the good old days. So long as the outbreak of anarchy is limited to nations like Somalia, that are sufficiently out of the way and have nothing the rest of the world wants anyway, the repercussions are not likely to be felt by anyone but the poor souls who had the misfortune to be born in those countries. But the day is fast approaching, predict Wright and McManus, when anarchy will break out in countries in which the developed world does have a stake.

While the preponderance of migration is going to be internal, from rural to urban areas, the growth of Third World population is so great that even the small percentage of those attempting to migrate to the developed world will have a profoundly destabilizing effect on the Western democracies. In addition to legitimate concern by reasonable people, a rise in right wing nativism is forecast, a prediction that has already proven disturbingly accurate in Germany.

Perhaps, had the book been written after rather than before the Los Angeles riots, some note might have been made about the role immigration played in that social breakdown. The authors observe that Los Angeles' population is likely to swell to more than 10 million, primarily as a result of immigration. They also observe, in their chapter on the "Rise of Nations," that we are witnessing a fundamental reshaping of the "social contract between the individual and the state." Among its consequences, the authors suggest, is the shift in primary allegiances "to the smaller nuclear community — ethnic, national or religious."

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In Los Angeles, we saw that happen. It was a descent into tribal conflict by and among people without a stake in the established order. Blacks who never had a full stake in the society were joined by newly-arrived Hispanics in venting their frustration

against a social structure they increasingly perceived as having no place for them. In such a society it's every tribe for itself, or even every man for himself. As people from around the world pour into places like Los Angeles, frustrated and rootless, they threaten to create a destabilizing disorder.

One can read *Flashpoints* and disagree with some of the authors' assessments and conclusions. After carefully laying out the dangers of rapid population growth and mass migration, Wright and McManus inexplicably back away from the inevitable conclusion that Western democracies will have to limit immigration if they hope to survive. Rather they worry about whether the developed world will be able to get by without a growing population and question the reluctance of some societies "even to consider balancing ... population or labor shortfalls with new permanent immigrants." It's almost as if they hadn't read the first 188 pages of their own book.

As the military historian Clausewitz once noted, generals often prepare to fight the last war. In much the same respect, modern societies prepare to deal with the last crisis. We have spent our lives guarding against a sinister attack from a competing superpower who meant us harm. *Flashpoints* is a vivid warning that we now had better be prepared to compete in a world where most people are merely struggling to survive. There will be no evil empires in the future to confront, rather billions of desperate people with no stake in and no respect for the order our civilization has so meticulously established. ■