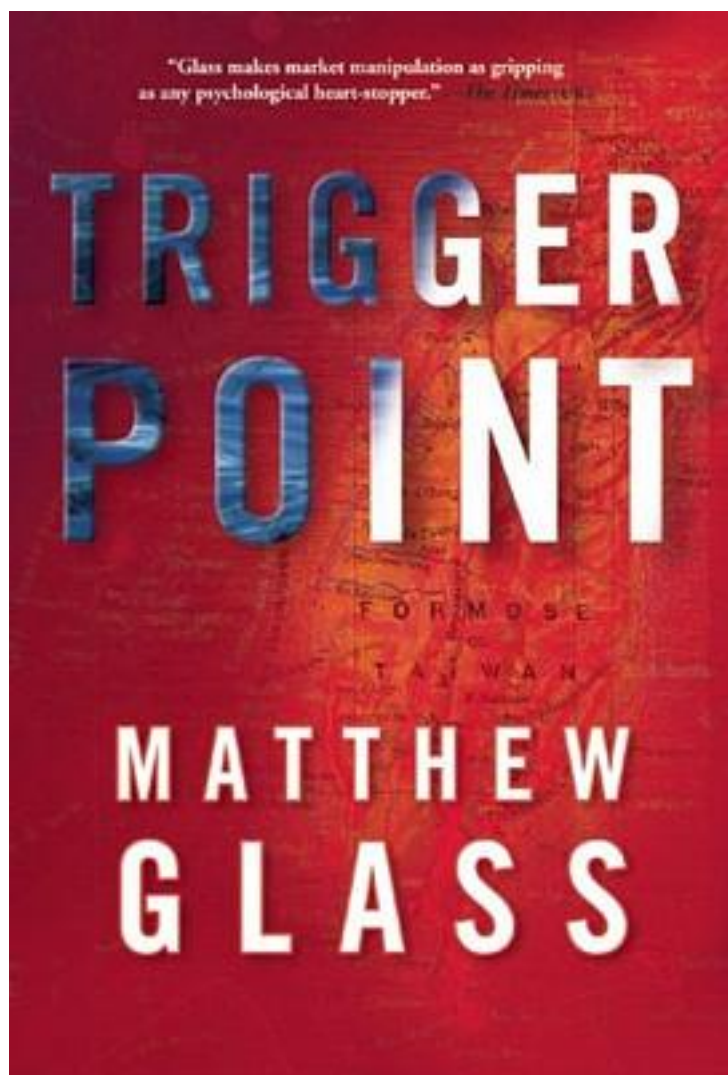


Trigger Point



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The year is 2018 and the current president, Thomas Paxton Knowles, decides to initiate a United States military operation in Uganda—called “Jungle Peace”—with the objective of eliminating the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), a particularly nasty terrorist group that just recently slaughtered a group of doctors and American relief workers. The operation in Uganda is approved by a UN vote, though China—which has troops on the ground in neighboring Sudan—votes against it and sends two ships to shadow the movements of US naval forces in East African waters. Despite tensions with China, Knowles hopes that Jungle Peace will be a quick, clean operation that will, in the months preceding US midterm elections, add to the already wide popularity he and his fellow Republicans are enjoying as a result of the current economic boom.

On Wall Street, Ed Grey is about to lead his investment company, Red River, into some lucrative short-term bets. One of his stock traders has heard that the bank Fidelian has some losses it needs to declare, so the plan is to short Fidelian and three other banks in anticipation of a brief market correction, and thus make significant profits off of the short-term market dip in the banking sector. When the Fed Chairman makes statements about an imminent bubble that needs to be controlled, Wall Street interprets this as evidence that the financial sector is unstable, so lots of people start shorting Fidelian, and indeed its stock begins to decline. The Fed Chairman follows up with a series of statements intended to convey how the Fed is keeping a watchful eye on the market correction, but with each statement he is seen to be implying that the Fed is privy to evidence of instability in the financial sector; so Wall Street continues to short and sell the financial stocks, and the market decline grows more serious.

President Knowles’ administration realizes that this economic decline will hurt Republican chances in the midterms, so they begin investigating causes and ways of restoring market vitality. They discover that the People’s Investment Corporation (PIC), which is owned by the Chinese government, controls upwards of 25% of Fidelian stock, and they begin to worry that China may be intentionally causing Fidelian to fail in order to influence the US elections. Knowles asks the Chinese President Zhang to issue a statement declaring that China hasn’t been using economic assets to influence US politics, and, though it is true that China is innocent in this regard, Zhang can’t issue the statement for fear of appearing economically weak and under US influence.

The US economic situation continues to decline. Fidelian stock is plummeting and in order to avert economic collapse the US government orchestrates a deal for the other major banks to purchase Fidelian. The Fidelian stockholders—the PIC and company—ask for an outrageously high price, and the US banks instead make a reasonable though still high offer. Knowles calls up Zhang and lets him know that China must accept the deal, since there won’t be a better one and Fidelian must be bailed out in order to avoid economic repercussions that would hurt the inextricably linked Chinese and US economies. Nonetheless, Zhang’s advisors think Knowles is bluffing, simply trying to exert influence over Chinese decisions, so China rejects the purchase deal and Fidelian declares bankruptcy. The US economy tumbles into freefall.

Meanwhile, in Uganda, though Jungle Peace hasn’t been accruing many LRA casualties, the army locates a major LRA compound. Knowles approves an apache raid on the facility, but it’s botched, resulting in two US deaths and a further two soldiers being taken captive by the LRA and moved into Sudan. Eventually the POWs are located and the US sends in a contingent of helicopters to extract the two soldiers, but it turns out they’ve walked into a trap orchestrated by Chinese troops in Sudan, and the extraction team gets pinned down in a fortified complex. In retaliation, the US navy

surrounds and effectively holds hostage the two Chinese ships that had been shadowing them in East African waters. At this provocation, China sends two battalions steaming for the African coast, and to match this imminent threat the US sends two of its own battalions steaming for the same location. With about 40 hours until the ships arrive, which will almost certainly initiate a battle and possibly a war, Chinese-US tensions are running astronomically high.

Knowles calls Zhang direct and tries to negotiate, asking for a deal where China releases the soldiers in Sudan and in return the US will release the ships, but Zhang refuses to make any deals: he demands that the US release the ships unconditionally. Knowles is confronted by the US ambassador to the UN who impresses upon him that the US foreign policy for negotiating with China has been wrong this whole time. The ambassador's point is that the US continually demands things of China, but China is going to resist these demands because they need to defend the nearly equal global status that they've achieved. While the US may not like to admit it, China has become an economic equal and is—with their massive control of US stocks—in a legitimate position to compete with and influence the US. So Knowles is advised that if he wishes to avoid all out war with China, he's going to have to make some sort of concession that allows China to prove its establishment as a global power. Knowles then issues a private statement to Zhang informing him that the US will release the ships then an hour later go in to extract its men from Sudan. Because this statement is private, it maintains the appearance that, when the US releases the ships, China has forced the US to concede. Things go according to plan: the ships are released and China lets the US rescue its men without incident.

The novel ends with a sense of global progress: President Knowles makes a speech that publicly recognizes China's status as a political equal and reaches out to create a US-China alliance that will work to lead the globe into the future.

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