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Famine Plot - Can It Happen Here?

THE UNITED STATES has long served as a sort of food store for the world. What would happen if the store ran out of food?

John Freivalds, vice president of a Minneapolis grain firm, speculates on that frightening possibility as the theme of his new book, "The Famine Plot" (Stein & Day, N.Y., \$8.95). It is fiction, related to actual events of the past, present and, perhaps, future.

"The Famine Plot" is more than ordinary crop failure. In a drive to control the world's food supplies, a foreign country introduces a grain virus that wipes out American wheat, corn, rice and soybeans.

The time is 1980, when Russia is host to the Olympics and the United States is struggling to deliver grain committed under agreements. To cover up, politicians try to buy grain from other countries, resorting to an "agricultural armada" to grow food in South America.

The fictional president was elected on promises to get the bureaucracy out of people's lives, but he was

seeking re-election by having the government play a larger role in solving problems.

This novel is unusual in that it has a solid agricultural background, with the writer showing extensive knowledge of the system. The thread of romance has a heroine employed by the Department of Agriculture who wrote her doctor's degree thesis on "The Diffusion Patterns of Corn Blight in the American Midwest."

Because of the grain shortage, food riots break out, first in other countries and then in the United States. The president orders a food rationing plan, calling it "end use allocation."

Black markets and high prices follow, with steaks going to \$21 each in restaurants and gasoline \$3.50 a gallon. Consumer activists advocate hoarding, garbage men report lighter loads and city people drive into the country at night looking for food.

When infrared satellite photos indicated that the crop-killing virus

had been deliberately introduced, an official told his staff not to mention it to the press. Because "commodity markets could go wild," he said "commodity markets have become the pulse of the country."

Because Oklahoma is a major wheat and cattle state, it is mentioned a number of times. The chairman of the 101st Chiefs of Staff is the son of an Oklahoma rancher. An activist group that a communist says "is doing our work in America" is based at Tulsa, where money rolls in from uninformed or misguided contributors.

"Our food balance is as precarious as our relations with certain other countries in the world community," writes Freivalds in his brief introduction. Obviously, he fears that what he has described as fiction could actually happen.

Perhaps it could, but let's hope that it doesn't. Food has often led to wars, revolutions and dictatorships in the past. If truth is stranger than fiction, it also could be far more disastrous.