



What Ifs?[™] of American History

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NEW ESSAYS BY

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ROBERT DALLEK, JOHN LUKACS,
JAY WINIK, AND OTHERS

EDITED BY ROBERT COWLEY

What Ifs? of American History: Eminent Historians Imagine What Might Have Been

Robert Cowley (Editor), Antony Beevor (Editor)

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Did Eisenhower avoid a showdown with Stalin by not taking Berlin before the Soviets? What might have happened if JFK hadn't been assassinated? This new volume in the widely praised series presents fascinating "what if..." scenarios by such prominent historians as: Robert Dallek, Caleb Carr, Antony Beevor, John Lukacs, Jay Winick, Thomas Fleming, Tom Wicker, Theodore Rabb, Victor David Hansen, Cecelia Holland, Andrew Roberts, Ted Morgan, George Feifer, Robert L. O'Connell, Lawrence Malkin, and John F. Stacks.

Included are two essential bonus essays reprinted from the original **New York Times** bestseller **What If?**- David McCullough imagines Washington's disastrous defeat at the Battle of Long Island, and James McPherson envisions Lee's successful invasion of the North in 1862.

What Ifs? of American History: Eminent Historians Imagine What Might Have Been Details

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From Reader Review What Ifs? of American History: Eminent Historians Imagine What Might Have Been for online ebook

Susanna - Censored by GoodReads says

This was the first book I read after the stroke.

I couldn't concentrate on any very long writing at the time, so the short essay format was perfect.

I liked some essays better than others - a particular favorite was the one on the Cuban Missile Crisis, in which the Cold War "got hot."

Peter Mcloughlin says

I read this book many years ago and reread it just now. It isn't bad as the parlor game of what ifs go. It tends to see the alternate timelines as more negative than actual history but as anyone knows from the 2016 election things in history could also have turned out a hell of a lot better than they did. The presentations are interesting and put a focus on critical turning points in US history. Always a good reminder that much of what accept as inevitable is in actuality highly contingent.

Socraticgadfly says

Good book with one, possibly two, exceptions

That omission would be a highly plausible counterfactual of us not entering World War I.

First, in the real world, WWI, as opposed to WWII, had no moral dimension to it, except as Wilson tried to impose it. So, another president could have gone in a different direction, especially one insisting that Britain's blockade by extension (not directly blockading Germany, but instead shipping to neutral countries, and interdicting supplies shipped in excess of prewar transactions, on the grounds that Sweden, Denmark or the Netherlands would then transship the excess to Germany) was just as much against international law as Germany's sink-on-sight submarine blockade zones.

Could we have had that "other president"? Absolutely. In fact, we nearly did.

Wilson beat Republican challenger Charles Evans Hughes in 1916 by one of the narrowest electoral vote margins in our history, 277-254. And one state made the difference. If Hughes had gained 4,000 votes in California, he would have won the electoral-college majority, through he lost the popular vote.

Let's say that enough voters are suspicious about Wilson's claims. Let's say that former Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan, who resigned in 1915 after he thought Wilson had gotten too close to war over the Lusitania, takes to the stump to put Wilson on the spot. And Hughes gets those 4,000 votes.

Being from California, let's say he cares less about the European conflict. Not being a Wilsonian, he's also

more of a realist on foreign policy. And he holds true to Washington's warning about entangling alliances.

So, after being elected, he announces an embargo program similar to Jefferson in the early 1800s. That alone would have made the British snap to attention.

Don't know why this counterfactual wasn't in the book; it could easily have happened -- more easily than some that made it.]

Our history, and that of the world in general, would have been incredibly different. A negotiated peace would have been likely, although grudging on both sides, on the Western Front, as all parties involved would realize that the outcome would be too much to risk. France and Britain would know they couldn't hold off Germany by the middle of 1918. Meanwhile, if the rest of history had gone according to reality, the Germans would see the war-weariness of their own people, combined with propaganda from the newly-established Soviet Union threatening revolution.

All powers in the war sign an armistice as a prelude to peace, then send combined armies east to overthrow Lenin. On the west, France accepts the loss of the rest of Lorraine to Germany, plus, say, Morocco as a colony. Germany also is allowed Luxembourg and, say, one-third of Belgium. Half of the Kingdom of Poland, ruled by the Czar, also goes to Germany. France and England both pay indemnities.

In Russia, an incredibly brutal war ends with one of the more liberal Grand Dukes on the throne of a ravaged country. Ukraine and the Baltics go independent.

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A second, possible one?

The capital isn't in Washington, DC any more. (And, having the capital in the spot where it could have been would have been more likely to keep us out of WWI.)

After the Civil War, Horace Greeley proposed moving the capital west, to St. Louis. St. Louis was almost dead center geographically. Still an important river city, it also had transcontinental railroad connections via the Kansas Pacific to Denver, then jogging up to Cheyenne. The Eads Bridge across the Mississippi would eventually complete the last link.

Feasible to move the capital? More so, if one Civil War-era counterfactual is allowed.

As a war measure, Congress decides to stop work on the Capitol rotunda for the duration.

Greeley then makes his remark soon after the war.

After Grant is elected in 1868, with today's Grant's Farm being located in St. Louis, the idea gains steam.

North and South see it as a healing measure, a symbol of a new start, along with a renewed western focus to our country. With the connection to his land, Grant, and even more so his cronies, blood relative and otherwise, see the opportunity for massive graft.

Washington is a podunk small town. St. Louis is at that time already above 500,000 people.

Sacrilege to abandon the Mall, with all of its monuments and memorials? Nonsense.

The obelisk of the Washington Monument and the original Castle of the Smithsonian are the only two items there.

Alan Chen says

My goodness, has it really been 10 months since I last finished a book? In truth, I largely finished this off in August and have only now read it cover-to-cover.

Catnip. That's what this book was for me.

I do science, but history and politics have always been my first loves. Perhaps it's something about relative immutability of events, that though interpretations of actions and motivations may change with time, the Admiral "Bull" Halsey will always be drawn off the landing beaches in the Philippines, leaving a ragtag group of pocket destroyers and escort carriers to fight a running battle with dreadnoughts and battleships firing shells weighing over a ton. Or maybe it's more in the clash and conflict of personalities, history and egos that leads people to outwit, outplay and outlast the others in the great chess match we call life. It could even be that I desire to know the lessons of history, so as build on what others have laid down. Whatever the cause, learning about people and events has always felt less like work, but more like a course in life education.

Which brings me to the book at hand. This is the 3rd (and to date, last) entry of the "What If" series of alternate history scenarios written by prominent historians. While the other 2 books charted wayward courses in stories spanning the globe on a timeline stretching back to antiquity, this book focuses on the territory that would become known as the United States of America. By focusing on the reader's home country (that happens to have a conveniently short existence), this book inherently has the advantages of being more focused and shorter, thus greatly increasing appeal. Compare, for example, that this is 2 pages short of 300 pages, while the combined edition of the first 2 "What If" clocks in at a Tom Clancy-like 800.

In the spirit of show-not-tell, here is a brief rundown of the scenarios.

* Might the Mayflower had not sailed?: Due to a string of factors including lack of funding, government obstruction, and a storm that landed the ship not at its original destination of Manhattan but on the rocky shoals of Massachusetts, Puritan value of equating hard work with virtue never gets implanted in American psyche.

* William Pitt the Elder and the avoidance of the American Revolution: Pitt avoids the revolution by restoring salutary neglect and in the process, leads to a world that not only flies the Union Jack, but has adopted British common law and abolished slavery.

* What the fog wrought: the Revolution's Dunkirk, August 29, 1776: by a fortuitous fog, George Washington and half the Continental Army avoid capture and the revolutionary cause lives to fight another day.

* "His Accidency" John Tyler: refuting that he is an "Acting President," Tyler sets a precedent where the Constitution had been silent and sets up the Mexican American War.

* Lew Wallace and the ghosts of the Shunpike: a garbled order leads Wallace to march his army in circles at a critical moment at the Battle of Shiloh. Blamed for the horrific and ultimately inconclusive loss of life, he finds solace in writing and pens the semi-allegorical/autobiographical "Ben-Hur."

* If the Lost Order hadn't been lost: Robert E. Lee humbles the Union, 1862: instead of the draw fought at

Antietam, McClellan dies at Gettysburg a year before the actual battle was fought. Faced with international pressure and domestic disgust at the fruitless expenditure of lives and livelihoods, Lincoln recognizes the South.

* The Northwest Conspiracy: spurred on by Lincoln's flagrant and repeated violations of the Constitution, secessionists and plain-fed up members of the opposing political party foment a rebellion and cause the US to splinter in 3: the North, the South, and the Midwest.

* Beyond the wildest dreams of John Wilkes Booth: by not only assassinating Lincoln but also Vice President Johnson, the conspiracy forces the Cabinet to form a regency to govern the country. Worse yet, after a mob retaliates by almost lynching prominent Confederate General Robert E. Lee, Lee orders the near-defeated Rebel army to disperse and attack the Union as partisans, creating an unending series of terror campaigns and guerrilla war.

* The Revolution of 1877: spurred on by worsening work conditions, worker strikes stop the trains and advance on Baltimore. President Hayes snaps and calls upon the military to attack the workers. When the smoke clears, the US has broken apart among class lines. The US experiment has failed, the American Dream has been exposed as a fairy tale, and "Everybody hates everybody."

* The whale against the wolf: the Anglo-American War of 1896: Driven by bellicose personalities, the US and Britain do battle for the 3rd time, this time over distant Venezuela. The massive American army's "wolf" steamrolls Canada, while the British navy's "whale" destroys the Statue of Liberty. Under threat of bombardment, the two sides quickly realize that the war is unwinnable and come to terms. The US annexes Quebec and learns to look beyond its own shores, shedding its isolationist tendencies in time to defuse the First World War.

* No Pearl Harbor?: FDR delays the war: FDR reluctantly decides to reopen some crucial food and oil shipments in exchange for a temporary 6 month halt to Japanese expansion. Japan agrees and calls off the fleet about to hit the US Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor. However, after the delay, Japanese militarists convince the emperor to resume limited attacks in the hope of not antagonizing the US. They do.

* If Eisenhower had gone to Berlin: Eisenhower probably could've beaten the Soviet Red Army to Berlin, because the bulk of the remaining German forces were on the other side of the city facing a tidal wave of angry Russian soldiers. However, Russian Premier Stalin might not have allowed this to happen, because what was at stake wasn't just the city (the countries had already agreed Berlin would be in Russian hands after the war). No, it was the nuclear research and uranium ore crucial to building the USSR's first nuclear weapon.

* Joe McCarthy's secret life: recruited by Soviet intelligence, McCarthy directs his Communist smear campaign into discrediting not only General George Marshall, but causing President Dwight Eisenhower to lose reelection. Censured by the Senate, he "beats the rap" by dying of natural causes.

* If the U-2 hadn't flown: if a whole string of factors ranging from weather to mission approval hadn't fallen into place, US President Eisenhower and Soviet Premier Khrushchev, both former military men who were sincerely interested in toning down the Cold War, might have severely curtailed the needless expenditures and waste that went into the great military-industrial complex

* The Cuban Missile Crisis: Second Holocaust: had the US launched airstrikes on Cuban nuclear missile positions but failed to destroy all their targets, one of the remaining rockets could have detonated over Washington DC and decapitated the US government. Without Executive restraint for a measured response, SIOB 63, the US war plan that called for the complete and total use of nuclear weapons against the Soviet Union, is unleashed without restraint, resulting in not only the destruction but the near extermination of the USSR. There is precious little Russian retaliation, because at the time the US maintained a gigantic superiority in strategic numbers and capability.

* JFK lives: JFK probably have pushed through his domestic initiatives, but his international record is murkier. He definitely wanted more peace with Russia and some reconciliation with Cuba. He could've also gotten the US out of Vietnam when it was still politically possible.

* What if Watergate was still just an upscale address?: If the long string of unlikely events hadn't fallen into

place, the vast array of ethics laws and hounding journalists wanting to be the next Woodstein (the author's term) wouldn't have existed, while national health insurance would. But maybe Watergate was only one in a series of events that Nixon would have been eventually undone by.

So how do entries fare? Inconsistent and unbalanced is the best way to describe it, though that is a flaw inherent to any piece of work where multiple authors work separately on multiple scenarios. Because some scenarios are less familiar or less accessible to the average reader, the authors will often pour most of their energies toward setting up the players and situation, and only briefly touch upon what might have been (Northwest Conspiracy). In contrast, for other scenarios the authors (correctly or not) assume that the reader can follow along and thus go free-wheeling as they walk us through "a precarious, careening ride that could have taken us to any number of destinations (the American Revolution)." Even the degree of speculation is different, with some different paths completely reshaping the foundation of the country's character (Mayflower), while others probably not changing history all that much at all (FDR). In this light, the book works best when the authors go full-tilt and delve novel-like into an alternate timeline (Cuban Missile Crisis) and most poorly when the authors spend too much time dithering over what was, pull their punches and end up barely poking the edges of reality (Berlin, U2), or, worse yet, gloss over a dozen monumental changes without spending much time on anything (JFK). Of course, there are a few exceptions, such as when the alternate take is not discussed in detail, but the existing record is dramatized (Ben-Hur).

On a side note, I sought out this book primarily because of the title of the Cuban Missile Crisis episode. I was not disappointed. Written as an archival report of the United States from the new nation's capitol of Cheyenne Mountain (the real life site of NORAD), the work is a dispassionate rundown of the events leading to a one sided nuclear war. When nuclear war is the topic, no words can be said to be overly dramatic. Of all the morbidly fascinating phrases employed, "collapsing in the general devastation" and "wanton act of megarrison" are so horrifying that they lapse into black humor.

RATING - I rate the book 4 stars, which in my book means, "I like it, but I don't love it," or this case, I loved it a lot less than I thought I would given the range of story material that could have been spun. My feelings remind me of the brilliance of the iTunes store, which enabled users to buy individual tracks instead of having to open wallets for entire albums. There are great essays, mediocre essays, and essays that are so light on the speculation that they barely belong in the book at all. Nevertheless, the work as a whole took me through a very entertaining jaunt through the annals of history and made me look down what was alternately an abyss of despair and a fountain of good tidings. If nothing else, authoritative speculation like this teaches that history is not always a lumbering thing with an inevitable course, but that it can turn on the smallest of players and most absurd of coincidences.

TL;DR: Far from greatness, but enough great moments to entertain, recommend and ultimately stoke the fires of imagination.

Artie says

A couple of these scenarios are implausible, particularly the Cuban Missile Crisis one but overall this was very informative and fascinating. I had no idea how much pop culture was influenced by a vague order that was issued during the battle of Shiloh.

Tim says

Overall, a disappointment. There are a number of essays by different authors. Only one really presents a story that takes place after a changed event. This one example was an absorbing and informative article. Most of the other essays presented a detailed description of the events and times leading up to the suggested change, and then painted only a brief and general picture of what might follow. The good part from these essays was the detailed descriptions of episodes in history that are not well-known, though it is not clear to me how accurate or exaggerated the descriptions are. Also, it is difficult to distinguish what actually happened (or who really said what) and what is posited as an alternative. Finally, some of the conclusions of what could have happened after a changed event seem implausible for other reasons than those discussed – that is, there is not enough thought given to all the factors (or the principle ones) that affect what is likely to happen next.

Jack says

Good series of 'what if...' essays - especially chilling was the one about the Oct 1962 Cuban missile crisis in which things quickly got out of hand (I was a freshman in high school when that occurred)

Very entertaining - especially if you know the 'real' history

Don says

It's interesting, and fun in lots of places, but not really very solid. I mean... James McPherson suggesting that if Bobby Lee's lost orders had remained unfound, then not only would have Antietam been a great Southern victory, but the Army of Northern Virginia would be entrenched in (yes) a fishhook defensive strategy in the hills around Gettysburg in the Autumn of 1862. How convenient.

Yet, the notion that Lincoln would not have been able to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, and then sustained a major Congressional setback at the midterm election and as a result had to accept an armistice -- well, that's certainly plausible and worth reading. So, we can indulge McPherson and others their little ironies and other flights of fanciful details (made up quotes, etc.) that otherwise get in the way.

Some of the real highlights are offered by John Lukacs on FDR delaying entry into WWII by delaying the circumstances that all but forced the Japanese into doing something rash, and Jay Winik re-envisioning the Lincoln assassination as "successful" beyond John Wilkes Booth's dreams ... Essentially leaving the Union without credible leadership, and the Confederates opting to extend their not-entirely-lost-cause in as guerilla fighters.

Googoojoo says

Largely suffers from the same problems as its predecessor books: it's mostly a series of essays explaining why certain events were important and could have happened differently, rather than imaginative explorations of the implications of these events. The best essays are Antony Beevor's, which is actually kind of a polemic

in defense of Eisenhower's decision not to race for Berlin in 1944/45, but which is interesting and well-reasoned; Ted Morgan's essay, which basically recounts Joe McCarthy's career as it happened in real life, but adds the twist that he was a Soviet agent, making sense of the way that he ultimately did much more damage to America than to the cause of international communism; and Robert L. O'Connell's essay, in the form of a government historical study presented to the president, looking back on the 1960s in a world where the Cuban Missile Crisis resulted in a nuclear war. (Note that only the last of these is actually alternate history, however.)

Steve says

Pretty good stuff. Really opened my eyes on a lot of historical events and how they unfolded. What if is always a dangerous question to ask especially in context of American History. The book is part of a series and consists of short stories and essays of what would have happened to this nation if small changes were made in the course of history...best article "what the fog wrought, the revolution's dunkirk, August 29, 1776" by David McCullough. Be careful when reading some stories drift into fiction and if you're not careful it's easy to read three pages and not realize it's what could have happened.

Nicholas Whyte says

<http://nhw.livejournal.com/898458.html>[return][return]I'd read the two previous volumes in this series, which are more global and less American in scope; loved the first one, less impressed by the second. This one concentrates on US history, and is generally pretty good - the one real dud is an essay on "What if Pearl Harbour hadn't happened?" which concludes that nothing would have been very different except that the Pacific War would have been six months late. The other Second World War essay is a bit more exciting but also concludes that it wouldn't have made much difference if Eisenhower had gone for Berlin.[return][return]There are no less than four essays on the Civil War, one of which is James McPherson's reprint from the first volume on "What if the South had won?", but the other three taking interesting tacks: one (by the dubious Victor Davis Hanson) credits Lew Wallace's personal disgrace at the battle of Shiloh with his later creation of the popular epic novel in Ben-Hur; one looking at the potential for insurrection against the Lincoln administration in what we now call the Mid-West, and one speculating (a bit chaotically) about the possibilities for continued insurgency in the context of Andrew Johnson as well as Abraham Lincoln being assassinated.[return][return]Two of the pieces are written from the counterfactual perspective first used, I think, by Winston Churchill in his 1931 essay "If Lee had not Won the Battle of Gettysburg". The one on how the Cuban missile crisis turned into a global nuclear war is rather conventional stuff; but Andrew Roberts' piece explaining the origins and course of the 1896 war between the USA and Britain is the pick of the book for me, although I don't quite agree on the likelihood of the US being given Quebec in a peace settlement; much more likely what happened in the 1885 Serbo-Bulgarian War, both sides being returned to the status quo ante.[return][return]The other piece that particularly caught my eye was on John Tyler, the first Vice-President to succeed to the Presidency after the death of his running-mate. Tom Wicker points out that Tyler's accession was far from assured by a strict reading of the constitution, and that the policies he pursued in office, in particular on the annexation of Texas, were crucial in their importance to the future of the country and not likely to have been pursued as successfully by any other potential president of the day. Tyler is much more interesting than I had realised, and the story has an exploding cannon as well, which in February 1844 killed numerous senior officials, one of whose grieving daughters found comfort in the arms of the recently widowed President Tyler, who married her four months later. (One of their

grandsons is still alive.)[return][return]Anyway, a good collection for the history buff.

Karen says

In my attempt to work through the books I already own instead of always buying new ones, I've been working through books like this one: books that I picked up at some time or another because they sounded interesting but which have sat on my shelves for years. There were definitely some interesting essays in here. The chapter about what would have happened if the Brits had won the Revolutionary War was excellent and has stuck with me over the two months it has taken me to get through this book. I was disappointed by the JFK essay, as I expected it to be a bit more compelling. There were good chapters and boring chapters, some of that distinction based on how well-informed I was about a particular topic coming into reading about it. Overall, I thought this was an interesting book, but I don't think it's one that will stay on my shelves.

Joe Johnson says

I enjoy reading alternative history fiction, it's one of my favorite genres. So this collection of "What if?" stories focusing on the United States seemed like a good fit for me. The book is a good read and some of the essays are quite thought provoking, such as the one concerning Senator Joseph McCarthy. But these are really essays on what could have happened at various points in the history of the United States and not truly stories set in an alternative history.

I do recommend this book if you are interested in American History, but if you are really looking for alternative history fiction you will probably be a little disappointed with this collection of essays.

P says

As an amateur historian, I found these imaginative essays quite interesting. Especially fascinating was the "Archive Report" on the nuclear war that happens when the Cuban Missile Crisis goes sour, the Union defeat at Gettysburg in 1862 (quickly ending the Civil War) and Eisenhower making it to Berlin before the Soviets. I'm sure the latter would have dramatically changed German history in the second half of the 20th Century--or spelled disaster as the Allies could have began battling each other.

The editor needed to create a little more consistency in showing the difference between actual history and imagined history. In some essays, the author makes that very clear. In others, I found out near the end that most of what I was reading was NOT real history, but the "What if?". I think my understanding of Civil War campaigns is now completely screwed up!

Update: I picked this one up to re-read the "What If" the Cuban Missile Crisis led to nuclear war, "What If" Eisenhower made it to Berlin first, and David McCullough's "What If" fog had not allowed George Washington and the Continental Army to escape the British forces in New York in August 1776. That last account should be read by all Americans.

Paul Lunger says

The 3rd book in the "What Ifs?" series, "What Ifs? of American History" is perhaps the weakest of the 3 books so far. The essays cover topics ranging from the Mayflower to the American Revolution to John Tyler to the Civil War to WWII & Watergate. Each of the 17 essays in this book examine various events in American history & cite simple facts of what could've been had they not happened. Where the majority of the essays fail is that they don't provide details of how significantly American History would change due to those non-events happening & in the case of the essay on John Tyler say he had to be president. For fans of alternate history, this book is a bust simply due to the lack of attempts at re-writing history which is what made the previous 2 installments work. A disappointing novel which could've been better done had the essayists taken the chance to really explore what the consequences of the events not occurring really are in detailed fashion.
