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



What Ifs?™ of American History

From the New York Times Bestselling Creators of What If?™

NEW ESSAYS BY

ANTONY BEEVOR, CALEB CARR,
ROBERT DALLEK, JOHN LUKACS,
JAY WINIK, AND OTHERS

EDITED BY ROBERT COWLEY



Synopsis

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.

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Customer Reviews

This is an interesting book and a good companion to the other *What If?* books. I would have given it another star if not for editing and factual (non-counterfactual) errors: McCullough writes "ships-of-the-time" instead of "ships-of-the-line" and puts Cornwallis' surrender in 1783. Fleming's

"Northwest Conspiracy" is a little long, and at one point promotes Carrington from Colonel to General, then back to Colonel again. Winik puts Richmond's fall on April 13th, not the 3rd. Eisenhower's heart attack was in September 1955, not 1956 (Morgan). Khrushchev banged his shoe on the desk at the UN, not Paris. He also could not have sent condolences to Powers' family after the latter died in 1977 because he himself died in 1971. The whole idea that US-Soviet relations would have taken a turn for the better seems far-fetched with the Eisenhower Administration having only 8 months left in office, especially as the author takes pains to stress some personal connection between Eisenhower and Khrushchev (Feifer). A Soviet sub is counterfactually sunk "south of Cuba" in the text, but south of the Bahamian island of Andros on the accompanying map. And how can a sub be "55 miles WEST of Virginia Beach"? Or even northwest (up the James River?) (O'Connell). After listing the Watergate burglars as McCord, Liddy, and Hunt, Malkin says that, other than McCord, "all the other burglars were anti-Castro exiles." Anti-Castro, yes, but not even Hispanic. And, on the subject of Nixon's career without a Watergate scandal (and none of his other crimes like the Ellsberg break-in coming to light during his time in office), what about the effect of Agnew's disgrace and resignation? (Malkin, Stacks). That should have been addressed, in my opinion.

Good book easy to read and interesting.

The introduction to one of the selections in this book suggests that it can be thought of as an "American Baedeker of roads that could have been, or almost were, taken." That's as good a description of any of this third volume in the "What If?" series of historical speculations. Once more, editor Robert Cowley has assembled a panel of noted historians and novelists, who offer all sorts of intriguing possibilities--an America without a revolution; what might have happened if the plot to assassinate Lincoln had also succeeded in killing Vice President Johnson; what might have been the consequences if the US and Britain had actually gone to war over a South American boundary dispute in 1896; and what might have happened had John F. Kennedy not been murdered. The tone of the pieces varies from the tongue in cheek (speculation on what the true motives behind Senator Joseph McCarthy's anti-Communist crusade might have been) to the truly frightening (a picture of the world in 1972, ten years after the Cuban Missile Crisis leads to a widespread launch of nuclear weaponry). Playing "What If?" can be an interesting parlor game, but it can also help to illuminate the importance of real-life decisions. In the scenario of a world where both Lincoln and Johnson are killed, the resulting chaos triggers a decision by Robert E. Lee to endorse the wish of Jefferson Davis and many others in the Confederate military--not to lay down arms at that point, but

to continue the fight as a guerrilla war, one that might have ended up costing countless more lives and prevented the nation's sectional breach from ever healing. With contributions from writers of the caliber of Caleb Carr, Robert Dallek, Tom Wicker and Jay Winick, the reader can be assured of an entertaining as well as a thought-provoking read. My one complaint is about the decision to include two pieces from the first book in the series, published in 1999. The jacket copy says these are pieces any American history collection would not be complete without. That strikes me as a rather thin excuse for the recycling. A big part of this book's audience will obviously be readers who have purchased the first two volumes, which are still easily available. If the publishers wanted to include some reprinted material, they could have easily mined the rich archives of the alternate history genre.--William C. Hall

The fact that many of writers in this collection have written for the popular press means that this book is READABLE. The writing and ideas presented waiver somewhat. Some of the essays can hold 10-25 pages, some only a few paragraphs. The piece on the Cuban Missile Crisis has plenty to say about Soviet capabilities

A family member gave me this book, knowing that I was a fan of American history and "what ifs" of all varieties. I've never been a fan of the ultimately ahistorical Harry Turtledove-style novels, and I was interested in reading some alternative history that was a little more academic in scope. That said, this book was horribly boring. I'm not a light reader - just look at my other reviews - but I couldn't even begin to get into this book. Nothing interested me in the least, and after giving the book a try for less than twenty-four hours, I finally had to just take it back. It is one of only two books I've ever returned - that's how brainsuckingly uninteresting it was.

Not well explained as an alternative

This series of counterfactual essays from a series of eminent historians is mostly interesting and fun. A particular highlight is the story of how a lopsided defeat of the Soviet Union in a war arising out of the Cuban Missile Crisis might have led to global condemnation of the United States by weak-kneed and cowardly nations around the world. Admittedly, I don't think that is the lesson that the author means for one to take away from his work, but I recommend this nonetheless.

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