

SPECIAL BOOK SECTION

Spilt History

By Charles Paul Freund

Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals, edited by Niall Ferguson, New York: Basic Books; 548 pages, \$30.00

What If?: The World's Foremost Military Historians Imagine What Might Have Been, edited by Robert Cowley, New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons; 395 pages, \$27.95

After the historical, comes the conditional: That's how Robert E. Lee lost a battle this year in Virginia, where things had otherwise gone so well for the general since the unpleasantness in Appomattox that he'd become a rare American example of honor traduced by fate, of the peculiar fulfillments of the tragic. Yet in June, just as officials in Richmond were placing a Lee mural as a tribute along a new James River walkway, Lee's fate was recast. A single statement by Richmond City Councilman Sa'ad El-Amin ended a widening debate over the mural's propriety, and resulted in what press accounts called the painting's "instant removal." "If Lee had won," asserted El-Amin, "I'd still be a slave."

After the conditional, comes the revisory. That's how Bill Clinton prevented *weltkrieg* last spring. Clinton conjured Adolf Hitler from the grave, as presidents contemplating military action have done before. And then Clinton, to justify his own coming military actions, drove a rhetorical stake through Hitler's black heart. Making his case for the NATO bombing of Serbian forces in Kosovo, Clinton decked his rhetoric in deadly derby and cigar: "What if someone had listened to Winston Churchill and stood up to Adolf Hitler earlier?" he asked an audience of government employees. "How many people's lives might have been saved, and how many American lives might have been saved?"

After the revisory, comes the accusatory. That's how Pat Buchanan has saved

the West from military destruction. He closed the western front of the Second World War, allowing Bolshevism and Nazism to lock in mortal battle in the bloody East instead. Hitler, asserted Buchanan in his controversial book, *A Republic, Not an Empire*, "was driven by a traditional German policy of *Drang nach Osten*, the drive to the East," and "had not wanted war with the West." It was only Britain's misbegotten military assurances in the East that sealed the alternate fate of the West. "Had Britain and France not given the war guarantee to Poland," Buchanan argued, "there might have been no Dunkirk, no blitz, no Vichy, no destruction of the Jewish population of Norway, Denmark, Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg, France or even Italy."

What is all this? Since when does politics succumb to an act of the imagination, as it has done this year in Richmond? Since when does history—speculative history at that—breach the wall that in this nation has always separated it from a pragmatic politics defined by the pothole that needed filling or the entitlement that could be created? Since when has foreign policy been advanced—from the presidential stump, yet—in terms of past paradigms as opposed to present national interest? Since when, for that matter, has the historical conditional, which has never succeeded even in establishing its own professional legitimacy, mutated into revisionist rationalization and topical political accusation?

Looking backward politically has always been the role of losers: those sighing

over a romantically remembered Lost Cause, or seething over a supposed Stab in the Back. Why are history's seeming winners now engaging in repeated arguments over events that, the suffering and bloodshed they entailed notwithstanding, appear ultimately to have led them to prosperous triumph? After all, alternatives to what happened always include far worse possible scenarios. These are not arguments over expressing regret for outrageous historical injustices. What we have, at the center of our national discourse, is a recurring debate over the essence of our history. What's this about?

Counterfactuals, allohistory, parahistorical conjecture, what if? The bastard child of causal contemplation has gone by many names, as if it were trying to escape its reputation as an unworthy, unprofessional waste of time and instead start life over again in more respectable guise. It has never worked. British historian E.H. Carr, in his 1961 "What is History?" lectures, dismissed all "what if?" speculation as a "parlour game." David Hackett Fischer cited "the fictional question" as a historian's fallacy: "All historical 'evidence' for what might have happened if [John Wilkes] Booth had missed his mark is necessarily taken from the world in which he hit it," Fischer wrote 30 years ago. "There is no way to escape this fundamental fact." The German historian Karl Hampe once declared in the Teutonic absolute that "History knows no 'if.'"

The objections to imagined historical

alternatives seem impressive: What-ifs can never prove anything, can never be tested, can spin out into an infinite number of contradictory scenarios, etc. What then is the point of indulging in them? Worse for the counterfactual, if its critics were to decide tomorrow that History does indeed know an "if" or two, these same critics would certainly reject it anew on the grounds that it is impossibly reductionist. Is the course of Western history really to be balanced on the alternate possible shapes of Cleopatra's nose? Can any kingdom ever have been lost merely for the want of a nail? Is this, as historian Niall Ferguson—a defender of counterfactuals—allows, not merely worrying over spilt milk, but worrying over the milk we might have spilled, but which is actually still safe in the bottle?

And yet the urge to imagine a history that is otherwise has proved persistent in the face of professional rejection, a rejection that has continued despite the hard-won acceptance of "cliometric" statistical what-ifs. In fact, we are obviously experiencing a major spike in such alternative-making: political, literary, and historical. Much of this activity is by writers of imaginative fiction, who kept the field vital during decades when it survived as pulp. Spurred, perhaps, by the 1992 crossover success of Robert Harris' "Hitler Wins" bestseller, *Fatherland*, a steady stream of alternate history anthologies has come from such writer/editors as Mike Resnick and Gregory Benford (a REASON contributing editor). Author Harry Turtledove, a credentialed historian, is his own cottage industry of imagined historical alternatives (he is probably best-known for his "Lee Wins" novel, *Guns of the South*). Del Rey, a science fiction imprint of Random House, has recently established an entire "Alternate History" line of fiction.

Military historians, perhaps more sensitive to the role of the contingent in their field than are their universalist counterparts, have also been unusually busy of late spinning alternate outcomes. Kenneth Mackay has refought WWII from the German side in several works, while Peter G. Tsouras has rewritten both D-Day and Gettysburg, both for Greenhill Books, a British house that is devoting a line to such works. *MHQ: The Quarterly Journal of*



Yalta Summit, 1945: A key "what if?" moment

Military History devoted its 10th anniversary issue last year to what-ifs, which *MHQ* founding editor Robert Cowley later expanded into this year's quite popular anthology, *What If?: The World's Foremost Military Historians Imagine What Might Have Been*. It features such luminaries as James M. McPherson, Stephen E. Ambrose, William H. MacNeill, John Keegan, and others daring to dip their pens—and their reputations—in other timestreams.

But by far the most striking event of all is the appearance (at last) in the United States of Niall Ferguson's *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals*, a work that appeared in Britain two years ago. A collection of familiar and new what-if scenarios of uneven insight by a group of historians—What if Charles I had avoided civil war? What if Hitler had invaded England? What if JFK had lived? What if communism had not collapsed?—the book's outstanding essay is Ferguson's introduction, "Virtual History: Toward a 'Chaotic' Theory of the Past," which Ferguson follows up with an afterword that attempts to apply his ideas to the book's other speculations, treating them as if they were historical facts.

The literature of the counterfactual is vast, filled with often-heated debate on

military, biographical, medical, meteorological, statistical, and philosophical grounds. Much of the work in favor of the counterfactual is defensive; the most impassioned such defense is certainly Alexander Demandt's *History That Never Happened*, which first appeared in Germany in 1984, and which has never had an American trade edition. Ferguson, author of the bestselling *The Pity of War*, dispenses with the defensive (he does not mention Demandt). His is the most assured approach to the subject since Nietzsche declared "what if?" to be history's "cardinal question." In fact, Ferguson's purpose is not merely to legitimize the counterfactual at all. It is finally to delegitimize the remnants of historical determinism and to establish a countervision of historical cause built on the developing concepts of chaos and complexity.

"Whether by posing implausible questions or by providing implausible answers," writes Ferguson, "counterfactual history has tended to discredit itself." Ferguson's first goal is thus to rebuild it from its foundations.

Those foundations are known to almost everyone because, in fact, almost everyone indulges in counterfactual thinking about

their own lives. When people consider how they embarked on their careers, how they came to meet their spouses, why they may be beset by debt or difficulty, how they wrecked their cars, or how they came to be presented with one opportunity or to have missed another, they are playing back autobiographical what-ifs. Far from indulging in a parlor game, most people are attempting to sort out the complexities of their lives and to come to grips with their own characters; to understand why what happened happened, and why what could have happened didn't. If Karl Hampe were to have declared that "Life knows no 'if,'" everyone would laugh at him because everyone is aware that his or her life has been a succession of such ifs, with lifelong consequences often stemming from the most trivial-seeming circumstances. People understand the role of contingency in their own histories.

Professional history writing, however, has balked at the contingent, and tried to replace it with something else. Ferguson runs through many of the main currents of historiography from its beginnings in search of this factor: the ancient concept of Fortune, the medieval role of God in history, Vico's Renaissance ideas about providential order, the Enlightenment shift toward scientific determinism, the rise of German Idealism as voiced by Hegel, the materialism of Marx. For millennia, almost everyone who was to take up his pen in the service of History was to perceive it in terms of a great cycle, or as progress toward a great end, or to indulge in a teleological exercise of one sort or another. Time had a shape, whether arising from God or reflecting Nature. In such a system, there was hardly room for the individual's free will. What, then, was the role of the contingent and the trivial?

But in 1830, Thomas Carlyle penned one of historiography's most famous passages. The succession of events in the world "is not acted," he wrote, "as it is in written History: actual events are nowise so simply related to each other as parent and offspring are; every single event in the world is the offspring not of one, but of all other events, prior or contemporaneous, and will in its turn combine with all others to give birth to new: it is an ever-living,

ever-working Chaos of Being, wherein shape after shape bodies itself forth from innumerable elements." It was, seemingly, an expulsion of science from history, because while "Narrative is linear, Action is *solid*. Alas for our 'chains,' or chainlets, of 'causes and effects.'"

For the intelligentsia of the 19th century, the potential loss of historical shape translated into more than "secularization"; it meant meaningless anarchy. Ferguson identifies the cultural expression of history-as-anarchy as Dostoyevskian despair.

Numerous anti-determinist historians, among them G.M. Trevelyan and A.J.P.

**As Ferguson sees it,
"Chaos means
unpredictable outcomes
even when successive
events are causally
linked." That is more
than history; it is, in
the author's word,
"chaostory."**

Taylor, were afterwards to enjoy distinguished careers. They attempted to accommodate the role of chance in the advance of history, and to argue that strict cause-and-effect extrapolation was, in Trevelyan's words, "a misapplication of the analogy of physical science." But the British school of historical idealism that arose in this century was as opposed to counterfactuals as the determinists.

Ferguson notes that the British anti-determinists were also historiography's anti-socialists, and that the conflict between anti-determinists and Marxists at midcentury was an open one. "Unfortunately—from the point of view of the idealists—these were conflicts that the other side effectively won." According to Ferguson, "the determinism of the nineteenth century was not, as might have been expected, discredited by the horrors perpetrated in its name after 1917. That Marxism was able to retain its credibility was

due mainly to the widespread belief that National Socialism was its polar opposite, rather than merely a near relative which had substituted *Volk* for class."

Historical teleology has since been challenged by a variety of approaches, many of them, like the *Annales* school of mentalities, devised in France. But Ferguson argues that the rescue of History has actually arrived from an unexpected quarter: from science and mathematics. The successful challenge to classical Laplacian determinism in science, he writes, has important implications for the understanding of what history is describing. Many historians, he believes, have been asking the wrong questions, based on an outmoded understanding of what science is. The rise of entropy, the recognition of unpredictability and randomness, and the fall of absolute time have profound implications for history. "Chance is first," wrote C.S. Pierce in 1892, "Law is second, the tendency to take habits is third." Moreover, scientists approach counterfactuals as a natural way to understand the processes they are studying. No scientist will ever state that "Science knows no 'ifs.'"

History's future lies at an intersection of science and art, one that has been explored by such novelists as the Viennese Robert Musil and Philip K. Dick. That intersection has blossomed into chaos theory, and it is where Ferguson seeks to place history, too. "The philosophical significance of chaos theory is that it reconciles the notions of causation and contingency." As Ferguson sees it, "Chaos—stochastic behaviour in deterministic systems—means unpredictable outcomes even when successive events are causally linked." That is more than history; it is, in the author's word, "chaostory."

Here are chaostory's rules: "It is a *logical necessity*," argues Ferguson, "when asking questions about causation to pose 'but for' questions, and to try to imagine what would have happened if a supposed cause had been absent," based on probability. And it is a "*historical necessity*" to attach equal importance to the possibilities as contemporaries understood them before the fact, and less importance to those that contemporaries did not anticipate. "The search for universal laws is futile," con-

cludes Ferguson. "The most historians can do is to make tentative statements about causation with reference to plausible counterfactuals."

Ferguson's argument about historical conjecture helps put its political application—this year's statements about Lee and Churchill, for example—into perspective, and that in turn reveals why the counterfactual is so important. When Clinton applies Churchillian fortitude to the situation in Kosovo, he is seeking not to open our understanding of the historical process, but to limit it. Because political counterfactuals like these imply a simple one-to-one causal relationship between a past situation and a contemporary one—a victorious Lee = slavery today; Hitler = Slobodan Milosevic—they become, paradoxically, what-ifs in the service of determinism. Political counterfactuals look backward from the present, not forward from the past. Though framed in terms of the contingent, these what-if questions are designed to have only a single answer. They are false counterfactuals, polemical devices intended not to open examination, but to close debate.

And they often succeed. Because the counterfactual has been disdained by the history establishment, political polemicists are able to use their counterfeit versions all the more effectively: There are few people prepared to dispute them. In the Lee case, for example, there was no notable objection on historical grounds (though admirers of Lee, black and white, did attempt to defend him on biographical grounds).

The Buchanan situation is even more instructive. Buchanan at least presented his argument—that Hitler did not seek war with the West—with his version of circumstances before the fact of war. His is not a tenable argument for several reasons. There is evidence, for example, that Hitler was all along thinking of a confrontation with the United States and was even preparing for it militarily. More important, Buchanan predicates his case on the grounds that Hitler was pursuing a rational military strategy. On the contrary, Hitler's own military decisions indicate that he had no such strategy. If he had, he might have won his war. In 1940, he was in a position to knock Russia out of the

war, or to gain control of the Middle East's oil, or both. His failure to exploit his opportunities was not the result of error, but of the megalomania that shaped his orders. (A good counterfactual examination of Hitler's situation can be found in Kenneth Macksey's *The Hitler Options*.)

Yet much of the response to Buchanan's thesis was actually ahistorical fantasy. It was repeatedly suggested that America's moral duty was to confront evil and fight the perpetrators of genocide. In fact, the United States did not at first know that a Holocaust was occurring; when it did know, it did nothing directly about it (such as bombing the rail lines to Auschwitz). In the meantime, FDR's State Department made sure that a minimum number of Europe's desperate Jewish refugees entered the country.

As for Clinton's Churchill impersonation, the claim that Serbia represented a Nazi-like threat is a trivialization of the 20th century.

These controversies are all lost opportunities, because even a cursory examination of their historical potential yields a richer understanding of the past and our complex relation to it. If we reframe any of these issues as true counterfactuals, some of those potentials appear. What if, for example, the Civil War had ended in some other way than it did. What would have been the effect on slavery?

The answer is that it depends on how the war would have ended. If the North had won a quick victory at First Bull Run, the only probable effect on slavery would have been to eliminate it from the new territories.

The North might well have won its quick war, but for a matter of inches; there is a brief scenario to the effect by Stephen W. Sears in the Cowley anthology. Both armies were green; it was a question of who would break first. Southern troops rallied around Gen. Thomas Jackson, who stood "like a stone wall" amid a hail of bullets. Had even one of those bullets hit Jackson, the rebels might have broken instead of the federals. As it was, the federals had somewhere to go: nearby Washington. The rebels didn't; they could have been chased down, possibly turning the war into a skirmish. Emancipation was not yet on Lincoln's agenda: Four of his Union states

were slave states, and slavery continued in the federal capital. Emancipation would have had to come by another route.

If the war had ended with Union victory in 1862, after Antietam, slavery would have ended, but possibly not as it was eventually to end. Emancipation had been proclaimed by then, primarily in hopes of fomenting a slave uprising in the South, and of preventing British recognition of the Confederacy. The Emancipation Proclamation, when it was announced, included the resettlement of freedmen (either to Liberia or to Panama) and compensation to slave owners. Those were the terms of slavery's 1862 end in the District of Columbia (though there was no serious effort at resettlement). When the Emancipation Proclamation became law the next January (freeing only the South's slaves), the issues of resettlement and compensation had been dropped.

But what if Lee had won the war at any point after taking command? What of slavery then? There are many possible scenarios, one of them being the immediate start of an emancipatory process, if not outright emancipation. Why? The answer lies with the significance of Great Britain to the South's economy: The South would not have survived without continued British trade in cotton. But Britain could not, for domestic political reasons, stand as the bulwark of the South's slave-dependent economy. Indeed, Palmerston, the British prime minister, was already concerned about the issue in 1861, when he anticipated a Southern victory. If emancipation equaled survival, the Confederacy's hand might have been forced. Many authors have argued such a scenario, among them Winston Churchill.

But Churchill went further. Writing in 1932, Churchill argued that an independent Confederacy would have necessarily changed the relationship of both the North and South to Great Britain, altered the balance of power in Europe, and prevented World War I. A victorious Lee, according to the Churchill counterfactual, would have ended slavery and, ultimately, spared the world two immense wars, Nazism, Soviet Communism, genocide, and 40 years of Cold War. Where's that Lee mural?

Could Lee have won? That controversy continues today. Lee's detractors argue that it was folly for him to take the war north; that he should have adopted a defensive strategy, forcing the more powerful Union to exhaust and demoralize itself with attempted invasion. (Edward H. Bonekemper's *How Robert E. Lee Lost the Civil War*, out now, is the latest book to argue this case.) Yet Lee came close to wiping out the North's advantages. A few minutes difference in the race to control Little Round Top and the world might well be a different place. A successful Pennsylvania campaign by Lee might have ruined Lincoln's hopes of re-election.

The really haunting turn in the war, however, involves Lee's Lost Order. Entering Maryland in 1862, Lee issued an order splitting his troops. A Confederate officer wrapped his cigars in a copy of the order, then lost them. In the most improbable event in American history, the order found its way into Union hands, precipitating Antietam.

What if that had not happened? What becomes of the Civil War when one subtracts from it its bloodiest day? Can chaostory accommodate such an equation?

For many, the possible answers are less alluring than is the mystery inherent in the event and its consequences. Carlyle was right: Every event in the world is the offspring of all other events. But there can be no total history. Some dimensions of history remain the province of art.

Ferguson's definitional limits to the counterfactual may serve history well, but they appear to orphan counterfactual fiction. A word should be said in its favor, because as a literature of history's unrealized potentials, it is an expression of the inherently possible.

It is ever more apparent that one of the reasons for the West's immense success is that—unlike its predecessors and alternatives—it has accommodated chance and complexity, building them into its system. Our unending open carnival of expression and markets puts into play a panorama of concepts and things—vulgar, mediocre, sometimes sublime—that yields results that cannot be planned or predicted. Science writer James Burke calls it “the pin-

ball effect”; REASON editor Virginia Postrel terms it “dynamism.” History may have surrendered its shape, but in doing so it also surrendered its limits.

That is the subject of counterfactual fiction, only directed at the past: history without bounds. It is deeply popular genre, in that it willingly vulgarizes history's actors, great and evil: Hitler as a demented American immigrant pulp artist in one story; Disraeli as a Victorian gossip columnist in another; the poet Byron as the King of Greece in a third. But this is less a trivialization of historical role and causation, and more a boisterous, unrestrained inquiry into them. Though the process

may sometimes shrink a mythic past, the potential of the future expands.

“Footfalls echo in the memory,” wrote a wistful T.S. Eliot, “Down the passage we did not take/Toward the door we never opened/Into the rose garden.” But history's imaginers—Philip K. Dick, L. Sprague DeCamp, and their successors—have gone roaring down that passage and ripped open the door. Out in that rose garden, they've staged an anything-can-happen party to which everyone's invited. Bring your own History. ♦

Charles Paul Freund (cpf@reason.com) is a REASON senior editor.

The New College Try

By Nick Gillespie

In Plato's Cave, by Alvin Kernan, New Haven: Yale University Press, 309 pages, \$25.00

Failing the Future: A Dean Looks at Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century, by Annette Kolodny, Durham: Duke University Press, 298 pages, \$24.95

What's College For?: The Struggle to Define American Higher Education, by Zachary Karabell, New York: Basic Books, \$24.00/\$14.00 paper

Few topics inspire as much doom-saying, declinism, and nostalgia as U.S. higher education—a recurring motif neatly summed up in the title of the recent academic memoir, *Gone for Good: Tales of University Life After the Golden Age*. Not coincidentally, few institutions have proven as adaptable, open-ended, and robust as American colleges and universities. Indeed, it's nothing less than astounding that all the colonial colleges—Harvard, William and Mary, Yale, Pennsylvania, Princeton, Brown, Columbia, Rutgers, and Dartmouth—are still up and running more than 200 years after their foundings.

Of course, those schools barely resemble their former selves. It is precisely that ability to morph into new and varied forms that underlies the continuous pronouncements—from the right and the left, the old and the young, the smart and the

stupid—on the “death” of the university, the “decline” of college, and the ongoing “crisis” in higher education. Colleges and universities are always dying, declining, and lurching from one crisis to the next. But they are also always being reborn, getting restored, and resolving problems.

In the early 19th century, administrators wrung their hands over whether to teach modern languages and, even more scandalous, “modern” literature (e.g., Voltaire and other Enlightenment authors); in the late 19th century, they vociferously debated whether students should have the right to pursue elective courses and to study science; in the early 20th century, they fretted over the “Jewish problem” (i.e., too many smart Semites) and whether American literature was worthy of study; during the 1960s and '70s, they debated assigning letter grades, killing foreign language requirements, chucking frats and