

## ALTERNATIVE HISTORY

by Edwin D. Reilly, Jr.  
for the Sunday Gazette

There is no privileged past . . . There is an infinitude of Pasts, all equally valid . . . At each and every instant of Time, however brief you suppose it, the line of events forks like the stem of a tree putting forth twin branches.

-André Maurois

I don't know of a book whose theme is consistent with the opening quotation, but there are innumerable authors who take the opposite approach—start with a known historic event and speculate on what the near future that followed might have been had someone made a different decision. I call them the “what if?” books. In bookstores, you are most likely to find them in the remainder bins.

Let me start with what many will consider a quibble. At Amazon.com, in the books category, you will find a few “What if?” books if you type “alternative history” in the search box. But if you type “alternate history” you'll find hundreds. To my taste, things that alternate, like one kind of electric current, are cyclic. But history doesn't work that way (except in the movie “Groundhog Day”).

One does not really have to read books about alternative history; their very titles tell you where they are going. Actual examples are “Rising Sun Victorious: An Alternate (sic) History of the Pacific War” by Peter Tsouras; “Dixie Victorious: An Alternate History of the Civil War” by the same author; “The Hindus: An Alternative History” by Wendy Doniger; and “What Might Have Been: Imagining History from Twelve Leading Historians” by Andrew Roberts” (whose cover shows a Nazi flag being planted on the moon.) And there is also “What If Jesus Had Never Been Born?” OMG!

This being the eve of the Fourth, I decided that I should concentrate on American history. But, having picked a theme of the day for which I owned no relevant books, I drove to a large book emporium to see what might be there. Sure enough, I quickly found “Virtual History: What Could Have Been,” Niall Ferguson, editor, in the remainder bin. I mean, of course, that his book was there; Niall himself must alternate among the several prestigious institutions where the book jacket says we might find him.

Only two of Ferguson's chapters were pertinent to the day. CAMELOT CONTINUED: What if John F. Kennedy had lived? by Diane Kunz, and BRITISH AMERICA: What if there had been no American Revolution? by J.C.D. Clark. I'll cover the gist of the first topic when I tell you, momentarily, about a more recent book. As to the second, I was surprised to read an opening quote of George Washington's that I was not previously aware of. In his letter of October 9, 1774, to Captain Robert Mackenzie, he wrote:

“I think I can announce it as a fact, that it is not the wish, or the interest of the Government [of Massachusetts], or any other upon this Continent, separately, or collectively, to set up for Independence. . . . I am well satisfied, as I can be of my existence, that no such thing is desired by any thinking man in all North America; on the contrary, that it is the ardent wish of the warmest advocates for liberty, that peace & tranquility, upon Constitutional grounds, may be restored, & the horrors of civil discord prevented.”

It's a good thing that the thinking women of Massachusetts thought differently. Hooray for Abigail.

Then, in the same trip, I struck gold, a newly published book by Jeff Greenfield: "Then Everything Changed: Stunning Alternate Histories of American Politics: JFK, RFK, Carter, Ford, Reagan." Despite the unfortunate "alternate," I took it home and devoured its mere 434 pages in two days. (Facing a deadline is a great incentive.) There are only three chapters: the first on an alternative JFK assassination; the second on an avoided RFK assassination; and the third on a Ford-Carter election with a different outcome.

There were plenty of opportunities for alternative histories for Greenfield to write about. In his own preface, he says "Just in recent times, for instance, four Presidential elections between 1960 and 2000 have come down to a relative handful of votes. A statistically insignificant shift would have given us Richard Nixon in 1960, Hubert Humphrey in 1968, Gerald Ford in 1976, and Al Gore in 2000.

RWR (surely you remember that his middle name is the same as the last name of an early 20<sup>th</sup> century president) is mentioned only briefly in the Ford-Carter chapter; it would have been a bit morbid to imagine an alternative to his attempted assassination. It's not in the Greenfield book, but we'll always chuckle at Reagan's humor (and bravery) as he faced surgery to remove his bullet, saying "I hope the doctors are Republicans."

The first chapter begins with a recitation of an actual plot to kill President-Elect John F. Kennedy that was thwarted a month after his election. Greenfield, of course, imagines that it succeeded. Richard Paul Pavlick (1887-1975) was a retired postal worker from New Hampshire who stalked JFK with the intent of killing him. On December 11, 1960 in Palm Beach, Florida, Pavlick was poised to carry out the assassination by blowing up Kennedy and himself with dynamite but delayed the attempt because Kennedy was with his wife and children. He was found and arrested a few days later before he was able to try again.

In Greenfield's alternative narrative, Pavlick makes a second attempt that succeeds, big time, so much so that it proved difficult to find enough of JFK to bury. And though the author gets Vice-President elect Lyndon Johnson made President three years early, it wasn't easy. The Electoral College was set to convene on December 15, and under the circumstances it wasn't clear if the Democratic delegates could vote for a dead man. So still-President Dwight Eisenhower and Democratic leaders arrange to have delegates vote for enough different people to assure that no one obtains a majority. Then, in accord with our Constitution, the House votes, one vote per state, and elects Johnson, and the Senate elects Hubert Humphrey Vice-President. Very clever.

Greenfield had began his preface with another thwarted assassination of a President-Elect, that of FDR on February 13, 1933 in Chicago. (In those days, inaugurations were not held until March 4.) While speaking in Miami, Italian anarchist Guiseppe Zangara fired five shots at Roosevelt. All missed their target, but several bystanders were hit, including Chicago Mayor Anton Cermak, who died of his wounds. Greenfield doesn't mention him, but the mayor was descended from the same Czech family as GE-Schenectady's master potter William Cermak, whose biographical profile I wrote for the Hall of Fame section of [EdisonTechCenter.org](http://EdisonTechCenter.org).

In the chapter on Robert Kennedy, RFK, on an unplanned whim, still goes through the fateful kitchen of the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles after winning the California primary that would have ensured his nomination for President, but this alternate time a bodyguard subdues Sirhan Bishara Sirhan before he can fire his pistol. Kennedy wins a narrow hard-fought victory over Richard Nixon and gets to be the one who enjoys the successful moon landing of the next year (and his name on a plaque left up there.)

Perhaps to lessen the possibility of perceived partisanship, Greenville reverses the Ford-Carter election of 1976. Carter, despite my actual successful leadership of his Schenectady County campaign (not mentioned, of course), wins the popular vote by one and a half million votes but loses to Ford in the Electoral College by two or three votes.

I wonder: Who went to the Inaugural in place of Jean and me (and Bob Carney and Brian Stratton)?

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