WHY DO WE ASK “WHAT IF?”
REFLECTIONS ON THE FUNCTION OF ALTERNATE HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

The new prominence of alternate history in Western popular culture has increasingly prompted scholars to historicize it as a broader phenomenon. What has largely escaped notice until now, however, has been the question of the underlying function of alternate history as a genre of speculative narrative representation. In this essay, I argue that writers and scholars have long produced “allohistorical narratives” out of fundamentally presentist motives. Allohistorical tales have assumed different typological forms depending upon how their authors have viewed the present. Nightmare scenarios, for example, have depicted the alternate past as worse than the real historical record in order to vindicate the present, while fantasy scenarios have portrayed the alternate past as superior to the real historical record in order to express dissatisfaction with the present. The presentist character of alternate histories allows them to shed light upon the evolving place of various historical events in the collective memory of a given society. In this essay, I examine American alternate histories of three popular themes—the Nazis winning World War II, the South winning the Civil War, and the American Revolution failing to occur—in order to show how present-day concerns have influenced how these events have been remembered. In the process, I hope to demonstrate that alternate histories lend themselves quite well to being studied as documents of memory. By examining accounts of what never happened, we can better understand the memory of what did.

I. ALLOHISTORY

Over the course of the last generation, and especially during the last decade, the genre of counterfactual historical speculation known as “alternate history” has emerged seemingly out of nowhere to become one of the most fertile fields of historical inquiry. Countless tales of alternate history—or what have been more elegantly described as “allohistorical narratives”—have appeared in recent years on a broad range of themes: the Nazis winning World War II, the American Revolution failing to occur, Jesus not being crucified, the South winning the Civil War, the atomic bomb not being dropped on Japan, Hitler escaping into postwar hiding, and many others. These narratives have appeared in a multiplicity of cultural forms: novels, short stories, films, television programs, comic books, historical monographs and essays, and internet web sites. So dramatic
has the emergence of alternate history been that it has been reported on by the mass media and even grudgingly acknowledged by its most hostile critics—historians—some of whom have enthusiastically moved to legitimize the once-unwanted bastard child of their profession through collections of historical essays, inspired monographic defenses, and scholarly analyses. In short, as shown by this flurry of activity, alternate history has become a veritable phenomenon in contemporary Western culture.

What explains the new enthusiasm for allohistorical speculation? Up until now, scholars and journalists have duly reported on alternate history’s new prominence, but they have done little to explain it or to explore its history. To be sure, the basic chronology of alternate history’s emergence is clear enough. The origins of posing counterfactual historical questions date back to the advent of Western historiography itself in antiquity, when such historians as Thucydides and Livy wondered how their own societies would have been different if the Persians had defeated the Greeks or if Alexander the Great had waged war against Rome. As a modern literary genre, however, alternate history traces its roots back to the more recent past, to the mid-nineteenth century, when the first


allohistorical novels were published in post-Napoleonic France. 4 Such works remained exceptional, however, well into the twentieth century. Besides scattered time-travel short stories published in pulp science-fiction magazines, and scholarly essays published in larger anthologies, few alternate histories appeared until the 1960s. 5 Thereafter, however, the legitimation of science fiction as a widely accepted genre of creative expression helped boost the fortunes of its lesser-known allohistorical offshoot. 6 Of late, other cultural and political trends have promoted alternate history’s departure from the margins to the mainstream. The rise of postmodernism, with its blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction, its privileging of “other” or alternate voices, and its playfully ironic reconfiguring of established historical verities, has encouraged the rise of alternate history. 7 The gradual discrediting of political ideologies in the postwar world, culminating with the death of socialism and the end of the cold war, has eroded the power of deterministic worldviews and thus further boosted the central allohistorical principle that everything could have been different. 8 Recent trends in the world of science, such as chaos theory, have also worked to reduce the power of deterministic thinking and thus have encouraged alternate history. 9 Lastly, the information revolution, by liberating human beings from the constraints of real space and time through cyberspace and virtual reality, has given us the confidence to break free of the constraints of real history as well. 10

All of these trends help explain the emergence of a climate hospitable to allohistorical speculation, yet they do little to explain why people have been inspired to write alternate histories in the first place. It is, of course, within our very nature as human beings to wonder “what if?” At the personal level, when we speculate about what might have happened if certain events had or had not occurred in the


5. Dramatic alternate histories began to form a trend within the realm of science fiction in the 1930s, appearing most frequently as time-travel tales in such magazines as Amazing Stories. Chamberlain, “Afterword: Allohistory in Science Fiction,” 285-286; Hellekson, *The Alternate History*, 18. Among academic alternate histories, the most influential early work was J. C. Squire’s *If It Had Happened Otherwise: Lapses into Imaginary History* (London: Longmans, Green and Company, 1931).


past, we are really expressing our feelings about the present. We are either grateful that things worked out as they did, or we regret that they did not occur differently. The same concerns are involved in the broader realm of alternate history. Alternate history is inherently presentist. It explores the past less for its own sake than to utilize it instrumentally to comment upon the present. Based as it is upon conjecture, alternate history necessarily reflects its authors’ hopes and fears. It is no coincidence, therefore, that alternate histories largely come in two forms: as fantasy and as nightmare scenarios. Fantasy scenarios envision the past as superior to the present and thereby express a sense of dissatisfaction with the way things are today. Nightmare scenarios, by contrast, depict the past as inferior to the present and thereby express a sense of contentment with the status quo. Fantasy and nightmare scenarios, moreover, have different political implications. Fantasy scenarios tend to be liberal, for by envisioning a better past, they see the present as wanting and thus implicitly support changing it. Nightmare scenarios, by contrast, tend to be conservative, for by viewing the past in negative terms, they ratify the present and thereby reject the need for change. These political implications, to be sure, are not iron-clad. Nightmare scenarios can be used for the liberal purpose of critique, while fantasy scenarios can tend towards a conservative form of escapism. Still, on the whole, nearly all alternate histories explore the past instrumentally with an eye towards larger present-day agendas.

By becoming aware of the fundamentally presentist character of alternate history, it is possible to appreciate one of its most important, but least acknowledged, virtues—its ability to shed light upon the evolution of historical memory. Ironically, alternate histories lend themselves very well to being studied as documents of memory for the same reason that historians have dismissed them as useless for the study of history—namely, their fundamental subjectivity. Speculative accounts about the past are driven by many of the same psychological forces that determine how the past takes shape in remembrance. Biases, fears and wishes, the desire to avoid guilt, the quest for vindication—these and other related sentiments all influence how alternate histories represent how the past might have been, just as they influence how people remember how it “really” was. The role of such forces in shaping allohistorical depictions of the past clearly shows that they are fundamentally rooted in subjective speculation. Yet while they are subjective, alternate histories are far from being unrepresentative. Since 1945, alternate histories on a variety of topics have rarely appeared in isolated fashion but rather have usually emerged in waves during specific eras. In a word,

11. Demandt writes that alternate history is based upon “private conjecture, which reveals more about the character of the speculator than about the probable consequences [of a different historical scenario].” Demandt, History That Never Happened, 5.

12. This is a common point made by many scholars. See, for example, Rodiek, Erfundene Vergangenheit, 30.

13. It is notable that even the historians who have attempted to legitimate alternate history as a field of historical analysis have dismissed its subjective dimensions rather than employ them as a vehicle for examining memory. Thus Niall Ferguson dismisses the essays in J. C. Squire’s If It Happened Otherwise as largely “products of their authors’ contemporary political or religious preoccupations.” Ferguson, Virtual History, 11.
they have illustrated collective speculative trends that provide a revealing reflection of society’s broader views of the past. Of course, it is not sufficient merely to study the representation of the past in works of alternate history, but their broader reception as well. Discovering whether or not a given narrative was a critical success or failure, whether it was a bestseller or a commercial flop, whether it was ignored or caused controversy, provides a broader sense of its larger resonance. Through this means of analysis, alternate histories can dramatically illuminate the workings of memory.

Surveying some of the prominent themes explored in alternate history provides a means of further underscoring its fundamentally presentist character. Not surprisingly, the most popular scenarios in alternate history have been those that portray events that have left their mark on the world of today and that continue to resonate in the present. These have most often been pivotal events of world historical importance—often called “points of divergence”—ranging from the deaths of kings and politicians, decisive military victories or defeats, the rise of grand cultural or religious movements, and even demographic trends, such as migrations or plagues. The popularity of specific themes, of course, has varied across national boundaries and over time. But given the predominance of American authors in establishing the genre of alternate history, it is no wonder that three of the most popular have included the Nazis winning World War II, the South winning the Civil War, and the American Revolution failing to occur. In tracing how each of these themes has been portrayed over time, it becomes clear how alternate history has consistently functioned as a means of using alternate pasts to expose the virtues and vices of the present.

II. THE NAZIS WIN WORLD WAR II

The scenario of the Nazis winning the Second World War is one of the most popular themes in the entire field of alternate history. From the outbreak of World War II to the present, American writers have speculated about the terrifying prospect of the Nazis emerging victorious in the conflict. Significantly, these allohistorical narratives have diverged sharply in portraying the consequences of

14. As various scholars have noted, examining the representation of Nazism is not the same as studying the memory of it. Only by combining an analysis of representation with reception does a clear sense of a narrative’s broader societal resonance emerge. Alon Confino has been one of the leading advocates of including the societal reception of cultural products in analyzing their significance as indices of memory. See Alon Confino, “Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method,” American Historical Review 102 (December, 1997), 1386-1403.

15. While the French arguably invented alternate history in the nineteenth century, American and British writers distinguished themselves in the twentieth century as the primary developers of the genre. Some have argued that this is due to the crucial Anglo-American contribution to the creation of modern science fiction. Neil Barron writes that “there is still a tendency to regard science fiction as a primarily Anglo-American phenomenon.” Anatomy of Wonder: A Critical Guide to Science Fiction (New York: Bowker, 1981).

16. See, for example, Chamberlain, “Afterword: Allohistory in Science Fiction,” 288. It is clear that the subject of a Nazi wartime victory is the most popular of all the allohistorical themes pertaining to Nazism. And a brief glance at the Uchronia website reveals far more allohistorical works devoted to the subject of Nazism and World War II than to any other subject.
a Nazi triumph. For the first three decades of the postwar era, up until the early 1970s, most allohistorical narratives consistently depicted a Nazi wartime victory in moralistic terms as bringing about a dystopian hell on earth. Accounts since then, however, have diminished its sense of horror and portrayed it in much more normalized terms as a relatively tolerable event. This shift, as we shall see, owes a great deal to the turbulent postwar history of the United States. As the U.S. entered a period of self-described decline in the 1970s, the function of alternate history changed from one of self-congratulation to self-critique. Thus, while the dystopian character of early postwar narratives served the triumphalistic function of vindicating the American decision to intervene in the war against, and ultimately to defeat, Nazi Germany, the increasingly normalized depiction of a Nazi victory after the 1970s reflected the dawn of second thoughts about American conduct in the war. Significantly, the return of national self-confidence during the 1980s—especially after the end of the cold war in 1989—once more transformed the function of alternate histories from self-criticism back to self-congratulation, as accounts once more returned to older patterns of representing a Nazi wartime victory.

The original function of allohistorical accounts of a Nazi wartime victory was to convince American readers to support American intervention in the Second World War. Novels such as Hendrik Willem van Loon’s *Invasion* (1940), Fred Allhoff’s *Lightning in the Night* (1940), and Marion White’s *If We Should Fail* (1942), as well as sci-fi short stories such as Alfred Bester’s “The Probable Man” (1941), reinforced the sentiment that America needed to defeat the Nazis by projecting bleak accounts of the consequences of failing to do so. By depicting Nazi Germany as a ruthless enemy that rained bombs upon such American cities as Rochester, Cleveland, and Indianapolis, by portraying the Nazis as carrying out vicious war crimes against civilians in all-American towns like Salem, Massachusetts, and by envisioning the dystopian nature of a Nazi-ruled world far into the future, these works clearly underscored Nazism’s evil and reaffirmed the necessity of defeating Hitler before he could emerge victorious.

With the Allied defeat of the Third Reich in 1945, however, allohistorical accounts of a Nazi victory lost their raison d’être and temporarily disappeared. In the first decade and a half of the cold war era, Americans feared the Soviets more than the Germans, who largely faded as a source of popular anxiety. By the late 1950s and early 1960s, however, international events revived memories of the


Third Reich. Against the backdrop of neo-Nazi hooliganism in West Germany in 1959, the capture and subsequent trial of fugitive SS officer Adolf Eichmann in 1960–1961, and the Berlin Crisis of 1958–1961, popular interest in the Third Reich returned throughout the West and provided a hospitable climate for new works of alternate history to appear. These narratives revived the wartime image of Nazism as the epitome of evil—but for a new purpose. Instead of motivating Americans to fight against the Germans, these accounts served the didactic function of preserving the Germans’ crimes in memory and of triumphalistically vindicating America’s historic decision to intervene against them. Thus, works such as well-known science fiction writer C. M. Kornbluth’s short story, “Two Dooms” (1958); journalist William L. Shirer’s Look Magazine essay, “If Hitler Had Won World War II” (1961); and legendary science fiction novelist Philip K. Dick’s classic work, The Man in the High Castle (1962)—all presented highly dystopian portraits of the Nazi occupation of the United States. To a degree, these texts expressed resurgent worries about the Germans, but their bleak portrait of a Nazi wartime victory had the primary function of vindicating the past as it really happened. Thus The Man in the High Castle’s blaming of isolationism for America’s loss in the war (in it, FDR is assassinated and his successor neglects to prepare the U.S. for the coming conflict) validated the real historical record, just as “Two Dooms,” by portraying how the U.S. would have lost the war had it not developed the atomic bomb and used it against Japan, served to validate cold war society as the least bad of all possible worlds. The epitome of this triumphalistic view appeared in the famed 1967 episode of Star Trek (written by Harlan Ellison), “The City on the Edge of Forever,” in which the crew of the Enterprise have to go back in time to ensure the death of an American pacifist (played by Joan Collins) who otherwise will keep the U.S. out of the war, thereby permitting Germany to—as Mr. Spock puts it—“capture . . . the world.” In short, up through the late 1960s, American allohistorical accounts of a Nazi wartime victory portrayed the past as a dystopia in order to vindicate the present.

With the dawn of the 1970s, however, allohistorical accounts of a Nazi-ruled world changed considerably. If the narratives of the 1950s and 1960s uniformly depicted a Nazi wartime victory in dystopian terms, the accounts that appeared during the 1970s and early 1980s depicted a Nazi triumph as bringing about far less fearsome—and in certain cases even benign—trends. In short, the premise ceased being regarded as a nightmare scenario and increasingly became viewed as something of a fantasy scenario. The shifting allohistorical depictions of a Nazi


20. Without the bomb, the U.S. in “Two Dooms” is forced to launch a seaborne invasion of the Japanese islands that leads to the decimation of American troops and allows the German army time to regroup and eventually to conquer all of Europe and America.

wartime victory reflected the increasing normalization of the Nazi past in American memory. By the 1970s, the fears of Nazism which had survived World War II and which had been revived during the late 1950s and 1960s, had begun to fade. Largely responsible were new present-day concerns that displaced the fears of the past. Thanks to the traumas of the Vietnam war, the upheavals of the Civil Rights movement, the scandal of Watergate, the onset of economic recession, and the escalation of cold war tensions between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, a sense of national decline produced a pessimistic mood that transformed the function of alternate histories from one of triumphalistic self-congratulation to self-critique.

This trend assumed a variety of forms. Some writers voiced support for the isolationist position that the U.S. should have remained on the sidelines and risked allowing the Germans to defeat the Soviets and win the war. Not surprisingly, this was a position taken up by conservatives. Thus, in his 1978 essay, “What if Hitler Had Won the Second World War?” historian John Lukacs argued that American neutrality, by ensuring a Nazi victory, would have prevented the advent of the cold war and would have brought about such benign trends as European unification under the direction of pragmatic Nazi leaders like Albert Speer. Similarly, libertarian writer Brad Linaweaver’s 1982 novella, *Moon of Ice*, optimistically portrayed American neutrality in World War II as leading to the triumph of pragmatists over ideologues and the overall reform of the Nazi regime. Yet, writers on the left also arrived at similar conclusions. In his 1972 revisionist study, *No Clear and Present Danger: A Skeptical View of the U.S. Entry into World War II*, political scientist Bruce Russett argued that American neutrality in World War II would have allowed the U.S. to neutralize the threat of communism (seen by him as more “dangerous” than Nazism) and to avoid the calamity of Vietnam. By portraying an alternate history in which the outcome was superior to real history, such scenarios expressed a clear sense of discontent with the present. More importantly, they reflected a diminishing sense of Nazism’s evil in American memory. This was epitomized, finally, in the transformation of the scenario of a Nazi wartime victory from the stuff of horror to humor, as seen in the January 27, 1979, *Saturday Night Live* skit, “What If: Überman”—in which a German-born Superman (played by Dan Aykroyd) helps Hitler win the war. More than anything else, this skit, however quirky, revealed the extent to which the scenario of a Nazi victory had lost its power to frighten.


25. I am grateful to Harold Forsythe for alerting me to the existence of this episode. For a transcript of the episode see: http://snltranscripts.jt.org/78/78jwhatif.shtml (accessed September 6, 2002).
In more recent years, the debate over American interventionism has continued to be fought out in works of alternate history. Newt Gingrich and William Forstchen’s 1995 novel, 1945, supported interventionism by reviving wartime stereotypes of evil Nazis bombing American soil (in this case the nuclear facility at Oak Ridge) and by depicting lily-livered isolationists as sacrificing the nation’s future. A similar critique of isolationism appeared in the 1995 HBO television dramatization of Robert Harris’s bestselling novel, Fatherland, in which (in striking contrast to the original British version) an American journalist succeeds in convincing U.S. president Joseph Kennedy to break off the planned normalization of relations with the aged dictator, Adolf Hitler, in 1962, by revealing evidence of the Holocaust. The same is true of less distinguished works such as Leo Rutman’s 1990 novel, Clash of Eagles, and Arthur Rhodes’s 2001 novel, The Last Reich, both of which depict a Nazi invasion of a neutral U.S. All of these works reflect a revived sense of triumphalism brought about by the end of the cold war and a renewed faith in the present. In contrast, conservative isolationists continued to bemoan the way history really transpired. Thus Pat Buchanan’s 1999 book, A Republic, Not an Empire, argued that American intervention in World War II ended up merely saving the world for communism. But such pessimistic works were few in the feel-good 1990s.

On the whole, American alternate histories of a Nazi wartime victory say just as much about Americans’ view of their own present as about their views of the past. American views of Nazism have fluctuated along with the nation’s postwar fortunes. In ascending periods of stability and prosperity, the scenario of a Nazi victory has been utilized to validate the present, while in declining periods of crisis it nurtured fantasies that all could have been different. Significantly, this same pattern is visible in other themes portrayed in American alternate histories.

III. THE SOUTH WINS THE CIVIL WAR

The theme of the South winning the Civil War has also inspired competing narratives that have reflected evolving American views of the past and present. The most famous work of all, science fiction writer Ward Moore’s 1955 novel, Bring the Jubilee, inverted historical reality by portraying the South winning the war and becoming an enlightened and prosperous region that liberates its slaves while the North remains an underindustrialized backwater seething with racist resentments towards blacks who (together with the cause of abolitionism) are

27. Robert Harris’s original novel was an international bestseller, selling over three million copies worldwide. Fatherland was also translated into twenty-five different languages. On the HBO film, see Christy Campbell, “The Shrinking of Fatherland,” Sunday Telegraph (June 26, 1994), 5. Generally, see Craig R. Whitney, “Inventing a World in Which Hitler Won,” New York Times (June 3, 1992), C17.
blamed for the defeat.30 One of the central interpretive questions raised by the novel is whether a Southern victory should be seen as a nightmare or fantasy scenario. In the novel, it is ambiguous whether the South’s triumph ends up improving the country or not. It clearly does for the South, though not for the North. For American blacks, the story is equally ambiguous. Their liberation in the South is not decreed out of benevolence, but on onerous terms akin to Russia’s real historical liberation of its serfs. Meanwhile, in the North, blacks are universally hated. Still, Moore pointedly notes that this situation is no worse than what happened in real history. Near the novel’s end, its central character, Hodge Backmacker, goes back in time and accidentally helps the North to win the war. Writing in the year 1877, he admires the political freedom and activism of the recently-liberated African-Americans as well as the absence of Northern racism. But he provides hints of the looming deal in Congress that will bring an end to reconstruction and sell out blacks by restoring white dominance to the South.31 Moreover, our awareness of the future horrors of World War I and World War II (which are prevented in Hodge’s alternate world by the fact that the South remains neutral in the so-called Emperor’s War of 1914–1916, thereby ensuring a German victory) encourages readers to think that a Southern victory in the Civil War might not have been such a bad thing after all. In submitting this iconoclastic vision, Moore was hardly acting as a nostalgic Southern advocate of the “lost cause.” Although his precise motives are unknown, his background as a working-class, left-wing New Englander makes it likely that he submitted his pessimistic allohistorical vision out of a sense of frustration at the unjust realities of American society in the 1950s.32 At a time in which the Civil Rights movement was gathering steam and bringing to the fore long-buried fissures in American life, his discontent with the present may well have led him to dream up an alternate past that allowed them to be avoided.

More upbeat than Moore’s ambiguous tale was novelist MacKinlay Kantor’s 1960 essay (and later novel), “If the South Had Won the Civil War.”33 Kantor’s central contention in this piece was that a Southern victory would have given the South the confidence to do what it resisted in the face of Northern abolitionist pressure, and free the slaves of its own accord. Responding to international trends in Europe and technological trends at home (specifically, the mechanization of farming), the South frees the slaves in relatively easy fashion in 1885. The clear subtext to this fantasy scenario is expressed openly at one point when the Southern President, James Longstreet, is quoted as making the counterfactual observation, “we stand fortunate . . . in that this reform has been accomplished by self-determination and not by the infliction of discipline which could . . . have been resented. . . . Had we . . . gone down in defeat, there might have ensued a period of

32. Moore was born in Maine. See the profile of Moore in *Contemporary Authors*, Volume 29-32 (Detroit: Gale, 1984) and *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, volume 8 (Detroit: Gale, 1984).
enforced amalgamation replete with every imaginable domestic horror.”\textsuperscript{34} In short, Kantor’s essay reflected dissatisfaction with the real American present by implying that the real historical victory of the North, followed up by the imposition of Jim Crow legislation in the South after the end of reconstruction, was to blame for the civil rights crisis of his own world. In Kantor’s view, a Southern victory would have ultimately led to a happy ending. As the tale concludes, the two confederations end up re-uniting, thanks to the vision of Woodrow Wilson and the international conflicts of World War I and II and the joint communist threat in the cold war. Although the problem of integrating blacks into Southern society remains a pressing one, the tale spared the South generations of decline, and ultimately left the nation in a more advantageous position to tackle the problems of the era.

If the fantasy tales of Moore and Kantor expressed dissatisfaction with the American reality of the 1950s and 1960s, more recent tales have presented nightmare scenarios that have validated the past as it really occurred. Journalist Tom Wicker’s 2002 essay, “If Lincoln Had Not Freed the Slaves,” stresses the importance of Abraham Lincoln’s historic decision to emancipate enslaved African Americans, for without it the South might have won the war.\textsuperscript{35} Wicker reminds readers that emancipation was hardly inevitable, for Lincoln wanted to avoid the impression that it was as an act of desperation by announcing it only after a Northern military victory. Had the North not won the pivotal battle of Antietam in September of 1862, England might have ended up supporting the South and forcing the North to agree to a negotiated settlement that would have kept slavery in existence and made the postponed struggle over civil rights much more violent. For Wicker, the emancipation of the slaves tilted the balance in favor of the North by preventing British support for the South, adding 180,000 black soldiers to the Union side, and causing disruptive slave unrest in the South. It is not hard to speculate on the reasons for Wicker’s upbeat conclusions. Published forty years after the turbulent Civil Rights movement, Wicker’s piece appeared in a world that had made important, if still not sufficient, strides in reconciling race relations between blacks and whites. Compared to the unsettled period in which Moore and Kantor were writing, Wicker’s world was much more optimistic; it ratified history as it happened as far better than what might well have been.

IV. THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION DOES NOT TAKE PLACE

Finally, tales of the American Revolution failing to occur have also reflected shifting American views of the nation’s past and present. An excellent example of a work that imagined a nightmarish past in order to validate the present was Robert Sobel’s classic work from 1973, \textit{For Want of a Nail: If Burgoyne Had Won at Saratoga}.\textsuperscript{36} Sobel’s work differs from most other tales of alternate history by being framed as a historical monograph—replete with fictionalized foot-

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 58.

\textsuperscript{35} Tom Wicker, “If Lincoln Had Not Freed the Slaves,” in Cowley, ed., \textit{What If?} 2, 152-164.

\textsuperscript{36} Robert Sobel, \textit{For Want of a Nail: If Burgoyne Had Won at Saratoga} (London: Greenhill Books, 1997).
notes and bibliographical sources—that chronicles the two hundred years of history that followed in the wake of British general John Burgoyne’s victory over rebel troops at the Battle of Saratoga in 1777. As described by Sobel, the course of history is dramatically altered by Burgoyne’s triumph. By putting an end to the “North American Rebellion,” the victory prevents the creation of a unified nation called the United States and ends up leading the colonies to develop into two separate nations: the Confederation of North America (CNA), composed of British loyalists, and the new breakaway nation of Jefferson, founded by the exiled rebels. These two nations quickly develop in such a way as to lead history onto a perilous course. While the CNA develops into a relatively peaceful industrial power, Jefferson becomes an expansionist nation, annexing Mexican territories all the way to the Pacific Ocean and renaming itself the United States of Mexico (USM) in 1819. Constant tension characterizes the relationship between the two nations. Indeed, at times it spills over into outright hostilities, as when the CNA and USM fight a major conflict called the Rocky Mountain War (1845–1853) over mineral rights along the two nations’ long border that results in several hundred thousand casualties. The political and social history of the two states is also far from positive. The USM, in particular, persists as a quasi-dictatorship that does not abolish slavery until 1920 (and uses “genocide” to defend it until then), while the CNA also suffers from serious racial tensions.37 Finally, the unstable USM contributes to the destructive Global War of 1939–1948 which results in over 200 million casualties and earns the dubious distinction as the “worst tragedy in the history of the world.”38 By the time Sobel reaches the present, in which all the world’s powers have developed nuclear weapons, he can only conclude that the relations between the CNA and USM resemble that of two “scorpions in a bottle. . . . And if one or the other lashes out, not only will the scorpions die, but the world may be destroyed.”39

In crafting this nightmare scenario of a world without a successful American Revolution, Sobel clearly validated real history as the best of all possible worlds. Sobel’s motives in arriving at his allohistorical conclusions are unclear. As a prolific business historian, he demonstrated a fondness for the efficiency of modern capitalism and may well have been attempting to support it by exposing the perils of an alternate American history that failed to adhere to capitalist economic principles.40 The fact, for example, that the authoritarian USM adheres to slavery long after its irrationality has been exposed, as well as the fact that a monopolistic corporate behemoth, Kramer Associates, ends up increasing global tensions through its arms dealing (especially its development of the first atomic bomb), may well have reflected Sobel’s support for free-market economics. Further still, the book may well have been influenced by the triumphalist spirit of the years

37. Ibid., 127.
38. Ibid., 362.
39. Ibid., 401.
40. Robert Sobel was Lawrence Stessin Distinguished Professor of Business History at Hofstra University. See his obituary, “Robert Sobel, 68, a Historian of Business, Dies,” New York Times (June 4, 1999), C18.
preceding the American Bicentennial in 1976, which if it did anything, validated
the American Revolution for having produced the best of all possible worlds. To
be sure, signs of Sobel’s pessimism about the present color the book as well.
Thus, the fact that the Global War of 1939–1948 is followed by the “War Without
War” reflected the influence of the cold war. But on the whole, the negative
portrayal of a world in which the American Revolution failed clearly served to val-
idate the present as the preferable alternative.

Significantly, the reverse was true of a work that appeared nearly twenty years
later, Richard Dreyfuss and Harry Turtledove’s 1996 novel, The Two Georges. In
contrast to Sobel’s allohistorical monograph, Dreyfuss and Turtledove’s novel
criticized the present by depicting the absence of the American Revolution mak-
ing the United States a much better place. With George Washington agreeing in
the 1760s to serve as chief of an American privy council, the colonies are able to
solve their differences with the crown and refrain from seceding. As a result,
America remains a possession of England (it becomes known as the North
American Union or NAU) and benefits in numerous ways. Under British control,
the treatment of minorities is vastly improved. Slavery is abolished in 1834, thus
preventing the Civil War and ensuring the rise of blacks into the middle class of
American society. Meanwhile, Native Americans are granted their own
autonomous nations within the borders of the NAU. Finally, the civilizing influ-
ence of the British is visible in the NAU’s low crime rate (five murders have
occurred in six months in New Liverpool—the alternate Los Angeles) and
firearms are nearly unknown (policemen do not carry weapons). To be sure,
American society is highly stratified along class lines—the Irish are the butt of
discriminatory jokes—but this alternate world is vastly superior to our own.
Further still, the rest of world history is superior as well. Without the American
Revolution erupting, France has no need to intervene and thus keeps its finances
in order, thus averting the French Revolution and the conquests of Napoleon,
which in turn prevents the rise of a nationalist backlash in the rest of Europe, thus
forestalling the unification of Germany, preventing World War I, World War II,
the Holocaust, the dropping of the atomic bomb, and the cold war—in short, all
of the disasters of the twentieth century.

In drafting this fantasy scenario, Dreyfuss and Turtledove clearly expressed
dissatisfaction with life in present-day America. Writing the novel in Los
Angeles in the early 1990s, the two writers subtly articulated their frustration
about many of the period’s crises, most notably the absence of positive race rela-
tions—made glaringly obvious in the L.A. riots of 1992—as well as the rise of
the right-wing militia movement, a thinly-veiled version of which appears in the
novel in the form of a rabidly racist splinter group called the “Sons of Liberty”
which urges secession from the British crown. More than anything else, Dreyfuss
and Turtledove’s transfiguring of the hallowed American notion of political
rebellion into a reactionary force epitomizes their pessimism about the present.

In the end, *The Two Georges* further validates the tendency of alternate histories to become self-critical in times of perceived decline.

V. THE FUNCTION OF ALTERNATE HISTORIES

Many other works of alternate history could be discussed alongside those mentioned above in order to illustrate further the primary function of alternate histories. But the larger point should by now be clear. The primary function of alternate history—the answer to the question “why do we ask ‘what if?’”—is to express our changing views about the present. Alternate histories have come in different varieties in order to accommodate different views towards the contemporary world. Nightmare scenarios have most often been used to validate the present, while fantasy scenarios have been utilized in order to criticize it. By tracing how a given theme has been portrayed over time, we can learn a great deal about any society’s views of its past.

Thus, though Frederic Smoler’s recent claim that a major “difference between American and other alternate histories is that foreigners tend to utopian scenarios, [while] Americans [tend] to dystopian ones” is certainly thought-provoking, it is ultimately flawed.\(^42\) As this essay has attempted to show, it is difficult to generalize about national differences in alternate histories without considering shifts within national context over time. At least in the American context, alternate histories have shifted their representation of a given historical topic in accordance with the mood of the era. Periods of time perceived as ascendant have tended to elicit allohistories that validate the present by imagining an inferior past, while eras thought to be in decline have tended to elicit allohistories that criticize the present by imagining the past as superior in any number of ways. It remains to be seen whether this is a uniquely American tradition. But evidence from other nations suggests that it may be a general trend.\(^43\) Time and further research will no doubt help to clarify this important question. It is my hope that by offering my own modest reflections on the function of alternate history in a suggestive rather than exhaustive manner, I may have alerted and perhaps stimulated other scholars to plunge into a field rich with fascinating opportunities for historical insight.

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42. Smoler, “Past Tense,” 46.
43. This is one of my contentions in my current book manuscript, *The World Hitler Never Made.*