

# 10 Great What-Ifs of American History

Course Guidebook

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# 1

## What If **LEE WON AT GETTYSBURG?**

What if the Soviets got to the moon first? What if the Constitution did not pass? What if the Allies lost World War II? History may tell you what happened, but asking “what-if” creates a new lens to explore the past and its impact on the present. History is contingent upon numerous things that have the potential to change everything. By looking at how things might have been, you can get a better look at why things are. This course will ask 10 of the biggest what-if questions in American history, diving into questions of what didn’t happen to understand what did happen. This lecture starts with the most famous battle of the Civil War: Gettysburg. Here, you’ll ask, “What if Lee won at Gettysburg?”

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## What If?

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It is 1863. Union and Confederate armies enter the second day of fighting at Gettysburg. At a hill called Little Round Top, a Union detachment shifts west, leaving the hill undefended. The Confederates seize the hill as a place to mount artillery and proceed to cut the Union army to pieces. The Union line collapses.

Ten days later, when draft riots break out in New York City, dozens of New York regiments in the disaffected Union army desert. Rioting spreads. The Confederate army continues to harass the reduced Union forces before heading back to the Confederate States in October. A stalemate ensues. Lincoln loses the 1864 election, and a negotiated peace secures the independence of the Confederacy.

France brokers peace talks that secure independence for the Confederacy in exchange for Confederate support of French interference in Mexico. France also uses the slaveholding republic as a buffer zone, while the French-Confederate partnership pushes abolitionist Britain and the free-soil Union into an alliance. When France declares war on Prussia in 1870, Britain, the United States, and the Confederacy are drawn into a world war—all because the Union failed to hold Little Round Top.

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## The Stakes at Gettysburg

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In the actual Battle of Gettysburg, the Union army did abandon Little Round Top—only to have a motley crew of various different units rush in to defend it at the last moment. They probably saved the Union army. So, you know the Union won the Battle of Gettysburg and the Civil War, but do you know why? Can you determine which factors made a difference? Can you recreate the fluid situation in the middle of battle; the choices the armies, commanders, brigades, engineers, and others had to make; and the consequences of those choices?

In July 1863, the Union and Confederate armies had been fighting for 2 years. Recently, the Confederates had scored a series of victories: the Seven Days' Battles, the Second Battle of Bull Run, and Chancellorsville. Morale in the Confederacy was high; morale in the Union North plummeted.

Disaffection was also underway in the North because President Lincoln made the fateful decision to enlist Black men in the army and make the Civil War a war for emancipation. Two weeks after the Battle of Gettysburg, New York rioted over Lincoln's draft order. At that moment, General Robert E. Lee invaded Pennsylvania so that his army could plunder supplies from the Union.

As frustration and Union casualties mounted, the Copperheads emerged: Northern politicians calling for peace talks and a cease-fire. As Lee explained to Confederate President Jefferson Davis, his plan was to make the war so damaging and unpopular that the Copperheads would enter a position to call a cease-fire—and once that happened, Lee and Davis believed the war would be over.



So, Lee invaded the Union, where he found good evidence of Northern disaffection. The invading Confederates openly seized Black people in Pennsylvania and sold them South into slavery; Gettysburg's Black citizens fled north to Harrisburg. The Confederates took Gettysburg, and the Union forces there retreated to the hills beyond the town, where the main force of the Union army under George Meade joined them.

Meade was trying to find the Confederate army that was marching around Pennsylvania, and on the first day, John Buford's calvary ran into some Confederate infantry and immediately sent word back: They had found the Confederate forces, and this was a good spot to fight. Buford was an expert at looking at terrain, and he used a series of ridges that were running parallel to each other to fall back slowly, dealing damage to the Confederacy, slowing them so that the Union infantry had time to get there. When the infantry eventually arrived, they continued slowing the Confederacy, eventually falling back through Gettysburg to Cemetery Ridge and Cemetery Hill, giving them an advantage of height.

## **What Really Happened at Little Round Top**

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Virtually every decision made at Gettysburg has been subjected to what-ifs. However, one moment truly stands out as a big accident: Little Round Top.

On the second day of the battle, some Union divisions left Little Round Top to occupy higher ground half a mile away. This left an opening: If the Confederates could get artillery up Little Round Top, they could enfilade the Union army. And if Little Round Top fell and Lee could turn the Union left flank, the South would win the battle. This would be yet another humiliation for the Union's army of the Potomac and yet another blow to Lincoln and his hopes for continuing to fight the war and bring the South back in. Lincoln was the leader of a democratic society—he had to win elections. Voters who saw loss after loss would start to wonder if the war was worth it.



GENERAL G. K. WARREN AT THE SIGNAL STATION ON LITTLE ROUND TOP.

Union army engineer Gouverneur Warren arrived on Little Round Top during the battle to check the signal station there, and he wondered where the troops were. There were also a lot of Confederate divisions heading that way. Warren tore down the hill, grabbed whatever Union forces he could find, and got the troops back onto Little Round Top 15 minutes before the Confederates arrived. There was a desperate struggle, and the Union defenders actually ran out of ammunition. So, they ran down on top of the Confederates with a bayonet charge and probably saved the Union army: The victory at Little Round Top allowed the Union to hold its defensive position and to decisively repel the Confederates on the third day.

And it was not just the US and the Confederacy watching this battle—there was also an international dimension to the fight. Britain was an abolitionist country with economic ties to the cotton South. Moreover, during the 1860s, while the Civil War was going on, France invaded Mexico, actively pursuing an empire there under Emperor Napoleon III. If it appeared that the Confederacy could defeat the North, France might step in. But with Union victory at Gettysburg, that door shut. The decisions at Gettysburg affected events in Mexico and Europe and vice versa.

Both armies understood that Gettysburg was not just a conflict about military positioning. Each side was trying to show the Union public and France that it was in control of the war, and the Confederates were trying to inflict psychological damage on the North. Yet because Little Round Top held, the Union army enjoyed an important victory—critical for the psychology and politics of the conflict. It was a well-timed win, coming almost simultaneously with a victory at Vicksburg in the West and just as the Union army was enlisting Black troops.

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## Contingent Moments

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The contingency of the outcome at Gettysburg primarily concerns the question of what would have happened if the Union army lost again and if the enemy army remained in Pennsylvania. Asking “what if” suggests that the window for Confederate victory was narrow, but it was certainly possible. During the Civil War, Washington DC was in an odd position: It was surrounded by Virginia, a Confederate state, and Maryland, a slave state that ended up on the side of the North. But the nation’s capital was vulnerable. A Lee victory at Gettysburg would at least open the possibility of a Confederate raid or perhaps the occupation of Washington DC. This would be a terrible blow to Lincoln’s political prospects and increase the sentiment that said, “The war is simply not worth it.”

However, victory at Gettysburg would not mean independence for the Confederacy. Any Southern victory would need to be followed up with more Union disaffection, probably a Lincoln defeat in 1864, and a political end to the war. And if France negotiated that peace in occupied Mexico, then the Confederacy would owe France. When the Franco-Prussian War broke out in 1870, the French would call in their debts.

If you have a victory by the Confederacy, you don’t have US history. You have North American history or Confederate history, and US history is a separate topic. You have to deal with where the boundaries are going to be: Who gets what parts of the Mexican cession? Will there be future wars between them? How do you deal with runaway fugitives who continue escaping to the North? How do you deal with those who’ve already escaped in the North? How do you deal with those who served in the US Army already?

Remember, a contingent moment occurs when what didn't happen was more likely than what did or when the odds are no better than even. Look again at Little Round Top: If Warren had been late, if people hadn't believed him, or if he'd been sick that day, the Confederates would have walked up that hill. The US Army would have retreated, and Northern disaffection would have increased. What are the factors without which things would have been different? The forces at Little Round Top and Northern disaffection. Victory at Gettysburg helped allay that disaffection, and that is how Little Round Top saved the Union.

Moreover, it's not just battles that provide contingency. Indeed, one of the most important what-ifs about the Civil War doesn't involve the war at all. For example, what if Henry Clay won the election of 1844? In 1844, James K. Polk beat Clay for the presidency by about 5,000 votes in New York. Polk ran on a platform to annex the Republic of Texas (which would trigger a war with Mexico). Clay ran against annexation. Polk won, fought a war with Mexico, and annexed territory to the Pacific. The crisis that led to Lincoln's candidacy and secession focused on the expansion of slavery into those Mexican territories.

However, what if Polk lost? What if that election flipped to Clay? What if the Mexican-American War never happened? What if Texas never became part of the United States? California wouldn't enter as a free state, new territories wouldn't be coming in, and the 1850 Compromise wouldn't occur. Instead, there would be no room left within the boundaries of the United States to continue expanding slavery. There would be no institution of popular sovereignty. So, presumably, under the Compromise of 1820, Kansas would remain a free state, and there would be no fight.

Had fewer Democrats made it to the polls in New York in 1844, Clay would have won: No Texas annexation, no Mexican-American War, no expansion of the US, and therefore no crisis over expanding slavery, no Lincoln, and no secession. The Civil War is so central to American self-understanding that it's mind-boggling to think that it might not have happened because of a few thousand votes in one city in 1844.

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# 2

## What If LEWIS AND CLARK VANISHED?

Thomas Jefferson sent four missions to explore the Louisiana Purchase. Three of them failed. Only Lewis and Clark were successful—and just barely. The expedition party faced a series of turning points during their legendary journey, including Lewis’s close call with a grizzly bear, several potentially deadly encounters with indigenous nations and the Spanish, and the decision to hire Sacagawea’s husband as a guide, with Sacagawea herself added as an almost incidental member of the Corps of Discovery. If any of these events had gone differently, the American West as you know it would be a very different place. In this lecture, you’ll ask, “What if Lewis and Clark had vanished?”

## What If?

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On April 29, 1805, Meriwether Lewis takes a shot at a grizzly bear and misses. The enraged bear charges and kills him and another expedition member. Without Lewis's guidance, the corps struggles through the summer heat, and men begin deserting as they struggle at Great Falls. The expedition breaks up; most of its members perish as they retreat. Lewis and Clark never return.

If Lewis and Clark die in 1805, then they are not around to publish any of their findings or maps. There's no evidence that any American expedition has reached the spot they were aiming for—the mouth of the Columbia River in what is now Oregon.

Meanwhile, the reorganized Lakota nation is able to continue to consolidate its power along the Upper Missouri. They control nearly all territory between present-day Minnesota and Montana, relying on numerous and skilled cavalry. The Lakota nation was forced across the Mississippi into the Great Plains in the early 18th century but refounded their nation in 1776 at their ancient sacred site of the Black Hills. By the time Lewis and Clark head up the Missouri, the Lakota have consolidated their power over hundreds of square miles of territory, bringing other Indian nations into a subordinate status and arranging trade deals with the British and Spanish.

After the Lewis and Clark Expedition vanishes, the Lakota continue to remain a geopolitical rival in the center of the continent, and the US has no evidence or knowledge that there is passage across the continent via the Missouri River. Crossing to the Pacific through the Louisiana Purchase is impossible. In this alternate world, the Oregon Trail never develops. Thus, the Indian nations of the Great Plains are not harried, harassed, or attacked by the 400,000 White settlers passing through on the way to Oregon—and the Lakota solidify their economic and military control over the region.

Those White settlers go south along the Santa Fe Trail. It crosses into what was then a province of an independent Mexico that invited Americans to settle there in 1827: Texas. Texas still declares independence in 1835, and with an increased settler population, Texans gobble up the Mexican West

much more easily and engage militarily with the existing powers in the Southwest—the Apache, the Comanche, and the Mormons. So, the major powers west of the Mississippi are Texas, the Lakota, and the British. This leads to some tense standoffs.

Perhaps there are 1862 peace talks in the British colony of Oregon between representatives of the powerful but unrecognized Lakota confederacy under Sitting Bull and an aging president of Texas, Sam Houston. Texans encroach on indigenous lands to their north and west for decades; no European nation is likely to recognize the Lakota, who nevertheless control the center of the continent and its highly profitable trade routes. Britain swoops in to preserve peace and profits on the West Coast. At the last moment, President Houston agrees to a compromise: Texas will recognize the Lakota Confederacy in exchange for the Lakota renouncing all claims to Mormon land. The peace treaty will go down as a durable effort of world diplomacy, remembered forever as the Peace of the Little Bighorn.

## **The Stakes of the Lewis and Clark Expedition**

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There are some misconceptions about the Louisiana Purchase, and one is in its name. The US didn't actually "purchase" any land in the deal. What Jefferson bought from France were the French claims to most of what is now the Great Plains. Spain didn't recognize the sale; it also claimed the territory. And everyone recognized that the indigenous nations of the area had their own claims to the land and the power to back those claims up.

Jefferson sent out four missions of exploration to try and map the territory and to locate a water route across the continent to the Pacific. The most remarkable thing about those missions of exploration is that they failed—until Lewis and Clark.

By the early 1800s, Meriwether Lewis was the secretary to the president, and William Clark had served in a number of militias and fought in the Northwest Indian War. Lewis recruited Clark to the Corps of Discovery because Clark was one of Lewis's commanders during the war. On the mission of exploration, they needed to make contact with indigenous

nations to establish diplomatic relations so that the land could be bought from the nations in the future. Essentially, Lewis and Clark were trying to get the US in with native nations and to keep the British and Spanish out.

The US government implicitly recognized the sovereignty of indigenous nations every time it signed a treaty. However, with the Corps of Discovery and this expedition, Jefferson was trying to finagle around not only potential foreign claims but also indigenous claims to sovereignty. In fact, he laid out to Lewis and Clark the best ways to get native nations to cede their lands. There's a note about what it would be like, in essence, to set up trading houses among these native nations—to put them into debt. Jefferson clearly stated that once these nations had run up massive bills, they were going to start to sell off their lands because it would be the only way that they could pay these costs.



## Contingent Factors

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Modern American borders are a political settlement of the 19th century. Change the military and political situation in 1803, and the borders shift, too—because Lewis and Clark almost didn't make it. From their journals, Lewis really did run into two grizzlies on April 29, 1805, but he managed to escape, killing the bear that charged him. They almost died of starvation in Montana. The Nez Percé nation voted whether or not to kill them once the corps stumbled into their territory. And the Spanish in Mexico, tipped off by James Wilkinson, who was head of the US Army and a paid spy in the service of Spain, sent a military expedition after Lewis and Clark.

In fact, the one thing Lewis and Clark had that the other expeditions lacked was Sacagawea, a Shoshone woman. She was kidnapped by Hidatsa when she was a child and soon sold into marriage to a French trapper. A couple of years later, when Lewis and Clark started making their way west, they built Fort Mandan, where they stopped for the winter, regrouped, and made sure that they had enough provisions to get through. While they were trying to find people that could help them, one of the men they hired was Sacagawea's husband, perhaps not only because of his skills but also because of hers.

One of the most crucial events on the journey happened in May 1805, when they were traveling by canoe. They had the very documentation that they had been sent to capture and collect in these boats. One of the boats collapsed, and Sacagawea managed to save nearly everything that had fallen overboard. Lewis and Clark's journals and maps provided the basic route for an overland effort to establish a colony in Oregon by John Jacob Astor in 1811. This effort failed spectacularly, but it then provided the basic route for the Oregon Trail of 1836 and its flood of 400,000-odd White settlers.

With no established northwest route in the 1820s, there likely would have been a delayed confrontation between the Americans and the powerful Lakota. Part of what weakened Lakota power in the 1840s was the rise of White settlers along the improved Oregon Trail, built for wagons. The cattle that White Americans brought with them competed for grass and forage with the enormous bison herds of the Great Plains. If the trail had

not been improved because it did not get made, the basis for Lakota power would have remained through the 1860s. It might not have been a world power—but it would have been a militarily powerful trade and cultural alliance seeking recognition of its sovereignty.

Moreover, without the Oregon Trail, American land fever would have been reduced to one stream—into the Southwest—instead of two streams. Texas would get even more White settlers and still declare independence from Mexico in 1836. A Texas twice as big as it already was would then ask to join the United States; as in real life, Andrew Jackson would say no, and Texas would begin its expansion into the Rocky Mountains.



Texas was not destined for absorption into the US. A group of Texas politicians, including Mirabeau Lamar, its second president, sought permanent independence and expansion. Lamar invaded Mexico, tried to annex Santa Fe, and fought bloody wars against the Comanche and Cherokee nations. In the real world, his efforts didn't go very far—but if the White settlers who headed northwest instead headed to Texas, Lamar's ability to expand would have been vastly increased. Texas could easily have gone as far as California.

Meanwhile, US claims on the Northwest Coast would have been nonexistent. In European law, the doctrine of discovery requires finding the mouth of a river. US claims in real life went back to Lewis and Clark and the Astoria expedition. Britain had real-life competing claims from naval voyages by James Cook and George Vancouver. Without Lewis and Clark, the US wouldn't even have paper justification, and Britain's claims to the Northwest Coast would go unchallenged.

So, by 1845, the North American West could have looked something like this: Texas gobbling up lands in the Southwest; Britain claiming the Oregon Territory, which it would run as a trade depot, relying on the tacit acquiescence of Indian nations; and the Lakota maintaining a wary trade network and continuing to play the Americans off against the Texans and British. In 1862, Sam Houston would be back in the Texas presidency, and his republic would have forced Mexico to abandon its claims to the Californias. Texas would also be aggressively expanding into Indian territory, but Houston would want conciliation. White American settlers would be encroaching on Lakota territory, and the Lakota would make common cause with Britain. Perhaps the Lakota would turn to one of their most effective leaders of the 1860s: Red Cloud or a very young Sitting Bull. These leaders might sit down for negotiation somewhere between all three of their territories—perhaps the Little Bighorn—to craft a peace in 1876.

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## Manifest “Destiny”

The idea that American expansion was inevitable is called Manifest Destiny—but that term was invented by John O’Sullivan in 1845, after the United States seized the Pacific Coast. Americans got there and then said it was “destiny.”

However, in many ways, Manifest Destiny was a result of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, not its cause. The success of the expedition sent follow-up efforts across the continent along the same route, and members of the expedition themselves promoted those efforts. If they hadn't made it, geopolitics in North America did not favor a northwest route—it favored a southwest route.

As such, perhaps the biggest potential outcome if Lewis and Clark were eaten by bears is that the indigenous people in the American West would have been able to maintain their lands, customs, and languages. In this what-if, the place that they were asked to give up or cede would not have been the Black Hills.

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# 3

## What If **THE ALLIES LOST WORLD WAR II?**

For many, Allied victory in World War II seemed inevitable. But on the eve of war, the vast majority of Americans wanted to remain neutral in the face of Nazi and Japanese aggression. If they'd had their way, the results of the attack on Pearl Harbor would have been very different. The American president foresaw the looming conflict, but he faced an uphill battle. Franklin Roosevelt understood that the United States could not separate itself from the rest of the world. However, plenty of Americans were just fine with Adolf Hitler and White supremacy. What if they'd had power? What if the US had not allied with Britain? In this lecture, you'll ask, "What if the Allies lost World War II?"

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## What If?

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Late 1941. Pearl Harbor. Three waves of Japanese aircraft attacks devastate the entire American fleet, leaving America defenseless. President Burton Wheeler had deliberately minimized America's troop levels as part of his promise to keep Americans unentangled in foreign affairs. For over a decade, no new naval ships had been constructed, and America's six aging battleships and lone aircraft carrier now lie at the bottom of Pearl Harbor.

The president vows to fight—but the isolationist 1930s have laid America's military cupboard bare. Japan seizes Guam, Australia, New Zealand, American Samoa, and parts of Alaska. The president is forced to sign a humiliating treaty exchanging Hawaii for Alaska in 1942. Meanwhile, a lack of American shipping has doomed Britain to a long, slow defeat in the war with Hitler. By 1943, Japan controls Asia and the Pacific, while Hitler rules all of Europe and the North Atlantic. America signs treaties of friendship with both Axis powers. World democracy as we know it is destroyed.

And all this because Franklin Roosevelt did a favor for a reporter in 1933 and was assassinated.

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## The Rise of Roosevelt

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President Roosevelt fought for Americans to prepare their country and their armed forces before World War II started—something never before done in American history. The years of preparation between 1938 and 1941 paid invaluable benefits when the fighting began in December 1941. It would have been a different war if the isolationists had been in power when Pearl Harbor happened. In fact, isolationism played a role in Japan's planning the attack. Yamamoto Isoroku designed the Pearl Harbor attack in part to exploit American political divisions. His plan was a tactical success, but its political effects did not go the way he wanted them to. That was because support and planning to protect world democracy came from the very top—Roosevelt in the White House.



In the midst of the Great Depression, the United States was a polarized place. A third of the population was out of work, and there was serious suffering. Roosevelt was seen by many in the Republican party as a dangerous revolutionary—as a socialist. Thus, there was a great deal of visceral opposition toward him and everything he stood for. That he ever became president seems a little far-fetched. He had been the Democrat's nominee for vice president on one of the worst tickets in American history. In 1920, the Cox-Roosevelt team lost the election almost 2-to-1. Several months later, Roosevelt contracted polio, which left him unable to use his legs. That kept him out of politics for most of the 1920s.

Roosevelt became the Democrat's nominee for the governor of New York in 1928 almost against his will; his political mentor, the outgoing governor Al Smith, more or less ordered him to run. An aide asked Smith whether he would be promoting an in-state rival by supporting Roosevelt. Smith responded: "He won't live a year." If Roosevelt hadn't contracted polio, Smith probably would have taken him more seriously—and it's likely the two men would have battled for New York's governorship in the 1920s, possibly damaging both their careers and making Roosevelt's path to the White House in 1932 much harder.

Then, in February 1933, Roosevelt was in his car, waving at supporters in Miami. An assassin named Giuseppe Zangara fired five shots at him. Five other people were hit, but Roosevelt was somehow unharmed.

Moreover, the whole Roosevelt coalition seemed odd at the time. Roosevelt counted among his allies African Americans in the North working for civil rights—and Jim Crow segregationists in the South. He had strong union and working-class support but was descended from old money. By 1941, Roosevelt had a cabinet with the ultraliberal Henry Wallace and the Republican Henry Stimson. This combination of opposites indicates just how far Roosevelt remade the political system. The modern terms of "liberal" and "conservative" actually date from the 1930s and not before. The confused state of politics in the 1930s meant that there was no clear "Democratic" or "Republican" position on foreign policy. Both the democrats and republicans each had internationalist and isolationist wings—and in the 1930s, the isolationists were clearly stronger.

## Isolationism

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There were big isolationist elements in both parties, concentrated in the American Midwest. The Midwest had trouble seeing why Europe and Asia mattered that much to them. This strain of thought had wide support after WWI and led to the draconian limitations on immigration passed in the 1920s. As the Great Depression crashed through the world's economies in the 1930s, the US tried to put the walls up—restricting foreign investment and foreign capital. When Roosevelt came to the White House, some American isolationists had become openly pro-Nazi, or at least Nazi-adjacent, including Vice President Garner. In cabinet meetings, he dismissed the danger of Nazism and opposed loans to Britain.

The isolationist bent was behind the Neutrality Acts of the 1930s—the laws that demanded embargoes on all belligerents in foreign wars, with no accounting for aggressor or defender. And as the '20s slid into the '30s, democracies became fascist autocracies across Europe, and other countries folded before Hitler, there came another aspect to isolationism: the idea that democracy had become obsolete. But in 1941, Roosevelt declared that democracy “cannot die—because it is built on the unhampered initiative of individual men and women joined together in common enterprise.” He saw it as his job to demonstrate to the American people that democracy was worth saving even if, as he wrote, it was hard work.

Roosevelt certainly played the isolationist card when he wanted to: He supported American immigration quotas and even turned away Jewish refugees from Hitler's regime in the 1930s. However, when Hitler seized Czechoslovakia in 1938, Roosevelt deliberately turned the nation away from isolationism. He saw the country was unarmed and unprepared. He had long pushed for changes in the Neutrality Acts, and one of the ways that he was quite clever in handling the isolationists was the Lend-Lease Act. Lend-lease was based on the idea that the US wouldn't give or sell a weapon—it would loan it with the expectation the weapon would come back. Just as important, Roosevelt pushed for America's first peacetime draft. It was a tremendous fight because the US had traditionally declared war and then built up an army.

Roosevelt was trying for an unprecedented third term. It was a bad time to fight the isolationists—but he did it anyway. He blasted away at the idea of postponing the draft until the war actually came. He worked to gather his allies and his enemies who saw the danger as isolationists mounted tremendous resistance. The debate was fierce. However, the more Roosevelt talked about preparedness, the more the American public seemed to listen. By 1940, over 60% of Americans, according to a Gallup poll, supported a peacetime conscription. Yet in 1941, when the conscription act came up for renewal, it passed by only one vote. Support from the White House was paramount.

But Roosevelt had key allies in Congress, too. Carl Vinson, a congressman from Georgia, pushed hard to build a US Navy and, in 1940, passed the Two-Ocean Navy Act, which built up American Atlantic and Pacific fleets. They weren't ready by the time Pearl Harbor happened, but the ships were in the pipeline and ready to fight when the United States did get in the midst of World War II.



Pearl Harbor, 1940

When the Empire of Japan attacked the United States on December 7, 1941, President Roosevelt was in part blamed by the isolationists. What's most important, however, is how quickly the US was able to recover from that attack and begin offensive operations—because of the preparations Roosevelt had narrowly secured.

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## Contingent Factors

Without the US Navy already in the process of being built when Pearl Harbor happened, Japan could have extended its empire even further and made it more difficult for the US to try to claw its way back into the Pacific. Could Japan have taken Midway or even the Hawaiian Islands? Without the US Pacific fleet in the process of being built, that's certainly a possibility.

Roosevelt's ability to build and rebuild his political coalition from 1938 to 1941 allowed the United States to prepare and arm for World War II, which is why and how the US was able to contribute so forcefully. Without lend-lease and without American assistance to the United Kingdom and to the Soviet Union, the war in Europe could have turned out very differently. For instance, one of the things that kept Winston Churchill in the war was the hope that the United States would join the British in fighting Hitler's Germany. No lend-lease means the British would have been less capable of fighting and less likely to stay in the war. Perhaps the British prime minister would have cut a deal with Hitler to save the British Empire but sacrifice Europe to Nazi tyranny.

If Roosevelt had died from an assassin's bullet in Miami, then what? Garner supported many of Roosevelt's New Deal programs, so you might assume he would get elected in his own right in 1936, like Roosevelt. But the isolationist in him did not care about the fate of democracy in Europe, and he probably would have preferred to balance the budget rather than shell out cash for military spending in peacetime.

Would Garner have abandoned the arms limitations treaties in 1937, as Roosevelt did, allowing for the construction of more American aircraft carriers? If he stuck to the treaties, as isolationists encouraged Roosevelt to do, Garner would have assumed there would be time to ramp up for war later if the situation called for it. The hit at Pearl Harbor, therefore,

would have been a much more telling blow. What's more, having Garner in the White House would have provided allies and opportunities for the isolationists—and pro-Nazi Americans—to gain power and influence in Washington in a way they never did under Roosevelt.

If Garner in the White House stood against American involvement in the world, it's likely the isolationists would have been solidly in the Democratic camp—and therefore nominated the grand isolationist Burton K. Wheeler of Montana for president in 1940. Wheeler voted against sending arms to Britain and demanded a peace platform at the 1940 Democratic convention—long after appeasement had been shown to be empty and after the draft and lend-lease were under way. By the end of 1940, he was fighting a losing battle.

However, part of the reason isolationists were on the back foot at last was that Roosevelt had bucked the prevailing political winds. It was more likely that isolationists would continue to run American foreign policy in the 1930s as they had in the 1920s. Had Roosevelt died in 1933, Garner would have become president, and isolationism would have remained in place, paving the way for perhaps a Wheeler. Either way, the United States would remain committed in the 1930s to a small national defense and nonentanglement in foreign affairs. This means that when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, the facilities, money, and resources that were already in the pipeline by 1941 would not have been there. Japan and Germany would have declared war on the United States before the government and the citizens were ready.

If you imagine a world where the US was not ready for WWII, Pearl Harbor goes better for the Japanese, and Hitler is able to consolidate his gains in Europe, the world you get is one in which there's a Japanese Empire dominating the Pacific, a German Empire dominating Europe, and the United States caught in between.

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# 4

## What If **THE SOVIETS GOT TO THE MOON FIRST?**

For most of its history, the space race wasn't much of a race. The Soviets had the first satellite in space, first man in space, first woman in space, and first dog in space. In 1966, they had plans for a moon landing and for an armed Soviet base on the moon. The textbooks right now could very well be talking about a manned spacecraft on another planet because the driving force was controlling not just outer space but also Earth—and neither the US nor the Soviet Union would have wanted to land in second place. In this lecture, you'll ask, "What if the Soviets got to the moon first?"

## What If?

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The whole world is listening in 1969 when humanity first breaks the bonds that hold us to Earth, and these words come down from the moon, spoken by a Russian cosmonaut: “One small step for man.” There is rejoicing across the communist world, but there is hell to pay in America. President Richard Nixon pledges that while NASA’s budget had been cut in the 1960s, he will double it in the ’70s—paving the way for multiple American trips to the moon.

The Soviets then realize their mistake. They had gotten to the moon by taking enormous engineering and safety risks, and now the Americans are matching their results. So, the Soviets get funding from their military budget, pursuing their stated goal of putting a permanent military base on the moon. The space race continues into the 1980s and beyond as state support for space programs keeps Soviet communism afloat and prevents the rise of Gorbachev. The Cold War continues—by 1997, with dueling military bases on the moon.

And all this because one man survives an operation, instead of dying mysteriously during surgery.



## The Soviet Space Program

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The Soviets were originally ahead in the space race. The man behind their success was Sergei Korolev, Soviet engineer and head of the Russian space program, who built the Soviet Union into the world's leading space power by 1964. Korolev was so important to the Soviet space effort that Moscow made his very name and existence state secrets. The world only learned about him in 1966, when he died during an operation—ostensibly for hemorrhoids. What if he had survived? Could the Soviets have put a man on the moon before the Americans? And what would have happened if they did?

The Soviets getting to the moon first would have ramped up pressure on American politicians to match and outperform the Soviets in space. Americans likely would have pursued an extended series of moon visits—well past the last time humans walked there, in 1972. There may have been far more currency placed on the US landing on Mars or somewhere else because it would have been a continued effort to outdo the Soviet Union.

Both the American and Soviet space programs were offshoots of military missile programs. As the United States began to outpace the Soviets in air power, Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev and Korolev agreed that a fleet of super-fast rockets, with nuclear payloads, was a cost-effective means to counter perceived American aggression. Korolev pitched the idea for an orbiting satellite after a meeting where he introduced the Soviet leadership to a new generation of rockets that could reach Britain in 7 minutes. As the meeting ended, he suggested that all they needed to do was to swap a satellite for a nuclear warhead and launch the rocket into space instead of at Earth. Khrushchev agreed, and on October 4, 1957, Sputnik became the first human-built object to orbit the earth.

Shock and disbelief covered the US. Sputnik forced Eisenhower to abandon his preference to keep the space program small, and Congress established a civilian organization—NASA—to oversee all space exploration activities. However, before the Americans could even get a satellite into orbit, Korolev sent the dog Laika into orbit later in 1957. And in 1959, the Soviets took the first photographs of the far side of the moon. In April 1961, Korolev beat the US yet again by sending Yuri Gagarin into

orbit. This time the Americans were closer, sending Alan Shephard into space a month later, for a much shorter time. Then, Korolev sent the first woman, Valentina Tereshkova, into space in 1963.

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## Korolev's Death

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Part of the Soviet advantage was that Moscow took risks the Americans didn't. Moreover, the Soviet space program was cloaked in secrecy. Cosmonaut deaths and injuries were usually not revealed to the public, and cosmonauts were forbidden from discussing details of their flights in public and were often portrayed with images of fake rockets. Korolev knew the terrors of the Soviet system all too well. In the 1930s, he was sent to the notorious gulag Kolyma in Siberia as part of Stalin's purge of engineers and scientists in the Soviet Union. He was only released in 1944 when he designed a new airplane for use in World War II. Years at forced labor did not improve his health, and in 1966, he died on the operating table.

Without Korolev, the Soviet program fell victim to infighting and budget cuts. Meanwhile, NASA threw everything it had at the Apollo program. The Soviets probably could have matched it—but without Korolev, when Apollo landed, the Soviets quietly conceded the moon to the Americans and scuttled their lunar project. When the Soviets quit, so did the Americans. US state spending on lunar and space exploration fell off after 1969. Nixon had okayed the space shuttle program because it was the cheapest way he could pretend to be interested in space, but once the Soviets stopped caring about the moon, so did he.

Could the Soviets have pulled off a moon landing if Korolev had survived? NASA had closed the gap between the space programs thanks to a \$6 billion budget. However, Korolev had never lost a race with the US, and in August 1965, he wrote to the new premier, Leonid Brezhnev, that it was time for the USSR to try to land a man on the moon by 1968.

## Contingent Factors

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It's not certain that the Soviets would have gotten to the moon first if Korolev had lived, but it was a possibility. What if they did? In each previous case, where the USSR went first, Americans followed. Therefore, historical precedent suggests that US efforts would have continued after a Soviet moon landing. That would have meant dueling moon missions. Perhaps the Soviets would have pursued Korolev's dreams of an all-female moon landing or a permanent moon base. If the Soviets had a moon base, the Americans would need one, too.

There were people in the State Department and the Department of Defense who argued that Americans should focus on areas where they had the greatest strength because every time they failed, it made the Soviet Union look that much better. So, the United States could have focused on other elements of a space race. However, the fact of continually competing with the Soviet Union and coming in second place would have been a nonstarter politically. Moreover, the space program was a drag on resources, and by 1969, President Nixon knew it. In the real timeline, Nixon wanted the good press that came from the moon landing, and he got it. If the Soviets beat the Americans, would Nixon have hung in there?

The Apollo program is legendary today, but only because it succeeded. If it had been cut in 1968, Apollo might be remembered today as an enormous waste of federal resources. The decade of Apollo was also the decade of Vietnam, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and civil rights. Civil rights leaders lined up against the space program, and civil rights activists protested the lunar landing. Nixon, his cabinet, and other supporters would have had to figure out a way to continue to justify the resources used on the space program.

Space exploration in the mid-20th century was not just about technology: It was an idea. Although the space race was propelled by military and security concerns, its rhetoric and justification suggested the astounding possibilities of the modern era and the promise of human destiny beyond the stars. NASA reshaped the idea of space as a stepping stone to the future. The space race produced a "space chic." Much of the culture of US

science in the 1960s and '70s was utopian in its outlook—see *Star Trek* (1966) and *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1969). The first interracial kiss ever broadcast on television was between Kirk and Uhura.

Moreover, the Apollo missions inspired the modern environmental movement. The fragility of the Earth as a “pale blue dot” suspended in the cosmos changed American minds about the need to protect the Earth. Yet, the critique by civil rights leaders was very on point: Many of the subsequent space dreams of the 1970s and '80s were very White. For example, even though *Star Trek* took bold steps in American television, its idea of a diverse human cast consisted of one female African American who answered the phones and a Japanese scientist; every other main cast member was White.



People often assume that the history of space exploration is primarily technological. However, the limitation on space exploration was not technological but military and political. Without Korolev, the Soviets were not able to match the United States. Without Soviet competition, the United States landed on the moon and was done with it. In some ways, Korolev's death was also due to political factors. He died in 1966 in part because of the suffering and torture he endured in the gulag very likely weakened him. Korolev might have survived if Stalin had not used the gulag for anyone who disagreed with anything he said—but that was the political system of Russia as it was adapted by the communists.

The space race needed political support, science, and confrontation. If the confrontation continued—if the Soviets had gotten to the moon first—there would have been continued efforts in the United States to sponsor a space program as an alternative vein for nuclear confrontation, at least until someone decided to put a military base on the moon, as was in the Soviet plan. The Cold War would have turned hot very quickly. Intelligence agencies at the Kremlin and in DC would have been working on insidious attempts to again increase their competitive advantage well into the 1970s and 1980s. NASA's investment into space exploration produced a utopian bent in American culture, and had the space race kept going, it is possible that the sense of limitless possibilities that so characterized the 1960s would not have gone out of fashion in the 1970s.

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# 5

## What If **THE CONSTITUTION DID NOT PASS?**

The Constitution split the nation: Opponents thought it would destroy state governments and end liberty; proponents said that without it, the Union would break up. Though it is now taken for granted as the basis for American society as you know it, the Constitution only passed by a few votes. The stakes of not ratifying it were enormous. Perhaps the states would have broken up into regional blocs, depending on their particular interests. Could the 13 original states have become 3 countries? Would they have been conquered by Europe, or would they have made alliances with other emerging maritime nations threatened by Europe—like, say, Hawaii? In this lecture, you'll ask, "What if the Constitution did not pass?"

## What If?

By 1804, New England's decision to separate from the United States seems like a bad move; its close alliance with Great Britain has brought it into the war against revolutionary France. Meanwhile, the Southern Association of American States under President Jefferson has cultivated warm relationships with Napoleonic France, eventually leading to the 1803 purchase of the Louisiana Territory. Days after that Southern diplomatic triumph, New England's president, Sam Adams, dies in office.

That leaves the untested Aaron Burr as acting president, and New Englanders do not think he has the political skills to restore New England's international power. But Burr shocks everyone by sending Nathan and Jonathan Winship around the tip of South America and out into the Pacific to create an alliance with another maritime leader looking to expand his influence: King Kamehameha I of the Kingdom of Hawaii.

With an escort of British warships, the New Englanders and Hawaiians sail up to the coast of Oregon to establish a colony, but they are quickly expelled by the Chinook Indians. Conveniently, at that moment, they receive news of Britain's 1805 war with Spain, so the allies head down to attack the Spanish fort at San Francisco, thereby creating the Boston-Honolulu Protectorate of Norte California.

Of course, this grand geopolitical adventure would never have happened if the state of New Hampshire hadn't rejected the proposed American Constitution in February 1788—by three votes.



## Birth of the Constitution

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How close did America come to breaking up? No less than Alexander Hamilton was panicking that America would splinter into “such combinations of them as might happen to be formed out of the wreck of the general Confederacy.”

Tensions were running high in the wake of the Revolution. The central government under the Articles of Confederation had very little power, precisely because the Revolution had been fought, in part, against the threat of a central government in London. In 1787, a group of representatives from the states met in Philadelphia to try and amend the Articles of Confederation—but that’s not what they did. Initially, the convention had been approved as a way to amend to the articles, which had been adopted unanimously by all states. Yet, once the delegates got to Philadelphia and had a quorum, they agreed on the first day to throw it out and start fresh. Thus, a lot of delegates and states felt that they had been manipulated into approving this process.

The Constitution was controversial because it created a powerful federal government in a way that reminded many Americans of the British system that they had just fought a revolution against. The president was much more powerful than any executive had previously been in the state governments or in the Articles of Confederation. Many people feared the Constitution would undo the Revolution’s successes.

In 1787, it looked like Americans had a choice: accept the Constitution or break up into confederacies. The people who wanted the Constitution passed—the Federalists—kept coming back to that choice. Alexander Hamilton warned Americans about this, writing under the pen name Publius, in *The Federalist Papers*. He even sketched out a few ideas of what those alternative confederacies would look like.

First, he predicted a system of three American republics: “one consisting of the four Northern, another of the four Middle, and a third of the five Southern States.” Alternately, there might be just two. Hamilton had no doubt the New England states would stick together. New York would join them, and, probably, New Jersey and Pennsylvania would also join. Hamilton’s imagined Southern confederation would likely oppose

restrictive trade policies that favored northern merchants and shipyards. Hamilton also assumed that the weaker states would probably ally with Great Britain so as not to be overrun by the larger states.

Why would the Founding Fathers think the 13 states would break up? Because they had just seen it happen in the American Revolution. The Revolution was a splitting of the colonies into confederacies—13 British colonies rebelled, but 14 others did not, including Florida, Bermuda, and Canada. In 1787, boundaries and loyalties were fluid. European powers established colonial domains, but often, their very presence created new and different identities and governments in response. All of these groups were trying to find their way in the world and dealing with the shifting colonial powers.

So, when Federalists stressed the idea that the Constitution was the only way to bring together 13 states into a workable union with a national government, they were thinking about the fragile world system and how little independent states could appear, disappear, and shatter. If Americans wanted to be one nation, the Constitution was the way to go.

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## Contingent Factors

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More contingent moments were there along the path to the Constitution on the way to ratification than most people realize. The Constitution was created in 1787 to create a working national government that could overrule the states—but those states had to accept it first. It became law when the delegates at the Constitutional Convention voted to pass the draft document; 39 of the 42 delegates that were present voted in favor of this document. They then sent the draft Constitution to Congress, and Congress sent it to the states for ratification. Interestingly, the delegates had specified that only nine of the states had to ratify, and they did so for a reason.

They didn't think all of the states were going to accept the document. If they required unanimous approval, which had been the case under the Articles of Confederation, it was never going to happen. So, it was a bit of a trick to say that the document would go into effect as soon as nine states agreed—but it worked.

The ratification process didn't go well. North Carolina and Rhode Island said no, so Federalists had to go 9 for the remaining 11. During the ratification process, the American people split into two groups: the Federalists, who supported the Constitution, and the Anti-Federalists. It would be an uphill battle for the latter. The Federalists who wrote the Constitution knew they would have to convince people to vote for it, so they had pamphlets, arguments, newspaper essays, and speeches ready to go when the convention announced the Constitution to the world.

Political shenanigans ensued. In Pennsylvania, the state legislature was ready to call for a ratification convention. There was a solid Federalist majority, so the Anti-Federalists decided not to show up. Federalists had the votes to pass a ratification election, but they needed two more legislators present to conduct any business—and by state law at the time, the state legislature had to adjourn in the next 24 hours. With a few hours to go, the Federalists found two of the missing Anti-Federalist members, forcibly dragged them back for a vote, and set up a very early ratification convention. Pennsylvania then voted to ratify. However, if two legislators had found better hiding places, then the legislature would have voted adjourned. There would not have been a vote for many more months in Pennsylvania—potentially allowing the Anti-Federalists to mobilize. This was a contingent moment.

However, the real contingent moment came in New Hampshire. The state had elected an Anti-Federalist majority to its convention. A “no” from New Hampshire would probably push Anti-Federalists over the top in Virginia and New York—or so the Federalists feared. However, New Hampshire Federalists had a plan. John Sullivan, the state's chief executive, arranged to delay several anti-Federalist delegates so that the Federalists would get to the convention early and draft a set of rules before most of the Anti-Federalists arrived. One of those rules said that any motion to adjourn would take precedence over any other item of business.

When the debate on the Constitution began, Federalists convinced eight Anti-Federalist delegates to switch their votes, but those eight delegates had promised constituents to oppose it. If the convention voted on the Constitution now, it would lose. If they could adjourn, they might win in a later session. Good thing the motion to adjourn was allowed, by the rules,

to interrupt any other voting. The Convention voted to adjourn, 56 to 51. If those 8 votes had been required to vote up or down on the Constitution instead, the vote would have been 59 to 48 against.

New Hampshire met again 4 months later. With assurances that a Bill of Rights would be added to the Constitution in the First Congress, they voted yes, the ninth state to do so. The Constitution was law of the land. But what if John Sullivan hadn't figured out the Anti-Federalists had a majority in New Hampshire—or what if he was sick that day and couldn't pull off his trick? The rules might have required an up or down vote, and then, no Constitution.

In the end, Federalists compromised in the spring of 1788 and agreed to include a Bill of Rights—the main Anti-Federalist objection—to get a national, federal government with real power—the main Federalist goal. That decision not only brought the Bill of Rights into existence but also probably persuaded enough fence-sitters in New Hampshire, Virginia, and New York to ratify in the first place.

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## Contingent Effects

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What if New Hampshire had voted down the Constitution rather than adjourn in February 1788? Perhaps you would have seen a continent that looked much more like Europe, broken up into many different countries that were constantly squabbling. It's also likely that the divisions between the western and eastern regions of states would have been so intense that there would be a split not only between North and South but also between East and West. New Englanders would certainly have gone off on their own. Pennsylvania would not likely have joined a southern confederacy—after all, it had already abolished slavery in 1780. Thus, you can lump the central states together, and three American confederacies emerge in the wake of the Constitution's failure.

Which of these confederations would be mostly likely to ally with Great Britain? In the real world, the French Revolution of 1789 divided American leadership between pro-British and pro-French sides. Jefferson in particular wanted to cozy up to revolutionary France. If he had his own country, it's easy to see a strong alliance developing between France

and the southern republic—which could mean Jefferson once again acquires the Louisiana Territory, requiring geopolitical counter from the Bostonians. Perhaps the small New England republic might make a move to build an expansionist alliance with another new state allied to Britain that was also building its territory—the Kingdom of Hawaii.

New England and Hawaii were natural allies: Both were smaller maritime nations trying to trade with Britain without being overrun by it. So, if they made a foothold in Oregon—and then joined in Britain's 1805 war against Spain and France—why not aim for the lightly defended Spanish-held forts of California? Perhaps the people of the 21st century would assume that a Boston-Honolulu dominion of California was the most natural thing in the world and that Aaron Burr was a farsighted genius.

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# 6

## What If **COLUMBUS NEVER “DISCOVERED” AMERICA?**

Christopher Columbus thought the world was 30% smaller than it really is, which is why he tried to sail to India. Spanish monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella were less interested in discovery than they were in gold and conquest. Other countries had very different approaches to exploring the New World. What if one of those countries came to America first? What if the first Europeans to make contact with the Aztecs weren't the Spanish but the Portuguese, and what if, instead of war, they brought trade? In this lecture, you'll ask, "What if Columbus never sailed?"

## What If?

It’s 1484. Christopher Columbus heads to Portugal to try and get funding for his plan to sail west to Asia, based on some faulty math that kings and navigators know to be wrong. Everyone says no. No one wants to spend money on a risky venture based on bad information. Columbus never sails.

Because Columbus never sails, the meeting between Europe and the Americas is delayed. This delay gives the Aztecs time to get their despotic king, Moctezuma, off the throne. Moctezuma’s efforts to exert direct control over the whole empire are very unpopular, and once he’s gone, Aztec kings resort to their usual approach of incorporating other peoples into an expanding empire.

The leading naval power of Europe in 1492 is Portugal. So, it’s likely Portugal makes first landfall in the Western Hemisphere. Where Spain’s objective in international affairs is always conquest, Portugal’s approach is to create alliances—to build trade networks and dependence. When the Portuguese reach the Caribbean in 1550, they encounter the trade networks of the Taino, and they set up trade centers, missions, and alliances. That lasts for 8 years—when the Portuguese alliance meets the Aztec empire.



Both the Portuguese and the Aztecs like the idea of tributary empires, so they join forces. Portugal thinks it's getting the better deal because new foodstuffs from the New World make it the premier power of Europe. The Aztecs think they get the better deal because they dominate the Gulf of Mexico. Aztec adoption of horses leads to a conquest of the North American mainland, beginning at Santa Fe in 1580 and creating a series of client states under Aztec political control stretching from Tenochtitlán to the Great Lakes for 100 years.

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## Columbus's Folly

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Born in 1451 in Italy, Columbus was a self-taught mariner, who had sailed to Africa, Ireland, and the Madeira Islands. He read many ancient and medieval texts about the world and the oceans, and as he read them, he thought they had made a mistake. Everyone in Europe in 1491 knew the world was round, but Columbus also thought the world was small.

The 1491 globe has a “western ocean” covering most of the world from Europe to Asia with nothing in between. Europeans thought this ocean was 10,000 miles across—which it is. They had accurately known the circumference of the earth (26,000 miles) for centuries. No vessel of the time could possibly make the voyage—unless you made the mistake of calculating a line of longitude as 58.5 miles instead of 67.8, which is what Columbus did. If you did that, you'd estimate the world is only 18,000 miles around, making the western ocean 3,000 miles across, just possible to cross with the ships of the 1490s.

So, Columbus's math was wrong, and everyone else knew it. In 1484, Columbus went to royal courts for funding, and they said no. In 1492, a Spanish council even recommended that Queen Isabella reject Columbus' proposal, and Columbus was on his way to France when she changed her mind. She sent messengers to stop him to let him know she'd agreed to raise taxes to fund the mission. If Columbus had left a week earlier, perhaps he would have gone on to France or even to England—who might have said no. It's strange that Columbus got any money at all—that's the contingent moment. He probably shouldn't even have sailed. He ran into the Americas by accident and thought he had found India, which is why he called the people he met *indios*.

When Columbus first reached the Caribbean and met the indigenous people of the Taino nation who live there, he immediately thought of slavery. He kidnapped several of the Taino and forcibly brought them back to Spain with him. In 1494, he returned with an invasion force. Within two generations, the Taino were gone—victims of European disease but also of their treatment at the hands of the Spanish generally and Columbus in particular.

This makes sense because Ferdinand and Isabella built their empire on the Reconquista, the effort to expel Spanish Muslims from Spain who had been living there for hundreds of years. They finished the war against the Muslims in 1492. The attack on the New World was simply a continuation of their aggression. Spain also instituted the encomienda system, where wealthy men were given parcels of land and indigenous laborers who would work that land for them.



COLUMBUS TAKING POSSESSION OF THE NEW COUNTRY.

Illustration by THE PHOTODUPLICATION SERVICE, INC. © 1984

The Spanish obsession with gold was what drove a lot of these expeditions. It’s also what led to the devastation and the genocide of so many indigenous nations, who were forced to try to find the gold. When there was no gold, they were punished.

Finally, Spain had ideas about bloodlines and race that no one else in Europe quite had yet. Spain forced its Jews to convert and then worried that those converts might be practicing Judaism in secret and so created a biological aspect to religion—the *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood). No one with Jewish heritage could hold church or civil office. In so doing, Spain created some of the first laws about race in a biological sense. Under Ferdinand and Isabella, Christianity was about your genetics. Thus, when the Spanish arrived in the Americas, they had developed an idea about biology, Christianity, and power that they thought gave them the right to do whatever they wanted to non-Christian peoples.

Would any European nation have done the same thing? Are there alternatives to Spain’s scorched-earth invasion? Are there real-life examples of exploration and colonization that came before 1492?

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## Alternatives to Spain’s Conquests

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The Portuguese contacted the kingdom of Kongo, in modern-day Angola, in 1483. Neither knew the other existed. But Kongo had resources, and Portugal had sailing technology. A series of allegiances emerged: Portuguese gained trading rights in Kongo and sent missionaries. The king of Kongo converted to Christianity, and Kongo sent emissaries and sons of nobles to Portugal. King Afonso I, who reigned from 1509 to 1542, adopted firearms and medicines but refused to allow Portuguese law or sovereignty in his kingdom. His son became a priest and was appointed bishop of Kongo by the Vatican.

There was, however, a cost: a vast influx of European goods and a precipitous rise in slave-trading and slave-raiding. So, you shouldn’t look at the Portuguese arrival in Kongo as a utopia or an equal alliance, but it was not an instant bloodbath or wholesale conquest, either. This period of détente and alliance between Portugal and Kongo lasted from 1483 to

1567. Can you imagine something similar happening in the Americas? Yes, because it happened elsewhere in the Portuguese trade empire. There are other options, too.

Perhaps the French had the most symbiotic relationship with the indigenous nations they encountered. Particularly when it came to the fur trade, they knew that they were not in control. They didn't know where to find the furs. They didn't know the river ways and the lakes. And they didn't know whose lands they were on at any given time. Thus, they were reliant on indigenous nations. Indigenous men hunted and trapped the furs, indigenous women prepared the furs, and the indigenous kin networks that were tied into these trade networks were the key to the French success in the fur trade.

So, Spanish conquest was a choice. The Spanish knocked over numerous Native American nations and territories over the next 50 years. Cuba fell in 1511, the Aztecs in 1521, and the Incas in 1532. In retrospect, this can seem foreordained or easy—but it wasn't.

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## Contingent Factors

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The richest, most powerful nation in North America in 1500 was the Aztec empire. Hernando Cortés of Spain invaded the empire—against the orders of his superiors—in 1519. If Columbus hadn't sailed in 1491, Cortés wouldn't have been there in 1519.

Cortés only brought around 500 soldiers with him to invade Mexico. He conquered the Aztecs by creating an alliance among the empire's enemies. The ruler of the Aztecs in 1519 was Moctezuma II. When he came to the throne around 1503, he began dismantling the Aztec system of promoting people based on skill and ability in favor of preferences for members of important families. He also began working on replacing the Aztec system of incorporation of defeated nations into a system of direct rule from the palace. So, the empire was weakened, and Moctezuma unpopular, when Cortés arrived to the capital, Tenochtitlán, and took Moctezuma hostage in his own palace on the pretense of a diplomatic visit.

Cortés later explained that Moctezuma believed that he (Cortés) was an emissary from the Aztec god Quetzalcoatl and prepared to hand over his kingdom to the Spanish. This threw the empire into paralysis for several months until rival leaders attacked the palace, and Moctezuma was killed. Cortés was chased out of the capital and ultimately escaped. He then assembled an army of Native American dissidents in the empire and seized Tenochtitlán—with a few hundred Spanish troops and tens of thousands of Native Americans.

What about disease? There is an overwhelming assumption that the epidemics in the Americas in the 15th and 16th centuries made it “impossible” for indigenous people to successfully repel European invasions. The epidemics did not make anything easier, but among the Aztecs, the great epidemics came in 1520 and 1538. The Aztecs did not perish from smallpox and then get attacked by Cortés. They were attacked and then stricken by disease.

Moreover, focus on the Aztecs ignores the many military failures of the Spanish. For instance, Hernando de Soto attempted to invade what is now Alabama. He arrived with more men than Cortés, faced a smaller, less urbanized indigenous opponent, and lost badly. Far from being foreordained, the fall of the Aztecs took place in 1521 because, in 1492, someone with the wrong math accidentally ran into two continents he didn’t know were there. And 25 years later, a soldier violated orders, kidnapped the king of a vast empire, and then successfully toppled the empire by building an army of people who spoke different languages and outnumbered his own soldiers by a factor of over 100. That’s contingent.

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## Contingent Effects

So, what if Columbus never sailed? Contact between the Old World and New World was going to happen—but it did not need to happen under the direction of a country as obsessed with war and racial purity as Spain in 1492.

Instead, push contact to 1550, under the Portuguese. That would give the Aztecs time to get rid of Moctezuma II and restore their traditional system that had been working for decades. Meanwhile, the Portuguese would probably have imported the same system of accommodation and alliance they had already built in Kongo to the Americas. When the trade-loving Portuguese met with the incorporationist Aztecs, both parties would benefit from an alliance. If that allowed Tenochtitlán access to firearms and horses, the Aztecs could have forcibly incorporated a lot of other nations.

How long could such an arrangement have lasted? Disease would have taken its toll—but remember that epidemics are a factor, not the factor, in the invasion of the Americas. If a Portuguese-Aztec alliance dominated North America, even for a few decades, it likely would have affected the distribution and exploitation of the continent’s resources.

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# 7

## What If **LINCOLN NEVER ISSUED THE EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION?**

There are lots of what-ifs where the Confederates win the Civil War, but in 1862, the Union army was actually within 7 miles of Richmond, on the cusp of victory, with no plans to free the enslaved. Lincoln only prepared the Emancipation Proclamation after a devastating Union defeat in 1862. What if the Union won before emancipation? Can you knit a country back together half slave and half free? What would freedom fighters like Harriet Tubman have done? In this lecture, you will ask, “What if Lincoln never issued the Emancipation Proclamation?”

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## What If?

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It is May 1862. The Union Army under George McClellan drives steadily toward Richmond, the Confederate capital. The Confederate commander Joe Johnston counterattacks and narrowly avoids getting shot himself. Because Johnston is not shot, General Robert E. Lee never receives command of the Confederate army. Lee never designs a reckless counterattack and never expels the Union army from Richmond. Instead, McClellan surrounds the city and accepts Confederate surrender. The Civil War ends with the Union restored and with slavery intact.

Yet, by this time, in 1862, thousands of enslaved people have already escaped to Union lines and begun participating in the destruction of slavery. Abolitionist Harriet Tubman fights back by leading rebellions of the enslaved and recently freed. By 1872, she infiltrates the enslaved city of Baton Rouge and successfully launches a massive slave uprising. The rebels seize cannon surreptitiously provided by the former General James Garfield, who believes war is the only way to end slavery.

A flummoxed President McClellan sends US troops, under the command of General George Armstrong Custer, who finds himself out-generaled. As Tubman defeats Custer, the British Navy announces its support for the insurgents—part of its pressure on the US to permit British interference on the isthmus of Panama. The Gulf States are consumed in a bloody guerilla war as US naval boats fire on British vessels, prompting the third war between the US and Great Britain.

It sounds farfetched, but the US came within one bullet of having a Union victory with slavery intact.

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## Contingent Factors

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In May 1862 of the real world, Johnston commanded the Confederate army, and Lee was just the military advisor to President Jefferson Davis. However, when Johnston was shot, he retreated to Richmond, and on the way, he ran into Davis and Lee. Davis appointed Lee to replace Johnston. That's quite a contingent way to get into command.

Once he was put in charge of Confederate forces, Lee devised an insane counterattack that involved sending almost all his troops to attack McClellan, leaving Richmond virtually undefended. The skeleton troops guarding Richmond were instructed to act as though there were lots more brigades and soldiers in the woods. The gamble worked: McClellan thought he was outnumbered and retreated.

Had a nameless Union soldier missed when firing at General Johnston, Lee would not have gotten command, he would not have devised an unlikely strategy in response, and the Union would have taken Richmond in 1862. That matters because in the spring of '62, there was no Union plan to end slavery. If the Civil War had ended in 1862, the Union would have been restored, and slavery would remain legal.

But that's only the first part—because by 1862, American slavery has been damaged despite Lincoln's reticence. Thousands of Black men and women had escaped to Union lines and were working with the army and Northern White abolitionists to make the war an antislavery war. McClellan's failure gave them that chance. If McClellan won—then what? The foundation of this question comes from the fact that emancipation was not originally a war aim for the Lincoln government.



## A War for “Union”

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Lincoln was born in Kentucky, and he grew up in a place where slavery was legal. As he traveled through roughly the Ohio River Valley in his growing-up years, he was confronted with the differences between slave and free states—and with his lot as a relatively middle-aged, White man on a sort of disappearing frontier. And he was left with the conclusion that a number of men were from his class and from his region came to, which is that the system of slavery doesn't overwhelmingly benefit a small-time rail splitter like him.

In 1860, Lincoln attained the Republican Party's nomination for president in part because he was a moderate. He wrote in 1858 that he “expressly disclaimed all intention to bring about social and political equality between the White and Black races.” However, the very idea that anyone in authority in America might curb the power of the institution of slavery was too much for those who had made enslavement the cornerstone of the cultural and economic life of the White South. Seven states seceded before Lincoln was even inaugurated.

One month after that, supplies ran low at Fort Sumter—a Union fort on an island in Charleston Harbor—and Lincoln sent the navy to resupply the troops. As ships headed for the island, Confederate forces opened fire. Four more slave states left the Union, and it was clear that war had begun.

At the beginning, it was a war for union. “The doctrine of secession is anarchy,” argued a Cincinnati newspaper. Secession meant the loser of any election could end a democratic government “at pleasure, because they have not had their way.” The Union states in 1861 largely believed they were fighting for democracy. However, thousands of enslaved men and women recognized the opportunity the war presented and fled to Union lines in a process historians call self-emancipation; they became known as contraband.

The arrival of enslaved people at Union lines created a political crisis for Lincoln. Four slave states remained in the Union: Missouri, Kentucky, Maryland, and Delaware. But while Lincoln might have wanted to reassure White Northern voters that he did not mean to end slavery, it was also clear that slave labor was being used by the Confederate army for military purposes. Every enslaved person who reached Union lines reduced the Confederate army's capacity to make war.

Moreover, the escapees provide military intelligence. Robert Smalls exemplified this heroism. He was enslaved aboard the Confederate ship *Planter*. On the night of May 12, the ship's White officers disembarked at Charleston Harbor, leaving Smalls and the rest of the enslaved Black crew behind. Smalls broke into the captain's quarters, put on a Confederate uniform, and sailed the ship out of the harbor in the predawn light, right past Fort Sumter and into the Union blockade. He handed over the ship, its guns, 200 pounds of ammunition, and a Confederate code book, as well as his own knowledge of Confederate mines and fortifications along the coast. This event came at the right time: just a few weeks before Lee's stunning reversal of Union military fortunes. When Smalls captured the ship and joined the Union fight, McClellan seemed unstoppable.

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## A War for Abolition

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Consider the progress of McClellan's army that spring. In March, they'd landed on the coast of Virginia. By April, they had besieged Yorktown. By May 5, they'd captured Yorktown and Williamsburg, and on May 30, they were 7 miles outside Richmond. At the same time, other Union armies had captured New Orleans and almost all of Tennessee. Progress was slow but steady.

As the Union pressed toward Richmond in 1862, Northern abolitionists feared they would miss their chance. Lincoln's strongest allies feared that they might defeat the South but maintain slavery. Editor Horace Greeley worried that if differences were merely "patched up, leaving the slaveholding oligarchy as strong as ever ... the rebellion would only be smothered, not suppressed." Nor did anyone know what a reunion with slavery intact would look like.

Then, Joe Johnston got shot. Lee defeated McClellan, shattering the Union's creep to victory. It was the failure of the Union to win the war then that finally convinced Lincoln to make the war a battle against slavery. On July 13, he first admitted to cabinet members he planned to emancipate the enslaved as "a military necessity absolutely essential to the preservation of the Union," as Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles recalled. Now, with "the reverses before Richmond," Lincoln declared, "we must free the slaves or be ourselves subdued."

Instead of trying to convince Unionist Southerners to come back into the fold, Lincoln decided to hamstring the South by tapping into one of its most precious resources: their human property. Enslaved people literally built the South, and their labor was keeping the South running during the war. Undercutting the slavocracy's power by freeing enslaved people was a huge step toward undercutting the Southerners' entire military operation. It also provided Lincoln's cause with the moral high ground in some ways and turned the federal army into an army of freedom.

Lincoln announced his plan to issue the Emancipation Proclamation in September 1862; it was to take effect on January 1, 1863. When word reached Cincinnati and Brooklyn, riots broke out. Lincoln's original text included plans to colonize any freed people outside the US. This brought swift condemnation from Black people across the country. In the end, colonization was not mentioned in the final version of the Proclamation. Instead, it authorized all "men of suitable condition" to be brought into the Union army. Additionally, under the influence of both Black and White abolitionists, the Emancipation Proclamation ultimately included a stipulation that Black men could be mustered into the federal army, and as a result, they could pick up guns and fight for freedom as well.

Free African Americans in the North immediately moved to sign up for war service, and thousands of those labeled as "contraband" were finally recognized as people. They too signed up to fight the Confederacy. These included one of the most famous Americans of all: Harriet Tubman.

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## Harriet Tubman

Harriet Tubman, or Black Moses as African Americans knew her, was disabled and grew up on the eastern shore of Maryland. She went through courageous feats to both emancipate herself and return multiple times to the Eastern Shore to bring kin and friends north to freedom. The route she used along the Atlantic Seaboard up through New York and into Canada was incredibly dangerous and required savvy about geography, good connections, and the Underground Railroad—a loose network of like-minded abolitionists, both Black and White, who helped fugitives from slavery along the way.

## 7. What If Lincoln Never Issued the Emancipation Proclamation?



Harriet went on to become the first woman to lead a military operation in US history. She had been serving as a nurse and carved out a role as a spy at local plantations before leading the raids along the Combahee River that saw the burning of multiple large plantations and the emancipation of hundreds of enslaved people.

In a world in which there is no Emancipation Proclamation, it's easy to imagine people like Harriet as participants in a very successful guerilla war against slavery. In the real world, some White troops expressed outrage when Black soldiers and former slaves joined the ranks to fight for the Union. The sterling record of the Black troops, and their service in some of the most unglamorous and difficult fights of the war, began to change minds. Fifteen Black soldiers and eight Black sailors receive the Congressional Medal of Honor, the highest American

award for bravery. The Union rank and file swung around to support emancipation—if only because they saw that it would bring victory for the Union.

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# 8

## What If **THE SALEM WITCH TRIALS NEVER HAPPENED?**

The Salem witch trials changed the colonial world. Accusations, trials, and executions tore across Massachusetts for months—and when it was over, the power of Puritanism was broken. If the trials hadn't occurred, perhaps you would still see witchcraft and accusations of witches as a part of daily life in the United States. Was Puritanism destined to fall, or did the trials flare up over a legal mistake? If there had been no Salem, would witch trials still be occurring today? In this lecture, you will ask, "What if the Salem witch trials never happened?"

## What If?

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It is 1937. In Hollywood, famed actor Bela Lugosi is arrested for witchcraft, after having made a spate of tremendously successful horror films, including *Dracula*. The shocking nature of these films—as well as Lugosi’s Roman Catholic religion and his past history as a union organizer—makes him suspicious in the eyes of the federal witchfinder general, J. Edgar Hoover. Other Hollywood stars are also arrested for witchcraft.

The trials go horribly awry: The prosecution fails to show any convincing evidence of supernatural activity. The jury returns a not-guilty verdict, and Franklin Roosevelt’s administration suffers great public embarrassment.

In this world, witchcraft remains a crime because the Salem witch trials never discredited it—no Salem witch trials, no collapse of Puritanism, and no end of witchcraft prosecutions. In this world, Rev. Increase Mather stayed home in 1688 rather than heading to England.

## The Conditions Surrounding the Trials

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The Salem witch trials seem strange to us today, but that’s because the idea of witchcraft as a legal crime no longer exists. That didn’t just happen naturally—people actually had to change the laws.

The Salem trials were not a usual thing in British North America. People at the time found them strange, terrifying, and unjust. Witchcraft was a crime in New England, and colonists believed in the invisible power of witches to cause harm at a distance, led by Satan. So, the concept of witches was not new, although the normal response to a charge of witchcraft was dismissal, not a witch hunt. What was new in Salem was the widespread nature of the outbreak and the number of people that participated in the accusations, as victims and in the trials. What happened in Salem had never happened before, and it never happened again. It probably shouldn’t have happened at all, and if Increase Mather had stayed home, it probably wouldn’t have.

In 1692, New Englanders had a lot on their minds besides witchcraft. The government of England had been overthrown in 1688, when William III deposed King James II. Massachusetts followed suit and overthrew their royal governor, Edmund Andros. Massachusetts in 1692 was being governed by an illegal, unofficial government run by Simon Bradstreet while the people waited for London to appoint a new governor and a new charter to run the colony.

Meanwhile, Puritan settlers in what is now Maine had violated their treaty with the Native American Wabanaki Confederacy. English colonists had begun settling on lands they had acknowledged belonged to the Wabanaki, and the Confederacy began launching raids against those towns. French forces joined the Wabanaki in 1689 in what became known as King William's War. Refugees from the fighting poured down the coast and into Salem.

Shortly thereafter, in January 1692, several children in the house of Samuel Parris claimed they were bewitched. Afflicted persons, who included men and women, old and young, would cough up phlegm, pins, and nails. The most notable accusers were young women in their late teens.

The afflicted in Salem initially named three women as witches—Sarah Good, Sarah Osborne, and Tituba. All three were outsiders: Good was homeless, Osborne was a notorious church-skipper, and Tituba was a Native American woman enslaved to Samuel Parris. At this point, the most likely thing to happen was for a dismissal of the charges or a small trial of these three women, but Massachusetts courts did not officially exist in 1692. Technically, there could be no official court until the new charter and governor arrived.

Bradstreet allowed the examinations to go forward, but not jury trials. That meant that the court could hear accusations but couldn't put anyone on trial. This meant that Salem now had a system in place where witches could be named but not brought to justice—a perfect arrangement for a panic. When Bradstreet began in March, there were 3 accusations; by May, there were 68, and all due to a small legal change created at the spur of the moment—a contingent moment.

## What Made the Trials Different

Massachusetts had a leading theologian who was a well-known voice of caution on witch trials: Increase Mather, president of Harvard. Mather fully believed in witchcraft but argued for caution in witch trials. He had also been an advisor to the semi-legal governor Bradstreet. However, in 1692, Mather was away in London, arguing the colony's case in front of the king. Royal officials had tried to prevent Mather from leaving the colony a few years earlier. Had they succeeded and Mather remained in Massachusetts, he might have been there to counsel Bradstreet and prevent him from making a few simple but catastrophic decisions.

In May, the new governor, William Phips, arrived to find the jails full of accused witches and the towns full of stories of satanic covens meeting with the devil. Phips created another special court to deal with the infestation. The court was allowed to make its own rules and also chose to accept as legal proof the claims of spectral evidence—the assertion by a bewitched person that the shape or specter of a witch tormented them. The bewitched person could see the specter, but no one else could. If a bewitched person saw an apparition and then something bad happened to them, that was taken as evidence. However, there was no way to verify that individuals did see these things, people, or animals.

In trials before and after the Salem witch trials, spectral evidence was not permitted to convict an accused witch. It could corroborate against additional charges, but there had to be something that could be cross-examined, shown to a jury, and guaranteed. The Salem trials, therefore, used a different legal apparatus than previous Puritan trials—because they bubbled up at a moment when the normal legal system was not functioning and a much more aggressive group of witch hunters took charge. It didn't



take long for things to get out of hand. By the time the Salem witch trials had come to an end, over 200 people had been accused, 14 women had been hung, 5 men had been hung, and 1 man had been pressed to death under stones. Several more individuals died in prison from sickness or poor conditions.

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## The Downfall of Witch Trials

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Plenty of people in Massachusetts in 1692 opposed the trials. In June, 26 men from Andover signed a petition to the court condemning the practice of letting spectral evidence dictate guilt or innocence. Mary Easty, condemned to die by the court, accepted her sentence but wrote to Phips pleading that officials change their methods of “discovery and detecting of witchcraft.” She begged the judges to “examine these Afflicted Persons strictly and keepe them apart some time” when questioning them as well as to carefully check the testimony of confessing witches for mistakes or inconsistencies. She was executed 7 days after she wrote the letter. These men and women believed in witchcraft, but they did not believe in the witch trials.

Eventually, the courts were shuttered when Increase Mather and others made plain their objections, but by then, the damage was done. The churches had gone along with the courts, and both lost their reputation. As Emerson Baker wrote: “The concerns raised about the trials changed people’s views of their government and helped bring an end to the Puritan theocracy.” Over the next 10 years, the standing order was replaced, and the colony all but admitted it had erred. The General Court adjusted the witchcraft statute in December 1692, and in 1703, it banned spectral evidence.

Salem’s zeal probably scuttled witchcraft trials in British North America. While trials continued to vex Europe, judicial skepticism reasserted itself in colonial towns. In 1697, Connecticut’s last witchcraft case was dismissed. A 1720 case in Littleton, Massachusetts, was dealt with privately by ministers. At the same time, a swirl of “reverse witch trials” came to the courts—legal cases where the witch accuser was brought up on charges of slander or defamation. Now, the accused witch could countersue her slanderer.

More forgiving forms of Protestant worship also took root in the wake of the trials. Increase Mather lost his job as president of Harvard, and the less-stringent Samuel Willard took over. Excommunications declined in Massachusetts. All forms of Protestant worship were legalized.

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## Contingent Factors

The trials were an anomaly. They were much larger and much more intense than any others in New England, and they exacted a huge price on the Puritan establishment. And yet, at several moments, key figures could have acted to cool things off and proceed in the typical way Puritan courts usually did. Simon Bradstreet, with accusations but no legal system, opted to gather evidence rather than waiting for the governor to arrive. Phips let the trials go on. The judges allowed spectral evidence when previous Massachusetts courts did not. These were all individual decisions that broke with Puritan tradition.

There have been many attempts to explain Salem's trials as the result of something else, such as response to economic inequality. The problem is, economic inequality existed in Salem in 1630, 1650, and 1692, but only in 1692 did the witch trials occur. Only an explanation based on the decisions of the judges and officials to accept extreme judicial measures when they had not previously explains why Salem happened in 1692 and not before. Had Bradstreet and Phips made different decisions, there might have been no explosion of the trials, and Puritanism might have hung on for more generations.

In the wake of Salem, laws changed, and the governments lost the ability to prosecute witchcraft and other satanic crimes. Salem took the question of Satan out of the public sphere. Without the Salem witch trials, in the long term, it's possible that the role of Satan in someone's religious experience could have remained a part of the judicial system as something that could be prosecuted.

How long could witchcraft have lasted? A long time. In the 1980s and 1990s, a series of expensive trials blossomed across the United States, accusing men and women of abusing children as part of a satanic cult. These were witch trials: People were accused of membership in an

organized satanic cult that met secretly, had the shadowy support of elites, and committed all kinds of atrocities. The courts accepted testimony of children as young as 4, and even when that testimony seemed to contradict common sense, it still resulted in convictions.

There are people who believe in witchcraft today. If the law still recognized it—if Salem had not discredited it—would witchcraft have remained as a consistent, occasional part of the legal system? If the Salem trials happened because Puritans were ignorant, then we are all safe from witch trials today. If the Salem trials came from judges changing their minds about what does and does not count as evidence, then we are not.

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# 9

## What If **NAT TURNER SUCCEEDED?**

Most American slave revolts ended before they began, but Nat Turner's ended in a bloodbath that forced Virginia's governor and legislature to consider emancipation in 1831—and they came within a handful of votes of abolishing slavery in the state. For the White power structure in Virginia, the biggest what-ifs when it came to slave revolt and rebellion asked: What if it spreads? What if all enslaved people are in on it? What if this means the end of slavery? If Turner's forces had reached the county seat, they could have seized an arsenal, and the outcome and debate over emancipation would have been very different. They only failed because they delayed for about 15 minutes—and that delay might have meant Civil War under Millard Fillmore, not Abraham Lincoln. In this lecture, you will ask, "What if Nat Turner succeeded?"

## What If?

On August 22, 1831, Nat Turner launches a war of emancipation against Southampton County, Virginia. As White militias scour the county for Turner's forces, Turner himself crosses the Nottoway River without running into any resistance, walks into the undefended county seat of Jerusalem, and seizes the arsenal. A long, bloody siege begins. For 6 days, Turner holds out, but learning that federal troops are on their way, he and his army abandon their siege and flee to the Great Dismal Swamp.

Defended by the wilderness, Turner's rebels can hold out for years. For the White populace, this successful rebellion results in a vote that creates two Virginias: one slave and one free. And in 1850, East Virginia secedes with South Carolina, launching a Civil War a decade early. With the eventual defeat of the Southern states, the institution of slavery is ended—a direct result of Nat Turner's rebellion.



In real life, Nat Turner's rebellion was defeated after 2 days. Nevertheless, in the aftermath, Governor John Floyd decided he needed to abolish slavery—because of fears about White safety. The Virginia legislature really did debate emancipation in 1832; the efforts failed, but a switch of eight votes in the legislature would have put Virginia on the path to emancipation.

If, at any point along the rebellion route, Turner had decided even a half an hour earlier to head toward Cypress Bridge and attempt to cross, he and his forces could have made it across the bridge and almost certainly would have made it into Jerusalem. The way this rebellion falls apart is about a 15-to-20-minute gap in decision-making. In the real world, the slave holders in the state legislature were able to convince Virginians that the danger was past.

If Turner had captured the arsenal, the urgency for the lightly enslaved mountain west of Virginia would have been far more intense. Virginia could have split into an antislavery West and a pro-slavery East. That would have made East Virginia rather like South Carolina: a heavily enslaved coastal state with a powerful slaveholding class committed to the expansion and moral rightness of slavery. South Carolina tried to leave the Union in 1850 but got no takers. If East Virginia had been following Carolina's lead for 18 years, would they have seceded, too? Would there have been a Civil War a decade before Lincoln? Would President Millard Fillmore have risen to the occasion?

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## Contingent Factors

Nat Turner's revolt of 1831 was a highly contingent event. Turner had, in fact, escaped from enslavement in 1825, but he returned voluntarily, quoting Luke 12: "He who knoweth his master's will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes." Turner was remarkable and remarked upon in his own community. He would go truant sometimes and even did things like baptize a White man, which made him an outlier but, also in other ways, a respected spiritual leader. It's that spiritual calling and authority that he relied upon to turn himself into a rebellion leader.

Turner began his revolt with only four other men. They moved from plantation to plantation, trying to gather weapons, ammunition, and fellow insurgents as they went and murdering any Whites they found. Turner declared himself a general and his ultimate band of about 50 rebels an army of liberation. But at the Parker plantation, the group stopped for “some time” against Turner’s advice. As they were about to leave, a militia patrol stumbled into them accidentally. In the ensuing firefight, Turner lost about half of his fighting force and decided not to continue to Jerusalem. Within another day, Turner’s forces had been reduced to three men, and the rebellion was over.

The choice to pause for so long seems to have been a spur-of-the-moment decision that could have gone either way. Were Turner to have successfully made it to Jerusalem and commandeered the arsenals, he would have left the local militia under-supplied and under-armed. This would have undercut the most immediate enemy of the rebellion at the same time that it would have been possible for Turner and his coconspirators to arm a larger group of people from both sides of the county and potentially in surrounding counties. So, certainly, one of the impacts would have been much higher rates of death among White Southamptonites and potentially a huger force for local militias and maybe even eventually federal troops to have dealt with.

But what did Turner mean to do at Jerusalem? Some historians think he may not have had a clear goal or plan. The rebellion—as a response to enslavement, violence, and inhumanity—may have been an end in itself.

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## Resistance

The violence of the slave system—and the violence of Turner’s revolt—was not contingent. The system of slavery as it developed in the Americas continually brought forth mass uprisings. Indeed, Turner himself acknowledged that he deliberately kept the initial number of conspirators small because he understood how previous rebellions had failed. Too many conspirators meant too many people who could alert the authorities.

There were many day-to-day types of resistance that African Americans participated in—whether it was going to illicit meetings in nearby swamps or aiding people who had escaped to the Great Dismal Swamp (one county away) to live there in free communities. Turner’s uprising even prompted numerous smaller rebellions among the people he encountered along the way.

Historian Scot French has suggested that the support for the revolt was widespread among the enslaved of neighboring counties. Indeed, after the rebellion had been smashed, Nat Turner hid out in a Southampton cave. Someone fed him and kept him alive, and it took an extensive intelligence network among the enslaved to carry that out. Turner reciprocated the support he found among the disinherited: In his confession, “he did not mention a single enslaved person in connection with the rebellion whom officials had not already executed.”

In the wake of Turner’s revolt, White mobs began roaming the territory, meting out retribution upon any Black people they happened to run into. Over 100 Black people, both free and enslaved, were murdered at the hands of White mobs. Over a dozen Black men had their heads cut off and impaled on spikes outside Jerusalem. After Turner was hanged for his crimes, his body was dismembered and passed to members of the public as curios.

So, the violence was not contingent, but the particulars of Turner’s uprising and its effects were. In the words of one historian, “what began as a small group of enslaved men went on to force the question of slavery’s viability in the Virginia General Assembly”—in a way other rebellions had not. After the rebellion, Governor Floyd suggested gradual emancipation and forced relocation of all Virginians of African ancestry. His concern stemmed from fear of slave revolts and rebellions. He may have wanted an end to slavery, but he didn’t want a beginning to racial equality. For him and many other White Virginians, it was simply impossible to imagine a Virginia without African Americans—their place in the social hierarchy and their labor. Could the answer and solution have been removal?

In the end, the Virginia house of delegates brought a motion to vote on the question of whether it was “expedient” to discuss emancipation as a response. It failed by a vote of 73 to 58. Instead, the legislature doubled down on restrictions on slavery. It banned religious meetings by Black

people without Whites present. After the debates, the issue of slavery went right back to being a forbidden topic in Virginia politics. In 1836, enslavers in the House of Representatives succeeded in passing a gag rule, which prevented even the discussion of slavery in Congress.

But with the alteration of a few votes—based on a shift in redistricting or a different decision by Turner about when to cross a river—Virginia could have opened up the possibility of discussing emancipation as a political and legal reality in 1832. What might have happened then?

## Contingent Effects

The Virginia debates took place just a few years after New York's emancipation effort finally took effect in 1827. New York had a sizable enslaved population. Even then, New York's emancipation law had taken decades between its passage in 1798 and the arrival of full freedom. In the meantime, many enslaved people in New York had been sold by enslavers further south. That probably would have been the fate of many of Virginia's enslaved had any emancipatory scheme passed. Indeed, the governor of Ohio in the wake of Nat Turner called for new laws to prevent free Blacks from moving there.

Slavery was the backbone of Virginia's entire social structure, but enslavement benefitted the plantations in the East far more than in the West. So what if they split the state of Virginia at the Blue Ridge, as some people at the time suggested, allowing the pro-slavery east to go its own way and the efforts of the west to create a White republic to go theirs.

One possibility were Turner's rebellion to have succeeded is that it could have inspired a bargaining point between White and enslaved Virginians. Virginia ultimately split over the question of slavery during the Civil War era, ultimately ending in the creation of West Virginia as a state. Thus, it's highly plausible that were Turner to have been able to hold out in Virginia long enough, these debates could have become much less about the hypothetical prevention of a future potential revolt down the road and more about containing a very real threat in the present. Maybe those far western Virginia counties would have split off sooner.

When West Virginia did break away from Virginia during the Civil War, it did try to create an all-White republic: White legislators originally included a clause in their constitution forbidding slaves or free Black Americans from moving to the state. If Turner had reached Jerusalem in 1831, the western half of the state might have bailed out, which would have made East Virginia into a very proslavery state. Like South Carolina, it would lack any significant western mountain country where slavery remained less common and less popular among White voters. That kind of East Virginia might have joined South Carolina in 1850—the first time South Carolina tried to secede from the Union. That would have put the fate of the Union and a Civil War under the direction of Millard Fillmore, who once ran for president on a promise to kick Catholics out of the US.

More importantly, the rebellion of Nat Turner was at a time when Black Virginians had terrifying what-ifs cutting through their lives. They wondered, What if those imprisoned start giving up other names? What if other people are implicated here? What if the local justices don't contain the extra-legal killing of African Americans in the county? Free people of color wondered, What if they don't let us live here anymore? But they continued to resist slavery by finding ways to survive, although Nat Turner did not survive the slave rebellion he began.

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10

# What If JFK SURVIVED?

It's the moment that defined a generation—when an assassin's bullet took out the young and idealistic American president John F. Kennedy. Some say it's the day that everything changed. But is it? If Kennedy had not traveled to Dallas on November 22, 1963, US history would look very different. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 would not happen, and neither would the Voting Rights Act of 1965. There may have been subsequent legislation, perhaps in the 1970s, but it was primarily the death of Kennedy that allowed that legislation to be passed. From voting rights and the Cold War to the war in Vietnam, would Kennedy's legacy have been any different if he had survived? What else might have changed on that terrible day in Dallas? In this lecture, you will ask, "What if John F. Kennedy survived?"

## What If?

It is 1969. An embittered and visibly aged President John F. Kennedy leaves the White House for the last time as student protesters hurl rocks and garbage at the presidential motorcade. Years of protests over Vietnam have cracked his image, and his failure to pass any serious civil rights legislation has left his political coalition in tatters. There is no Civil Rights Act or Voting Rights Act to hail as accomplishments of the 1960s. It is remembered as a dark decade of hard-bitten Cold Warriors—not the apex of civil rights.

This is the world without November 22, 1963.



## Contingent Factors

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The assassination of President Kennedy is one of the most visible contingent events in US history. Advisors suggested that Kennedy shouldn't make the Dallas trip: It might not be safe to visit a segregated city with his civil rights record. There were still signs in public spaces with his picture marked "traitor" or "wanted." But Kennedy went, the newspapers published his route, and he drove there in an open-top convertible. If any of those things had changed, then perhaps Kennedy's motorcade would not have entered Dealey Plaza and into history.

Kennedy was planning to run for reelection in 1964, and he particularly planned to run on his record against communism. Had he lived—if Oswald had missed or Kennedy had decided not to go to Dallas—would anything have been different? Would a second Kennedy term have been different than Lyndon B. Johnson's tumultuous and historic 5 years in the White House?

In the 1990s, Kennedy's own secretary of defense, Robert McNamara, suggested that had Kennedy lived, he would have taken troops out of Vietnam. Kennedy biographer, Fredrik Logevall, argued that Kennedy's personality would have gotten the US out of the war because he had "the more flexible and reflexive mind." But what was Kennedy's actual Vietnam policy in 1963? Was it more likely that he would have confronted communism in Vietnam as Johnson did or that he would have found a way to end US involvement?

## The US and Vietnam

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US involvement in Vietnam goes back to World War II. During World War II, Japan occupied Vietnam and kicked out the French. Vietnamese nationals wanted the Japanese out, and the US wanted that, too. So, American intelligence services were in contact with and supporting Ho Chi Min and resistance against the Japanese. After the war, things changed. France wanted back into its Vietnamese colony; Vietnamese nationalists didn't want that. From the American point of view, France was an important part of the emerging Cold War alliance against the Soviet Union. Thus, the American administration under Harry Truman decided

it needed to back France in reasserting control in Vietnam, cutting its ties with the Vietnamese nationalists. The French war effort in Vietnam, from 1945 up to the mid-1950s, was bankrolled by the US.

The prevailing doctrine in US intelligence and defense communities in the 1950s and '60s was the domino theory. This was the notion that if one country falls to communism, nearby countries will also begin to fall to communism—like a chain of dominoes. Whether or not this theory was correct, it made for a mindset in Washington that led to a policy of containment. President Kennedy's posture on Vietnam was containment—in other words, not allowing communism to spread into other areas. But the hawks within the federal government wanted to take a different approach. They wanted to not only contain communism but to stop it outright.

Vietnam was not on many Americans' radar in the early 1960s. The big, terrifying challenge was Castro's Cuba, and Kennedy certainly stood firm there, taking the world to the brink of nuclear conflict during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. Kennedy received a huge bump in popularity after he found a way out of the crisis, and in fact, when Khrushchev took his missiles out of Cuba, Kennedy rather silently took US missiles out of Turkey. It was part of a number of quiet moves he made between 1962 and 1963. He also negotiated a removal of American military advisors from the Southeast Asian nation of Laos—right next door to Vietnam. And in 1963, he signed a limited Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty with the Soviet Union.

However, as historian Diane Kunz points out, withdrawal from Laos and the Test-Ban Treaty left Kennedy with less room to maneuver in Vietnam because he was a staunch anti-communist. He needed to show that he was still committed to countering the communist threat. If he could no longer confront Cuba, why not send American troops to support an anti-communist regime somewhere far away, in a place that most Americans had never heard of?

Kennedy had succeeded in getting Soviet nuclear missiles out of Cuba, but part of that deal was hands off Cuba and Fidel Castro. So, communism still had a foothold in the Western Hemisphere. Kennedy was concerned

about his perception as a dynamic leader, and if he couldn't achieve a victory in the Americas, he might well have looked for victory somewhere else, like Southeast Asia.

Kennedy ran for president as the candidate who would be tough on communism; he thought Eisenhower and Nixon hadn't done enough. Moreover, Kennedy and Johnson had the same foreign policy team—including Dean Rusk (secretary of state), McGeorge Bundy (national security advisor), and McNamara (secretary of defense). The men advising Kennedy in 1963 were the same people advising Johnson in 1965, and all of them defended the idea of increasing the American military commitment. Rusk even warned Johnson about the collapse of Christian civilization if the US failed in Vietnam. The men who laid out militarization as the best option to Johnson were also the same men laying out militarization to Kennedy. In 1995, McNamara said Kennedy would have ended Vietnam; in 1965, McNamara was telling Johnson to commit more troops to Vietnam.

On the day of his death, Kennedy was scheduled to give a speech in Dallas after driving through town. That speech included a promise that Americans “dare not weary of the task” in South Vietnam, no matter how “risky and costly” that task might be. Kennedy was planning to recommit himself to Vietnam on the day he died—November 22, 1963.

Therefore, it appears that Kennedy's plans for Vietnam were not significantly different from Johnson's, and therefore his death did not affect American policy there. But there is something that would have changed if Kennedy had lived: civil rights.

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## Contingent Effects

If President John F. Kennedy had not traveled to Dallas on November 22, 1963, US history would look very different, particularly in the area of civil rights and other domestic programs. He likely would have won reelection in 1964, and he would still have Johnson on his ticket. He'd still carry Texas as well as some of the states that favored him and Johnson being on the same ticket.

But the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 would not have happened. There may have been subsequent legislation, perhaps in the 1970s, but it was primarily the death of Kennedy that allowed that legislation to be passed. Civil rights leaders—Martin Luther King Jr., Fannie Lou Hamer, Stokely Carmichael, Fred Shuttlesworth, and many others—had long put pressure on Kennedy. Kennedy resisted. Even after Birmingham police turned pressure cannons on Black children protesting in Alabama, Kennedy proceeded slowly.

In July 1963, Kennedy addressed the nation on civil rights—the first president to do so. Immediately afterward, his domestic agenda stalled in Congress. In September 1963, civil rights was number six in the White House memoranda. Kennedy supported civil rights, but it was not the top of his agenda. Johnson's unexpected accession to the presidency provoked anxiety among civil rights leaders. They did not know he would stake his presidency on civil rights. But Johnson made a clear choice—a break from Kennedy's go-slow policy.

When Walter Cronkite announced to the world that Kennedy died at 1 o'clock, civil rights activists thought civil rights legislation was dead on arrival. However, they quickly saw that Johnson was a far more skillful political maneuverer than they expected, and they observed that he would advance civil rights legislation because it was palatable to the American electorate and was Kennedy's priority. So, those fears were alleviated.

Three days after the assassination, Johnson read a proposal for his new presidency from Democratic dealmaker Jesse Unruh:

The fight should be made now—spectacularly.  
 ... President Johnson cannot be seriously further  
 hurt by a strong civil rights stance since Kennedy  
 absorbed most of the shock of opposition.  
 President Johnson can be hurt, however, by any  
 sign which can be misconstrued as hesitation.

Unruh pleaded and Johnson listened, arguing that Democrats, minority voters, and Americans in all northern and western states wanted the legislation. To win their support—and to get enthusiastic democratic

support—Johnson had to “secure civil rights legislation or appear as the defeated, but undaunted champion of such proposals.” This seems to be an unexpected, contingent development—that a mild Dixiecrat from Texas would pursue civil rights very aggressively.



This may seem like a dour note to end on: The civil rights successes of the 1960s only happened because Johnson became president by accident? But remember that the civil rights victories of 1964 and 1965 really did happen. One of the great moments of American history, when the United States took a huge step toward proving that its founding principles of liberty were not a dream. A great achievement is no less praiseworthy because it is contingent.

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