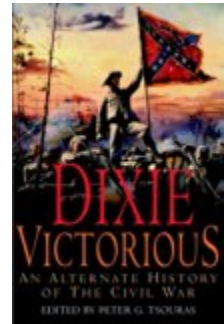


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Peter G. Tsouras, ed. *Dixie Victorious: An Alternate History of the Civil War*. Pennsylvania: Stackpole Books, 2004. 272 pp. \$18.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-85367-595-9.

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## Second Guesses

Historians usually sniff at counterfactual questions. When an undergraduate raises her hand and begins her question with “What would have happened if ...” I usually prepare for my pat response: “Historians have enough trouble figuring out what happened. I can’t even begin to speculate what if.” This usually gets a laugh, dodges the question, and allows me a quick escape from a free-wheeling, free-associative, fifty-minute response.

However, when I dodge these questions, I dodge my younger self. Counterfactual questions were the spice of my undergraduate academic life. Before taking a spectator’s seat to the academic skirmishes and battles that filled my graduate seminars, I engaged history as a delicate narrative where every action led ultimately to now. This narrative informed my present. Speculating as to alternative narratives and their effect on my world was par the course for late-night bull sessions in dorm rooms and diners. Counterfactual speculation brought the past and the present into clearer view.

Peter G. Tsouras, editor of *Dixie Victorious: An Alternate History of the Civil War*, cultivates this speculation and has turned it into a cottage industry of “alternate” histories of the Second World War, the Cold War, and now the Civil War. Though Tsouras never explicitly states the value of these alternate histories in his introduction, he implies that counterfactual questions give us greater insight into the factual past. Unfortunately, the authors of *Dixie Victorious* do so with only mixed results. Tsouras himself understands that counterfactual histories live or die by their plausibility. In his chapter

“Confederate Black and Gray: A Revolution in the Minds of Men,” Tsouras speculates what might have happened had Jefferson Davis and his cabinet heeded the suggestions of Major General Patrick Cleburne and recruited African Americans into the Confederate armies in return for their freedom. In reality, Davis suppressed Cleburne’s Manifesto of 1864 and African Americans were only (and hardly) used by the Confederacy in the waning and desperate last days of the conflict. However, Tsouras speculates that African American troops might have made the difference diplomatically and militarily and goes so far as to imagine a Battle of Kennesaw Mountain where William T. Sherman is killed and the Confederacy victorious. This imagined victory comes on the heels of England’s recognition of the Confederate States of America (CSA) in return for gradual African American emancipation. With British recognition and enlarged armies, the Confederacy wins the war.

Upon short telling, this all sounds rather unhinged. However, Tsouras has embedded his imagined Civil War in empirical evidence. Not only did Cleburne’s Manifesto exist, but prominent Confederate leaders like Robert E. Lee made similar recommendations late in the war. In a letter dated January 11, 1865 to Andrew Hunter, the prosecuting attorney during John Brown’s trial, Lee suggested offering freedom to all slaves who enlisted and, therefore, “to relieve our white population to some extent.”[1] For Tsouras, Davis’s intransigence towards Cleburne’s suggestion was a case of a civilian government ignoring the sound opinion of military leaders. If only the Davis administration had been wedded more to

Southern sovereignty than to the moribund institution of slavery, the result could have been much different. Tsouras even imagines a Voting Rights Bill of 1896 made necessary by the growing economic power of millions of free slaves. This, in turn, leads to the gradual disappearance of slavery all together by the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

Though incredible, Tsouras's speculative exercise leads one to some illuminations about the historical record itself: there were at least a few military officers in the CSA who were able to disconnect Southern identity from the existence of slavery, an authentic recruitment of slaves into the military in return for freedom might have led to greater civil rights (not so unlike the effect of the world wars on American civil rights in the twentieth century). It is at least interesting to think about.

However, many of the other counterfactual histories in *Dixie Victorious* are harder to swallow. In this regard, their implausibility makes them problematic for even speculative exercises and, therein, insufficient for illumination of the past and the present. For example, Wade Dudley's chapter entitled "Ships of Iron and Wills of Steel: The Confederate Navy Triumphant" imagines the hapless Confederate Secretary of the Navy, Stephen Mallory, as the "Southern Themistocles" for convincing the Confederate cabinet to create a victorious fleet of ironclads that ultimately break the Northern blockade, threaten the populations of Philadelphia and New York, and, on May 15, 1862, force Lincoln to "slump ... at his desk" upon reading of McClellan's surrender of the starving Army of the Potomac River and Great Britain's recognition of the CSA (p. 63). However, the means by which the South builds this remarkable fleet without an industrial base requires Dudley to imagine daring Southern raids on Northern supplies, entire populations dedicated to the new, iron-clad navy, and Britain's diplomatic recognition without eliminating the factor that kept it from recognizing the Confederacy in reality: slavery.

Here, the fine line between counterfactual history and historical fiction has been crossed. To make his case, Dudley fills his alternate history with an imagined dialogue between Mallory and Jefferson Davis, battles that assume the existence of an iron-clad force beyond the South's economic means, and fictional citations (helpfully highlighted by asterisks) that make up twenty-six of his thirty-one foot notes. This type of counterfactual history does not pass the plausibility test, but is not very good fiction either. It is not factual enough to be an interesting alternate history, yet it is not creative enough with

character and plot to be good historical fiction. Therefore, it is merely frustrating.

There are a few other quibbles I have with *Dixie Victorious*. All of the chapters have real and "alternate" footnotes. These alternate footnotes are designated with an asterisk, but ordered with the real footnotes. However, there seems to be no standard as to what makes an interesting or useful alternate footnote. Tsouras uses them sparingly and well (he even constructs titles for texts and dates of publication that are historiographically sound—for example, one can sense a turn to more social history in his alternate citations from the mid- to late twentieth century). Dudley, however, uses so many alternate footnotes that they, themselves, are almost entirely fictional. A standard for this interesting exercise in speculative citations would be useful (and should be stated in the introduction).

Also, at the end of each chapter the each author writes a short section on what happened in "reality." These sections are not particularly illuminating. In fact, one is tempted to skip them entirely as they feel secondary to the chapters themselves. However, ultimately, a counterfactual is only interesting in the context of the history itself. Without a clear idea of what happened, a counterfactual is not even a counterfactual, as the facts themselves are unclear. These chapters would benefit from an extended analysis of the history as it happened at the beginning of each chapter. These introductions could raise the alternate questions that the exercise in counterfactual history seeks to answer.

Finally, the book lacks an index. This is frustrating as it would be interesting to cross-reference the different counterfactual histories with certain historical events and individuals. How does one author treat Jefferson Davis differently than another? How does each author speculate differently about the British and their diplomacy with the CSA? It is difficult to answer these questions without an index.

*Dixie Victorious* is an interesting exercise with uneven results. Some of its chapters might be of some use in a general survey course as a way of opening student interest into the effects of historical events. It also might be interesting to the knowledgeable amateur historian of the Civil War, but to an amateur generalist the analysis of real events is too thin to make the alternate histories in each chapter very interesting or illuminating.

Note

[1]. A copy of this letter can be found online at [LettersAndrewHunter.htm](http://www.sonofthesouth.net/leefoundation/LettersAndrewHunter.htm).  
<http://www.sonofthesouth.net/leefoundation/>

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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