Imagination Meets Reality:
Writing a Counterfactual History of the American Civil War

In June of 1959 the editors of Look approached McKinlay Kantor – the Pulitzer Prize winning author of Andersonville – and asked him if he would write an essay explaining what might have happened if the South had won the war. The editors were searching for an unusual way to commemorate the centennial of the American Civil War. Kantor, who was already in the middle of a major writing project, was skeptical of the idea that one could write a fictional account of America’s most revered war. But after receiving assurances that he would have a free editorial hand in determining the article’s content, he agreed to give it a try. The resulting essay, which appeared in the November 22 1960 issue of Look, was touted on magazine’s cover as “an amazing version of history as it did not happen – the most provocative article on the Civil War in 100 years.”

Kantor decided he would take the reader into a world where the Confederate States of America were about to celebrate the centennial of their independence. The article was written as if the author were a Confederate historian in 1960. Our American Civil War,” he began, “ended abruptly in July, 1863, with the shattering of the two most puissant armies which the North had been able to muster and marshal.” From there the narrative proceeded to chronicle the history of the Confederate States of America over
the first 100 years of its existence, complete with citations to works on the successful rebellion.

Reminiscing years later about his decision to make the article into a fictional historical narrative, Kantor recalled that “a guess was made that everybody and his dog who read that particular issue of *Look* would have his own personal theories and that they would be at variance with my own.” Moreover, he predicted, they would all be writing him letters. And so they did. Among the many letters and telegrams – which included one from former president Harry Truman – was a telegram from a 17 year old boy who asked the author “Don’t you know that Ulysses S. Grant survived the Civil War and lived to become President of the United States? How dare you call yourself a *historian*?” Kantor had inadvertently become a pioneer of what we today call “alternative” or “counterfactual” history.

Forty five years after it appeared, *If the South Had Won the Civil War* remains a true classic among all genres of “what if” history. Several years ago, when I began writing a counterfactual history that culminated in 2005 with the publication of *The Confederate States of America: What Might Have Been*, I revisited Kantor’s response to the question posed by the editors of *Look* magazine in 1960. The first thing that struck me was that his essay was not only one of the most imaginative efforts to show how the South could have won the war; it was also one of the few historical narratives that examined how the Confederate victory would have reshaped American history. There were, to be sure, some differences between his counterfactual interpretation and the one that I was constructing almost a half century later. This is hardly surprising; by its nature, counterfactual history can never be shown to be “true” or “untrue”. One can debate the relative “plausibility” of one or another alternative scenario, but it is impossible to *prove* that what did not happen did not happen. In the end, the only way to evaluate a counterfactual historical account is to offer one’s own version of the story and hope that readers find it more plausible in some broadly defined sense than that presented by other writers. In this essay I will reconsider Kantor’s story in terms of when it was written and then look at the way a counterfactual story of a Southern victory would be written today.

One of the things that still sets Kantor’s account apart from almost every other effort to examine the implications of a Southern victory in the Civil War, is that he recognized the need to break the question “What if the South Won?” into several smaller
counterfactual questions. The first of these lesser questions is how could the South have won that war? A sizeable body of literature, dating all the way back to the years immediately after the war, insists there was no way for the South to win. As recently as 1992 Shelby Foote, a well-known chronicler of the war, claimed in an interview for the acclaimed PBS Civil War documentary edited by Ken Burns that the South “never had a chance to win that war.” Foote’s pessimistic assessment of the Confederate military prospects was hardly unusual. It reflects what I call a “counterfactual pessimism” that pervades the scholarship of virtually every historian who has written about Civil War battles. The North, according to this view, simply had too many men and supplies for the South to win.

Kantor quickly dispels such pessimism by introducing two small but significant changes into his counterfactual account of the war. He begins by describing the death of Union General Ulysses Grant in a horse accident while leading his troops toward Jackson, Mississippi in May of 1863. Upon Grant’s death, command of the Union forces in Mississippi falls to General John McClernand, whose incompetent leadership causes Grant’s bold plan to capture Vicksburg from the east to come completely unraveled. The Union army suffers a series of disastrous setbacks and eventually surrenders to the Confederates on June 30, 1863. Within a few days of that humiliation, the Union cause suffers an even greater disaster just outside the town of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. This time it is the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia under Robert E. Lee that annihilates the Union Army of the Potomac. Confronted with the destruction of their two largest armies, Northern resistance crumbles. After a period of turmoil throughout the North, the United States and the Confederacy sign the Washington Treaty which formally ends the war on December 16, 1863.

It could have happened that way. Indeed, most writers who have imagined scenarios in which the South is victorious do so by having the war end with a glorious Confederate victory – most often at either Gettysburg or Antietam. Yet, while it is possible, this approach has always bothered me because it requires a very unlikely chain of events to actually end the war at this point. There were virtually no major battles of the Civil War resulting in a victory so decisive that one army surrendered to the other on the spot. Horrific casualties and the intensity of fighting typically left both armies too exhausted to press any advantage one or the other might have gained from the fighting. Tired and battered, both armies survived to fight another day. To imagine
that Confederate forces could force the surrender of the two largest Union armies in the space of a month stretches the limits of credulity. Nor is it clear that even the loss of these two armies would bring about the collapse of resistance in the North. The historical record shows that both sides suffered major military setbacks at one time or another, yet those reverses did not cause either government to throw in the towel. The only way that a Southern victory at Antietam or Gettysburg could have ended the war would be if those victories were sufficiently overwhelming that Britain or France were willing to pressure the Union into accepting a mediated peace. Kantor elected to not involve the European powers at this point, however the idea of foreign intervention at this pivotal point in the war has become more popular among writers of counterfactual scenarios of the war in the last couple of decades.
to happen as long as Abraham Lincoln is president. But Lincoln was up for re-election in November, 1864. Simply put, the most obvious way for the South to win the war would be for the rebels to create a bloody stalemate in both the east and the west. Imagine a situation where, rather than the overwhelming victories over two Union Armies described by Kantor, the Confederates enjoyed more modest successes that succeeded in slowing the Northern advances in the Mississippi and Tennessee Valleys, and enabled them to conduct a successful raid into Pennsylvania in July and August of 1863. In that case, the situation facing the Confederates in the Fall of 1863 might look like Map 1. Discouraged by the inability of Lincoln’s administration to put down the rebellion, Northern voters would elect a new president in the fall of 1864 who was willing to negotiate an armistice with the Confederate government.

McKinlay Kantor understood that Confederate victory must rest on military successes in the West as well as the victories of the Army of Northern Virginia in the East. Moreover, unlike most writers, who end their story with the signing of an armistice, Kantor pushed on to explore the treaty that would be necessary to actually end the war. “The Southern States, by act of conflict, had annulled a distasteful marriage to the original Federal Government,” he wrote, “but the establishment of their national independence had in no way resolved the cumulative problems of individual commonwealths’ cooperation within a centralized structure.” The most immediate problem would be whether the slave states that had stayed with the Union would now join the victorious Confederacy. Kantor conjectured that the victorious rebels would concede Missouri and the new state of West Virginia to the North, but that Kentucky, most of Maryland and the District of Columbia would all join the Confederacy. The result was thirteen Confederate and twenty two Northern states. The Confederates renamed the former capital of the United States the District of Dixie and made it the capitol of their new nation; the federal capitol was eventually moved to Columbus Ohio – which was renamed Columbia. In a final twist of irony Texas seceded from the Confederacy in 1878. That, however, was the limit of political disintegration on either side of the Mason-Dixon Line. At the end of the 19th century what had once been the United States of America had been split into three independent nations.

While there is ample room for debate about the details, Kantor’s alternative history of how the South won the Civil war has actually withstood the test of time rather well. This brings us to the question of how the success of the Confederate revolution
might change the course of history not only for Southerners, but for the rest of the world as well. The editors of *Look* magazine asked Kantor to write his counterfactual account of the Civil War as part of the commemoration of that war. An overriding theme of that commemoration was the essential unity in American culture which made any long-term break up of the Union formed in 1790 improbable. Americans, in this view, shared a common republican vision forged in the revolutionary struggle against Britain and the early decades of independence. Kantor’s scenario following the Confederate victory reflects this “consensus view” of American history. In his counterfactual world, leaders on both sides of the new boundaries begin to make conciliatory comments about their recent opponents almost as soon as the fighting ends.

At this point it becomes clear why Kantor chose a scenario that would quickly end the war in 1863. It is important to his story of the postbellum period that the costs of war are sufficiently muted that the two countries will eventually consider reunification. This occurs with blinding speed. In 1884 James Birdseye McPherson, president of the counterfactual United States proclaims in his inaugural address that “had the hideous attrition of the campaigns in 1862 and 1863 been extended – or perhaps even intensified – for another two years, the vigor of the young population upon our Continent might have been bled into whiteness. … We must embrace those patriots of the South, no longer to be typified as dissident and rebellious, and with them declare: ‘Give thanks to God that it ended when it did!’” This spirit of reconciliation would grow and eventually lead to cooperation among the countries during World War I; a joining of interests that stirred Confederate President Woodrow Wilson to champion what had become known in the South as the consolidation movement. During World War II, soldiers from the USA, CSA and Texas all fought together once again. By 1960, the pressures for unification had grown to the point where, according to Kantor’s narrator, “the reassembling of American power … had become an almost religious necessity.”

Amid the political chaos and international turmoil of the first decade of the twenty-first century, Kantor’s optimistic scenario that bygones would be bygones a few decades after the Civil War and that a reunited coalition of American power would inevitably rise to dominate the world seems almost naïve. However, we must remind ourselves that *anything* is possible in an alternative or counterfactual world. To Americans basking in the afterglow of a victory in World War II, the idea that the Americans would be able put their differences behind them in the years after 1865 and reunite their divided country
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seemed not only plausible but uplifting. Kantor’s theme played to a deep-seated sense at the time of the war’s centennial that *reunion* would always triumph over division. The centennial was a celebration of the success of the United States of America at the midpoint of the twentieth century.

Four and a half decades later, most historians seem somewhat less sanguine about the possible implications of a Confederate victory. By the 1990s the prevailing view of the struggle between the states was a contest between two regions with very different “visions” of where American society should go. What some have termed the “Revolution of 1860” by the Southern states was not the result of politicians who misunderstood the sentiments of their constituents; it reflected deep seated regional antagonisms that dated back to the creation of the nation in 1790. Southerners went to war in 1861 in an effort to break free from what they saw as the growing domination of the Northern states. Fearful of the consequences of that domination, the South fought to create an independent nation based on slavery and staple agriculture. Had they succeeded in their effort, there is little reason to suppose that they would immediately seek to reunite the fractured union. More likely is a scenario where the Confederates seek a partnership with their European allies, Britain and France in an effort to strengthen their position vis a vis a northern neighbor still smarting from the onus of defeat.

Another question Kantor raises is the future of slavery in the Confederacy. Here again, the accepted wisdom of 1960 ran counter to the views of most historians today. Kantor argues that slavery in the Confederacy would come to an end fairly soon after the war. Emancipation, he argued, “was the trend of the nineteenth century and could no longer be ignored.” Consequently he projects that the Confederate Congress would approve a “Liberation Act” by 1885. This may have seemed plausible enough to historians in 1960, most of whom believed that slavery was an uneconomic burden to the South. However, scholarship since that time strongly suggests that American slavery was an extremely profitable business, and that the value of slave property was a major incentive for Southerners to fight a war to protect their property. Slavery might indeed eventually die out in the Confederacy, but someone would have a very difficult time convincing the planters to part with their valuable investment in chattel labor. The global forces to eliminate slavery and the slave trade mentioned by Kantor would have to be reinforced by more concrete economic forces before the Confederacy would be
nudged towards some sort of emancipation. Independence by itself would not create those forces, but it is possible that conditions in the world market for Southern staples could provide strong incentives for Southerners to emancipate their slave labor.

When I present my counterfactual account of the Confederate States of America to an audience, one of the first questions asked is invariably “So where would we be today if the South had won”? As we have seen, Kantor’s answer in 1960 was that the United States would be getting back together again. I do not have a clear answer where we would be in 2005, because there are so many counterfactual worlds that could have emerged over the course of the 20th century. Choosing which one is “most likely” involves a flight of imagination that takes us too far beyond what we actually “know”. One of the great challenges is how to combine imagination with a sense of reality or plausibility as we reconstruct our fictional history. Struggling with the tension between these often competing pressures, I came up with the following recipe for what I call Counterfactual History Pudding:

Ingredients:

2 parts historical plausibility
1 part common sense
1 part imagination

Mix ingredients until they are blended into a smooth even texture. If the texture seems uneven or coarse, try a little more common sense. If the pudding seems gray and boring, add more imagination.

Carefully pour ingredients into a mold shaped in the form of a well-defined historical setting.

Allow to set until pudding has firmly jelled. Be careful not to remove pudding from historical setting.

Serve with a large dose of skepticism.

In order to extend his imaginary world to 1960 Kantor infused his story with a very heavy dose of imagination that led him further and further beyond the limits of historical reality. Preferring to stay closer to the actual path of history, I am content to describe a counterfactual world in 1900 where two nations occupy the area that was once the United States of America. Even by that date we would see a very different world from what actually existed at the end of the nineteenth. Consider the geopolitical features presented in Map 2, where the coastline of the United States ends at Baltimore,
and the Caribbean and most of South America is controlled by Britain and the Confederacy. This would almost certainly result in a far more pessimistic prognostication for 1960 than the optimistic scenario McKinlay Kantor imagined in the *Look* Magazine article. Does that make it any more accurate? Not necessarily. One of the joys of writing counterfactual history is that there is no way to judge imaginary scenarios as “right” or “wrong.”

Map 2: A Counterfactual North American circa 1900

One reason the Civil War – or any war for that matter – offers a wonderful arena in which to explore the “what ifs” history is that all wars offer ample scope for counterfactual “chefs” to adjust their recipes to suit their tastes. So readers – whether gourmet consumers of counterfactual history, or novices tasting the fare for the first time – should pull up a chair; kick back your heels and enjoy the meal!

Author’s Note: Roger Ransom is Professor of History and Economics, Emeritus at the University of California, Riverside. His book, The Confederate States of America: What Might Have Been was published by W.W. Norton in spring, 2005. McKinlay Kantor’s article If the South Had Won the Civil War appeared in the November 22, 1960 issue of Look Magazine. The article was published by Bantam Books in 1961 and republished in 1994 as a Forge Paperback with a foreword by Harry Turtledove and “An Historical Inversion” by Kantor discussing the genesis of his work. All of the quotations in the text were taken from the 1994 Edition.