

Chit Chat Club

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In deciding what to talk about tonight, I am reminded of Michael Wilding, the movie actor. When asked to comment on his impending marriage to Elizabeth Taylor to become her eighth husband he remarked that he thought knew what to do. His big problem was how to make it interesting. My subject tonight is historical and I will attempt to make it interesting. And a way to begin is by trying to define history.

The word history derives from the ancient Greek meaning enquiry or researches, a sort of narrative or story. Herodotus, the first recognized historian, defined his task as attempting to find the truth of past events in order to understand why they happened. However, mine is not a talk about true past events but to speculate about them and to stimulate your imagination. I will propose tonight to give you several examples of counterfactual alternative versions of historical events that

have occurred to me over not a few hours of non-professional speculation. I will not dwell too much on controversial military or political decisions, decisions that continue to challenge historians.

For example: what if the Assyrians had destroyed the Jews in their siege of Jerusalem as they had destroyed other similar peoples in their conquest of Asia Minor in 721 BC? Or, what if the Persians had destroyed the Greek civilization by defeating the Athenian fleet at Salamis in 480 BC? Without a siege lifting plague, there would probably be no Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity or Islam. And probably there would be no Western Civilization as we know it, had there not been an unexpected wind shift favoring the Greeks at Salamis. There would be no English language as we know it if the incompetent Roman general, Varus had been able to defeat and Romanize the German barbarians in the Totenberg Forest in 9 AD. As a result of this, the Germans permanently stopped Roman

civilization at the Rhine. It is reasonable to suspect that there would be no United States or Canada if Francis Drake and his captains and a fortuitous storm had not destroyed the Spanish Armada and saved England and Protestantism from inevitable destruction in 1588. A massive and probably successful Spanish invasion from across the Channel in was prevented. As with many conquerors both before and since, Napoleon had only to recognize his limits. Permanent glory and European peace was in his grasp after his massive victory at Austerlitz. With continental Europe at his feet in 1805 however, he could not resist invading Spain and where he lost one army and then, sealing his inevitable defeat he attempted his ill-advised and needless invasion of Russia.

The what if's continue. In 1862 the Civil War was going badly for the North. A wrapper around a packet of lost cigars accidentally found by a Union scout contained details of Robert E. Lee's secret plans to invade the Maryland and invest

Washington. That information resulted in the Union Army stopping the Confederates at the bloody battle of Antietam. What If Stonewall Jackson. Lee's best commander, had not been accidentally shot and mortally wounded by one of his own men? With his help, Lee would, in all likelihood have won later at Gettysburg. A Confederate victory at either place would have led to European recognition of the Confederacy and in all likelihood, forced the Union to ask for terms. After four score and seven years, the United States would have been no more. Antietam gave Lincoln the confidence to issue the Emancipation Proclamation and Gettysburg made the ultimate defeat of the Confederacy a certainty.

To continue, what if Hitler had had more talent and had not been rejected as a young man by that art school in Vienna? Would painting have become his passion rather than nationalism and half-baked racism? Would he still have joined and later lead the Nazi Party in Germany? What if he had not

joined the Japanese to declare war on the United States on Dec 11, 1941? With the Soviet Union and Britain on the verge of defeat, that totally unnecessary step literally snatched German disaster and defeat from the jaws of victory in World War II. I could go on with many examples. Speculating historians, particularly military historians love this stuff. These are great stories that challenge the imagination.

As a non-historian and a physician, I tend to be somewhat more focused. Health or the lack of it is intriguing as a major mover in human events. Also, when unanticipated disasters such as floods, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions or epidemics occur affecting human lives, there are often major shifts in human affairs. What if Krakatoa had not blown up in 1883? Without that volcanic eruption which destroyed an entire island along with massive loss of life, Indonesia would not have become Moslem. Moslem missionaries seized on the event to discredit the prevailing Hindu gods and were able to convert virtually the

entire country overnight to become the largest Moslem nation on earth.

I already mentioned the plague that saved the fledgling Jewish kingdom from the Assyrians besieging Jerusalem. This was before the Babylonian Captivity and long before the Bible. One can only guess at the plague's identity. But it seems that God delivered the Hebrews then as he had in Egypt in the days of Moses, by killing off their enemies with disease. Epidemics of plague and other diseases swept through the ancient world causing massive death and corresponding disruptions in society and they continue to do so today. They characteristically affect armies of massed men but as in Pharaoh's Egypt, plagues also significantly affect civil populations as well.

Ancient plagues are known today by many literary references. For example, Thucydides described the Great Plague of Athens 430 BC, which killed 2/3 of the population and which markedly affected the course of the Peloponnesian War. The writer and

emperor Marcus Aurelius died in the Plague of Antoninus, 169 AD, that also cost some 2000 Roman lives a day. The epidemic of Cyprian 256 AD hastened the Christian conversion of Rome and North Africa. The finishing touch on the fall of ancient Rome was the terrible plague of Justinian in 540 AD, described by Procopius. That plague which began in Egypt reached Byzantium the next year where for months it killed as many as 10,000 a day for months. It spread to Europe, where it vitiated Justinian's attempt to restore Roman imperial power and ultimately led to the final conquest of Italy by the Lombards in 570. Bede described a plague that decimated Britain in 444 AD that prevented effective resistance to the successful invasion and conquest and takeover of the island by the invading Saxons. Although disease and epidemics were commonplace during the Dark Ages and beyond, the great plague of the Black Death in Europe in the 1340's and 50's is perhaps the most significant. 1/3 to 1/2 of the population of

Europe died. It killed an estimated 25 million people and was responsible for massive social disruption and is credited with the fall of feudalism. Feudalism had been a fairly successful and long-term social arrangement that served well the agrarian society of Europe for centuries. Probably carried by shipboard rats from the East, the Black Death first appeared in southern France it quickly spread northward and within a few years it affected the entire continent. It forced the English to call a five-year truce in their 100 Year War with the French. The massive die-off made feudal estates untenable without the labor to sustain them. Farms became sheep pastures. What workers remained demanded and received money wages. Prices went up and cities and towns began to grow and flourish with what became a transformed capitalist society. The plague was the incentive for Boccaccio to write *The Decameron*, setting a new course in literature.

Later, what if Spanish sailors on Columbus' ships and the Conquistadors had been healthy? The conquest of the Americas was facilitated by the epidemics of imported European diseases that attacked the immunologically naïve indigenous natives. No one knows how many Indians died of disease in North, Central and South America over the next 400 years as the result of this Columbian Exchange, but there was massive death. As result, the continent was rendered essentially open for the taking from the pitifully small remaining native population. The acute shortage of native labor for the burgeoning sugar plantations and gold and silver mines and later the cotton plantations led to the African slave trade. The subsequent involuntary importation of millions of Africans into the Americas who were relatively resistant to malaria and yellow fever permanently affected and continues to affect the course of history in the Western Hemisphere.

Although dealing with big subjects such as epidemics and other major catastrophes and their effect is dramatic and infinitely interesting, it is also intriguing to try to consider smaller but no less significant events and try to imagine what might have been, had things been different. Naturally the events that I have selected reflect my own interests. Anyone in this room can, I am sure come up with his own favorite examples of counterfactual history just as intriguing.

Shakespeare had Richard III say it: *A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!* Richard's horse is killed. Richard is killed. At Bosworth Field in 1485 the War of the Roses was finally over. The Tudor dynasty of the Welshman Henry IV and his descendants was established. Think of it! The English renaissance and the reigns of King Henry VIII and Queen Elizabeth I, the Protestant Reformation and the British Age of Exploration and the ascendancy of Britain to 400 years of world supremacy all can be traced to the death of a horse.

What if John Milton had not been blind? Would we have had *Paradise Lost*? We probably would not. His blindness, likely the result of painless and progressive glaucoma was untreatable in the 17 C. Although, it made Milton totally dependent, at the same time it afforded him particular insight. Milton's blindness might have affected his eyes but gave him a brilliant internal vision. He was also able to dictate his deathless epic poetry without any visual distraction.

At the risk of being too anglo-centric, consider the effects of smallpox on English royalty. Virtually unknown today through vaccination, smallpox was a highly infectious and lethal viral infection. Survivors were left terribly scarred and often disfigured. Even after she recovered from her attack, Queen Elizabeth was forced to wear a wig for the rest of her life.

After the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the importation of William and Mary from Holland, Queen Mary died of smallpox in 1694. Her death without offspring followed by William's led to

her sister Queen Anne taking the throne. Anne's only surviving child and heir, the seven-year-old Duke of Gloucester died of smallpox in 1700. Anne was the last of the Stuarts. In 1714 with the Act of Settlement, the English throne went to Protestant, George I imported from Hanover. The German Hanoverian dynasty started and continues to this day. The arrogance of George's grandson George III, and the brutality of his German mercenaries were important in convincing colonists in North America that they needed to be independent. This legacy of smallpox was the ultimate failure of British efforts to prevent and suppress the rebellion in colonial America and the subsequent establishment of an independent United States.

Disease, perhaps yellow fever or malaria or both decimated a frankly nationalistic Scottish attempt to colonize the Isthmus of Panama in the Darien Scheme of 1699. Disease along with poor planning and Spanish hostility brought an end to Scots pretensions at economic independence. The scheme that

projected an important and profitable port for transshipment across the Isthmus of Panama had been enthusiastically embraced across a broad spectrum of Scottish society. It's failure and the resulting widespread financial ruination of so many heavily invested Scots, led to a financial crisis in Edinburgh. In desperation the Scots agreed to the Act of Union in 1707. Thus the United Kingdom and the permanent end of Scottish independence resulted from the decimating effects of yellow fever and malaria in America.

The source of Beethoven's deafness is open to endless speculation. Whatever the cause, one can also speculate about what effect his deafness had on his music and on that of his followers. What if he could have actually heard his Ninth Symphony as his audience had? Perhaps his music would not have sounded as radical as it did. He might well not have been the musical pioneer that he turned out to be. The course of

nineteenth century romanticism might have been entirely different.

The climax of Napoleon's career was at Waterloo, his final defeat. His command of the field was much less than he had hoped likely because of his hemorrhoids. Inability to sit comfortably prevented his mounting a horse and being able to adequately direct his troops to overwhelm the outnumbered British under Wellington before the timely arrival of Marshall von Blucher and his Prussian reinforcements. It can be argued that Napoleon's days were numbered anyway. The French were clearly exhausted after years of war, but Napoleon's piles certainly helped defeat him.

Constant pain along with the superior German army led to the fall of Napoleon's pretentious nephew. Napoleon III was suffering from bladder stones during the Franco-Prussian War when the French suffered humiliating defeat in 1871.

Assuming military command for which he was totally

unprepared, he was captured and made prisoner of Field Marshal Moltke at Sedan. French defeat and the loss of Alsace-Lorraine resulted in French rancor and hostility that corrupted Franco-German relations for the next 70 years.

Bladder stones and painful urination thus helped to create the groundwork for the First World War.

In the United States, what if Lincoln had not attended Ford's Theater that fateful night in April 1865? Without his assassination, there is no doubt the Reconstruction of the South would have followed a different course. Perhaps the full realization of emancipation could have been achieved in the 19th Century. Instead of the vacillation of the weak and frequently inebriated Andrew Johnson. Lincoln's continued strong leadership certainly could have been decisive in the subsequent struggle for civil rights.

What if Woodrow Wilson had not suffered a stroke in the midst of his exhausting campaign for ratification of the Treaty of

Versailles and for American participation in the League of Nations? Could have our active involvement in the League following World War I, in some way prevented World War II 20 years later? Many historians think so.

A Political assassination in our own time also presents intriguing what if's. One can reasonably assume that World War I would have started without the assassination of the Heir Apparent to the Austro-Hungarian throne in 1914. However, consider this: what if Bobby Kennedy had not been assassinated? That very weak 25 Cal. bullet that Sirhan Sirhan shot into Bobby Kennedy's head in the middle of the 1968 Democratic Party primaries was not immediately fatal, unlike the rifle shot that had killed his brother. After being wounded, Bobby Kennedy was awake and talking and if he had been taken immediately to an appropriate hospital and treated properly, he could have easily survived without significant disability. As it was, in the confusion of the moment critical time was lost. Kennedy was

taken inadvertently to the wrong facility and by the time surgery was ultimately performed, it was too late. Richard Nixon in all likelihood would not have been elected that fall and the subsequent tragic course of events of the war in Viet Nam might not have followed. Needless to say there would not have been the scandal of Watergate and the permanent tarnishing of the American presidency.

In 1888 the 91-year-old Wilhelm I, the German Emperor died and his 57-year-old only son assumed the throne. Frederick III was an accomplished soldier who had distinguished himself in the Schleswig-Holstein, Austro-Prussian and Franco-Prussian Wars was a political liberal. A foe of Chancellor Bismarck, he wanted a free press and the German imperial autocracy replaced by a constitutional monarchy. His liberal ideas were encouraged and abetted by his wife Victoria, the oldest daughter of the British queen. Unfortunately for Germany and the rest of the world, after only 99 days Frederick was dead

and his arrogant anglophobic son became Kaiser Wilhelm II. The medical story is interesting. An inveterate cigar smoker for most of his life, the Crown Prince Frederick became aware of voice hoarseness about a year before he assumed the throne. Consultation with German specialists resulted in a diagnosis of laryngeal cancer. To cure him they recommended radical surgery, a laryngectomy, a new operation at the time. The prospect of complete and permanent loss of the Crown Prince's voice shocked and alarmed him and his wife. Further consultation was demanded and this time the English specialist Sir Morrell McKenzie was called in. After the famous German pathologist, Rudolph Virchow had evaluated several inconclusive biopsies, McKenzie recommended against surgery. This put him at odds with the German medical establishment, which precipitated a virulent controversy that continued long after the unfortunate royal patient, had died. In the meantime Frederick grew worse by the day and by the time the cancer

had become painfully obvious he had required a tracheostomy and was rendered voiceless anyway. By the time Frederick became kaiser he had only a short time to live, a true medical tragedy. What if Frederick had survived? A progressive liberal leadership of the nation would have been the result. A pompous pretentious reactionary obsessed with illusions of German power replaced a liberal. This example of medical misadventure had profound century-long effects. The resulting terrifying events of the 20th C. do not need to be detailed. It is certainly very likely that had the anglophobe, Wilhelm and his warped mind and withered arm not become Kaiser in 1888, the 19th C. naval race, German militarism and the first World War would not have occurred; neither would the Russian Revolution, the rise of German fascism and Hitler, the Second World War or the Holocaust. The entire 20th C. would have been radically different. Perhaps the loss of millions of lives could have been avoided. How many brilliant minds were lost on the battlefields

and in the death camps? How much genius was lost forever by Nazi fanaticism, we can only imagine? What if we could turn back the clock? Would we have the cure for cancer? Would we have the cure for the common cold? Would we have cold fusion? The lasting effects of Kaiser Frederick's hoarseness on mankind is a wonderful example of what if. Blame it on cigars!

This counterfactual approach to history can be a continuous succession of what if's. To take a micro as well as a macro view of injury and disease and their effects can make stories out of history. Unlike Miss Taylor who quickly shed the unfortunate Wilding, I hope you have found it interesting.