

What Ifs: Alternate Histories

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Entertainment

Midnight Facts for Insomniacs

Podcast Transcript

(Note: transcript consists of episode outline)

This episode is different. Normally we talk about things that have happened or are currently happening. In this episode we're talking about things that *never* happened. This was a landslide victory in the Discord poll btw, our subject today is alternate histories.

So I was initially excited about this episode but that was before I realized how challenging it would be. I'm used to reporting facts, not speculation, and it turns out that crafting credible alternate realities is actually tougher than it seems, because I feel a responsibility to always get the facts right, and there's no way to judge facts in this scenario; it's impossible to figure out the likelihood of something happening that didn't happen, because the likelihood ultimately is zero, and once you've cross that threshold and started extrapolating things that could have happened from things that didn't happen you're in La-La Land. But I feel good about the result. If you remember, last week I

predicted an imaginary *future* and that was fun and depressing, so it's not like I don't enjoy making stuff up as long as I get to use evidence to make informed and educated guesses. In fact, it's human nature to constantly speculate about what might be or what might have been. We like to make educated guesses. We like to make uneducated guesses too. Humans are rampant speculators. Alternate histories serve a variety of psychological functions, right? They can be comforting, like sure the world is crazy but imagine how much worse things could have been. That's been challenging lately, it seems like we always think we've hit rock bottom, and then life grabs a shovel. But it would be hard to debate the fact that most alternate histories in fiction and literature traditionally have been metaphorically or literally apocalyptic, and those are the more compelling ones for me. I'm a disaster thinker, and judging by the popularity of post apocalyptic science-fiction, I'm not alone. For thousands of years we've been imagining worst case scenarios, from on the beach to Mad Max to the hunger games. But alternate histories can also exist as grass-is-always-greener scenarios, lamenting missed opportunities, like if only Kennedy or MLK hadn't been shot, if the US had reacted differently to Covid, if there had never been a Vietnam war or the Star Wars prequels. The world could have been so much better. I blame at least twenty percent of the world's problems on Hayden Christensen. I

guess George is ultimately to blame. The alternate history genre goes back to at least a few years before the birth of Christ. I guess you could say that religious texts are the original alternate history, but they wouldn't qualify. They fail the credibility test. How crazy that the alternate history genre is technically more well researched and credible than the Bible. So the first actual, acknowledged alternate history that we know of is part of the Roman historian Titus Livius's *Ab urbe condita* (From the Founding of the City), a massive undertaking in which he traced the history of the founding of Rome and then speculated about how things could've gone differently. Specifically, book 9 contains his musings regarding what might've happened if Alexander the Great hadn't died due to illness (or maybe poisoning) in 323 BC, and instead had survived to continue his conquests, and eventually waged war on Rome. This Roman historian Titus Livius concluded, shockingly, that Rome would have won. He was like, "Alexander really lucked out by dying painfully, because we would've kicked his Macedonian ass." You know how they say history is written by the victors; well alternate history tends to be written by the self-declared hypothetical victors.

So in the case of the *Ab Urbe Condita*, Alexander's death by illness or assassination was the so-called *point of divergence*. Every alternate history

needs that one moment, the pivot point that marks a crossroads, a branching of history. And as soon as you start mucking about with points of divergence, revising history and making guesses about the results, everything becomes wild speculation and is inevitably 100% wrong. Let's just get that out of the way, if you've seen Jurassic park you know all about chaos theory, and if you've seen a far worse movie starring Ashton Kutcher you're also familiar with the butterfly effect, and these two philosophical concepts explain why there's no point to any of this at all, but it's still fun.

The issue with trying to build an alternate history is that we focus on giant pivotal moments, and we forget that tiny actions can have massive consequences; after that first point of divergence, even the smallest subsequent deviation in circumstances spawns an infinite number of subsequent divergence points, making the next series of events literally impossible to predict. Basically there are too many variables, each minuscule change branches into innumerable potential pathways. If you've seen Everything Everywhere All at Once you're already picturing hot dog fingers and raccoonatouille, but the movie most associated with chaos theory was the aforementioned butterfly effect, a terrible film based on a valid scientific principle which was proposed by a man named Edward Norton Lorenz. Edward Norton Lorenz. He was a

meteorologist and mathematician and notoriously very method. So back in 1961 this guy was creating a weather model, a program for predicting the weather, but he quickly realized that even tiny changes could completely alter the outcome. For instance by entering the value .506 instead of the full data point .506127 he found that the model would predict a storm rather than sunshine. And since the difference between those values is minuscule, about the equivalent of a wing flap, he famously claimed that a butterfly flapping its wings could cause a hurricane miles away.

Now, of course that's mostly nonsense. First off, modern weather models DO predict the weather with a high degree of accuracy, regardless of butterfly flapping intervention. The problem with Edward Norton Lorenz's weather model was that the model itself was overly simplistic, which meant that tiny changes would throw the whole thing out of whack. However, it's true that—as we established—tiny changes CAN have outsized impact; they just mostly don't, and it's essentially impossible to predict which butterfly wingflaps will result in typhoons and which will just result in butterfly.

So we're in a weird situation in which the butterfly effect is mostly nonsense but the concept is ultimately sound. I personally prefer this famous proverb as summarized by Benjamin Franklin:

"For want of a nail the shoe was lost,
For want of a shoe the horse was lost,

For want of a horse the rider was lost,
For want of a rider the battle was lost,
For want of a battle the kingdom was
lost,
And all for the want of a horseshoe
nail.

Tiny changes, giant effects.

Now when we talk about or think about alternate histories we often focus on the big picture, but there are also vital points of divergence in each of our individual lives. Do you ever think about what would have happened if you hadn't bombed that one job interview, or attended a different college, or never met your current partner? And it's funny because we can beat ourselves up over a choice or path or decision that we feel went wrong, but who knows, maybe if you had nailed that job interview you would have left the building ten minutes later, and the timing would've been exactly right for you to get flattened by a bus. Stephen King explored this concept in his novel *11/22/63* in which a time traveler goes back to the 60s to save John F Kennedy only to return to an absolute hellscape in which society has crumbled. Saving Kennedy was the equivalent of retroactively nailing that job interview, and the result was the equivalent of getting pancaked by that bus.

In the doomsday episode, we talked about a few of the many times that minor errors have resulted in the world

teetering on the brink of nuclear war. And naturally, nuclear close calls are one of the staples of alternate histories. Any one of those incidents could have been disastrous, and to illustrate how single individuals making single decisions can have ginormous consequences, I'm going to describe one that we didn't discuss and that has been the subject of speculation for decades by alternate history buffs primarily because it all came down to the split second decision of one man. September 26, 1983. The absolute pinnacle of the Cold War, relations between America and the Soviet union are at an all time low. Just a few weeks earlier, the Soviets had shot down a South Korean passenger jet carrying an American congressman, so relations were at a breaking point. In an underground bunker near Moscow, Lieutenant Colonel Stanislov Petrov was tasked with monitoring the Oko nuclear warning system, oko is Russian for "eye," this was an early-warning system that consisted of both orbiting and geosynchronous satellites. Petrov's job was to immediately relay any alerts to his superiors so that they could invoke the "launch on warning" protocol, a strategy that is mostly self explanatory and was employed by both America and the Soviets to immediately launch nuclear weapons upon notification that an attack was eminent, striking before any missiles could actually land. basically it was mutually assured destruction. It should have been called

the "hair trigger" protocol. The "what could possibly go wrong" procedure. Or maybe the spite protocol. It's not going to save your own lives but you get to die with the knowledge that you've ensured a lot of additional death. It's the "I'm taking you all with me" policy.

So it was right after midnight on September 23 1983 When the system lit up, blaring the word LAUNCH in giant red letters, indicating an incoming intercontinental ballistic missile from the United States.

Petrochemical assumed it had to be a mistake...why would the US launch an attack with a single missile. But in quick succession, the system reported four more. Five nuclear-tipped warheads descending on Moscow.

Petrov had a decision to make. If he didn't report the strike and Soviet lives were lost, along with the ability to counter strike, whatever was left of the Soviet Union's governing body would have him executed for treason.

The spite protocol again. If he DID report the strike, he was ensuring a nuclear holocaust that would eradicate billions off the face of the planet.

Petrov went with his gut, and saved the world. Within hours, experts determined that the Oko system had misinterpreted some sunlight reflecting off of clouds. How much did they spend on this system? Anyway let this be a lesson to all of you who take your job really seriously and get caught up in protocols and chains of command. The world exists today because one Russian guy refused to

do his job. But what if he had reacted differently? Well, this alternate history is in some ways an easy one...there was no potential positive outcome and the only question was the degree of devastation. We're talking about mutually assured destruction; it's not called "mutually impossible to predict, who knows? Might not be so bad, who can say? Maybe the bombs will explode in giant bursts of confetti and signs will pop out saying just kidding! Got ya! You should have seen your millions of faces. Welcome to PTSD."

No. It's a foregone conclusion that the outcome will be not positive.

suboptimal. You might not know this or you might but nuclear stockpiles were much larger in the 80s; they peaked in 1986 at the height of the Cold War.

Compared to now, when the world has an estimated 13,000 warheads (it's hard to know exactly because the Trump administration ended the policy of nuclear transparency, and it's only being restored gradually now that the Biden administration has reversed course. Incidentally "Trump withdrew the United States from the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces, which limited ground-launched nukes in Europe. The former reality TV star also [pulled America out](#) of the 1992 Open Skies Treaty, which allows the United States, Russia and many European states to monitor each other's atomic arsenals via photographic-reconnaissance flights." So that's cool. But despite his best efforts Trump was foiled before he could thoroughly us back to the 80s,

and he had a long way to go, because in 1980, America alone had over 23,000 nuclear weapons and the Soviet Union had even more at approximately 30,000. Obviously the weapons themselves were less powerful than the ones we have now. But still...50,000 combined nuclear weapons would have been plenty. Even if half of them misfired we'd still easily succeed in ending ourselves. Humans, historically very thorough when it comes to eradicating other humans and being eradicated in return. Now it's important to remember, as we mentioned in the profanity episode when we discussed George Carlin's famous bit, in the event of nuclear war, the world wouldn't actually end. That's a myth. WE would end. And by we I mean specifically you and me and North America. Civilization in the northern hemisphere would end. There would still be irradiated cannibal nomads roaming the wastelands, we're like cockroaches, don't count us out—I'm an optimist—but otherwise we're talking the end of the US, and Russia. So what would this have looked like? Within moments of the Soviets launching what they believed was a counter strike, America responds in kind. In this timeline, petrov is conflicted after the first missile, but the report of four more forces his hand. Five missiles seems like a strangely restrained opening salvo, but it's a salvo that is more than enough to level Moscow. He hurriedly phones his superiors and the USSR

surges into action. With only moments to respond, Soviet leaders authorize the counter strike. Minutes after their retaliatory launch, they realize that they are in a suspicious state of not being dead, and begin to digest the full reality of what happened and what they've done. Presumably they arrange a quick execution of whoever designed the Oko satellite warning system. But by now it's too late. Russian missiles have targeted American Air Force bases like McClellan in Northern California, so you and I would have lived very short lives. Additional targets include urban centers like San Francisco but also military installations like the pentagon and over 1000 missile silos, with other warheads reserved for Strategic Air Command in Omaha Nebraska as well as aerial refueling bases in areas like Chicago, Milwaukee, Phoenix, Salt Lake City, Sacramento, Wichita, Fort Worth, Shreveport. Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri—home to the 351st Strategic Missile Wing, "which operated the Minuteman I and Minuteman II Intercontinental Ballistic Missile weapon system from the Oscar-01 launch facility and 14 other similarly constructed facilities throughout Southwest Missouri. In total, the wing operated 15 flights, controlling 150 Minuteman ICBMs that could reach the Soviet Union in less than a half-hour." But by the time those missiles arrive of course the counterstrike warheads are already in the air, the Americans have responded to the very real first salvo in what is

about to become world war 3.

So midnight in Russia is 5pm on the east coast of the United States. When the first missiles strike, Americans are driving home from work, some are at dinner tables.

There's no internet in 1983, so when communication lines from Russia and the US go dark, the rest of the world scrambles to understand what's happening, and how to respond. It quickly becomes clear to Europeans that the details are irrelevant, because nuclear fallout is coming. From the UK to Poland, chaos reigns as Europeans alternately flee, hunker down, and battle for resources.

The northern hemisphere obviously gets the worst of it. Australia and New Zealand stay strategically quiet and mind their own business—suddenly they find something interesting to look at in the opposite direction—and presumably no one in America or Russia bothers sending a random missile to take out a bunch of dingos and eucalyptus trees just for the hell of it. But infrastructure in America and the USSR is annihilated. As for Asia, at this point in the 1980s, China and the USSR were in the middle of their own Cold War, and knowing that China would realize that the Soviets had struck first, the USSR would likely attack China as well, because better safe than sorry. Sorry to have not committed mass murder. You have to seize the opportunity, *carpe diem*, live for today... cause that's all you get. You don't want to end up with mass

murder FOMO. Note that I'm not painting the Soviets as the bad guys for fun here, or out of jingoistic patriotic loyalty, this is a scenario in which the USSR mistakenly started WWII and it's reasonable to assume that they'd go all in.

So now the Southern Hemisphere: subsaharan Africa, South America, Malaysia, Indonesia...all are inundated by and in some cases thoroughly overwhelmed with refugees from land and sea. The countries in the Southern Hemisphere with a viable military react by shutting their borders; across the world militaries seize control in an attempt to restore at least the appearance of order. For a short time they maintain a semblance of civilization...but then the skies begin to darken. Soot and debris are spreading through the atmosphere, dimming the sun and plunging global temperatures by an average of thirteen degrees Fahrenheit. Have you seen the sky after fires? It's oppressive, mentally. So ocean temperatures follow the global trend and plunge, the algae that acts as the lungs of the world begins to die, sea ice expands by six million square miles, overwhelming and encapsulating naval ports from Copenhagen to Saint Petersburg, transforming them into frigid tombs. How long would it last? Multiple recent computer simulations by researchers from Louisiana State University indicate that the "nuclear little ice age," could last thousands of years.

And yeah, ice age sounds worse than a nuclear winter. Winter is just a few months. An age is at least a year, I think. The world wouldn't end, even humanity most likely wouldn't end, but humanity in the "compassion and benevolence" sense of the word, that would be eradicated. Not everyone would die, but most people would wish they had.

Fun stuff. If you enjoyed that one, you'll love the rest.

Of all of the points of divergence that have fascinated alternate-history buffs, there are arguably two that have spawned the most debate and speculation. The *most* popular one is obvious, and we're going to avoid it, because it's just too well covered, notably and most recently in the *Man in the High Castle*: what if Hitler had won? But we're not going there.

More interesting to me, because it also seems more plausible and is closer to home: what if the North hadn't won the Civil War? Notice I didn't say, "what if the south had won," because the South wasn't trying to win...they were trying not to lose. As a reminder, in 1861 the South wanted to secede from the United States for a number of reasons, chief among them the ability to own other people. And don't let anyone tell you differently: slavery wasn't the **ONLY** cause of the civil war, but it was the primary cause. Some people will tell you that the war wasn't about slavery, it was about state's

rights, and those people are assholes. Possibly uninformed and ignorant assholes, but being uninformed and ignorant isn't an excuse for also being an asshole. And if you do encounter one of those assholes you should immediately ask them which specific rights the northern states were trying to take away that the southern states were trying to protect. The confederacy wanted to preserve the right to deprive black people of *their* rights, and anyone trying to gaslight you with the "state's rights" nonsense can go fuck themselves. So the South didn't need to conquer the north, they simply needed a stalemate, they needed to avoid being conquered. And that's why, even though the North had major advantages like a stronger economy and larger population, the South did have decent odds. They simply needed to hold out until the north got tired of investing lives and resources. Southern General Robert E Lee was hoping that a couple of dramatic victories would be all that was needed to dry up the North's appetite for fighting. And northern's WERE conflicted. While the South was fighting to preserve slavery, northerners weren't necessarily fighting to end it, they were fighting to force the South to stay in the Union; it was just becoming obvious that the way public sentiment was going, staying in the Union was eventually going to mean giving up slavery. Many people in the North didn't want to fight a military battle over slavery, it wasn't

by any means a make-or-break issue for most northerners, but they weren't going to just let the south go. It's like when you kind of hate your significant other but you also don't want anyone else to have them. Like when your spouse turns out to be a giant racist but you're pretty sure you can change them. It was almost a matter of principal, like "Hey, we had a deal. We were in this together. Now we're going to have to burn Atlanta to the ground. This is your in fault. Keep in mind you did this to yourselves."

So it's totally possible that if a couple of battles in the beginning had gone a different way, maybe the north decides it isn't worth the trouble. In all likelihood if not for Sherman's victory in Atlanta and the battle of Mobile Bay, if the union suffers some bitter and humiliating losses, the presidential election of 1864 doesn't go well for Lincoln. If he isn't re-elected, his opponent George B. McClellan would doubtless have begun negotiating a ceasefire. Lincoln today would be viewed not as one of the most successful presidents but as a colossal failure. On the plus side for him personally, his skull would have remained far more intact. there would have been no point in the politically motivated assassination of Lincoln by John Wilkes Booth, so for Lincoln personally it would have been a plus. Not dying is usually a preferable outcome. Though it would be interesting to know which Lincoln would choose. Living forever in the history books or living a long life in

disgrace. So in this alternate timeline Lincoln lives on as a national embarrassment, and a ceasefire is negotiated. The South doesn't exactly win, but it doesn't lose, which is a win. Sort of. And what happens next? First off, slavery obviously doesn't end in 1863. Not only does slavery survive in the confederacy, but other slave countries like Brazil would have been emboldened to continue investing in slavery rather than pressured into ending it after the north's victory, which is what actually happened. So slavery flourishes in both the northern and southern hemispheres, and for the confederate states, slavery would remain a point of pride, it would have been the institution that the south literally sacrificed lives to protect, and it would be an enduring symbol of their victory. They would likely have doubled down on human trafficking. It's easy to imagine that slavery could easily have survived well into the 20th century. We're talking about enslaved humans working in the fields in the united states after the first Rose Bowl game was played, after Einstein published his theory of relativity. After the model T, after the sinking of the Titanic. Think about that when people give you the states rights argument... even if they're dumb enough to believe that the primary motivation was anything other than slavery, the result would have been a *victory* for slavery, more enslaved humans and for a longer duration. Historians are confident, though, that it would have ended eventually. World sentiment

was moving in the direction of abolition and the south would have been under intense pressure, because one of the disadvantages they were facing was lack of resources. They couldn't survive on their own, so they would have eventually had to make concessions to the north, or lean heavily on Europe for supplies, and sentiment in Europe was moving in the same direction. Plus, human farm labor was becoming unnecessary and irrelevant. If the South had clung to slave labor while the north automated farm equipment, the south would have fallen even further behind economically. Southern states would have become increasingly backward, increasingly disadvantaged and old-fashioned, increasingly isolated. Even more backward than they are today. It's possible that the relationship between the north and south would be analogous to the relationship of North America to Mexico, with a similar disparity of economic and military power. And of course to protect slavery and shut down the underground railroad that operated between the north and south, the south would've had to militarize the border. Avoiding another conflict would have been difficult.

Meanwhile, the westward expansion of America would doubtless have been affected; with the breakup of the United States, the Midwest and West would almost certainly have pursued their own independence and in the best case scenario North America would today be similar to Europe, with

a loose collection of independent countries united by treaties, geography, and a common currency. Imagine the Federation of the West Coast negotiating trade treaties with Alliance of The Great Lakes, border walls being erected between North and South Dakota.

The northeastern federation—the states that made up the union during the civil war—would likely be far more liberal and progressive than the US as a whole is today...the south in modern America pulls the country in a more conservative direction. The north would also most likely dominate North America militarily and economically; Conservatives traditionally prioritize military power, but in this case the north had a massive manufacturing and industrial advantage, and a hostile southern neighbor is a major incentive to militarize. The north's military advantage would have increased and the south would have had to pursue an alliance with other countries—most likely Britain—as a bulwark against invasion. Like in Europe in the lead up to World War I, a complex web of alliances and treaties and conflicting motivations would result in a state of constant tension, and it's perfectly reasonable to believe that an American version of World War I would've broken out before the European conflict, forcing Europe and Mexico and Canada to pick sides. Canada would obviously be the deciding factor. The outbreak of war would have resulted in a mad rush to recruit the Mounted police. An equestrian

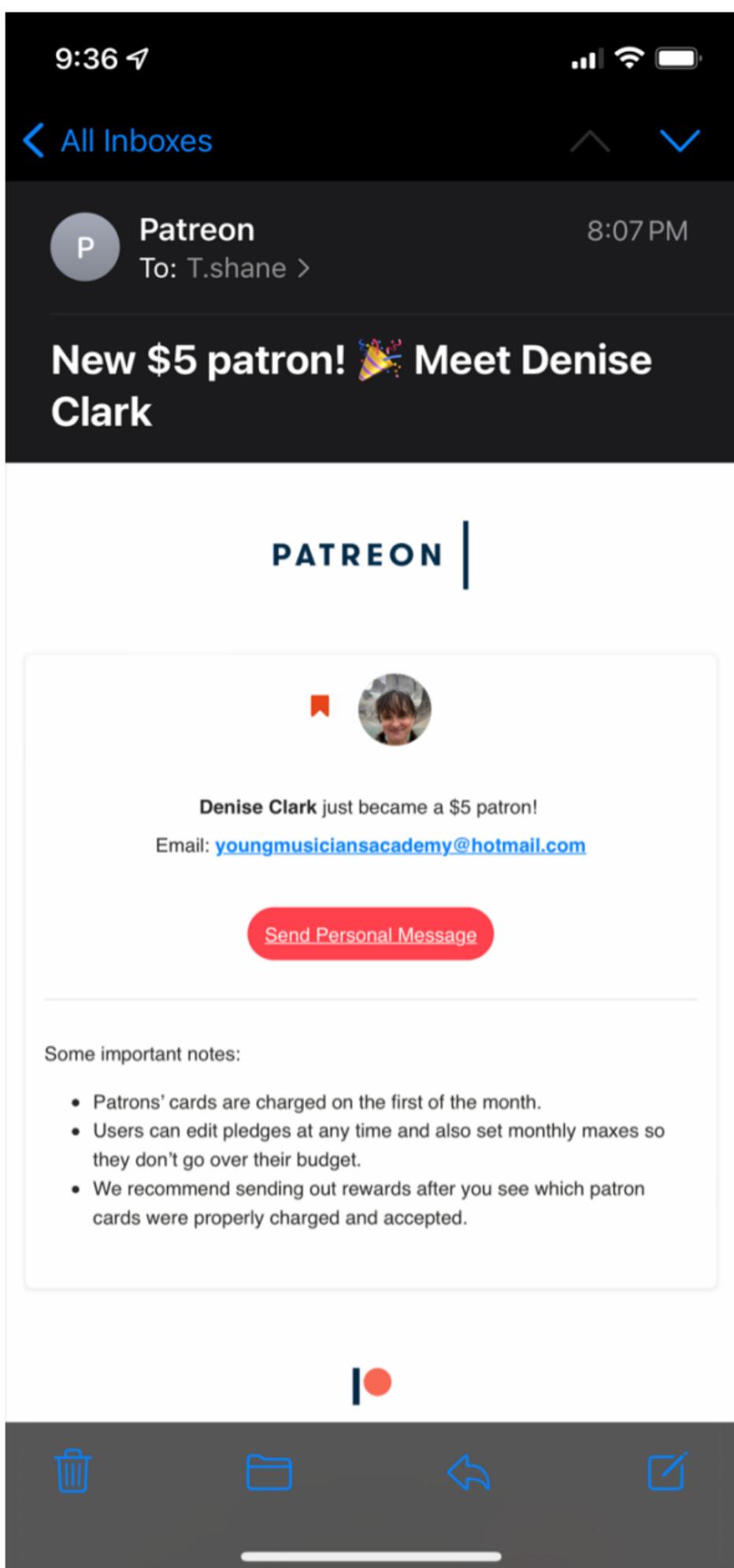
brigade: the crown jewel of any modern military.

So in the end it's hard to imagine any advantages or benefits or positive effects of an alternate outcome for the Civil War. Clearly the biggest effect and drawback is that slavery would have persisted, resulting in decades more of human suffering. On the other hand, there are plenty of people in the South who I wish weren't affiliated with modern America, but I guess that's true of every state and region pretty much everywhere. Though it's tough to argue that there aren't a larger number of racist dingbats in the south.

So that one was fun too.

I actually enjoyed this exercise, it's like a thought experiment, and we should do another one...eventually. Not any time soon. But this is a cool idea and I'd be interested to know whether listeners agree with my...predictions? Retroactive predictions? I based most of this episode on some very intelligent sources and you can check out all of them via an extensive list of links in the transcripts, but I also did a good amount of extrapolating on my own, so there's plenty of room for input and debate. I'd encourage all of you insomniacs to comment in the discord. It's free, it's fun, it's a real community. And did I mention you can join our Patreon for as little as three bucks a month? Not only do you get discord perks, but we are now livestreaming video for After Midnight

episodes in Patreon. Patrons get a link for every episode that allows them to watch after midnight episodes in real time, so if you enjoy video and want to see what our dumb faces look like, your best option is to become a patron. (You can also see us on Instagram as well, of course.) Speaking of Patreon btw, we have a new patron.



We don't have any new reviews this week but we do have some new ratings, we're back up to five stars on Apple podcasts and over 250 ratings in Spotify. If you haven't left a Spotify rating or an Apple review, it really helps, so please do that. In The meantime, here's one from the vault, we still have lots of older reviews to get to and this one was from last year, it says



Thanks!

Genuinely exactly what I was after to listen to in bed. Thanks guys!

MartyMac1888 from the United Kingdom

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