The triumph over Germany defined America for decades.
Here are four ways the nation might be different had it never happened.

If there'd been no V in E …

New Yorkers jam Times Square on May 7, 1945, to celebrate the news of Nazi Germany's surrender, which took effect the following day. World War II in Europe began in September 1939 with the German invasion of Poland. The United States entered the war in 1941 after it was attacked by Japan, a German ally. HARRY HARRIS/AP

Matt Alderton Special to USA TODAY

Although the outcome isn't always as sweet, history is a lot like baking: Even the smallest change to a recipe can produce dramatically different results. Sometimes, the outcome is a triumph. Others, a train wreck. But while you can always make another batch of cookies, in history there are no do-overs. Still, it can be interesting — enlightening, even — to imagine if there were.

WWII   AMERICA COMES HOME

Surrounded by officers and aides, American Gen. Dwight Eisenhower, the supreme Allied commander in Europe, makes a V-for-victory sign with two of the pens used to sign Germany's unconditional surrender at Reims, France, on May 7, 1945. Adolf Hitler had committed suicide a week earlier as Soviet troops overran Berlin. AP

"This is what historians call *counterfactual history*," says historian Thomas Kühne, professor of history and director of the Strassler Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts. "In the end, it is speculation. But in my view, counterfactual thinking is an interesting experiment that can help us learn from the past as we consider the options for our future."

Of all the consequential dates in modern history, one that's especially ripe for reimagining is May 8, 1945. V-E Day.

"The 'V-E' in V-E Day stands for 'Victory in Europe,' but really, it's about victory over Hitler," says Rob Citino,

executive director of the Institute for the Study of War and Democracy and senior historian at The National World War II Museum in New Orleans.

"What would a world ruled by Adolf Hitler look like?" Citino asks. "It's a world beyond imagination."

If the war in Europe had ended in Germany's favor, Citino says, Hitler's war machine would have barreled on toward other nations — including, perhaps, the United States, whose postwar story may have had a very different plot.

Here, for example, are just four of the countless ways historians think postwar America might have looked different:

1. There might be more pandemics

The year 2020 will be remembered for the COVID-19 pandemic that swept the world. If V-E Day had never happened, it's conceivable that the modern world might have seen similar pandemics sooner and with greater frequency, suggests Michael Broache, an assistant professor of political science at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

According to Broache, a significant outcome of World War II was the establishment of the United Nations, a byproduct of American victory. Given current events, its absence in the international community would be

While guarding newly arrived German prisoners of war on a pier in New York City, Pfc. Clarence Ayers reads about the German surrender on May 8, 1945. JOHN ROONEY/AP

Britons dance in the street in London's Piccadilly Circus on V-E Day. Britain had been at war with Germany for over 5½ years. THE NATIONAL WWII MUSEUM

especially conspicuous in the realm of public health. That's because the United Nations maintains and supports numerous specialized agencies, including the World Health Organization, whose leadership has been pivotal in preventing and controlling previous global health crises — including smallpox, which it helped eradicate in 1979.

"The World Health Organization coordinates cross-border cooperation on broad public health issues. That's really important during a pandemic because viruses don't see borders," Broache says.

"COVID-19 is a transnational problem that requires transnational solutions. ... If World War II had a different outcome, there would be a very different set of institutions to turn to, if any."

2. Civil rights probably would have been quashed

If Germany had won the war, smallpox may not have been eradicated, but the American civil rights move-

ment almost certainly would have been, according to Kühne, who says a victorious Hitler would likely have invaded the United States in the late 1940s or 1950s. "The Nazis no doubt would have continued their anti-Jewish genocide in the United States," he says. "But they also would have radicalized Jim Crow and returned to enslavement of African Americans."

Even if the Nazis did not invade and occupy the United States, the civil rights movement might have failed to launch.

"The civil rights movement was fundamentally about black mobilization, a lot of which came from black veterans who returned home thinking if they could defeat Nazism abroad, they could defeat segregation at home," says historian Donald Nieman, executive vice president for academic affairs, provost and professor of history at Binghamton University in Binghamton, New York.

"Absent the optimism that came out of World War II, I'm not sure the civil rights movement would have gotten the traction that it did," Nieman says.

WWII | AMERICA COMES HOME

President Harry Truman (holding paper) discusses the German surrender at a White House press conference May 8, 1945. Truman had been president for a month. AP

3. The middle class would be smaller

World War II was as much an economic victory as a military one, Citino says. "We came out of World War II the richest country in the world," he says. "Our economy right now is taking a hit because of the coronavirus, but we're still what (Harvard economist John Kenneth Galbraith) called the 'Affluent Society.' We still enjoy a standard of living that would have been the envy of anyone on Earth 100 or even 50 years ago, and that affluence is the real legacy of World War II for the United States."

From American affluence sprang the American middle class. "After the American victory came a massive demobilization of the armed forces, a very significant decline in federal consumption and a dramatic increase in private investment," Nieman says. "Had we not de-feated Nazi Germany, it's hard to imagine that kind of rapid demobilization and burst of investment, which led to the development of a consumer economy immediately after World War II."

4. American innovation might be missed

In Germany, World War II caused a "brain drain," according to Kühne, who says many scientists and scholars were lost to the Holocaust while still others fled to America. Had it lost the war, the United States might have experienced similar intellectual losses.

"The size of our military would have continued to be much larger than it was; the ability and willingness to pass the G.I. Bill probably wouldn't have been there; and there would not have been the same kind of optimism-fed belief by Americans that they could do better than their parents did," Nieman says. "With all of that, I think we would have seen dramatically fewer young people going to American colleges and universities."

Although it's difficult to draw a direct line from one to the other, it stands to reason that a host of achievements — from the moon landing to the internet — were born of a postwar investment in higher education.

Concludes Citino, "The sense of ingenuity and improvisation on which Americans have always prided themselves became wedded to education after the war, and we still benefit from that in all sorts of ways. If you think about things like the space program and the digital explosion, I don't think it's an accident that they took place in a country that spent a hell of a lot of money on higher education after World War II."