

## *Stroke of Fate*

Joe Webb

From October to December 1953 NBC aired a curious historical series, *Stroke of Fate*.

NBC's inspiration was the successful CBS radio and television series *You Are There*. That series started in 1947 as *CBS is There* and soon adopted the more listener-focused name that made it famous. In 1953, the television version of the series started.

NBC and others saw an opportunity to do something historical but with a twist. Rather than dropping modern day reporters into historical events, *Stroke of Fate* offered a cerebral "what if?" approach with dramas of historical persons in hypothetical circumstances.

This was an interesting premise intended to stimulate interest and discussion of the trends of history and the eventual shaping of world affairs and conditions.

A typical episode would explore a speculative historical event, and then present a drama around how the world would have changed if an historical figure had lived longer or had succeeded or failed in their endeavors.

Examples are what might have happened if Benedict Arnold's treasonous act in the Revolutionary War had been successful rather than thwarted, or if Robert E. Lee had accepted the leadership of the Union Army rather than the Confederacy for the Civil War.

The scripts were either written or supervised by Mort Lewis who had two noted historians recruited to advise him and add credibility to the series. [Allen Nevins](#) of Columbia University was a prolific scholarly researcher for academic and consumer audiences. His work was known and respected worldwide.

While Nevins was mainly an academic researcher, [Stefan Lorant](#) lived through perilous times in Europe's upheaval through both World Wars. He was a filmmaker and a photojournalist. A native Hungarian, he moved to Germany after World War I to pursue his filmmaking and photography career, and 14 years later was imprisoned for opposing Adolf Hitler. He eventually found his way to England and published his memoirs about his imprisonment and the events that led to it. It became a best-seller. He moved to the United States in 1940. He wrote and published many photo-biographies of important US and world political figures. He is considered a pioneer of photojournalism.

Having two advisors of such different backgrounds was a brilliant idea for the series, but a review in *Broadcasting* magazine in January 1954 thought there was a downside that contributed to the series cancellation. That review expressed the belief that the historians had too much sway in the process, affecting the flow of the dramas and making them less effective. The tug-of-war between accuracy and art resulted in a broadcast "devoid of artistic merit."

Producers had high hopes for *Stroke of Fate*'s radio success, and expected it would lead to a television series, just as *You Are There* had for CBS. Unfortunately, it did not, and *Stroke of Fate* ended after 13 weeks. Early reviews were positive, but those sentiments slowly faded, and the intriguing concept was abandoned. Luckily, all 13 episodes survived.

There are some important documents that can enhance your enjoyment and appreciation of the series, copies of which are in this set.

[The Wikipedia page for \*Stroke of Fate\*](#) is exceptional. It has links to Wikipedia pages for each of the historical events about which *Stroke of Fate* offered its educated speculation. There is a PDF file of the page, but it is worth checking the page online for revisions.

The Wikipedia biographies of Nevins and Lorant are also included in PDF format.

This is collector and researcher Joe Webb.