Counterfactuals are often seductive. Reading the first book-length accounts of the EU referendum campaign, it is tempting to ask a series of what ifs. Did Cameron need to call a referendum at all? Could he have won an emergency brake on EU migration if he had asked for one? What if Boris had campaigned for Remain? Just when was the die cast?

History is supposed to be written by the winners, but Craig Oliver, on the losing side as Cameron’s director of communications, rushed to get his account in first. This has been quickly followed by a slew of others – from victorious Brexeters, reflective pollsters and productive journalists, including 600 pages of scintillating insights from Tim Shipman, the political editor of the Sunday Times.

Both Oliver’s book and Shipman’s are dissections of the most remarkable and most important political campaign in modern British history. They are explicitly not explorations of the long-term structural factors that shaped the vote to leave – this is not about globalization’s winners and losers or contested ideas of national identity. Shipman is interested in the political class: their choices, decisions, their better angels and their demons. In his own words, he wants to answer the question: How far will someone go to win? Oliver, meanwhile, a journalist-turned-spin-doctor, had been at Cameron’s side for much of his premiership, so his is the view from inside the bunker.

Oliver’s account is an expanded campaign diary, written, clearly hastily, in a plain and direct first person narrative. There are some interesting anecdotes: how No 10 grapples with the renegotiation, the agony over Boris’s wavering and the splits in the party, the strange bedfellows of the cross-party Remain alliance and the unplanned developments – Cameron’s tax arrangements, John Whittingdale’s sex life – that get in the way.

There is much, too, that could have been expected given Oliver’s vantage point: the contempt for Gove, the disdain for McDonnell and Corbyn (who comes across as useless and indifferent in both accounts), the tussles with the BBC (you may be surprised how frequently Oliver is able to get the BBC to change a headline or tone down its coverage).

The book effectively conveys the breathless exhaustion of running a campaign: the endless media churn; the unending pressure of a life delineated by news bulletins. But it is largely devoid of significant substantive reflection, and written in a slightly tired style.

Oliver might have done better to wait a little longer and reflect a bit more. He remains proud of the campaign and the majority of its decisions despite its ultimate failure, like a maths student hoping for marks for showing his working while getting the wrong answer. He concedes that the central premise of the Remain campaign, that fears over the economy would trump concerns about immigration among key swing voting groups, was wrong. But he still gives the impression that he believes Remain did a great job, just based on bad data.

Shipman has a more thoughtful view on this aspect of Remain’s strategy – that the problem was not a focus on economic risk, but the inability to link that effectively to the direct effects of lower GDP on people lives, for example on public services. Leave, with its simple messages and memorable phrases, was more effective.

Oliver (now Sir Craig) is especially loyal to his old boss. Cameron in his view took the
Looking back now it is hard not to reach the conclusion that almost every significant judgment made by Cameron was wrong. Many will contest the idea that the referendum was politically unavoidable. Shipman reports that this was certainly not the view of George Osborne. Certainly it was a gamble which spectacularly failed. Cameron’s renegotiation strategy was predicated on an opportunity to change the EU treaties, which never occurred. What he did get out of the renegotiation was too moderate and too complicated to sell to the public. Interestingly, it seems it was Theresa May who reined in Cameron’s instinct to ask for an emergency brake on immigration, believing it would be blocked by Germany.

As Shipman demonstrates, Cameron was out-maneuved by sceptics in his parliamentary party who were successful in lobbying for the question to change (from Yes/No to Remain/Leave), enforcing a period of purdah, maintaining the regular franchise (no votes for 16 and 17-year-olds), and suspending Cabinet collective responsibility.

Cameron’s previous rhetoric and promises around immigration boxed him in and meant he had no compelling counter-narrative to the Leave campaigns’ ruthless ability to exploit the public’s concerns. Ultimately, he was too focused on keeping the Conservative Party together.

Shipman’s All Out War, much the more enjoyable book, is excellent at conveying the accumulation of small decisions and tactical choices that led to Leave’s victory. It is long, rich and detailed, charting the early skirmishes on Europe in Cameron’s first term right through to May’s coronation, written with pace, humour and insight. Shipman has interviewed nearly all the principal figures on both sides, and his extensive efforts yield remarkable stories

If, in its focus on the political class and their choices, it occasionally strays into ‘great man’ style historical explanations – a Boris and Gove dinner discussion is regarded as a moment that ‘changed the future path of British history’ – it is all the more entertaining for it. Shipman sketches rich portraits of some of the less public figures in the campaigns, none more so than Dominic Cummings, the divisive former adviser to Michael Gove who led Vote Leave’s campaign. Cameron has called Cummings ‘a career psychopath’. He alienated much of the Eurosceptic Tory class, as well as Farage and co, and the board of his own campaign. But in Shipman’s view, the man who coined ‘Vote Leave, Take Control’ is certainly more genius than maniac.

Success has many fathers. Part of this book is an effort to answer: who delivered Brexit? As Farage parades around America, it is an interesting question. The warring Leave campaigns (the official Vote Leave, and the Arron Banks-funded and UKIP-affiliated Leave.EU) both believe that the Brexit vote has their DNA.

Vote Leave viewed Farage and co as toxic; Leave.EU believe they forced the debate on to immigration. There is mutual contempt, even loathing, between the sides, but Shipman puts forward the view that ultimately the campaign competition may have made them stronger.

The Remain autopsy will no doubt continue. I have more sympathy than Shipman for the view that winning an EU referendum for Remain was, if not impossible, clearly very challenging. But the nagging what-ifs are hard to banish. More than anything, it is tempting to wonder if those extra Remain votes might have been recruited by a capable Labour leader who was up for the fight.

History I suspect will be far kinder to the fears of the Remain campaigners than the claims of the Brexiters. Turkey will not join the EU. Leaving will hurt the economy. The £350 million weekly cheque will never be cashed. We will find that we have not had enough of experts. But, from Shipman’s portraits, you suspect most of the campaigning Brexeters won’t care. They won.