



# The Man Who Would Not Be Washington: Robert E. Lee's Civil War and His Decision That Changed American History

*Jonathan Horn*

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## **The Man Who Would Not Be Washington: Robert E. Lee's Civil War and His Decision That Changed American History** Jonathan Horn

The riveting true story of Robert E. Lee, the brilliant soldier bound by marriage to George Washington's family but turned by war against Washington's crowning achievement, the Union.

On the eve of the Civil War, one soldier embodied the legacy of George Washington and the hopes of leaders across a divided land. Both North and South knew Robert E. Lee as the son of Washington's most famous eulogist and the son-in-law of Washington's adopted child. Each side sought his service for high command. Lee could choose only one.

In *The Man Who Would Not Be Washington*, former White House speechwriter Jonathan Horn reveals how the officer most associated with Washington went to war against the union that Washington had forged. This extensively researched and gracefully written biography follows Lee through married life, military glory, and misfortune. The story that emerges is more complicated, more tragic, and more illuminating than the familiar tale. More complicated because the unresolved question of slavery--the driver of disunion--was among the personal legacies that Lee inherited from Washington. More tragic because the Civil War destroyed the people and places connecting Lee to Washington in agonizing and astonishing ways. More illuminating because the battle for Washington's legacy shaped the nation that America is today. As Washington was the man who would not be king, Lee was the man who would not be Washington. The choice was Lee's. The story is America's.

A must-read for those passionate about history, *The Man Who Would Not Be Washington* introduces Jonathan Horn as a masterly voice in the field.

## **The Man Who Would Not Be Washington: Robert E. Lee's Civil War and His Decision That Changed American History Details**

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## War and His Decision That Changed American History Jonathan Horn

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## **From Reader Review The Man Who Would Not Be Washington: Robert E. Lee's Civil War and His Decision That Changed American History for online ebook**

### **Adysnewbox says**

Pretty short (for a biography), but still an interesting look at Robert E. Lee, the most famous general of the Civil War and also one of that era's more complicated men. This book takes the (unique?) angle of comparing Lee to George Washington: in their geographic background; family connections (Lee married Washington's step-great-granddaughter); military service; places of residence; etc. Last but not least, author Jonathan Horn analyzes the choices both men make when faced with leading an insurrectionist army (Washington of course led the Continental Army; Lee was the leader of the Army of Northern Virginia on the Confederate side of the conflict). It was interesting to compare and contrast the two men, both in their rationale in choosing sides during their respective conflicts, and in the resulting consequences of their choices. Robert E. Lee is a puzzle of a man...one who was opposed to slavery and pro-Union, yet threw his lot in with the Confederate due to his unwavering loyalty to his home state of Virginia. This decision would ultimately prove his undoing; nevertheless, his coolness and military brilliance still won the respect of people on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line.

An interesting "sub-plot" that the author spends much time dealing with is the fate of Lee's home at Arlington, and how this home had strong ties to the Washington family as well. Today, this lovely white house is the centerpiece of Arlington National Cemetery, an important historical location near present-day Washington DC. Tracing the history of this abode was fascinating and provided some interesting insight into both Washington and Lee. This wasn't a very long book, but it was well researched and it had a lot of interesting insights into two important figures in American history, linking them together in ways I had never before considered.

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### **Jim Clinton Slusher says**

I've been wanting to catch up a little on Lee and this book was sufficient for the basics. I learned a few interesting things, but it was more confirmation of insights from other Civil War reading than feeling like I got an in-depth look at his so-called genius and renowned character. I am not a particular fan of Lee's, believing that this one man could have averted much disaster and suffering if he'd simply adhered to his oath to protect and defend the United States of America and stuck to his other professed principles favoring an end to slavery and the importance of the union. He couldn't raise his sword to his beloved Virginia, but had no trouble encouraging the solicitation of and conscription of thousands of other fellow southerners to raise their swords to their own brothers and families. His battleground genius always seemed to me indebted as much to the ineptitude of the Union generals he faced as to his own brilliant planning. This book didn't really offer an instructive nuance to that observation nor give me particular insights to help me understand why and how he was supposedly so great.

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### **Will says**

I blitzed through this book, which offers a compelling tale of a complex and important man. It offers just the right level of detail to enable the general reader to understand the political and military currents in which Lee

moved without getting distracted or lost in smaller matters.

I learned that Lee opposed secession and war, but also felt incapable of continuing to serve in the Union army once it became the enemy of his home state. He also felt compelled to accept the call to put his talents as a soldier to use when asked by Virginia.

At the end of the war he was asked to serve as the president of Washington College in Lexington, Virginia. There were only 45 students enrolled, the position was poorly paid, and the institution might well have gone out of business. Lee was drawn to the purpose of providing education to young men, many of whom had served in the war, with the hope that it might contribute to the reconciliation of the Union. His presence proved a powerful draw and the enrollment multiplied tenfold in the five short years before his death.

Like many good books, this one made me want to learn more: about George Washington, Stonewall Jackson, the Constitution, and the Civil War.

But now I will read General Lee's College, better to understand the university I will soon be privileged to lead.

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### **Ann says**

I read this book because I wanted to know more about Lee, and to make a more informed judgement about his statues, etc. The book was a well-researched short biography that presented a full picture of a man who was basically good, but made one huge mistake. It is fairly evident that if Lee had chosen to fight for the Union, the Civil War would have been very much shorter, and less costly in lives. Lee was a great general and the early Union generals were not so great. Lee did commit some of the bad acts that are attributed to him--such as delaying the freeing of the slaves that had belonged to his father-in-law, but there were some reasons for that delay. He was a slave-owner, but only to a small extent because his father had lost most of his family's money. In the long run, I like him as a person, but do not feel that his statues should hold a place of honor. I do not believe that it is appropriate to deify people who rebelled against their country. But we should remember that they were very human with good and bad sides.

This book compares Lee with Washington, and to the writer there is no comparison.

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### **Sally Ewan says**

Interesting biography of Lee, making much of his connection to George Washington through his wife's lineage and his own ancestor's war service. Lee will always be a hero of mine, and I'm definitely looking forward to meeting him in heaven! It was painful to read how Lee, in his tenure at Washington University, "looked beyond the traditional classical curriculum to more practical offerings," a well-intentioned move that has borne bitter fruit in colleges today.

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### **Naomi says**

I thoroughly enjoyed this well researched and documented "entry" biography of Robert E. Lee. I found the author's writing style to be engaging and engrossing on the life, including familial history all the way back to

Washington and how that impacted the General.

One side note...In the beginning, I was reading for a review for Netgalley in a digital edition. I found that I had a more difficult time with it. I recently picked the book up from my library and read it in 3 days.

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### **Caroline says**

My major criticism of this book? It's too short. And I don't say that in a 'I loved it, hated getting to the end, could have read ten times as much' kind of way. I mean that it's too short to do justice to its subject. Leaving aside plate sections, notes and the bibliography, it's little more than 200 pages, and that is just not enough, not even close enough, to treat the topic of Robert E. Lee and his wartime career with the kind of focus and attention it warrants.

To be honest, I'm not even entirely sure what this book is trying to be. It isn't a biography of Lee, even though it may appear to be and seems to be marketed as such. But it skips over huge chunks of Lee's life - we skip straight from his marriage to his service during the Mexican War, for example, a leap of some 15 years. It isn't an investigation of his Civil War generalship, because again, aside from focusing on a few key battles it doesn't delve into any kind of depth there. It seems to be some kind of curious amalgam of abbreviated biography, potted wartime sketch, and extended essay on the links and parallels between Lee and George Washington.

That there were such links is undeniable. Lee was married to Washington's granddaughter-by-marriage after all, his father had served closely with Washington during the Revolution, Lee lived in houses and on plantations with direct links to Washington, was gifted one of Washington's swords. He was considered by many to be a kind of spiritual heir to Washington, a man who never had children of his own and therefore lacked any direct heirs. If Washington was 'first in peace, first in war and first in the hearts of his countrymen', as Lee's father described him as such in his eulogy, then many in the South considered Lee in the same manner. And yet Lee, for all these parallels and for all his reverence and awe of Washington, fought against the Union Washington created, rebelled against the government created by Washington, deliberately turned against all that Washington stood for. The decision that Lee made, 'the decision that changed America', as the title calls it, shredded every link and bond Lee had with Washington.

It is a interesting topic, but alas not one I feel is done justice here. A psychological profile of Lee would be a fascinating read - he comes across here as a man so wedded to the notion of self-denial, so determined not to follow in the footsteps of his father, that he have deliberately acted against his own inclinations and desires his entire life, as indeed he did when choosing to forsake the Union, since Lee actually opposed secession. A man, indeed, who could not even rebel against rebellion. I'm not sure such a man is entirely deserving of the kind of respect and admiration history has bestowed on him, from both sides of the Mason-Dixon line...

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### **Louise says**

Jonathan Horn explores the twists of fate that intertwined George Washington and Robert E. Lee. It begins with Henry Lee II winning the hand of George Washington's love. The couple (Henry Lee II and Lucy Grimes Lee) became Robert E. Lee's grandparents. The book ends with Lee's presidency of George Washington College and a discussion of Arlington and DC based memorials. In between and throughout, you see George Washington looming large in the life of the (essentially fatherless) Robert E. Lee.

“Light Horse Harry”, Robert E. Lee’s father, served in the Revolution under Washington, and later at his side in the Whiskey Rebellion. The childless Washington took a paternalistic interest in young officers (most famously, Alexander Hamilton) but not Light Horse Harry. After the war, Lee invested in land that abutted the Washington’s planned canal. The canal was never built and Light Horse Harry lost the fortune his wife inherited. Lee’s father went into debt and depression and ran away from his problems. With his father in the Caribbean, Lee and his mother and siblings were dependent on the largess of the extended family.

Lee married the much sought after Mary Anne Randolph Curtis, Martha Washington’s granddaughter. Upon the death of George Washington Parke Curtis, the Lees inherited the Arlington Estate where Curtis had kept family and national heirlooms from Mount Vernon. Along with this estate came the slaves (“dower slaves”) that due to restrictions set by the Curtis family could not be freed by Washington when he freed his own. The fate of the heirlooms and the eventual emancipation of the dower slaves are an ironic twists of history.

This book sheds no light on reasons Lee left his US Army career for the unknown future of the Confederacy. It does introduce a new variable in showing Lee taking arms against the Union that Washington created. Lee, himself, has trouble explaining this decision at times saying Washington would have done so too. As in other biographies, Mary Anne Randolph Curtis Lee is shown to be a Plantation Princess as she writes to Union generals with special requests. The reason for Lee’s decision could be simple: it may have been made by his highly partisan Confederate wife.

The position of the White House (a Curtis estate, not the POTUS home) and the companionship of John Augustine Washington III (George Washington's brother's grandson) are germane and of interest, but the details on the battles and their strategies are not needed to tell this story and detract from the narrative.

This book is interesting and fills a niche for Civil War readers. It is no substitute for a biography (such as: Clouds of Glory: The Life and Legend of Robert E. Lee) It adds dimension to Lee's portrait and can give psychologists something to chew on.

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## **Mary Kovarik says**

This book is well written and even handed. The author treats Robert E. Lee as a real person, not a legend. I did not know that Lee was the President of Washington and Lee College after the Civil War. Thus he had gainful employment after the Civil War and was well respected by students who came from all across the United States. The book shows that his father was a ne'er-do-well who shackled his family with a lot of debts.

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## **George says**

This is perhaps one of the best biographies I've ever read. The author treats the complex and challenging figure of Robert E. Lee with appropriate care and detail; he neither worships nor decries Lee but rather presents a nuanced, detailed, and contextually aware review of his life and the forces that compelled him. Lee unquestionably held unforgivable opinions on race and race relations; however, much about American history, the legacy of slavery, and the formation of the country America would become can be learned by studying his life. The author, Jonathan Horn, executes this superbly.

Horn chiefly considers the dueling nature of Lee's life and personality: Lee was against secession yet followed Virginia into rebellion...he was morally opposed to slavery, yet felt compelled to rely upon slavery

to fulfill the will of his profligate father in law...he was known as the perfect general and soldier yet claimed his military education was the worst mistake of his life...and on and on. The study of this man that was so completely torn by duty and devotion (and then self-restraint and self-denial) and the dueling forces that drove him was fascinating and deeply educational.

This would be a book for someone interested in learning about Lee, certainly, but would be good reading for anyone wanting to learn about the Civil War, the significance of the battles, and the strategy employed by both sides. Horn does a good job of setting the stage without being dry or tedious. Horn's style is readable and compelling -- the story he makes of Lee's life is immensely entertaining.

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### **A Million Pages says**

I've always felt that research, when thoroughly done and applied correctly, is what sets a great author apart from a good one. Horn truly put a lot of effort into this novel and it shows. He gave an open perspective of Robert E. Lee's life, avoiding minute battle details and giving you more interesting facts about his childhood, marriage and how his choosing Virginia over the Union changed the future of this country. I learned interesting details about Lee's original plans for his army that could have turned the tides of the war. Horn also tackles the Lee family's trials and feelings with losing their home in Arlington and the outcome of these sites after the war. Lee generally led a life away from his wife and children which allowed for a lot of correspondence which Horn incorporated throughout the novel. It was a truly fascinating read.

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### **Oswego Public Library District says**

*The Man Who Would Not Be Washington*, a complete biography of Robert E. Lee from childhood through death, emphasizes the difficult choice he made at the beginning of the Civil War and its effect on his life and the country. This scholarly, thoroughly researched and engaging account of Lee's life examines his process in arriving at the fatal decision to ally with his native state rather than accept the offer to lead Union forces. Ironically Lee's opposition to secession mirrored Washington's devotion to the union, but his loyalty to Virginia resulted in his leading the rebel forces against the preservation of the United States and eventually losing his home, his land and many family members. The vivid battle scenes make this a must read for Civil War history fans. The strong sense of place and the somber tone of loss and heartache make it appealing to anyone interested in the lives of notable people. -BS

[Click here to place a hold \*The Man Who Would Not Be Washington\* .](#)

If you like this book, you might like *Clouds of Glory* by Michael Korda.

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### **Relstuart says**

An interesting biography of Robert E. Lee placing him the context of the son of a American Revolutionary War vet and related to George Washington by marriage to his step granddaughter. His choice to stay with the South in the Civil War is pivotal not only in his life but in the life of the nation. Lee had proven himself in combat as a good leader in the war with Mexico. Had the Medal of Honor been created for that conflict there is a strong chance he would have earned it. The war between the states would have been a different conflict

had he taken the reins of the Northern armies under Lincoln and General Winfield Scott. He was offered full control of the US union forces but chose to stay with his state instead.

Lee did not believe in slavery, calling it a moral and political evil. His father in law, the step son of Washington, owned slaves and he had to handle the will when he died. Because the terms on when his slaves were to be emancipated he asked a probate court to review the terms but the war intervened before it could be executed.

As the states were leaving the Union Lee was stationed in Texas. When the Texans entered Federal military installations and demanded they surrender to the state militia the Federal commander over Lee complied. Lee was shocked and dismayed and wrote he would have resisted and fought back. He was called back to DC where he was offered command of all Union forces. He discussed the offer and the situation behind closed doors with General Winfield Scott. No one knows what all was said. But Lee said later he could not have chosen any other course but to follow his state.

It is interesting to note that after a few years of war Lee knew the South was faced by a very difficult mathematical reality, that the North outnumbered them significantly and could continue to replace their losses and field bigger and better armies. When it was suggested that European allies might come to the aid of the South like France came to aid the colonies against Britain, he pointed out the North had won the public opinion war overseas by painting the conflict as only being over slavery. Clearly, the historical record shows Lee was not fighting for slavery though it was central in the minds of some. Lee recommended granting emancipation to the slaves and enlisting them in the Confederate army. While this did happen on a small scale his suggestion was not taken seriously and implemented. As the final year of conflict began and it became clear the South could not resist much longer without some sort of miracle, Lee told his son, "When this war began, I was opposed to it, bitterly opposed to it, and I told these people that, unless every man should do his whole duty, they would repent it; and now... they will repent."

After Lee signed the surrender papers with General Grant, he stepped outside and called for his horse. As he began to ride away Grant stepped outside, walked off the porch to position himself lower than Lee on his horse, and removed his hat as a sign of respect to General Lee. All the Union officers with him followed suit.

Lee was a leader in the South in war, and he led by example in making the peace afterwards. Encouraging veterans and citizens to respect the law and each other and to strive to live in peace. Not discussed or mentioned in this volume, after the war in church one day a black man entered and knelt at the front to pray. Lee moved from his pew and knelt down next to him.

Lee was the Washington of his day and some of the similarities are striking. But, Lee was not to be the victor Washington was. While respected by many in both the North and South, he was not the hero everyone wanted him to be. But, perhaps he was better than what we deserved.

Overall I felt this was a pretty evenhanded biography. It wasn't hero worship as the author also deals with Lee's shortcomings honestly. It's not super long but still does a decent job of telling Lee's story.

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## **Michael Bremer says**

This book was quite interesting. I never knew very much about Robert E. Lee beyond his role as the Military Leader of the Confederate Army. I find it interesting how he seemed to blame the Northern States for the War. Something a number of my Southern friends still do. I also wondered why he made his tactical choices at Gettysburg. While there is no way to be certain, I felt the author's surmise was reasonable.

The provides a great background on Lee, his family and his family connections to George Washington. The title of the book is very appropriate. Lee loyalties at the outset were initially with the Union, but in the end he decided to instead support his State of Virginia. Which was the opposite of how President Washington had decided. If Lee had decided to go with maintaining the Union he possibly would have been elected President after the war. Although he would not have been as beloved by the Southern States.

A man of many contradictions (as are we all), I thought the book summarized his loyalties quite well near the end of the book when Lee was quoted, "I need not tell you that true patriotism sometimes requires of men, to act exactly contrary, at one period, to that which it does at another, and that the motive which motivates them - the desire to do right - is precisely the same." The circumstances govern the choice. An interesting thought. Not sure I concur...but I understand his point.

After the war he was President of Washington College in Lexington. Under his leadership the school implemented a number of innovative approaches to education. Lee's mentor from West Point General Winfield Scott, said he understood Lee's decision to resign his commission, but "I think you are making the greatest mistake of your life." Turned out to be true.

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## Clif says

Robert E. Lee is a fascinating character in American history. He stands alongside the many other sober, thoughtful, God fearing, talented men that came before him in the American aristocracy of intellect (that being far behind us now). He was keenly aware of his character and determined to put self interest aside as much as possible. At all times he sought to do the right thing.

Though Lee was admired in my family (that is almost entirely from the American south as far back as the 1700's), he put his all into defending a society built on slavery. I bought this book to find out exactly how he arrived at his decision to fight for the Confederacy. In addition, I wondered what happened to him after the surrender at Appomattox.

I'm pleased to say that Jonathan Horn's biography of Lee answered my questions and then some. This book attends to Lee's thinking without needlessly going into daily details of life that could have added many pages.

Lee was quite prepared to stay with the Union. He bound his decision to accord with the one the state of Virginia would make. He did not like the idea of succession, was very doubtful that it could succeed and was in conversation with General Winfield Scott, the head of the U.S. Army, about taking command of Union forces just days before he would turn in his commission and join the rebels. Scott warned Lee that if he did go over to the other side, it would be the greatest mistake of his life.

On slavery, Lee was with the many who thought the institution should be allowed to go away in its own time while doing little to nothing to get that started. He never claimed it a good thing and was in agreement with Lincoln that the best option was the return of slaves to Africa. But this idea of slavery withering away was never practical because of economics. The South had to have slavery to survive as a society based on labor intensive agriculture with a low profit margin that required paying no wages.

In his account of the war, Jonathan Horn avoids taking us through every forest and down every path. The major engagements are detailed. Though Lee was an exceptional commander, he had the assistance of others such as "Stonewall" Jackson and James Longstreet on which he could depend. In fact, he was an adviser to Jefferson Davis in Richmond for some time before going to the front to take actual command. He also had

help from the other side, facing a variety of Union generals, primarily George McClellan, who would not, until Grant, tenaciously follow Confederate forces to grind them down with the advantage of numbers.

From the start, Lee denounced those who predicted a short war. He thought it might last ten years. Eventually the industrial might of the north combined with its armed force over three times that available to the South prevailed.

Here I must address Lee's legacy. Let me take you back to the fight as it approached Richmond with the west fallen to Grant at Vicksburg and Atlanta burned by Sherman. With all hope gone for an armistice, far less victory, Lee, as Horn writes, made a point of questioning how anyone could have expected a different outcome. "While the military situation is not favorable, it is not worse than the superior numbers and resources of the enemy justified us in expecting from the beginning. Indeed, the legitimate military consequences of that superiority have been postponed longer than we had reason to anticipate."

With this any admiration I had for Lee collapsed. Before he made his decision to fight for the South, he was aware of his proven skill in the field and he was aware of the advantages of the North. He had no fondness for slavery. As mentioned, he had no illusion that the war would be short. By placing himself in service to the South he would be prolonging as much as was within his power a conflict that would kill over 650,000 troops. To say that he had to do this because of the choice of Virginia to join the South is a refusal to place the responsibility where it belongs, on himself. Indeed, and increasingly near the end of the war, the image of Lee in command was all that kept the South fighting. Imagine how different things would have been had Lee taken command of Union forces from the start. The war might well have been far shorter and less destructive.

I only wish that this were more widely known about the man: that he became an instrument of destruction knowing the chances of victory were almost nil, based solely on the decision of others to join the South.

What happened to him after the surrender? He took a position as head of Washington College (now Washington and Lee University) in Lexington, VA. where he served until he died peacefully in 1870.

It should be noted that Arlington was the home of Lee and his wife, Mary, after they inherited it by way of Mary's father, the adopted son of George and Martha Washington. The house still stands surrounded by the graves of thousands of soldiers at Arlington National Cemetery across the Potomac River from the District of Columbia.

*The Man Who Would Not Be Washington* is a penetrating character study and epic tragedy that I am very glad I read.

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