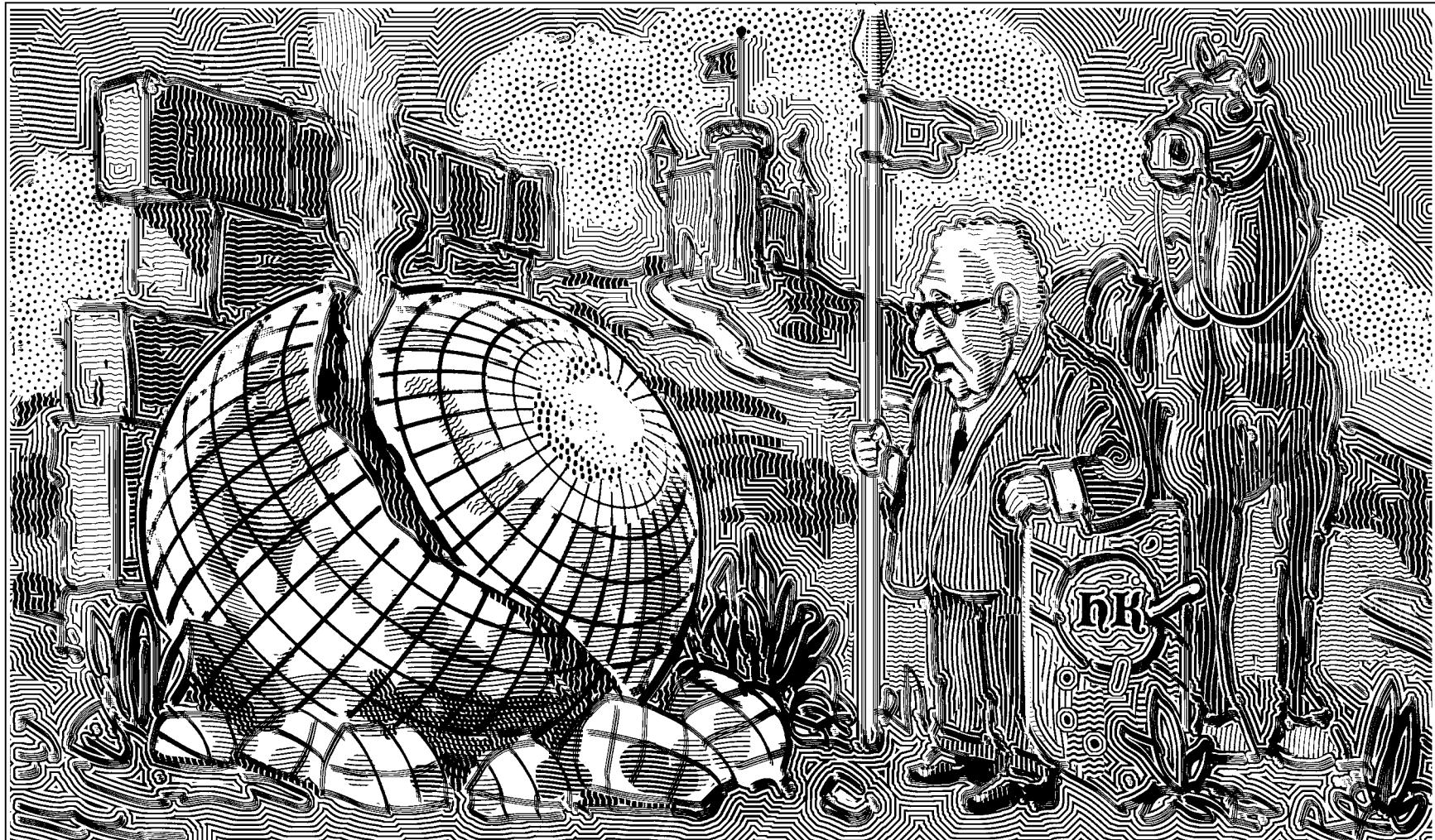


VOLUME XV, NUMBER 2, SPRING 2015

# CLAREMONT

REVIEW OF BOOKS

*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*



## THE WORLD ACCORDING TO KISSINGER

by Angelo M. Codevilla

### Plus:

Michael Anton:  
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Women**

Mackubin T. Owens:  
**Robert E. Lee**

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Book Review by Mackubin Thomas Owens

## GENERAL OF THE LOST CAUSE

*The Man Who Would Not Be Washington: Robert E. Lee's Civil War and His Decision That Changed American History,*  
by Jonathan Horn. Scribner, 384 pages, \$28

*Clouds of Glory: The Life and Legend of Robert E. Lee,* by Michael Korda.  
Harper, 832 pages, \$40



General Robert E. Lee at the Battle of Fredericksburg,  
after a painting by H.A. Ogden

HERE HASN'T BEEN A STANDARD biography of Robert E. Lee since 1995, when Emory Thomas published *Robert E. Lee: A Biography*. The past year, however, has brought two valuable but different Lee biographies: Jonathan Horn's *The Man Who Would Not be Washington* and Michael Korda's *Clouds of Glory: The Life and Legend of Robert E. Lee*. Korda's is the more traditional, examining both Lee's military and personal life. While admitting Lee's shortcomings, Korda, also the author of well-received biographies of Ulysses S. Grant and Dwight Eisenhower, offers a very favorable view of his subject. Horn, a journalist, by contrast spends little time on Lee's military actions during the war, concentrating instead on the personal and national consequences of his momentous decision to wage war against the Union that George Washington had helped to create.

Horn's argument is provocative. How, he asks, did Lee bring himself to make his fateful decision to fight for Virginia and against Washington's Union? The choice was difficult, Horn shows, because the bond between the two Virginians was not Confederate propaganda, but real, and twofold.

First, Lee's father, "Light Horse" Harry Lee, had been one of Washington's favorite generals and a close confidant. The elder Lee—whom Horn calls a "foundering father"—had disgraced himself and his family after the Revolution, incurring debts by land speculation that adversely affected others, including Washington, whom Lee ensnared in his business deals. Horn is not the first to contend that Robert E. Lee's famous rectitude was an attempt to atone for Harry's sins.

Second, Lee married into the extended Washington family: his wife was the daughter

of Washington's adopted son, George Washington Parke Custis. Though a fundamentally decent man, Custis was often overwhelmed by his responsibilities, a trait his daughter inherited. Both biographies, but especially Horn's, describe the problems Lee faced in constantly dealing with the fecklessness of both father and daughter regarding the management of money. Lee was forced to carve out an inordinate amount of time from his U.S. Army duties to attend to his father-in-law's affairs. Indeed, one such occasion brought him to national prominence: home on leave in 1859, he was called to Washington and assigned to command the detachment that captured John Brown at Harper's Ferry.

In any event, the Washington-Lee bond was real, and both sides invoked it. Abraham Lincoln, through an emissary, appealed to the legacy when offering Lee command of



the Union forces charged with defeating the rebellion. In the course of beseeching Lee to command Virginia's forces, John Janney, the president of the state's secession convention, called him "first in war" among the citizens of Virginia, a clear allusion to Washington.

**B**UT WHILE LEE'S DECISION MAY HAVE divided Americans, his favorable reputation has been shared nationally. How did this come to pass? During the war, Lee was nicknamed the "rebel chieftain." In taking up arms against the Union, Lee violated his oath as an officer, committing treason against the United States, if we follow the plain meaning of the word. In *Conquered into Liberty* (2011), Eliot Cohen observes that Benedict Arnold, the paradigmatic American traitor, never took an oath to defend the Con-

stitution, which didn't exist, after all, until after the Revolution. Lee and the other officers who fought for the Confederacy, however, did take and then violate that oath.

Yet in the aftermath of the war something remarkable happened: the "rebel chieftain" was transformed from a regional hero into a national one. Americans, South and North, came to see Lee as surpassing all others on both sides of the conflict in terms of soldierly virtue, integrity, magnanimity, and humanity. Indeed, for decades no Civil War figure's reputation, not even Lincoln's, surpassed Lee's.

As a national hero, Lee came to be seen as the perfect soldier—a Christian and a gentleman as well as a peerless commander who prevailed against adversaries far less skillful than he, but whose superior resources ultimately proved overwhelming. According to historian

Gary Gallagher, the consensus came to hold that in defeat, Lee and his soldiers could look back on a record of selfless regard for duty and magnificent accomplishment.

His standing in the South is no mystery. When he assumed command of what would soon be called the Army of Northern Virginia in June 1862, the Confederacy was on the brink of defeat. In the west, Union armies had penetrated deep into western Tennessee and northern Mississippi and had captured the important city of New Orleans. In the east, George McClellan's Army of the Potomac seemed to be moving inexorably towards Richmond. Had that city fallen in the spring or summer of 1862, the rebellion might well have ended with the seceded states returning to the Union.

But when Joseph Johnston was seriously wounded in June 1862 and Lee replaced him as commander of the Confederate army opposing the Union's Army of the Potomac, he immediately changed the character of the war by inflicting defeat after defeat on Union forces. Over his first year in command he drove McClellan back from the gates of Richmond during the Seven Days Battle, then shifted his forces north to crush John Pope's Army of Virginia at Second Manassas in August. Lee immediately invaded Maryland to capitalize on his advantages and the Union's disarray. There, his outnumbered army fought the Army of the Potomac to a bloody draw at Sharpsburg (Antietam) in September. He repulsed a Union assault at Fredericksburg in December, then crushed the Army of the Potomac under Joseph Hooker at Chancellorsville in May 1863 before being checked in Pennsylvania at Gettysburg.

This incredible string of victories against a materially superior foe made Lee a hero in the South. The spell he cast over the Confederacy continued for the duration of the war, during which circumstances forced Lee to fight continually on the defensive. So powerful was the Lee legend that even as late as the winter of 1865, with his army besieged in Petersburg, the Southern population clung to the hope that the Confederacy would prevail. As long as Lee was still in the field, success was somehow possible. For three years, he and his army had proved the backbone of the Confederate cause and the constant source of hope.

**I**N THE NORTH LEE'S STANDING WAS THE result of his stoical acceptance of the war's outcome, as well as his extraordinary rectitude and gentlemanly reserve. He chose not to write a memoir and refrained from public commentary. After his death, his stature benefited from the Northern desire for national

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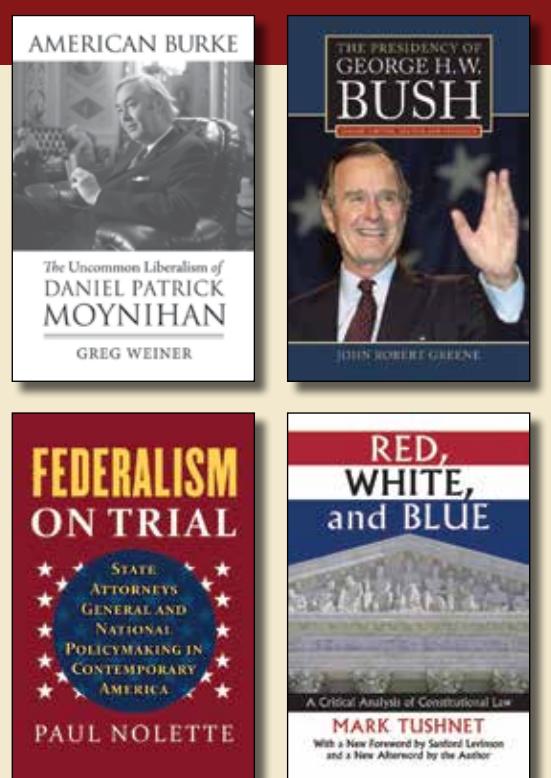
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reconciliation, which led many Northerners to accept the “Lost Cause” justification of the war.

As Yale’s David Blight observes in *Race and Reunion* (2002), this interpretation of the war was the South’s response to the physical destruction and psychological trauma of defeat. The matchless bravery of the Confederate soldier, said Virginia’s Governor Charles T. O’Ferrall, succumbed to the “juggernaut of superior numbers and merciless power.” Robert Penn Warren wrote, “In the moment of its death, the Confederacy entered upon its immortality.”

Although the political component of the Lost Cause school is demonstrably false—that the cause of the war was not slavery, but the central government’s oppressive power, against which the South wished only to exercise its constitutional right to secede—there is a great deal of truth to the military component. The South did fight at a material disadvantage, and Lee’s generalship permitted him to overcome immense odds on battlefield after battlefield.

There is, however, only so much logic to Lee’s elevation. In “the post-Civil War effort to turn Lee into a kind of secular saint,” Korda writes, “his views on race have been almost altogether eliminated from his portrait.” For instance, Lee has often been described as an opponent of slavery, but his views mirrored those of many other Southern whites: slavery was particularly regrettable as a burden on whites rather than an injustice to blacks. His dislike of the institution was exacerbated by his efforts to execute his father-in-law’s will, which manumitted Parke Custis’s slaves. Because of legal issues arising from that will, Lee was unable to free them until January 1, 1863, the day that Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation took effect.

Of course, his military prowess is why most Americans know of Robert E. Lee. But even his generalship—praised alike by officers who fought with and against him—has been reassessed critically. Remarkably, some of his most prominent critics have been Southerners or historians who have written sympathetically of the Southern war effort. For instance, historians such as Thomas Connelly and Alan Nolan have contended that Lee’s single-minded offensive orientation resulted in casualties the Confederacy could not afford, hurting the Southern cause.

**A**CCORDING TO HIS DETRACTORS, LEE had no grand strategy and a too narrow, parochial focus on defending Virginia. His predilection for the offensive helped bring about a defeat that could have been postponed, and possibly averted. Con-

nnelly argued the Confederacy would “have fared better had it not possessed” a leader as aggressive as Robert E. Lee. Indeed, some historians have gone so far as to dismiss Lee’s military reputation as “manufactured history,” a postwar invention by such Lost Cause writers as Jubal Early, who distorted the record by vastly inflating Lee’s abilities and wartime stature.

Korda agrees with some of these criticisms, especially those regarding Lee’s focus on Virginia at the expense of the greater South.

He remained a Virginian first and foremost; he had resigned from the U.S. Army to defend Virginia; and while he was committed heart and soul to the Confederacy if only as a matter of honor, his first love remained his own state. His strategic vision was a reflection of his personality—a strong preference for attack over defense, a belief in the superiority of his own troops over Federal troops, and a determination to remove Federal forces as “invaders” from all of Virginia.

But as other historians have noted, this was not so much a myopic focus on Virginia as a belief that the South’s best chance for achieving independence was to employ a strategic turning movement with infantry and cavalry to neutralize the Union’s advantage in engineering, artillery, and gunboats. For Lee, maneuver was not an end in itself but only the means to attack the enemy and inflict heavy losses. Only in this manner, Lee believed, could the South persuade the population of the North that a costly, interminable struggle lay ahead if the Confederacy were denied independence. This confirms military historian Russell Weigley’s observation that Lee was the most Napoleonic general of the war, always seeking a climactic battle of annihilation. In addition, Lee was the commander of only one Confederate army, not a general in chief responsible for overall Confederate strategy.

Mostly, though, Korda agrees with such Lee defenders as Gary Gallagher that Lee’s reputation was certainly not manufactured after the war. Korda, like Gallagher, demonstrates that Lee’s eminence rests not on retrospective accounts informed by full knowledge of how the war unfolded but on what Southerners, both civilians and soldiers, said and wrote during the war. The record is clear: the people of the Confederacy harbored a remarkable faith in Lee and his army. Korda echoes Gallagher’s argument—“the Confederate people looked to them as the nation’s best hope for winning independence”—and

they didn’t see the setbacks at Sharpsburg (Antietam) and Gettysburg as disasters, believing, even in late 1864, that ultimate victory was possible.

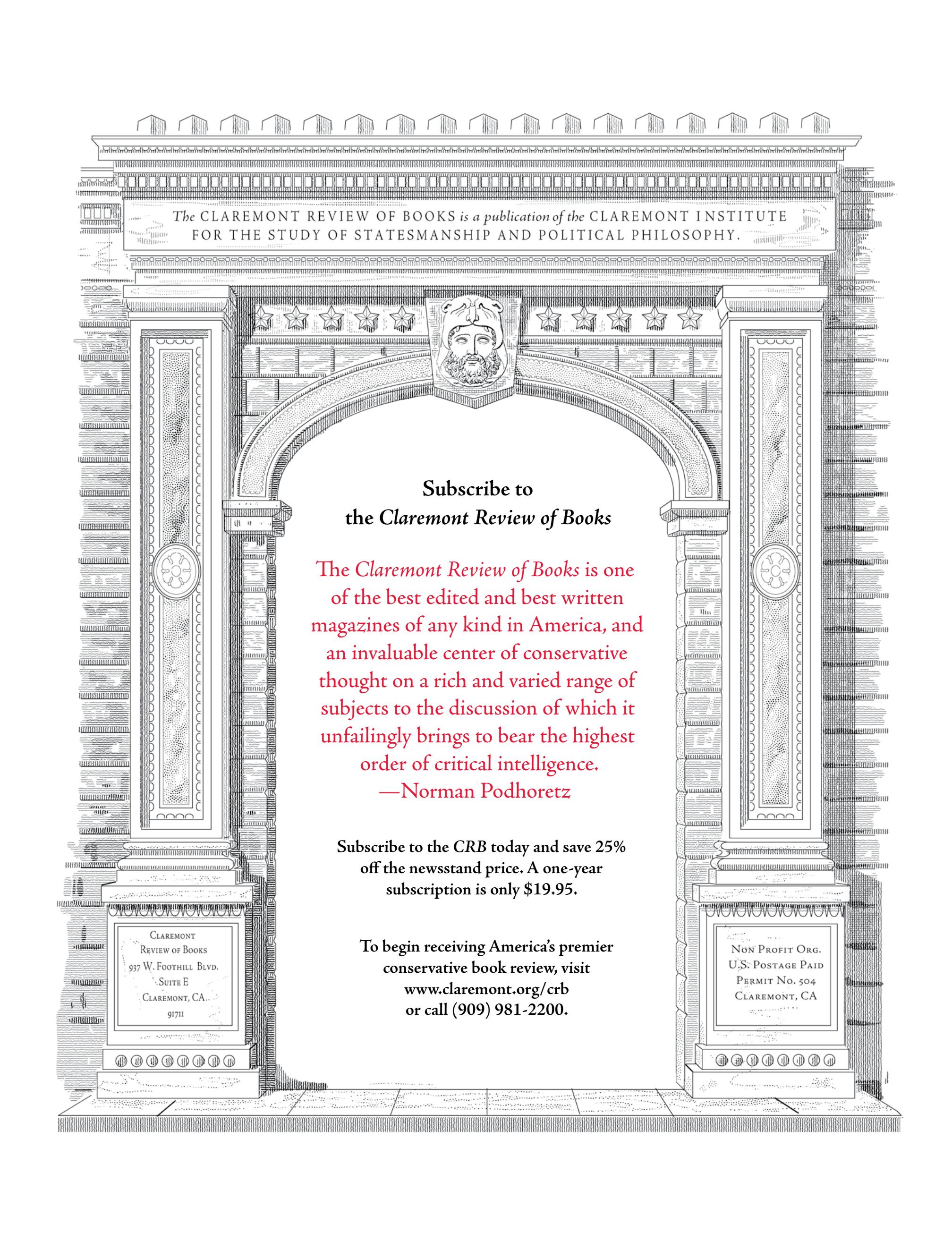
**K**ORDA DOES PUT HIS FINGER ON ONE of Lee’s shortcomings as a commander: his refusal or inability to make sure that his generals always executed the orders he gave. “Lee possessed every quality of a great general except the ability to give a direct order to his subordinates and ensure that it was obeyed.” Lee, ever the gentleman, thought it sufficient to describe what he wanted to accomplish and leave the actual execution to others. This worked with “Stonewall” Jackson but not with James Longstreet, who saw his role as a contrarian whose responsibility was to force Lee to consider all options. But at the same time, Korda will have no part of Lost Cause attempts to blame the Confederacy’s ultimate defeat on Longstreet. Lee certainly leaned on the general he called his “war horse.”

Both biographies make clear the great cost of the decision Lee made in 1861. He lost his home, his family life, his health. A vigorous man at the beginning of the war, he appeared old and haggard four years later. Korda speculates that Lee suffered from heart disease. He died, five and a half years after Appomattox, at the age of 63.

I believe that Lee, the greatest general of the war, did more with less than anyone had a right to expect. He came astoundingly close to his goal of winning the war by inflicting a catastrophic defeat on a Union army. Horn’s argument is also persuasive, however. Lee’s decision to resign his commission and take up arms against the Union did have a profound impact on the course of American history.

But consider another scenario. Had Lee not changed the character of the war when he assumed command of the Army of Northern Virginia in June 1862, it is possible that the seceded states would have returned to the Union under the old formula, “the Constitution as it is, the Union as it was,” i.e., with slavery intact. Thus, Lee’s decision may have been the sort of occurrence that summons up the idea of Providence. The war was necessary to save the Union but also to make it “worthy of the saving.” Lee’s choice and subsequent prowess made this outcome possible.

*Mackubin Thomas Owens, who recently retired as professor of national security affairs at the Naval War College, is dean of academics at the Institute of World Politics in Washington, D.C., and editor of Orbis, the quarterly journal of the Foreign Policy Research Institute.*



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