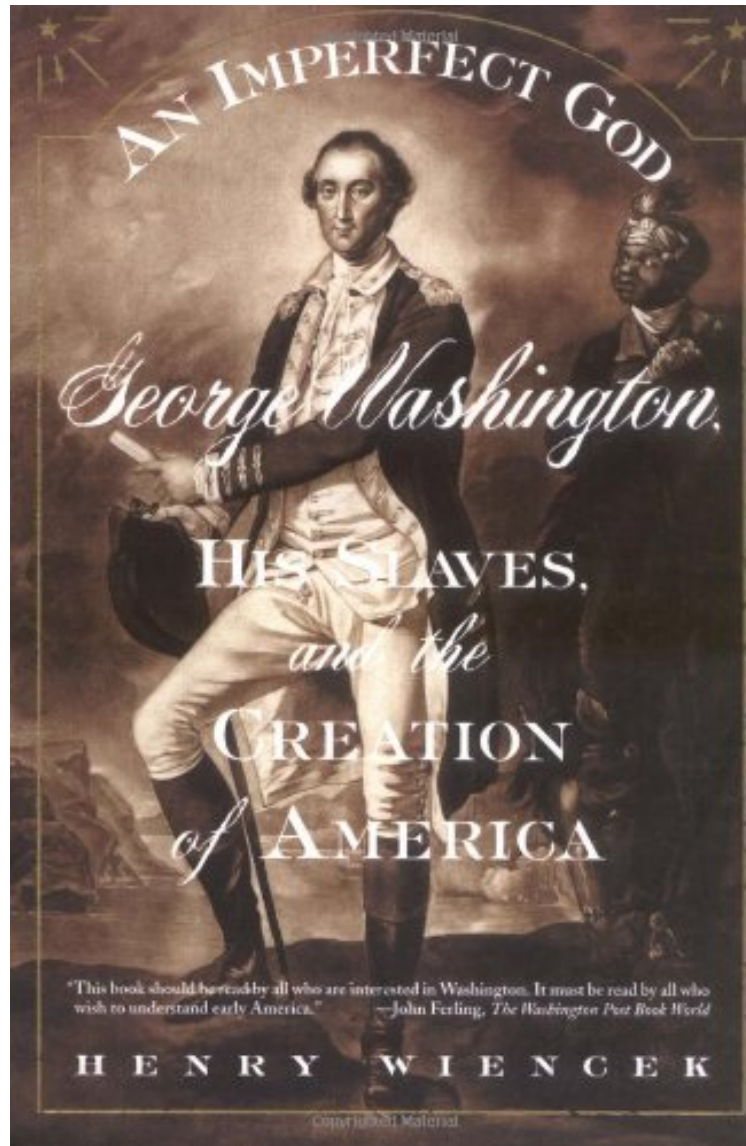


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An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America

Henry Wiencek

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Henry Wiencek : An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America:

10 of 10 people found the following review helpful. A fascinating topic and a fresh look at WashingtonBy Howard

Schulman This book is definitely "different". In it, the author examines how President George Washington went from a man steeped in the belief that slavery was acceptable to one who seemed to be deeply troubled by it. Unlike most history texts of the period, this one spends a lot of time constructing arguments and making educated guesses. Although at times the arguments seemed to be a little bit of a stretch, the author presents a lot of apparently fresh research and his ideas were definitely new and insightful. Bravo! It is fairly interesting how the author pours through seemingly uninteresting records of slave sales and otherwise uninteresting personal correspondences of Washington and his family in order to discover what Washington's true thoughts were and what he actually did when it concerned his slaves. Slavery was not a topic that Washington liked to talk about publicly, and he seemed to have thoughts both pro and con, so we're frequently left with no definite answer. Furthermore, he seemed to part company with his wife on this subject! Martha, it appears, had no problem with the continuation of slavery, while Washington clearly did. In his will, Washington freed most of his slaves. We also discover that Washington had thoughts about doing so during his presidency. That would have set quite a precedent. It never happened, but things would have been different if it did. In the first half, the author spends time explaining how slavery evolved in the United States. Slavery just didn't happen overnight. It evolved and changed over the years, finally becoming that brutal institution we all now recognize. These sections were quite interesting and well done, too. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. I enjoyed reading this book. By Frank Lee Wiencek presents Washington as a closet abolitionist, a man who has grown to abhor slavery but is helpless to suppress it. This spiritual awakening is due to his experiences in the revolutionary war serving with African soldiers. I don't buy it. Why not just give the slaves a salary? Why house them in hovels and work them dusk to dawn? I enjoyed reading this book, it is well researched and brings to light many sad truths about the founding fathers. Washington's will freeing his slaves upon the death of Martha is Hitchcockian. She wisely told them that there was no need to wait. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. GW as a real human being. By Just Me Love this book. It is the first biography of George Washington I've read that really made me appreciate him as a human being that, if I met him today, I could talk with him and not be just staring at a historical idol. The writing evoked an emotional as well as intellectual response in me. I first read this book in hardcover, but had to have it on my Kindle to reread on a trip.

An Imperfect God is a major new biography of Washington, and the first to explore his engagement with American slavery. When George Washington wrote his will, he made the startling decision to set his slaves free; earlier he had said that holding slaves was his "only unavoidable subject of regret." In this groundbreaking work, Henry Wiencek explores the founding father's engagement with slavery at every stage of his life--as a Virginia planter, soldier, politician, president and statesman. Washington was born and raised among blacks and mixed-race people; he and his wife had blood ties to the slave community. Yet as a young man he bought and sold slaves without scruple, even raffled off children to collect debts (an incident ignored by earlier biographers). Then, on the Revolutionary battlefields where he commanded both black and white troops, Washington's attitudes began to change. He and the other framers enshrined slavery in the Constitution, but, Wiencek shows, even before he became president Washington had begun to see the system's evil. Wiencek's revelatory narrative, based on a meticulous examination of private papers, court records, and the voluminous Washington archives, documents for the first time the moral transformation culminating in Washington's determination to emancipate his slaves. He acted too late to keep the new republic from perpetuating slavery, but his repentance was genuine. And it was perhaps related to the possibility--as the oral history of Mount Vernon's slave descendants has long asserted--that a slave named West Ford was the son of George and a woman named Venus; Wiencek has new evidence that this could indeed have been true. George Washington's heroic stature as Father of Our Country is not diminished in this superb, nuanced portrait: now we see Washington in full as a man of his time and ahead of his time.

.com Was George Washington a dedicated slaveholder and, like Thomas Jefferson, a father of slave children? Or was he a closeted abolitionist and moralist who abhorred the abuse of African-Americans? In *An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America* Henry Wiencek delves into Washington's papers and new oral history information to assemble a portrait of the first President of the United States that (while uneven in the telling) concludes that Washington supported emancipation by the time of his death. To begin, Wiencek briefly addresses and dismisses the claim that Washington fathered a child with Venus, (a slave owned by Washington's brother, John Augustine). According to Wiencek, the President was likely sterile and such an affair would have been out of character for a man who prided himself on "self-control." Wiencek's real focus in *An Imperfect God* is Washington's personal and political position regarding emancipation. The primary ground for Wiencek's argument is Washington's will and a selection of private letters that elaborate a plan for providing land and means for his freed laborers. The will in particular offers powerful evidence of Washington's true intentions, including explicit declarations manumitting Washington's slaves after his death. As Wiencek shows, the document punctuated a long period of equivocation. *An Imperfect God* is an imperfect book. Wiencek's occasional first-person accounts of his field research, including discussions with descendants of Washington, feel strangely out of place in what is elsewhere a straightforward

biography punctuated with digressions into Washington's larger historical context. Further, Wiencek sometimes dabbles in hagiography and is willing to excuse much in a man who was a slaveholder his entire life. Yet, Wiencek is right to point out the distinctions of Washington among the slaveholding Founding Fathers. Readers can only imagine along with Wiencek the national tragedy that could have been averted had Washington provided the great example of emancipation while in office. --Patrick O'KelleyFrom Publishers WeeklyThis important work, sure to be of compelling interest to anyone concerned with the nation's origins, its founders and its history of race slavery, is the first extended history of its subject. Wiencek (who won a National Book Critics Circle award for *The Hairstons: An American Family in Black and White*) relates not only the embroiled "blood" history of Washington's family and that of the Custis clan into which he married, but also the first-person tale, often belabored, of his own search for facts and truth. What will surely gain the book widest notice is Wiencek's careful evaluation of the evidence that Washington himself may have fathered the child of a slave. His verdict? Possible, but highly improbable. Yet his detective work places the search on a higher plane than ever before. Also, while being a social history (unnecessarily padded in some places) of 18th-century Virginia and filled with affecting stories of individual slaves, the book stands out for depicting Washington's deep moral struggle with slavery and his gradual "moral transfiguration" after watching some young slaves raffled off. While by no means above dissimulation, even lying, about his and Martha's bond servants, by the time of his death in 1799 Washington had become a firm, if quiet, opponent of the slave system. By freeing his slaves upon Martha's death, he stood head and shoulders above almost all his American contemporaries. This work of stylish scholarship and genealogical investigation makes Washington an even greater and more human figure than he has seemed before. History Book Club main selection. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc.From BooklistThomas Jefferson is revered as our apostle of liberty; yet, when he died deeply in debt, he had made no provision for the emancipation of his slaves, and many were sold and families scattered. George Washington was conservative, authoritarian, and aristocratic in outlook and demeanor; yet, he strongly emphasized in his will that his slaves were to be freed, despite opposition from his family. Wiencek, a Virginia historian, studies Washington's moral struggle with the institution of slavery. As Wiencek's fascinating and often emotionally wrenching examination of Washington's private correspondence reveals, he expressed distaste for slavery as a young man. But like many similarly minded Virginia planters, he was not prepared to advocate emancipation. As commander of the Continental Army, Washington was deeply moved by the sight of black slaves and free men fighting alongside whites, which seems to have accelerated his personal opposition to what he regarded as a curse. Unfortunately, like Jefferson, his personal opposition could not spur him to lead a public campaign that might have spared the nation the horrors to come. Jay FreemanCopyright American Library Association. All rights reserved