

Scrutinizing The President: Davis As Husband, Foe, Leader, And Symbol

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Review

SCRUTINIZING THE PRESIDENT

Davis as husband, foe, leader, and symbol

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Boritt, Gabor S. *Jefferson Davis's Generals*. Oxford University Press, ISBN 195120620

The eight essays included in **Jefferson Davis's Generals** stem from papers written by various authors and presented to the editor's Civil War Institute at Gettysburg. Five of the papers discuss relations between commander in chief Davis and some of his full generals: J.E. Johnston, R.E. Lee, Beauregard, Bragg, and Hood; one deals with the wives of all these except Hood; another concerns pictures of Davis in the Northern press; and the last addresses broad questions of strategy and history. Although each essay is followed by endnotes and a bibliographic essay, there is no index for the collection.

Craig L. Symonds's essay treats coolly the hot topic of his subtitle's double entendre: "Davis and Johnston at War." The two men, so much alike, clashed repeatedly until Davis finally wrote out for Congress, but never sent, his explanation of why he could not again give Johnston charge of an army. In a balanced, careful assessment, Symonds awards the palm for valor in this "war" to Davis, but perhaps overstates the case in calling this "dysfunctional partnership" a major cause of defeat.

In Emory M. Thomas's paper, Thomas states that the Confederate president, and historians after him, "believed that Lee and Davis were in strategic accord when, in fact, they were not." Davis wanted defense while Lee wanted "climactic battle." Conceding that "Lee never spoke or wrote his heresy," Thomas seeks proof in Lee's two invasions of the North. But he fails to note that Davis approved both campaigns, and that it was Beauregard, not Davis, who refused to supply the diversion Lee wanted in 1863 (and for good reasons: insufficient troops and an impending attack on Charleston).

T. Michl Parrish's contribution to **Jefferson Davis's Generals** points out that Beauregard thought up grand strategies that President Davis never adopted -- one cause of the friction between the two men. Parrish treats their "animus" evenhandedly, pointing out that Davis put the general in the right niche at Charleston and that the two were able to smother their feelings for the good of the Cause they both loved. Parrish's crystal clear style helps to make this essay a gem.

Steven E. Woodworth's essay blames Davis for, of all things, not supporting Braxton Bragg -- failing to provide "a sound command system along with good officers." Whether or not this makes Davis liable for Bragg's failures, we at least learn that the two were not special friends. Some assertions in this essay seem dubious, but reading that Bragg was a good general with "genuine talent" whose subordinates did indeed sometimes fail him is a refreshing change.

Herman Hattaway's paper expertly discusses many aspects of John Bell Hood's rise to a top command and his friendship of mutual admiration with Davis. Mostly Hattaway is right on target, showing that Hood deserved promotions for his battlefield performance but did not know how to manage an entire army. Hattaway dismisses the idea that Hood was a "spy" for Davis. The essay seems to accept, however, the widespread but erroneous notion that Davis approved Hood's fatal move to Nashville.

In a happy shift of gaze to women, **Jefferson Davis's Generals** presents an essay by Lesley J. Gordon. Gordon shows Varina Davis, Lydia Johnston, and Elise Bragg with devoted husbands, in contrast to Caroline Beauregard, whose husband neglected her. Greater acquaintance with the Lees' circumstances might have sweetened the author's view of Robert and Mary. The other portraits in Gordon's contribution, except for a few errors, are well done and true to life.

Harold Holzer's piece uses illustrations to trace the printed image of Davis in the Northern press, from military president to traitor to buffoon, and then later -- in an "iconographic miracle" -- to restored hero. Davis never wore the Confederate uniform that some prints put on him, Holzer says, but he was always "the living symbol" of the Confederacy and the Lost Cause.

James M. McPherson's work gives a brilliant analysis of strategy, puts the War in the broad context of history, and then takes up particular points, even clearing muddy ones presented in the book's other essays. In the face of Southern

soul-searching, he ends on a novel note: maybe the Yankee army had something to do with the Confederate defeat.

With its varied topics, viewpoints, and styles, this collection of essays will interest scholar and non-scholar alike.

Felicity Allen lives in Auburn, Alabama. The University of Missouri Press is publishing her biography of Jefferson Davis entitled Jefferson Davis, Unconquerable Heart.