

### Jefferson Davis, Confederate President

Donald C. Simmons

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## Review

Simmons, Jr., Donald C.

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**Hattaway, Herman and Beringer, Richard E..** *Jefferson Davis, Confederate President*. University Press of Kansas, \$39.95 ISBN 700611703

Mystery man

Highly accessible reference tackles scholarly conflicts

Jefferson Davis has undoubtedly been the subject of more books and scholarly articles than any other nineteenth-century American political figure. Herman Hattaway and Richard Beringer, in this well researched work, have done both scholars and readers with a general interest in the Civil War a valuable service by carefully reviewing most of the significant scholarly work on the Confederate president and by analyzing their contents. The result is a book that deals with the major questions confronting historians of the Confederate government, written in a style that makes for comfortable reading for even the amateur historian. Hattaway and Beringer chronologically examine the major contentions among Davis scholars, and the result is a very thoughtful analysis of the major historiographic issues and theory addressed by previous scholars.

The obvious weakness of the book is the failure to incorporate the latest theories regarding American political leadership, specifically the influence of presidential wives. The lack of references to the work and theory of noted presidential scholar Robert P. Watson is disappointing. No effort is made to ascertain the influence of Varina Davis on her husband's political decision making. In spite of the general consensus among scholars that presidential wives often exert considerable influence on their husbands, the only references to Mrs. Davis are brief and dismissive.

At the end of the text, in the appendix, is a review of James David Barber's model of presidential leadership. This assessment is not well presented and appears to be an afterthought.

According to the authors, using Barber's model, Jefferson Davis was clearly an active-negative president, with perhaps an occasional hint of passive-negative. A more detailed analysis of models of presidential leadership is needed.

This is an informative book, but contains little that is new about Davis. The less than three pages at the end that deal with the Confederate president's postwar years leave the reader wanting. The political influence of Davis did not end with the Confederacy, but this is not evident to the reader. The authors mention that Davis's public image underwent various transformations during the postwar period, but note this only in passing. In spite of these obvious weaknesses, the chapters are well researched and the footnotes provide a wealth of information about previously published secondary sources. Hattaway and Beringer have produced an adequate, but very readable general reference biography that deals with the life of Jefferson Davis through the end of the sectional conflict.

*Donald C. Simmons, Jr. serves as executive director of the South Dakota Humanities Council and the South Dakota Center for the Book. A former professor of history, he is the author of Confederate Settlements in British Honduras and co-editor of Latin America and the Caribbean in Transition.*