

Embattled Rebel: Jefferson Davis as Commander in Chief

Joseph G. Dawson III

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Dawson, Joseph G. III (2015) "Embattled Rebel: Jefferson Davis as Commander in Chief," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 17 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.17.1.21

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol17/iss1/20>

Review

Dawson, Joseph G. III

Winter 2015

McPherson, James M. *Embattled Rebel: Jefferson Davis as Commander in Chief*. Penguin Press, \$32.95 ISBN 9781594204975

Reappraising Jefferson Davis as Confederate President

In his influential study, *The Road to Appomattox* (1956), historian Bell Irvin Wiley virtually leveled a bill of indictment against Jefferson Davis, asserting that as Confederate commander in chief Davis's "performance in that capacity left much to be desired" (Wiley, p. 39). Wiley contended that Davis displayed many more faults than positive qualities. According to Wiley, Davis committed numerous errors and was a poor administrator who found it difficult to delegate authority. Writing in 1991, historian William C. Davis also reached more negative than positive conclusions in his sweeping and hefty full biography, *Jefferson Davis: The Man and His Hour*. Without backing away from criticisms where they were merited, biographer William J. Cooper softened the historical strikes against the Confederacy's leader in his judicious and detailed treatment, *Jefferson Davis, American* (2000). Although James M. McPherson's study is not so caustic as Wiley's, McPherson's findings place him in the critics' camp, closer to Wiley and W. C. Davis than to Cooper.

It is important to recall that Davis had never held state or national executive office before 1861, but he built a substantial political and military record. Davis was a college graduate, completing studies at West Point. Thereafter he served as an army lieutenant on the frontier, fought as a volunteer colonel in the U.S.-Mexican War, sat in both the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate, and gained administrative experience as Secretary of War for President Franklin Pierce. Few American presidents come close to compiling such a distinguished career. Of course, Davis's colleagues knew his list of credits. McPherson rigorously adheres to the years 1861-1865, allowing himself only a few pages to treat Davis before the war or to compare or contrast him with other potential candidates for the Confederacy's presidency.

Relationships between Davis and his generals naturally forms a major portion of McPherson's study and accounts for a substantial catalogue of Davis's faults and errors. For instance, McPherson joins with the negative views of one of the Confederate senators from Texas, Williamson S. Oldham, who had claimed that Davis was too personally attached to generals of questionable credentials or accomplishments. As McPherson summarizes, those officers included Braxton Bragg, John C. Pemberton, Leonidas Polk, and Theophilus Holmes (pp. 250-51). Earl Van Dorn could be added to this quartet of problematic generals whom Davis favored. One of the best parts of McPherson's study is how he evaluates Davis's growing dependence on Robert E. Lee, obviously the Confederacy's best army commander. McPherson also devotes necessary space to relate Davis's problems with two prickly generals, Joseph E. Johnston and P. G. T. Beauregard, who were often at odds with the president. The author persuasively argues how detrimental it was to the Confederacy that Davis, Johnston, and Beauregard did not work well together. Yet Davis repeatedly picked those two generals for important assignments. On the other hand, McPherson misses a chance to mention that like Abraham Lincoln, Davis appointed to high rank several so-called "political generals"—officers who possessed little or no antebellum military experience.

McPherson deals effectively with several of Davis's controversies. He appropriately calls Davis's strategic approach the "offensive-defensive" strategy. McPherson gives readers an excellent brief analysis of the difficulties and practicalities of Confederate strategy. The author also delineates the needs for Confederate conscription (pp. 70-73) and suspending habeas corpus (pp. 73-74, 174-75). McPherson joins Wiley in concluding that Davis's personal foibles and irascible personality, partly caused by health problems, alienated Confederate civilian leaders, such as congressmen, governors, and selected cabinet members.

On the other hand, McPherson devotes less attention or analysis to other worthwhile points about Davis's presidency. These include debates over how to defend the southern coasts and what military resources to employ there, "King Cotton Diplomacy," and Confederate impressment of slaves. Naturally, McPherson addresses some of Davis's interactions with the five leaders who held the post of secretary of war, but such an important topic could deserve more attention, especially how Davis worked with James Seddon. McPherson mentions several individual state governors and Davis's communications with them. The most volatile state executives, Joseph Brown of Georgia and Zebulon Vance of North Carolina, demanded much of the president's time, but

McPherson does not define the president's relationship with the majority of state governors. Glimmers of Davis's rhetoric come through on some pages, but how his rhetoric compared or contrasted with Lincoln seemed to beg for McPherson's treatment.

Penguin Press has published a handsome volume. Its pages have wide margins supplemented by many photographs, period drawings, and maps. On the other hand, the book lacks a selected bibliography, which will disappoint some readers. Others will know that to produce his many substantial books on the Civil War, McPherson possesses considerable knowledge of many archival collections, though few are cited in the notes of *Embattled Rebel*. Those notes confirm that the author relied heavily on two key diaries by civilian staff members of the Confederate War Department, Robert G. H. Kean and John B. Jones, who shared an anti-Davis tone. McPherson's lively, fresh account replaces Wiley's book about Davis as commander in chief.

Joseph G. Dawson III is Professor of History at Texas A&M; University, College Station. He is the author of "Jefferson Davis and the Confederacy's 'Offensive-Defensive' Strategy in the U.S. Civil War," Journal of Military History 73 (April 2009), pp. 591-607.