

Jefferson Davis and the Civil War Era

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Review

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Cooper, William J., Jr. *Jefferson Davis and the Civil War Era*. Louisiana State University Press, \$24.95 hardcover ISBN 9780807133712

The Confederate President and His Presidency

This slim volume contains much more than first meets the eye. William J. Cooper, Jr., Boyd Professor of History at Louisiana State University, is the author of important works on southern politics and a recent biography of Jefferson Davis, entitled *Jefferson Davis: American* (2000). From his research he has gained a deep knowledge of the South in the Civil War era. Here he presents nine interesting and stimulating essays about major issues in Jefferson Davis's leadership of the South and the Confederacy. Each essay is concise and clear, and each makes a strong argument about matters of historical importance. As a result, the volume challenges and rewards the reader as much as many heavier tomes.

Among the issues that he examines are Jefferson Davis's moderation in the secession crisis and his approach, as Confederate President, to state rights. Cooper confirms that Davis truly had a deep affection for the Union. He hoped to avoid its destruction and was not eager, as were William Lowndes Yancey and other southern radicals, to destroy the government established by Washington and the founding fathers. One of the remarkable things about Jefferson Davis was the depth of commitment that he subsequently made to Confederate independence. That goal became an unshakeable resolve for him, and he held himself to a high standard in its pursuit. Cooper also shows that the typical view of Davis as a "steadfast states' righter" is correct, but the exigencies of war shaped "his view of appropriate public policy." The Confederate Constitution gave the central government both "the duty to defend the nation" and broad power to wage war. Davis did not hesitate to use those powers. In reality, he had no alternative if he wanted the Confederacy to survive. Nevertheless, there was loud and persistent criticism of his actions, much of it falling into the category of

a defense of liberty. Cooper argues that historians have been misled by the shrillness of this criticism. On page 39 he concludes that politicians who practiced what George Rable has called the "politics of liberty" were strikingly ineffective.

Another strength of these essays is their insight into the connection between domestic politics and military strategy. Saying that it is "absolutely wrong" to separate politics and military affairs, Cooper argues that "Confederate military history is in a basic sense political." The Confederacy did not come into existence with a strong sense of nationalism, and Cooper points out that "time and again political and military authorities both told Davis that loyalty depended upon defense." To give up territory was to lose supplies, troops, and the morale that would sustain the war effort. Cooper credits Davis with a keen awareness of this fact, even in crisis situations. For example, a well-founded political judgment about the weakness of loyalty in the Trans-Mississippi prevented Davis from ordering troops to leave that region and reinforce Vicksburg. This was a constant reality in the Confederacy. Local officials forecast "dire results" if troops left their area, for Confederates "wanted concrete evidence that the government in Richmond was determined to defend their region."

Although Cooper credits the Confederate President with political realism on this score, he also criticizes Davis as commander-in-chief. He dealt too leniently, Cooper concludes, with some poorly performing generals, such as Braxton Bragg, and was too harsh with others who seemed to put their personal interests above total dedication to the cause. Perhaps because he had been a professional soldier, Davis gave generals too much autonomy in their field decisions, and Cooper argues that he did not intervene to quash disagreements or force needed action. He declares that "Davis did not have the steel or ruthlessness to make absolutely essential command decisions" (89).

The scope of this book's essays is not limited to the war years. Comparing Davis's personality before and during the war, Cooper concludes that Davis became more contentious and difficult during his term as chief executive. This position will seem questionable to anyone who has read the interminable and hostile correspondence that Davis carried on in the 1850s with General John Wool. Cooper is surely correct, however, when he argues that Davis played a sizeable role in creating the Lost Cause ideology that tried to write slavery out of secession and Confederate purpose. The success of that effort in popular culture was remarkable, and Cooper observes that erroneous Lost Cause thinking is still

“amazingly alive and well.” In fact, before the war Davis, like other southern leaders “regarded slavery as basic to secession and the Confederacy.”

Paul D. Escott is Reynolds Professor of History at Wake Forest University. He is the author of After Secession: Jefferson Davis and the Failure of Confederate Nationalism (1978), Military Necessity: Civil-Military Relations in the Confederacy (2006), and the forthcoming “What Shall We Do with the Negro?": Lincoln, White Racism, and Civil War America.