

### Jefferson Davis's Final Campaign: Confederate Nationalism And The Fight To Arm Slaves

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## Review

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**Dillard, Philip D.** *Jefferson Davis's Final Campaign: Confederate Nationalism and the Fight to Arm Slaves.* Mercer University Press, \$35.00 ISBN 881466050

### Re-Evaluating Confederate Emancipation

Phillip Dillard attempts to provide a deeper examination of the Confederate debate to arm slaves than historians have done before. First seriously mooted by Irish immigrant General Pat Cleburne, after the debacle of the Confederate loss at Chattanooga in late 1863, realistic proposals only came to the fore in late 1864 as General Robert E. Lee confronted President Jefferson Davis with the reality of severe manpower shortages in the Army of Northern Virginia. Davis, who had ordered all discussion of Cleburne's proposal halted less than a year before, was now more sympathetic to the concept. In his message to Congress in late 1864, Davis called for an examination of the potential recruitment of slaves into the Confederate army in return for some measure of their freedom. Davis's allies worked in Congress to make this plan so, but it took until early March 1865 before the Confederate Congress passed an act for the recruitment of such slaves in the Confederate army. Only small numbers were recruited though, many of whom deserted, which meant that it was much too bitty and much too late to have any effect on the outcome of the War. As a result, Dillard believes, other scholars, who have studied Confederate emancipation, dismiss the radical elements of it, believing that Davis "cynically promoted" it only as a desperate last measure to save the Confederacy (p.4). He disagrees and believes that the offer was real and truly revolutionary in nature especially as he promises to concentrate his argument of the attitudes of "common southerners" (p.5) rather than elites.

Dillard's effort centres on Confederate newspaper opinion from late 1864 through the end of the war. He focuses on three states, Virginia, for the eastern theater, Georgia, for the 1864 western theater, and Texas for the relatively peaceful Trans-Mississippi West. What he finds is that there were substantial

differences between these states, as well as some change over time. In Virginia, Dillard sees the greatest support for the arming of slaves and also in emancipation for any who did serve. There were opponents, but these were usually papers already critical of the Davis administration's general war effort. John Daniel's *Richmond Examiner*, for example, an implacable opponent of Davis, was, unsurprisingly, an opponent of the policy, even to the point of being heavily critical of the vaunted Robert E. Lee's support of it.

Georgia's newspapers, even though the state had seen the fall of Atlanta and Sherman's march to the sea, were more evenly split and also showed the most change over time. Regional differences within the state explained some of the division. Athens, for example, the seat of the University of Georgia, in the eastern part of the state, showed no support, the city being relatively untouched directly by the war. In the central part of the state, however, which had suffered the sting of defeat at the hands of Sherman, "the bold comments that appeared in the *Macon Telegraph and Confederate* [calling for the enlistment of slaves] . . . show that many Central Georgians would not follow the head-in-the-sand approach" of opponents but instead "heard the howls of necessity and explored radical solutions to the [Confederate] manpower problem" (p.136). Even some initial critics came around to its necessity as the situation became even worse for the Confederacy in the Spring of '65.

Texas indicated the least support for slave enlistment. Far away from the disasters on the battlefields to the east, most Texas editors and correspondents felt that the need for more troops could be met by more efficient conscription of the white population. They were also the most vociferous against any discussion of emancipation as a reward for slave service. Anyone suggesting such an idea was widely condemned. Judge John T. Mills, Irish-born immigrant and planter, for example, wrote to a Galveston newspaper in January 1865 calling for enlistment and emancipation as the only options were "submission and reunion or emancipation and continuing the struggle" (p.157). Mills, even though he had been an ardent secessionist in 1861, received such opposition that just six weeks later he "broke and recanted" (p.247). Writing another public letter, he stated that he had never "doubted our ability to maintain our independence without humiliating concessions to Yankeedom, or any of the rest of mankind, on the subject of slavery or any other" (p. 247). In Texas it seemed that the slavery system continued virtually unmolested as the state continued to produce cotton (for very lucrative sale across the border in Mexico).

Dillard rightly makes these state differences a major element of his study. Where the slavery system could still run efficiently, it did. But, even in Virginia where the need was most desperate, there were still many opposed beyond some disgruntled publishers. Its two Confederate senators were opposed voting against the measure as late as February, and only changed their minds when the Virginia legislature (meeting in the same building in Richmond) threatened to replace them. The final passage was a close run thing in the Senate too, and thus the act did not enshrine emancipation as a reward for enlistment. Slavery was to be maintained even at this late hour. Dillard wants to concentrate on the “common southerners” opinions but ultimately it was the elite’s views that really mattered. Only military desperation got anything passed at all.

Ultimately, it’s difficult to tell how much the newspaper editorials and/or letters truly represented the views of these common southerners. Too often Dillard sees support for emancipation in the papers as representing the will of the many. For example, the *Augusta Constitutionalist* was a major supporter of Confederate emancipation and published numerous letters in favor of it. Dillard takes this as a sign that the “vast majority” of Augustans “discovered that slavery could be sacrificed much more easily than southern independence” (p.220). His evidence from the *Constitutionalist* does not justify that conclusion (along with the fact that the other paper, the *Augusta Chronicle*, which, to be fair, he covers, was a vociferous opponent). This overstatement is a pity as just highlighting the extent of the debate in these three states is a valuable contribution to our understanding of the issue. Dillard shows that it’s too easy to dismiss it as a cynical ploy because it did prompt serious thinking and debate across the country about what the Confederacy stood for as it faced defeat. Engaging more with the historiography though would have added more nuance here and Dillard does not do enough of that. Paul Quigley’s work on southern nationalism, for example, sees “sacrifice” as the last defining characteristic of Confederate nationalism left at the end of the war. Perhaps the move to use slaves then had more to do with that example than any serious rethinking of what southern independence really meant or any real radical change in Confederate ideology on the centrality of slavery to its cause?

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