

# Colossal Ambitions: Confederate Planning for a Post-Civil War World

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## Review

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**Brettle, Adrian.** *Colossal Ambitions: Confederate Planning for a Post-Civil War World.* The University of Virginia Press, 2020. HARDCOVER. \$45.00 ISBN 9780813944371 Pp. 313

Historians revise and deepen our understanding of the past in response to concerns of their contemporary society or in reaction to earlier scholarly emphases. Carl Becker once described the work of the historian as revising “Mr. Everyman’s” misunderstanding of the past, and monographs often focus on a particular issue to contest the findings of earlier authors. Knowledge sometimes advances through sequential steps of revision, over-emphasis, and then correction, before new concerns renew the process.

In relation to the Confederacy, revision of a number of themes has been ongoing. The Lost Cause narrative—that of a united, resistant Confederate population never defeated but merely overcome by numbers—has been shown to be a myth and a distortion. From W. E. B. Du Bois and Charles Wesley, through Armstead Robinson to myself, Stephanie McCurry, Barton Myers, and others, scholarship has shown that there was extensive, serious division and popular resistance within the Confederate South.

In the middle decades of the twentieth century much historical writing treated the South as besieged and on the defensive, needing to protect itself from abolitionism and a growing northern population and economy. Prewar complaints by southern politicians of mistreatment by the North naturally made this theme seem reasonable. The pathbreaking work of Emory Thomas, however, established that the Confederacy, for all its problems, also embraced change and a revolutionary new future, at least in part. More recently the valuable work of scholars such as John Majewski, Matthew Karp, and others has reminded us that many secessionists and Confederates were not frightened or on the defensive at all. Instead they were optimistic and expansive in their thoughts about the future.

Adrian Brettle has taken this revisionist direction another important step farther. *Colossal Ambitions* is a thorough examination of confident, expansionist ideas about the Confederate future, ideas that circulated among members of the elite. Brettle draws on and analyzes the aspirations, suggestions, proposals, and predictions of elite southerners who were committed to the Confederate cause, including wealthy planters, journalists, businessmen, politicians, and officials. He examines their ideas and dreams for how the Confederacy might achieve many things: hemispheric domination; a prosperous commercial future; expansion into the west, the south, and the Caribbean; the maintenance of slavery and racial hierarchy; the development of industry; the building of future military and naval strength; and status as one of the world's greatest powers.

Brettle's research has been extensive and wide-ranging, for he quotes a remarkable variety of private citizens, essayists, newspaper editors, politicians, and others. He proves that among southern society's elite there were many who were both confident and fully committed to the Confederacy's future. The range of topics that he explores also is impressive, including relations with Native America peoples in the southwest and global diplomatic possibilities and interests. His work establishes that enthusiastic Confederates wanted much more than simply to "be let alone," as Jefferson Davis once claimed. These "ambitious and optimistic" individuals, as he notes on pages 8 -9, thought "in global terms" and trumpeted "the worldwide significance of their slaveholding republic." Brettle also examines how four years of war modified various ideas, as champions of the Confederate future adjusted to victories and defeats and to changing world events. His book illuminates an important aspect of the larger history of the Confederate South.

It is important to remember, however, that *Colossal Ambitions* is an in-depth treatment of a limited part of the Confederate experience. The people in this book were not ordinary Confederates, and in most instances they were thinking rather than implementing policy. Brettle occasionally refers to disunity or internal problems, but his focus is on the committed part of the elite section of the population. He says little about deserters, resisters, or disaffected politicians. There also is frequent over-emphasis in the prose. Repeatedly Brettle refers to "planners" who instead were commentators, journalists, or letter writers rather than officials designing a concerted scheme of action. The "economic planning" on page 78, for example, was simply discussion. In many cases a more appropriate word than "planners" might have been "optimists" or "believers," and some of their ideas could be called dreams or wishful thinking. As the

prospects of the Confederacy darkened, some of their hopes and dreams became unrealistic or delusional. Still, it is important to recognize how durable and ambitious was the mindset of these Confederates.

*Colossal Ambitions* is also a handsome book, well produced, but the lack of a bibliography is regrettable. A bibliography would have eased the task for future scholars who might want to explore some of the resources that Brettle has identified.

***Paul D. Escott***, Reynolds Professor of History Emeritus from Wake Forest University, has written about the Confederacy and the Union. His most recent book is “The Worst Passions of Human Nature:” White Supremacy in the Civil War North.