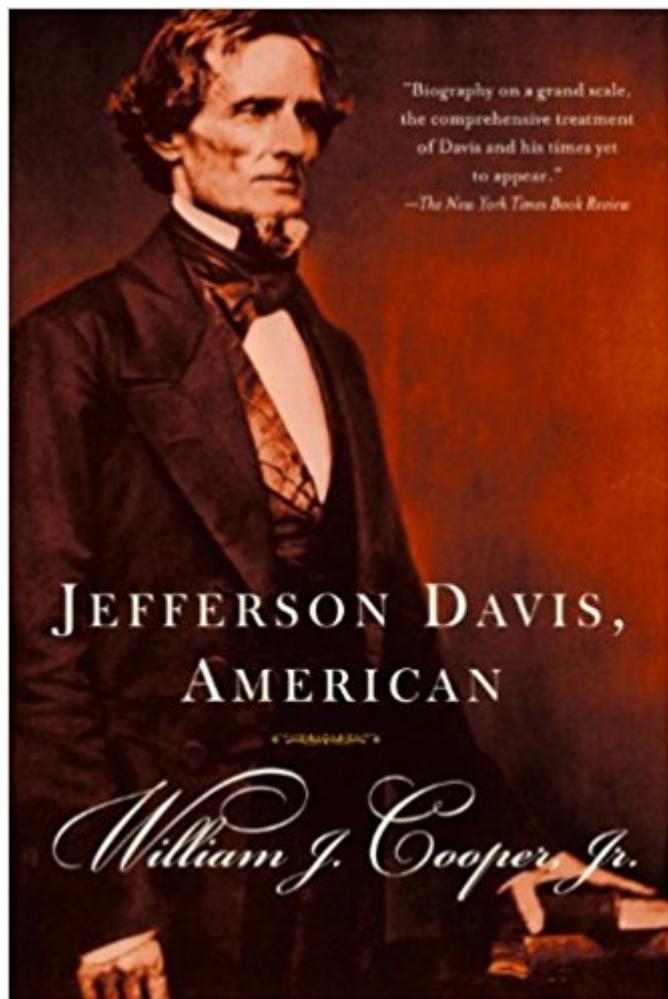


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Jefferson Davis, American



Synopsis

From a distinguished historian of the American South comes this thoroughly human portrait of the complex man at the center of our nation's most epic struggle. Jefferson Davis initially did not wish to leave the Union—â• as the son of a veteran of the American Revolution and as a soldier and senator, he considered himself a patriot. William J. Cooper shows us how Davis' initial reluctance turned into absolute commitment to the Confederacy. He provides a thorough account of Davis' life, both as the Confederate President and in the years before and after the war. Elegantly written and impeccably researched, *Jefferson Davis, American* is the definitive examination of one of the most enigmatic figures in our nation's history.

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Customer Reviews

The title might seem odd, given that Jefferson Davis (1808-89) served as president of the Confederacy during the Civil War, and never once, in the 34 years between the end of the war and his death, expressed any remorse for his part in the conflict that tore America apart. Yet, as historian William J. Cooper Jr. reminds us in his sober, comprehensive biography, Davis "saw himself as a faithful American ... a true son of the American Revolution and the Founding Fathers." Indeed, Davis's own father had fought in the Revolution, and Davis himself was a West Point graduate and Mexican War veteran. He declared January 21, 1861, "the saddest day of my life," as he resigned his U.S. Senate seat to follow his native state of Mississippi out of the Union; yet he also unflinchingly defended secession as a constitutionally guaranteed right. Cooper's measured

portrait neither glosses over Davis's lifelong belief that blacks were inferior nor vilifies him for it: "My goal," he writes, "is to understand Jefferson Davis as a man of his time, not condemn him for not being a man of my time." The chapters on the Civil War show Davis intimately involved in military decisions, as well as in diplomatic attempts to gain foreign support for the Confederacy. Cooper acknowledges the irony of his subject--who interpreted the Constitution as strictly limiting federal authority--being forced by the war's exigencies to create a powerful, centralized Confederate government. Yet, this depiction of a forceful, self-confident Davis makes it clear that he never could have been anything but "a vigorous and potent chief executive." The author also paints an attractive picture of a warm family man who was devoted to his strong-minded wife and their children. Neither hagiography nor hatchet job, this evenhanded work sees Jefferson Davis whole. --Wendy Smith
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Much has been written about Jefferson Davis, claims Cooper (*The American South, etc.*), professor of history at Louisiana State University, and most of it is negative. Instead of viewing Davis strictly through a modern lens, Cooper has set out to understand Davis as "a man of his time who had a significant impact on his time, and thus on history" and to "not condemn him for not being a man of my time." Davis was born in Kentucky in 1808 and attended Transylvania University in Lexington. In 1824, he left the South for West Point, graduated in 1828 with a commission as Brevet Second Lieutenant and went on to a noteworthy career as a hero of the Mexican War and an able statesman. Davis served as secretary of war under President Pierce and then as a U.S. senator from Mississippi. Indeed, Cooper notes, many thought Davis would be president one day. Always believing himself a firm supporter of the Constitution and a true patriot, Davis trusted in the sovereign rights of states ("he looked to Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and John C. Calhoun as the great expicators of states' rights and strict construction, of the proper understanding of the nation and the Constitution"), which included the right to own slaves if a state so chose. Although Davis did not initially favor secession, he believed the Confederacy's goals to be consistent with the America he honored, and was proud to serve as the president of the Confederacy. Previous accounts of Davis's life have argued that he was basically an incompetent leader; some even have suggested that the failure of the Confederacy was, at the core, Davis's fault. But here Davis appears much like any other leader, possessing both strengths and weaknesses. In the already cluttered field of Civil War history, Cooper's is the definitive biography; readers will be particularly pleased to discover the compelling power of his narrative. (Nov.) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Perhaps few individuals in history, and certainly among Americans, are as equally viled and beloved at the same time as Jefferson Davis. Jefferson Davis, born in Kentucky, just a few miles away from along another great man he would be forever associated with, Abe Lincoln, and grew up in Mississippi. He proclaimed a deep love for his adopted state; the South, with all its traditions and culture; and for America. He was considered one of the great political minds of his time (often compared to another great Southerner, John C. Calhoun) and quite handsome and charming. He was an outstanding Senator and often considered a possible future US President. Yet, it was as President of the Confederate States of America that he would earn his notoriety; an office he didn't want as the result of a series of events he fought against and prayed would never happen (he regarded it as the "saddest day" of his life). He was a graduate of West Point, the son of an American Revolutionary hero, and a veteran of the Mexican-American War. He was also a man of deep religious faith. Author William J. Cooper Jr did an outstanding job in bringing this tragic American icon to life with all his charm and flaws. His portrayal of Davis is both balanced and objective, and comes complete with many of the untold stories of his life such as his love for those enslaved by him and by a system he privately disliked. Here we get more than just a glimpse of the man, we get a real sense of who he was and, perhaps, what he could have been. At 706 pages including the Epilogue, this is an excellent biography of a grand and fallen man. An excellent read for anyone interested in American History, the Civil War, or US politics, or human psychology.

I am an Australian and have recently begun reading about the Civil War. I purchased the Kindle edition of this book largely on the basis of these reviews. I was interested in Jefferson Davis in order to obtain a human perspective (albeit from the President's perspective) upon my understanding of the war which, on the basis of my prior readings, was mostly about the battles and the politics. My particular interest, I suppose, was in the notion of the lost cause: the odds were clearly against the Confederate States and central to their secession was the maintenance of the moribund institution of slavery which had all but been abandoned by the rest of the civilised world. What sort of man could lead the breakaway states in these impossible circumstances? From a distance of 150 years, Jefferson Davis perhaps feels like he has been dispatched into a mere footnote of history. But this book sheds enormous light on the man, the war and the Confederate government. At times I limped through some of the less interesting parts of the book - for example, the constitutional issues and pre-war politics. But this was not a weakness of the book - rather it was a weakness of the reviewer. The author is to be commended for his meticulous and detailed

research. This really is the benchmark by what all historical biographies should be measured. One cannot emerge from this book without being significantly impressed by Jefferson Davis. His ability to lead the Confederate States in impossibly trying circumstances was, for me, fascinating and perhaps, even inspirational.

What drove the South to secede? Why would they rise up in arms to combat a nation they professed so passionately to love? A deep question with an answer perhaps easy to verbalize, but certainly difficult to understand. It is also an answer enormous in its scope if you grapple with it in the context of the whole of the South. There are many people, opinions, and motives but we can begin to understand if we focus on the mindset of one individual: Jefferson Finis Davis. If anyone personified the Confederate cause, he did. I had only a superficial knowledge of Davis, and essentially viewed him as a traitor to the nation. Then I occasioned upon his great-great grandson, Bertram Hayes-Davis. He speaks and writes often about Davis, and his tag line is that he is misunderstood. I decided to plow into this book to find out. Davis' motives often don't get much in-depth analysis in conventional histories of the war. Summarizations are easier. Even those pieces that discuss the Southern perspective may do so with little penetration into issues and positions. William J. Cooper's book drives right to heart of that question. A professor of history at Louisiana State University, he doesn't promote Davis' agenda, but neither does he demonize it. No matter how you approach the topic, one cannot escape the issue of slavery in all its perspectives. It's morality, its importance to the South's economy, its persistence in the South, how it was an integral part of the South's identity, and so forth.* Nor can it be ignored that the South waged a war of rebellion against the duly constituted government of this nation in what is still its bloodiest conflict. Trying to understand the South's motivations is an amazing exercise in cause-and-effect contradictions. Campbell expertly weaves this backdrop into the story.* It is true that the war was not started to end or even to maintain slavery, but slavery was the backdrop of all national politics in the US from the Missouri Compromise of 1820 through the end of the war in 1865. It then echoed in national politics down to the present day. First and foremost, Campbell paints for us a portrait about Davis. If his isn't the definitive biography of the man, it should be a contender for that moniker. It is full of period anecdotes, observations by peers, newspaper columns, and extracts from letters to, from, and about him. It's also a portrait of the antebellum South through Davis' experiences, the sectional and

national politics of the times, and the Civil War and its immediate aftermath. As for the war itself, the book deals at the national level -- grand strategy, not details of battles and campaigns. It is a thorough portrait that Campbell builds. Davis was born to politics; it was his life's work. He had a successful plantation (Brierfield) in a bend in the Mississippi River in Warren County, Mississippi, with a full complement of slaves* and the other resources, crops, and related activities of a typical Southern plantation. Beginning in 1840, he often left it to his brother, Joseph, to manage (along with Joseph's own neighboring plantation, Hurricane), while he spent much of his time engaged in politics. He had a family that he adored, but, again, politics usually came first. He long-suffered of ill health, afflicted by a chronic eye infection as well as a condition known as trigeminal neuralgia. While these were episodic and could be disabling (the neuralgia was extremely painful), they didn't slow him down much.* Throughout his early army career after graduating West Point, Davis was accompanied by James Pemberton, his personal slave. When Davis got Brierfield up and running, he made Pemberton the plantation overseer. This is telling of Davis's character, not to mention his confidence in Pemberton, since the overwhelming majority of plantation owners employed whites in this role. Pemberton held it until his death in 1850. Campbell acknowledges that Davis was "a reasonably humane slave master," but also that he was totally committed to the superiority of the white race and to the institution of slavery (pp. 230-239). Davis was a workaholic, often to the point of exhaustion. He would work long hours and travel regularly despite his recurrent health problems. He paid great attention to detail and had difficulty delegating responsibility, the combination of which caused him to be a micromanager.* These traits were manifest in his political life as well as in his government service. During the Civil War he tended to neglect civil matters in favor of military issues, favored old friends in appointments of cabinet officers and military commands (see pg. 355, for example), and put up with poor performance and relationships among some of his senior officers -- his tolerance of Generals Joseph E. Johnson and P.G.T. Beauregard, and his reliance on General Braxton Bragg, for example. (Contrast this with the mutual respect, confidence, and trust between Davis and General Robert E. Lee. Theirs was a relationship solidly grounded.) These and other shortcomings and failures during the war were legion, and are discussed in detail by Campbell.* Davis's tendency to micromanage was apparent when he was US Secretary of War. It was manifest during the Civil War as well. Take, for example, when General Leonidas Polk violated Kentucky's neutrality on September 3, 1861, by occupying Columbus, Kentucky. Local politicos were aghast at the implications for the Southern cause in Kentucky and beseeched Davis to order the

general's immediate withdrawal. Davis instructed Secretary of War Leroy Pope Walker to direct General Polk "to retire from Kentucky and to explain his actions." Before he received Secretary Walker's instructions, General Polk wired Davis that "military necessity make taking Columbus essential." Davis accepted this and sent General Polk a countermanding order. (Pp. 356-357.) In fairness, it must be pointed out that Walker was not up to the task of being Secretary of War, which lends credence to Davis bypassing him in this example, but, "From the earliest days in Montgomery, Davis basically acted as his own secretary of war. Considering no matter too trivial for his attention, he did not assign Secretary Walker primary responsibility for any activity. Much correspondence and many directives went out over Walker's signature, but all the major decisions, and many minor ones, were Davis's. (Pg. 354.) This kind of direct involvement was in large part why he went through three Secretaries of War between February 1861 and November 1862. There was a lot to the man. He was an ardent supporter of progress, championing the likes of Manifest Destiny and the establishment of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC. I would have liked more about his time as the US Secretary of War under President Pierce, 1853-1857. Campbell devotes only one chapter, about 35 pages, to this episode in Davis's life, and even then only briefly touches on the many innovations Davis applied. On the other hand, Campbell provides much detail in his description of state-level politics in the South, particularly Davis's rise in his home state of Mississippi. Throughout his career, Davis was passionate about states' rights, and therein is the core of what drove him to the Confederacy. In his first major congressional speech in the US House of Representatives, on February 6, 1846, he said, "To all which has been said of the inherent powers of the Government, I answer, it is the creature of the States; as such it could have no inherent powers, all it preserves was delegated by the States, and it is therefore that our Constitution is not an instrument of limitations, but of grants." [W]hatever was then deemed necessary was specifically conveyed; beyond the power so granted, nothing can now be claimed except those incidents which are indispensable to its existence; not merely convenient or conducive, but subordinate and necessary to the exercise of the grants. He was quite the orator. With his chronological approach, Campbell provides a thorough, comprehensive journey through Davis's life and times. As to the question of who Davis really was, the title provides the book's main theme. As Campbell puts it in his preface, "By 1860, he stood as one of America's most accomplished

political leaders. A superb politician, he dominated his state of Mississippi. As a hero of the Mexican War, as a notable cabinet officer, and as a prominent member of the United States Senate, Jefferson Davis commanded respect across the nation. He was spoken of as a man who could legitimately aspire to his country's highest office. And he did become president, but not of the United States. (Pg. xiv.) He believed in the Constitution, and served his country long and well until the Civil War, yet his dedication to states' rights, first manifested during the Nullification Crisis between South Carolina and the United States government in 1832-33, prevailed. An exercise in contradictions, indeed. Yet, was there a contradiction in these seemingly divided loyalties? Many in the South, including Davis, felt not clear in their beliefs. Campbell discusses Davis' views comprehensively and at length, relying in large part on his speeches in public, at party conventions, and in the House and the Senate. Davis always strove to be clear, but he struggled to reconcile all of his points to reality. Contradictions remained. The struggle many, north and south, had in answering that to themselves shows they, too, struggled with the contradictions. Campbell is an accomplished author of Civil War history with several books already to his credit. These include *We Have the War upon Us: The Onset of the Civil War, November 1860-April 1861*, *Liberty and Slavery: Southern Politics to 1860*, and *The South and the Politics of Slavery, 1828-1856*, to name a few. Each of these compliments Jefferson Davis, American quite well. This is a fine resource for those of casual interest about Jefferson Davis and the Civil War as well as those of a more scholarly bent. It is a long book (658 pages of text, plus extensive end notes) but it is well written, flows smoothly, and is easily read. I highly recommend it.

One can't understand the Civil War without understanding the government in the South and Jefferson Davis was the main man. This book gives a very interesting perspective on how the government ran or rather how it didn't really run and how little control Davis had as commander-in-chief over his commanders. Things were hard in the South and that brings the deprivation into sharp relief. As with all these types of biography there is far too much emphasis on his relationship with his wife which drags on and on but the main part of the action is very interesting.

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