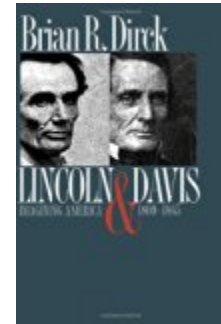


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Imagining the Imagined Community: Lincoln, Davis and the American Nation

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North and South. Slavery and Freedom. Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis. These three pairings dominate the historiography of antebellum and Civil War America. Each encapsulates the contradictions that lay at the heart of the American republican experiment in the nineteenth century. When the nation came apart in 1861, North and South became the Union, which stood for freedom, and the Confederacy, which stood for slavery. Lincoln and Davis were transformed, too, not only into leaders of their respective sides but into symbols of their respective causes, whom future generations would forever 'compare and contrast,' to the glory of the former and the detriment of the latter. As Brian Dirck puts it in the Introduction to his study, "Davis has usually been the horse chestnut to Lincoln's chestnut horse." In part, he suggests, this assessment is justified. Lincoln, he points out, whatever his personal failings (from a twenty-first century perspective) on the race issue, did choose to place slavery on the road to extinction when he issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Davis, on the other hand, "never questioned the wisdom or the morality of slavery, and he fought a war for its protection" (p. 1). The twin issues of victory/defeat and freedom/slavery, Dirck concludes, "lie at the heart of traditional assessments of Lincoln and Davis." This approach, whilst worthy enough in itself, dominates the literature, leaving little "room for other narratives, other ways of telling the stories of the Civil War presidents, which, while acknowledging the

importance of victory and slavery, nevertheless ask different questions" (p. 2).

Dirck is not the first to devote a single volume to a comparison of Lincoln and Davis. Bruce Chadwick's study, *Two American Presidents: A Dual Biography of Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis* (1999), appeared quite recently, but is summarily dismissed by Dirck as offering "little at all in the way of serious scholarly insight" (p. 247). Indeed, Dirck argues, "much of the current literature on Lincoln's and Davis's nationalism is simply old-fashioned, rooted as it is in politics and institutions" (p. 3). Dirck's approach is to move beyond both the straightforward biographical approach and the victory/slavery paradigm. He focuses instead on Lincoln's and Davis's "understanding of national identity—American, Confederate, and Union—in a comparative analysis" that explores new angles of enquiry (p. 2). Specifically, he seeks to apply the alternative approach pioneered by scholars of nationalism to the question of how Lincoln and Davis saw, or rather imagined, "that grand abstraction," the American nation. In searching for "the psychological, social, cultural, and political factors that shaped their national imaginations," Dirck is engaged in a process of asking "imagination questions," that will, he hopes, shed new light on the ideas, and the idealism, behind the icons (p. 4).

Dirck divides his study into three sections: Early Imaginations, Sectional Imaginations, and Wartime Imaginations. Under each he compartmentalises his

analysis in chapters exploring the role played in each man's life by fathers, friends, jobs, homes, and the development of their national imaginations both prior to and during the Civil War as expressed via their public announcements, their political allegiances, and their religious faith. Dirck finds that both men lacked successful role models in their respective fathers, and each turned to alternative figures—in Davis's case, his brother Joseph, and in Lincoln's, the rather more distant figure of George Washington—and to the political arena to fill this gap. It is perhaps going too far to state that each "sought in the national arena the fathers they had not possessed in their homes" (p. 19). Nevertheless, Dirck makes a persuasive case that, for Davis in particular, his brother Joseph represented a strong influence in the development of his national thinking. Joseph, according to Dirck, "gave his brother to understand that the American nation was a thing of abstraction, of high ideals far removed from the hurly-burly of everyday politics," and it was under Joseph's direction that Jefferson "constructed his seminal ideas about what it meant to be an American" (p. 22). Lincoln had no such direct, familial mentor to hand. Instead, Dirck observes, he turned to the figure of George Washington to perform for him "metaphorically and in the abstract, the task of father/conservator for the nation that Joseph Davis and his office performed in a more direct fashion for Jefferson Davis" (p. 28).

The main differences that Dirck uncovers in Lincoln's and Davis's national imaginations had their origins, it seems, in these early influences. For Davis, the national was a reflection of the familial. His 'imagined America' was, Dirck argues, a 'community of sentiment,' whereas Lincoln's was a 'community of strangers.' The "essence of Americanism," for Davis, was "feelings, fraternity, an emotional sense of cohesiveness within the family that was the Union" (p. 87). Early in his career, Davis had seen the Revolution as pivotal in the construction of this fraternal ideal, although even then he evinced a tendency to place the role of the South centre-stage, and to accuse the North of a sectionalism at odds with the nationalist sentiment of the South. Lincoln, in contrast, distrusted emotion, and thought it should be kept apart from political life. He placed his trust in the law, which was his career after all, and saw in disinterested legal procedure the basis whereby a nation of strangers might function effectively and to the benefit of all. By the 1840s he, like Davis, thought that the cohesiveness produced by the Revolution was fading away, but whereas Davis saw this as a cause for concern, Lincoln regarded it as a natural progression. Ultimately, Dirck shows, both Lincoln

and Davis "created for themselves an America that rested upon assumptions affording a degree of personal comfort" (p. 146). Events, of course, were to challenge such assumptions and, in the process, restructure the 'imagined America' that each relied on in both psychological and practical terms.

In the process of exploring the national imaginations of Lincoln and Davis, Dirck of necessity covers a lot of familiar ground, especially in terms of each man's domestic circumstances. There is evidence here, and indeed throughout Dirck's study, of the influence of Michael Burlingame, whose study of *The Inner Life of Abraham Lincoln* (1994) attempted to uncover the psychological impulses that motivated Lincoln. Burlingame laid a large portion of the blame for Lincoln's apparently unhappy home life on his wife's bad temper. Dirck, too, is rather dismissive of Mary Todd, despite recognising that she had her own share of troubles. In general, Dirck is critical of Davis's tendency to presume to know the minds of others, but falls into the same trap himself. As far as the Lincoln marriage is concerned he, like so many other scholars, is perhaps too quick to assume that Lincoln struck a bad bargain in Mary Todd, and that here, too, it was not emotion but legal obligation that kept him bound to her. From a modern perspective, Davis's wife, Varina, could have done with a little more of Mary Todd's temper, although Dirck has avoided some of her more heart-felt comments regarding her own bad bargain in this study, which is a pity. Varina's description of her husband as "a live oak...good for any purpose, except for blossom & fruit" sums up much of what Dirck seems to be driving at as far as Davis was concerned.[1] He was, it seems, a sentimentalist without sentiment, who created for himself a world view that failed, in several crucial respects, to marry up to reality. Davis, "surrounded by slaves who learned at least to fake contentment and a wife who learned to couch her opinions in circumspection," saw what he wanted to see. Lincoln, by contrast, "may have had much the unhappier home life, but he never deceived himself as to what he had and what he did without" (p. 74). The familial, in other words, was not, for Davis, quite as familiar as he believed it to be.

If the light never dawned for Davis as far as domestic matters were concerned, national affairs proved another matter entirely. Here, Dirck shows, disillusionment had set in by the 1850s. Rather like John C. Calhoun, whom Davis admired, Davis's national outlook became increasingly sectional, prompted, Dirck argues, by the debates over the Compromise of 1850. By 1859, Davis no longer saw the Union as "a community of intimate friends con-

nected by emotional ties of honor and principle” (p. 151). Indeed, by then he had ceased to believe that “there was any such thing as an American community at all,” and the Revolution, previously seen by him as the defining act of national unity, instead appeared as no more than “an act of thirteen separate communities” (p. 152). For Lincoln, as indeed for many northerners, the defining moment was the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. For perhaps the first time, Dirck suggests, Lincoln was forced to revise his belief that “strangers could and usually did reach essentially moral decisions when engaged in public business” (p. 135). Unlike many others, Lincoln never fell into the trap of thinking in sectional, northern terms, and he never identified the South, specifically, as the enemy. Nevertheless, his national outlook shifted after 1854. By the time he became President of a fractured Union, he had developed “a new line of thinking in his national identity, whereby Americans needed emotions and the heart to remain steadfastly American” (p. 172). Ultimately, Dirck shows, “Lincoln would quickly grow comfortable presiding over his vast nation of strangers, but Davis needed a Confederate community of sentiment” (p. 181). Such a community, unfortunately, forever eluded him.

Concluding his assessment of Lincoln and Davis, Dirck argues that he has turned “traditional perspectives” of both men upside down. Lincoln, long seen as a “sentimental nationalist,” was, in fact, a man whose “nationalist imagination construed America as a nation of aliens.” Davis, the tradition “cold fish,” was, in contrast, “a sentimental nationalist who placed emotion at the foundation of his nationalist imagination” (p. 245). Yet, as Dirck himself has shown, Davis’s emotion operated within strictly defined limits, and he distrusted that which he could not control. His world view, in common with many of his fellow southerners, prevented his seeing what was before him, be that the reality of slavery or the dangers inherent in secession. Dirck highlights several events in Davis’s early life where his tendency to construe “as narrowly as possible the wording or rules and laws,” was evident (p. 42). This narrow outlook, itself a product of the rather more restrictive background he came from, could be a help, but proved in the end to be much more of a hindrance. Unlike Lincoln, Davis came increasingly to think in local, not national terms. He “expected all Americans to feel the same way about their own home states,” and he “abstracted his feelings for Mississippi into a general theory of state sovereignty constitutionalism, which he saw as the only moral basis for American government” (p. 158).

In contrast, Lincoln had the more expansive vision,

but this should not surprise us. Lincoln, too, was, as Dirck has shown, very much a product of his time and place. Indeed, as a northerner (broadly conceived), it would be rather more unusual if Lincoln had thought of the American nation as other than a community of strangers. Slavery may have been the big moral divide between North and South in the antebellum period, but in practical terms immigration also separated the sections. Lincoln was very conscious of the implications for American nationality of large-scale immigration but, unlike present-day scholars of nationalism, he did not regard this as destructive of American nationality. Although Dirck discusses in some detail Lincoln’s reverence for and use of the Declaration of Independence, particularly its function as “an imagined link among his fellows Americans,” he does not pursue the point as fully as he might have done (p. 123). Dirck notes that, in the course of the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858, Lincoln described the Declaration as “an electric chord” which linked the nation together. Taken alone, however, the fuller implications of that observation as far as Lincoln’s national imagination was concerned are missed. In the course of that speech, Lincoln had observed that a great many Americans had no traditional links with the Revolutionary era. These more recent arrivals could not “carry themselves back into that glorious epoch” in any direct historical sense. Nevertheless, through the Declaration of Independence American nationality could be established. Recent immigrants, too, had the “right to claim it as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh” of the original signers.^[2] Lincoln’s vision, his national imagination, enabled him to see not only that the nation’s future was a heterogeneous one, but that such heterogeneity was no barrier to a truly national outlook.

Dirck’s analysis of Lincoln’s response to the Civil War, and his desire to “redeem the awful, bloody mess the war had become by making it a struggle for the noble, nationally enshrined ideals of liberty and equality contained in the Declaration of Independence” brings his study full-circle (p. 202). At the outset, Dirck’s description of Lincoln as lacking a father, searching in the figure of George Washington for a replacement father for himself and the nation contrasted rather negatively with Davis’s stable and supportive—and very much flesh and blood—brother Joseph. Yet later, in his meditations on the Declaration of Independence and its role in American nationality, Lincoln successfully replaced blood with belief, not just for himself but for the nation. In his emphasis on the voluntaristic nature of national imagination, Lincoln proved himself to be the heir of Washington. He had the

ability, unlike Davis, to abstract the genuine sentiment from the symbol. Lincoln's fathers may have been "acts of rhetoric," but Lincoln had the ability to derive a realistic vision of America from rhetoric alone (p. 29).

In the end, it is difficult to concur with Dirck's suggestion that as far as Reconstruction was concerned, Lincoln "might have done better to emulate Jefferson Davis, who understood quite well the value of defining and using the 'enemy' in creating the negative spaces of nationalism, in creating a viable national community" (p. 225). Since Lincoln was assassinated, the point remains moot. Dirck's is a fascinating study, with moments of genuine insight as to Lincoln's and Davis's respective motivations. If it does not exactly turn traditional assessments upside down, it nevertheless opens up new directions in the much neglected area of American national identity. Ultimately, however, in contrasting Davis's community of sentiment with Lincoln's apparently bleaker national vision, Dirck has confirmed that Lincoln's was

the more optimistic, perhaps realistic, national imagination, depending as it did on the kindness of strangers.

Notes

[1]. Varina Davis quoted in Carol K. Bleser and Lesley J. Gordon (eds.), *Intimate Strategies of the Civil War: Military Commanders and their Wives* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) p. 6.

[2]. Abraham Lincoln, Speech at Chicago, Illinois, 10 July 1858, in Peter J. Parish (ed.), *Abraham Lincoln: Speeches and Letters* (London: Everyman, 1993) p. 93.

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