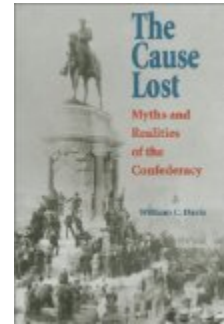


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William C. Davis. *The Cause Lost: Myths and Realities of the Confederacy*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996. xi + 224 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-0809-6.

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“A look at the Confederacy,” author William C. Davis writes, “is a look at Americans in the act of nation-building” (p. ix). Few historians have better credentials to examine that process than Davis. A Pulitzer Prize nominee, his books include *Breckinridge: Statesman, Soldier, Symbol* (1974), *Jefferson Davis: The Man and His Hour* (1991), and “A Government of Our Own”: *The Making of the Confederacy* (1994). In addition, he has received numerous awards, including three Jefferson Davis Awards, the T. Harry Williams Memorial Award, and the Bell I. Wiley Prize.

This collection of twelve of his essays, written over a period of twenty years, reflects his “continuing fascination with these would-be founding fathers, their idealism,...their naivete, their folly, and their courage” (p. x). Their story, he believes, is not only a regional phenomenon but a national one. “Their every act revealed not how Southern they were but how American. Theirs was to be the new ‘cittie on a hill,’ or so they thought, but they failed. The fault was not in their Stars and Bars but in themselves” (p. xi).

The first three essays deal with a subject dear to the author’s heart, Confederate president Jefferson Davis. Rejecting the conventional wisdom that Davis was an enigma, the “Sphinx of the Confederacy,” the author sees him rather as a talented and insecure man whose well-documented shortcomings were matched by often forgotten virtues. If he was hot-tempered, obstinate, and a poor judge of character, he was also determined, fearless, and trusting to a fault. His flaws do not make him unusual or mysterious. Davis’s character faults stand out more clearly because of the intense scrutiny to which his life has been subjected, but he was, in reality, “a man of quite ordinary weaknesses thrust into quite extraor-

dinary circumstances” (p. 13).

Davis also examines the Confederate president’s relationship with two of his top-ranking generals, P. G. T. Beauregard and Joseph E. Johnston. The portrait that emerges is not a flattering one. “In the pride, the pettiness, the vanity, and a host of other failings of all three men,” Davis writes, “was born much of the eventual doom of the lost Cause” (p. 16). None of the three escapes the author’s criticism. Davis is chided for his “stubbornness, obstinacy, compulsion to have the last word, thin skin, and inability to subordinate or overcome his own human frailties for the greater good of the cause” (p. 33). Beauregard “never shook himself of the outmoded Napoleonic notion of winning the war with one decisive battle, nor did he ever become sophisticated enough in his thinking to see the vital interdependency of military and civil policy” (pp. 32-33). But it is for Johnston, the man lauded by some as a defensive genius, that the author reserves his harshest criticism. Davis sees him as a general consistently lacking a plan of action, unable to understand and act on even the simplest of orders, reluctant to engage the enemy or to keep his own government informed of his actions. “The raw material for command,” Davis concludes, “simply was not there” (p. 33).

In fact, Davis asserts that of the eight top-ranking generals of the Confederacy, seven were “men of limited vision and hampered abilities” (p. 35). The one exception was Robert E. Lee. It was not only Lee’s brilliance on the battlefield that enabled him to work effectively with the Confederate president. The two men thought alike strategically, and Lee understood as few others did how to get along with Davis—not to question or challenge him, to keep him fully informed, to avoid politicians and public controversy, and to remain loyal. In his relationship

with Davis, the author writes, Lee was, at times, wasteful of time. Lee “knew how to subordinate his own pride to the greater good of getting what he needed from men, whether his subordinates or his superiors” (p. 40). As a result, the president and his top commander “achieved a synergy that helped to keep the Confederacy afloat in the east far longer than could have been expected with any of the other full-rank generals of the Confederacy in command” (p. 49).

One of the volume’s most interesting essays deals with a figure far less familiar to the modern reader than Davis, Lee, Beauregard, or Johnston, but one who was a major figure in the mid-19th century. John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky had been a congressman, vice-president of the United States under James Buchanan, U.S. senator, and presidential candidate. He was, in the author’s words, “the most popular and illustrious” statesman to join the southern ranks, and he became one of the more capable major-generals in the Confederate army (p. 148). But it was his tenure as the last Confederate secretary of war that Davis examines here. Of the several men who filled that office, Davis writes, Breckinridge was the only one who neither feared nor stood in awe of Jefferson Davis, and thus was the only one to be independent of him. Though appointed in February 1865, near the end of the Confederacy’s brief existence, Breckinridge nevertheless made an outstanding contribution to the cause. Incredibly, he was the first secretary of war to engage in the conduct of military operations and the movement of troops without interference from Davis. While Breckinridge could not reverse the war’s outcome, he did skillfully manage the last desperate stages of the conflict, including the evacuation of Richmond. “His lasting contribution to the history of the Confederate States is not that it might have won its independence,” Davis writes, “but that he managed its defeat in a manner that lent his stature to the cause itself” (p. 158).

In a rare and welcome departure from most volumes of this sort, Davis devotes two essays to the Trans-Mississippi. He makes a compelling case that the conflict in that oft-neglected theater was, in many ways, a different war—more ethnically and racially diverse, more oriented to cavalry operations, and more motivated by pure hatred. “It was a war of brutality and savagery and outrage unparalleled in the American experience—” he writes, “all fought side by side with innovation and daring and pathbreaking in all the best traditions of American ingenuity” (p. 71). His concise assessment of the Trans-Mississippi at the end of 1863 expertly sums up the problems faced by Confederate leaders west of the

river. “Often forgotten and sometimes scorned by Davis and Richmond, used as a graveyard for incompetents and a recruiting place for the eastern armies, stripped of its produce, and now cut off from the rest of the Confederacy,...[it] could look with embarrassment only to murderers and cutthroats for its successes” (p. 104).

The Confederates in this region would find their greatest success in frustrating the Federals’ Red River campaign in 1864, but the fruits of that triumph were soon largely squandered in Sterling Price’s ill-fated raid into Missouri. Davis concludes that, as a practical matter, the Confederacy would have been better off to abandon the Trans-Mississippi entirely. This was, of course, a political impossibility. “Southern nationalism and honor required that [Davis] try to hold all of the South, even those portions that had relatively little to contribute” (p. 108).

This is a controversial assertion, and it is only one of many in the book. In the volume’s final two sections, entitled “Excuses, Turning Points, and Defeats” and “The Confederacy in Myth and Memory,” Davis tackles a host of controversial issues, and the reader is not left in doubt as to where he stands. For example, he argues vigorously and convincingly that slavery, rather than state rights, caused the war, but he makes a crucial distinction “between what led the sections to war and why men subsequently fought that war” (p. 180). Slavery, he argues, had everything to do with the former and usually had little or nothing to do with the latter. “Probably 90 percent of the men who wore the gray had never owned a slave,” he writes, “and had no personal interest at all either in slavery or in the shadow issue of state rights....They fought and died because their Southern homeland was invaded and their natural instinct was to protect home and hearth” (p. 183).

The author has little regard for what he terms the “turning point” and “what if” school of Civil War history, challenging, for instance, the notions that a southern victory at Antietam in 1862 would have brought English recognition of the Confederacy and that Lincoln’s defeat in the election of 1864 would have resulted in southern independence and the maintenance of slavery. He scoffs at the notion that the South was never truly defeated in the war. “The Confederacy was utterly, crushingly, devastatingly defeated,” he writes, “and to suggest anything else is not just myth but pure fantasy” (p. 189). Neither does he accept the theory that the Confederacy’s demise was due to loss of will. Willpower, he contends, follows rather than leads events, and the Confederacy’s loss of

will was a result of defeats on the battlefield rather than a cause of those defeats.

Davis also weighs in on the ongoing controversies over the nature of slavery, the participation of African-Americans in the Confederate army, and the constitutional justification for secession, and he has a unique slant on the current debate over the proper role and place of the Confederate battle flag. Other essays deal with the largely forgotten siege of Charleston, the myths concerning Stonewall Jackson, and the Civil War and the Confederacy in cinema. The author has devoted many years to studying the Civil War and the Confederacy, and he has formed strong opinions regarding both. Those opinions

are clearly displayed in this volume. Some of his views will undoubtedly stir controversy, but one does not have to agree with all of his conclusions to appreciate his ability as a writer or to admire the depth and breadth of his scholarship. This concise, clearly written volume will appeal to both general readers and serious students. It is must reading for anyone who shares the author's "continuing fascination" with the Confederacy.

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