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Jefferson Davis in Blue: The Life of Sherman's Relentless
Warrior (review)

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ral's notorious contempt for common servicemen, his son Ulric became a war hero. At age twenty, he was promoted from captain to colonel. In an ill-fated expedition to seize Confederate chiefs in March 1864, Dahlgren marched 470 troops into a rebel ambush near Richmond. He lost his life along with those of a hundred federals. The third brother, William, constantly wrangled with the family. Belligerent like his relatives, he fought with Garibaldi and during the American war spied for the Union in England.

As Gower subtly reveals, Charles was equally self-promoting. As Nicholas Biddle's protégé, in 1835 he arrived at Natchez, Mississippi, to manage a U.S. Bank branch, married into the wealthy Ellis-Percy-Routh clan, and managed an empire of cotton plantations worth a half million dollars. In violent local encounters, Dahlgren swaggered his claims to honor. As a military commander in 1861, however, he was too dilatory and defensive to win favor with his men or superiors. Nor was he much of an armchair strategist though firing off implausible schemes to Mississippi Governor J. J. Pettus and Jefferson Davis. His dismal performance in the Mississippi theater is hardly worth mentioning. When Vicksburg fell, the Dahlgrens and their slaves retreated to south Georgia where he tried to reconstitute a plantation life. Alas for the Southern cause, there were too many self-inflating Dahlgrens doing little but grumbling loudly about the stupidity of others.

Dahlgren's postwar years mirrored the troubles of so many formerly proud and prosperous slaveholders. Nothing much carried on his vast farmlands but unrepayable debts. Facing ruin and humiliation, Dahlgren moved to New York to open a brokerage business on Broadway. His last years were vainly spent trying to overturn the will of step-daughter Sarah Dorsey. She had bequeathed her property to her idol, Jefferson Davis.

In sum, this otherwise commendable history of Charles Dahlgren could have provided a richer picture of the entire clan and their struggles for status. Late in the book, lengthy verbatim excerpts from the general's mundane diary could have been replaced with more exploration of fascinating interactions. Nonetheless, *Charles Dahlgren of Natchez*, generously illustrated, is most readable, exciting, and informative about an overbearing but ultimately distressed cast of male relations.

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Jefferson Davis in Blue: The Life of Sherman's Relentless Warrior. By Nathaniel Cheairs Hughes, Jr., and Gordon D. Whitney. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002. ISBN 0-8071-2777-9. Maps. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. xviii, 475. \$49.95.

The authors of this ambitious study, Nathaniel Cheairs Hughes, Jr., and Gordon D. Whitney, attempt to shed light on one of the Union Army's most controversial officers. *Jefferson Davis in Blue* more than meets their ambi-

tions. Jef Davis, as he was known, began his military career as a corporal in an Indiana volunteer regiment during the Mexican War. Despite receiving praise for his performance at the Battle of Buena Vista, Davis failed to secure an appointment to West Point. Hughes and Whitney acknowledge that “not having attended the Military Academy would set him apart from other regular officers” (p. 20). Instead, Davis was commissioned a second lieutenant in the First Artillery Regiment.

When the Civil War broke out, Davis was among the contingent of regulars protecting Fort Sumter. Later, he took command of an Indiana regiment, then rose through the ranks while developing a reputation as a hot-tempered disciplinarian. Davis’s temperament fueled an event that almost ended a promising career. Detailed to Louisville, Kentucky, to help suppress the invading Confederates, Davis failed to arm and organize the local home guard. He received a stern reprimand for this from his commanding officer, Major General William Nelson. Davis took offense at this action and demanded an apology. When Nelson refused, Davis confronted him later at the Galt House Hotel and shot his superior to death. Despite the seriousness of the crime Davis was neither court-martialed nor tried in a civilian court.

On the battlefield Davis made up for his personal shortcomings. A brilliant performance at Jonesboro established him as one of the Union Army’s brighter stars in the Western Theater. This was recognized by General Sherman, who promoted Davis to Fourteenth Corps Commander. According to the authors, “Sherman seemed to have liked Davis from the start. They communicated easily, they trusted each other, and they enjoyed each other’s company” (p. 216). Operating on the left wing of Sherman’s Army during the battles around Atlanta and the March to the Sea, he became Sherman’s most reliable corps commander. Hence, the reason for the subtitle of this book, *Sherman’s Relentless Warrior*.

Sherman recommended Davis for promotion to brevet major general, but the War Department refused. The most likely reason was another controversial incident. After Davis’s corps crossed the treacherous Ebenezer Creek in Georgia, he ordered the dismantling of the pontoon bridge. As a result an untold number of black refugees following his army either drowned or were captured by Confederate cavalry. His biographers surmise the order may have stemmed from either Davis’s unabashed antiabolitionist views, or from the sound military principle that the ex-slaves would hinder his rapidly moving army. Whatever the reason, Davis was labeled a racist in some circles.

After the Civil War, Davis served in Alaska and the Department of the Columbia. During the latter assignment he distinguished himself during the Modoc Indian War. Jef Davis, who suffered from various maladies throughout his life, died in 1879. *Jefferson Davis in Blue* is the first full-scale biography of this controversial soldier and it is doubtful this balanced work will be surpassed any time soon. Unfortunately, the hefty price tag may keep its readership to a minimum.

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