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Jefferson Davis, Confederate President (review)

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Jefferson Davis, Confederate President. By Herman Hattaway and Richard Beringer. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002. ISBN 0-7006-1170-3. Maps. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. xix, 542. \$39.95.

This work is difficult to characterize. In spite of the title, the authors readily attest that it is “not a biography” (p. xi), in part because, except for a brief Prologue and Epilogue, it does not cover the events of Davis’s life before or after the Civil War. But neither is it a sharply focused account of the Davis presidency, for the authors include lengthy discussions of many aspects of the Confederate experience that were largely outside Davis’s control or even his knowledge. Perhaps the best way to describe it is to say that it is an extended essay about the Confederacy itself.

The most pervasive theme is the authors’ repeated insistence that Jefferson Davis was an “active-negative” personality, a term borrowed from the book on *Presidential Character* by the social scientist James David Barber. Beyond that, the authors explore a wide variety of issues touching upon the political, economic, and social-cultural elements of the Confederacy’s brief history. Although these issues are presented more or less in chronological order, the text occasionally jumps from topic to topic. The effect is rather like having a lengthy conversation with two knowledgeable and thoughtful commentators about various aspects of the Confederate experience. There are valuable discussions of supply problems, foreign policy, the post office, currency, manpower and desertion, tax policy and other financial problems, strategy and politics, and, of course, Davis himself. The authors offer a particularly useful discussion of the whole impressment issue (compensated confiscation) showing how, over the course of the war, the inability of Confederate officials to establish a clear and consistent policy seriously eroded popular support for the government.

In the process of articulating these themes, the authors mine the works of scores of recent scholars, thereby providing an overview of recent Confederate historiography. George Rable and Michael Ballard are among those quoted regularly, but the most frequently cited scholars are recent Davis biographers William Cooper and William C. Davis, who are quoted frequently and at length.

The authors offer some judgments. They note Davis’s tendency to micro-manage, his penchant for the military offensive, and his willingness to abandon a State Rights philosophy to achieve victory. In discussing his invocation of martial law, they write that Davis “was becoming the democratic usurper that some Confederates feared” (p. 132). And there is the rather astonishing statement that P. G. T. Beauregard “could have been the architect of [Confederate] success” (p. 242).

While there are no startling revelations, these are two authors with a lot to say, and much of what they say here deserves thoughtful attention.

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