

Comparing Presidents: A Study Of Abraham Lincoln, Jefferson Davis Falls Short

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Review

COMPARING PRESIDENTS

A study of Abraham Lincoln, Jefferson Davis falls short

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Chadwick, Bruce *Two American Presidents: A Dual Biography of Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis*. Birch Lane, ISBN 1559724625

The problems with **Two American Presidents** are so all-pervasive that no sort of detailed critique can be offered in this brief compass. Carelessness with facts abounds, whether simple misidentifications -- historian James Rabun appears as Rabin -- or misstatements such as repeatedly giving Davis five children instead of six and four sons rather than three. We are told that Davis grew his beard in 1861, despite several photographs from the 1850s that show the beard firmly in place.

Worse are the baseless exaggerations. Davis graduated only from West Point, yet is described as being "one of the best educated men in America," and also as "one of the richest men in the country," though his plantation actually belonged to his brother, Joseph, and more than once Davis toyed with leaving politics because of his precarious finances.

Chronology is equally challenging to the author. He lists an honorary degree from Maine's Bowdoin College as one of the praises heaped on Davis in 1861, when in fact Davis received the degree in 1858. The patent absurdity of a New England college giving a degree to the Confederate president should have occurred to someone connected with this book.

Equally troubling, sources are either misunderstood or misused. In several places where the narrative is clearly derived from one specific source, that source is not credited, and in others it appears that Bruce Chadwick simply borrows citations from secondary accounts.

Such shortcomings would be mitigated if his conclusions offered something new or trenchant. Nowhere, however, do we get the summary "comparing the two presidents . . . to examine how the differences in their characters and styles of leadership affected the outcome of the war," which is Chadwick's avowed purpose in writing the book. Rather, there are just scattered comments during conventional biographical accounts of their administrations, and they mainly conform to traditional orthodox views.

The Civil War abounds in comparisons, this general versus that, this battle against another. It is one of the traditional means we have of measuring men and events to form conclusions as to why things have happened. No two men of their era offer a richer opportunity for comparison than Lincoln and Davis, and while contrasts between them have been made innumerable times, no one seems to have devoted a whole book to a comparison until now. Unfortunately, even after the appearance of **The Two American Presidents**, that job still remains to be done.

William C. Davis is a past editor of American History Illustrated and Civil War Times Illustrated, and a prolific Civil War author. His latest book, Lincoln's Men, is reviewed in this issue.