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Charles L. McCollum

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Interview

WILLIAM J. COOPER, JR. PROBES JEFFERSON DAVIS'S CHARACTER

McCollum, Charles L.

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William J. Cooper, Jr.'s much-anticipated biography of Jefferson Davis characterizes the Confederate president as a dutiful politician who, along with many fellow Southerners, reluctantly deemed secession necessary. A Boyd Professor at Louisiana State University, where he teaches history, Cooper is the author and editor of several earlier works on southern history, including South and the Politics of Slavery and The Conservative Regime: South Carolina, 1877-1890. In this interview, he describes how he approached the biographer's task when writing Jefferson Davis, American and offers insight about the character of his elusive subject.

Civil War Book Review (cwbr): *In a recent review of a different Jefferson Davis biography, Steven Woodworth commented, "The Confederate president has somehow inspired what is probably the worst overall body of literature of any great figure in American history." Did that fact influence your decision to write this biography?*

William J. Cooper, Jr. (wc): I think overall that sentiment is correct, and there are reasons for that. One is that after the War there were fierce partisans on either side—even among professional historians, Davis was such a divisive figure that people either detested or adored him—so any semblance of objectivity was lacking in almost all cases.

In the 20th century, the problems changed. The fact that the Confederate experience was looked upon as a military struggle led people away from writing about the politicians. They were considered peripheral figures, impeders of the war effort—with Jefferson Davis seen as the chief impeder. Also Davis's long and complicated life contributed to the problem. Frankly, I think many were frightened off by his complexity. My interest in Davis is longstanding, and the

fact that there weren't many good biographies led me to give it a try.

cwbr: The choice of the word "American" in your title is backed up by the emphasis of the book: two-thirds is devoted to Davis's life before and after the Civil War. Why did you choose to emphasize these periods of his life?

wc: I wanted to write a whole life of the man—he was more than president of the Confederacy. From my point of view, one can not understand how Davis conducted himself as president unless one grasps what he was like before the War. There was a dissonance in his attitude that I think is important to realize in understanding his actions as president.

Secondly, after the War he lived 24 years, quite a long time. To devote scant attention to that is unfair to him. His complete career patterned so much of what was happening to the South. He became the living embodiment of the Lost Cause—which is so crucial in understanding the history of the South after the Civil War. Even more importantly, though, the views Davis articulated about region, race, and nationality became the accepted views of much of the white South. For that reason, I think his later years merited that much attention.

Back to my choice of title, I think Davis consciously thought of himself as an American. He never thought of himself as rebelling from America; he believed secession in 1861 was the only way to ensure that the original intent of the Founders would not be usurped by the upstart Republicans. And, after the War, he talked about the glory of American nationalism and about how pleased he was that the sections were reuniting.

cwbr: In Jefferson Davis, American, you state that one of your goals is "to understand Jefferson Davis as a man of his time, not to condemn him as not being a man of my time." Can you explain what you mean by this?

wc: If we analyze Davis through present-minded eyes, we just end up with condemnation rather than historical understanding. Though no one in his right mind can now condone what Davis believed in regard to the superiority of the white race and the value of slavery, one has to examine him as a man of his time—a time in which his views weren't at all extreme. I wanted to make it clear that Davis merits our best efforts to objectively understand him.

cwbr: Davis is commonly perceived today as having been cold, arrogant, and stubborn. In the biography, however, you show that he could be a warm and friendly man.

wc: You have to look at Davis before 1860 and Davis after 1860. Before 1860 he was a successful professional politician and was accomplished at doing the things they had to do, such as appealing to constituents, mingling with the crowds, and getting along with his colleagues in Congress.

But when the War came, his whole view of reality changed. Now he had embarked on a holy crusade because the United States had somehow failed and his Confederacy couldn't be allowed to fail as well. Success was so important to him that every man was expected to give all he had to the effort. If Davis ever detected what he perceived as a personal motive (or, one might even say a human motive) coming before duty, then he became an austere and cold person. Unlike Lincoln, Davis couldn't accept the human comedy during the War, even though he did have a very warm personal side.

cwbr: Throughout your study, Davis's devotion to the concepts of strict constructionism and states' rights are illustrated. Yet during the War, Davis strayed from this philosophy and at times defied the Confederate Constitution. Can you explain these seeming inconsistencies?

wc: Davis would not have seen this as inconsistent. The Confederacy was at war and since defense was the government's responsibility it could do things that would have been seen as reprehensible in peacetime. Additionally, Davis became so utterly committed to the Confederate cause that he could not conceive of its failure. As such, he did whatever he could in his power (constitutional or not) to defend the country, including freeing and arming of some of the slaves toward war's end. For him the cause superseded his philosophical stands on government.

cwbr: To what do you attribute his utter conviction about the Confederacy? Was it intellectual?

wc: I think it is mostly emotional and psychological, which becomes intellectual. When the antebellum country and values he so cherished disappeared, it was a crushing blow to him. Now the Confederacy couldn't fail. The old politics he had mastered had failed to save the Union and he believed it would take something else to save the Confederacy. So his devotion became

total to this cause and he felt that the same intense dedication needed to be shared by everyone else if this venture were to succeed—and it couldn't fail! What he had difficulty facing was that most Confederates didn't have this superhuman level of conviction.

cwbr: Here you hint at the willpower of the South. Some scholars have argued recently that southern defeat resulted from internal dissention and weak patriotism. Other historians, such as Gary Gallagher, contend that the Confederacy faltered because of the Union's military triumphs in the field and superior numbers. Which of these competing explanations strikes you as the most accurate?

wc: I think the Confederates did not come apart internally; they were beaten by the unrelenting advance of the Union, not by themselves. Confederate soldiers did desert the ranks, but this was not due to a lack of commitment. Most of them left in order to return home to protect their families as the enemy was, in most cases, already there towards the end of the War. This does not mean they were predestined to lose.

cwbr: So you don't subscribe to the Lost Cause theory?

wc: Not at all. It was a long shot, and perceptive Confederate leaders like Davis knew that, but there were many times when things could have gone either way on the battlefield which easily could have changed the outcome of the War.

cwbr: You describe Davis as being not so much an indecisive man, as one who thoroughly thought over his decisions before making them—perhaps at the expense of expediency. Did this style of leadership compromise his presidency and the Confederate cause as a whole?

wc: I do not think this attribute adversely affected the outcome of the War. When it came down to it, Davis was more than capable of making difficult decisions and he could do them in a timely fashion. An example: his handling of the decision to support Lee's second invasion of the North in 1863 over sending troops to assist Johnston and Pemberton on the Vicksburg front. He made no rash decision, as he held a two-day cabinet meeting and, responding to the pleas of the postmaster general, even reconsidered, before affirming his decision. By taking a reasonable amount of time on this issue, Davis made the correct choice,

as supporting Lee's plan to invade the North was the only sensible option, in my judgment. And it certainly didn't cause the defeat at Gettysburg.

cwbr: Is there a single decision that sticks out in your mind as being Davis's worst?

wc: Davis horribly mishandled the Army of Tennessee after the Kentucky campaign of 1862. Things that he should have done and things he refused to do led to disaster in that area. I can understand some of what he didn't do, but his decision in 1863 to leave Bragg in command after he personally inspected the situation was arguably the worst decision he made as president of the Confederacy.

cwbr: What ought to be Davis's enduring historical legacy?

wc: When you look at Davis you see the great difficulties America had trying to cope with the massive changes that took place in the 19th century. Here is a man who tried to deal with them as best he could. He desperately tried to hold on to values and ideals that in the end were not going to prevail, but he kept his faith in what he believed.