

A War Of Words: The Rhetorical Leadership Of Jefferson Davis

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Review

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Atchison, R. Jarrod *A War of Words: The Rhetorical Leadership of Jefferson Davis*. University of Alabama Press, \$39.91 ISBN 817319409

Jefferson Davis: Winning Speeches while Losing a War

In *A War of Words*, R. Jarrod Atchison, an associate professor in the Communications Department at Wake Forest University, examines the rhetorical leadership of Jefferson Davis. Specifically, he analyzes how Davis's rhetoric evolved over the course of five speeches: his January 1861 resignation from the senate, his February 1861 inauguration as Confederate president, his speech before the Mississippi legislature in December 1862, his January 1863 address to Congress in reaction to the Emancipation Proclamation, and his November 1864 call for slaves to serve in the Confederate army. According to Atchison, Davis successfully used these speeches to achieve short-term political goals, but in the long run his words failed to define the ideology of the Confederacy. He succinctly concludes that Davis "struggled in his role as rhetorical leader for the Confederacy." (92)

The speeches serve as an excellent example of how Davis's political view changed over time. When he left the senate, Davis used rhetoric to frame secession as an accomplished fact. Atchison explains how, unlike his southern colleagues who used their bombastic resignation speeches to attack the United States, the Mississippi senator skillfully employed both decorum and timing (in the jargon of rhetorical analysis this included both to *prepon*—appropriateness—and *kairos*—an opportune moment) to explain why secession should reduce tensions between the North and the South. At his inauguration a month later, Davis would articulate a Confederate ideology based on civic republicanism and a commitment to states' rights.

The war forced Davis to change the meaning of the Confederacy. Simply put, a nation of republican farmers committed to states' rights could not wage a successful war against a superior power. By the end of 1862, Davis would

employ amplification to portray the Union as barbarians trying to subjugate the South. Thus, to defeat these invaders, the Confederacy had to convert itself into a nation of virtuous warriors willing to sacrifice ideals including states' rights for nationalistic measures such as conscription. The 1863 Emancipation Proclamation only solidified this stance as it demonstrated that Lincoln's previous denials of abolitionism were lies, thereby proving the Republican abolitionist conspiracy that Fire Eaters had long alleged. Ironically, given this commitment to the defense of slavery, Davis would, at the end of the following year, call for the arming of slaves, urging Confederates to sacrifice slavery for their independence.

Davis's themes changed dramatically over the four years of the war, and Atchison contends that the president did not do enough to prepare southerners for these transformations. Atchison charges the president with "overlooking the long-term rhetorical work necessary to sustain a sense of Confederate nationalism in favor of short-term political gains." (2) A gifted orator, Davis rallied southerners behind his particular plans, but he did not create a long-term loyalty to the Confederacy.

Atchison credits his interest in the Civil War history to his days as an undergraduate student in Paul Escott's class. Apparently, Atchison took notes very well. His analysis of Davis's failure to create a Confederate nationalism dovetails with his mentor's conclusions in *After Secession: Jefferson Davis and the Failure of Confederate Nationalism*. In doing so, however, Atchison never acknowledges the opposing side of this historiographic debate, which would contend that Davis did an impressive job in keeping the Confederacy afloat for four years and in transforming states'rights imbued southerners into Confederates willing to sacrifice over 260,000 lives in a failed bid for their independence.

To put it another way, Atchison does not always carefully separate cause and effect. Did Davis's speeches fail to create Confederate nationalism and contribute to its defeat? Or, instead of lacking will, did the Confederacy lose will in the wake of military reverses? And if the answer to this latter question is "yes," then is it possible that Davis's stirring speeches lengthened rather than shortened the Confederacy's life? While historians will never achieve consensus on these answers, Atchison could have done more to buttress his side of the argument. First, he could have offered some thoughts as to what Davis should have done in these speeches to create a viable Confederate nationalism. Second,

he could have analyzed more speeches or writings. *A War of Words* looks at two speeches within a month in 1861, another two within a month in 1862-3, and a final one in November of 1864. This arrangement leaves two separate 22-month gaps: February 1861 to December 1862 and January 1863 to November 1864. During these periods, Davis delivered other speeches and messages to Congress that would help demonstrate the evolution of his rhetoric. Third, to help prove his case, the book would have benefitted from a greater discussion of the reactions to Davis's speeches. At times, there is a brief discussion of newspaper coverage, but not enough to provide the reader with a sense of the speeches' impact on popular opinion (recognizing that popular opinion is impossible to gauge in the nineteenth century).

Despite these misgivings, *A War of Words* is to be commended on several fronts. First, it takes the language of political speeches seriously. Too often, this rhetoric is ignored in studies of the Civil War. The words of political leaders mattered, and Atchison's work reminds us to give them the consideration they deserve. Second, he stresses the evolution of rhetoric over time. Often scholars posit nationalism as static entity—either it existed or it did not. In contrast, Atchison uses Davis's speeches to show that Confederate nationalism of 1861 did not equate to Confederate nationalism of 1865. Third, the author manages to accomplish these goals in a very brief and readable book (fewer than 100 pages of text). The fact that the reader will wish for additional pages is more of a positive than a negative. Overall, if you study Civil War Era politics, *A War of Words* deserves a place on your bookshelf.

John M. Sacher is an Associate Professor of History at the University of Central Florida. He is the author of A Perfect War of Politics: Parties, Politicians, and Democracy in Louisiana, 1824-1861. He is currently working on a book on conscription in the Confederacy