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Interview

CWBR AUTHOR INTERVIEW: JEFFERSON DAVIS AND THE CIVIL WAR ERA

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Interview with William J. Cooper, Jr.

Interviewed by Christopher Childers

Civil War Book Review (CWBR): You begin your latest book with the phrase "Jefferson Davis by William Cooper, once again," of course referring to your 2000 biography "Jefferson Davis, American." But why Jefferson Davis in the first place, what lead you to study this man?

William J. Cooper, Jr. (WJC): I've been interested in Davis for a long time. When I was a senior in college, I wrote my senior thesis on the Confederate strategy at the end of the war in the West from Atlanta to Bentonville, and of course Davis was a major character, and that and I went to graduate school and I thought about Jefferson Davis and my advisor told me that Davis was too complicated for a graduate student to write a biography about, but I could pick a portion of his life like "Jefferson Davis, Secretary of War." This seemed to me to be about as dull as you could get. So I went in a totally different direction, and I ended up writing about antebellum politics. But Davis was interesting to me and always in my mind. Nobody ever wrote the biography of Davis that everyone turned to. I became a dean in the 1980s and when I finished that I was looking around and I said to myself, "This is the time. If you are ever going to give it a shot, give it a shot." And so I decided to try it. At that time the Jefferson Davis Papers project at Rice University was made open to me-- earlier in my career they had a less than open door policy to let people come in. And so I decided to take a shot at it.

CWBR: This collection of essays focuses sharply on Davis the politician and Davis as the commander-in-chief of the Confederate States of America. And you characterize Davis as the "consummate antebellum politician," a man who intimately understood politics as "a means to an end," and he worked to achieve his goals through deliberation and compromise. Was Davis representative of the ordinary southern politician? How did he differ from his colleagues?

WJC: I don't think he did differ from his successful colleagues. I could rattle you off a half dozen more names, but Davis has generally been depicted as a person who was not a politician; a man who was the antithesis of the politician, and this depiction did not simply deal with the Confederate States of America, though it centered on his role as president. But before that he was most often characterized in the historiography as a person who was stiff-necked, who was unbending, who as his wife said, "didn't know the arts of a politician and wouldn't practice them if he knew them." And my research indicated to me that he was a very different kind of person. I don't think he was that kind of stiff-necked, unbending man; I think he was a professional politician and he was really good at what he did.

CWBR: Keeping in the vein of politics here, you say in this book, definitely, Davis played a critical role in the opposition of the Compromise of 1850, yet as you also note, this didn't mean that Davis opposed compromise, *per se*. Why did he oppose the plan from 1850? And what would he have preferred?

WJC: Well he opposed the plan for 1850 chiefly because of California. Bringing in California as a free state would end the balance in the Senate. There would be 16 free states rather than 15, and the slave states would remain at 15. He saw southern power in the Senate as absolutely critical in maintaining southern power in the nation. And he followed Calhoun. Calhoun believed that you had to have political power to maintain your position in the United States even if your position was based on views of the constitution. So Davis believed that California coming in would disrupt the balance and would weaken southern power. He also objected because California was being handled a way differently from any preceding territory becoming a state. It was done so quickly with no territorial phase, which would eliminate any possibility for Southerners to participate in its settlement. That's why he opposed the Compromise of 1850 so desperately.

What he preferred and what he had supported and voted for in 1848 was to extend the Missouri Compromise line. He also voted in 1848 for the proposal that would turn the question of slavery and the territories of to the federal judiciaryâ€”the so-called Clayton proposal, which like the Missouri Compromise extension, passed the Senate, but failed in the House. He supported both of those, because he thought those were dividing the question, giving the South a fair chance; whereas he thought the Compromise of 1850, with California as the headlight, didn't give the South a chance and broke equality.

CWBR: Davis urged caution during the secession crisis and he didn't support immediate secession. Did southerners ever question Davis's suitability for the Confederate presidency based on his supportâ€”albeit qualifiedâ€”of the Union?

WJC: Well, not really I don't think. There may have been a few radicals who thought Davis had been too conservative, but not for most Southerners. He was not like Alexander Stephens, who had actually opposed secession at the Georgia secession convention. Once it became clear that Mississippi was down the road to secession, Davis said fine. When he was in Jackson, in November 1860 at the meeting of the congressional delegation for the governor to make his decision on how to approach the legislature and the crisis, Davis opposed immediate action and he told the governor this. But when Davis left that meeting to go to Washington, he made it very clear that what Mississippi decided was where he would go. When he first got to Washington in December, he was very dismayed and very depressed and didn't think there was any chance that any kind of compromise, and then his spirits lifted a bit at mid-month. As he said, he didn't really give up on the Union, until the failure of the Committee of Thirteen in the Senate. But he was not looked upon as somebody who had really opposed secession, like Alexander Stephens. He was looked upon as a moderate, and that was terrifically important, especially to people in the Upper South states. People in states like Virginia had informed some of those who were going out that they needed to put in a moderate man like Davis.

CWBR: Now you certainly make clear too that Davis has held firm loyalties to the Union. Yet you also note that early on in the war Davis wanted to make, "the enemy know firsthand that the sting of war." How would you describe Davis's feelings toward northerners, and toward bringing the war to them? And then, how did Davis's outlook harden over the course of the war years?

WJC: In the beginning, what Davis wanted was for the Confederacy to be left alone, but he didn't really think that was going to happen. He didn't believe the North would let the South go without a struggle, and he foresaw a very long and difficult struggle. At the same time, I don't think Davis had any enmity toward Northerners, *per se*. He began to have a real antipathy toward the Lincoln administration because of what he saw as a harsh war policy. Confederate territory came into Union hands in 1861 and from then on every month, every week almost, more and more fell. What he saw was not only Union armies pushing Confederate armies back or overrunning Confederate forces, but he saw buildings burned, he saw people put on the road as refugees, he saw a war against civilians. And then, of course, when the Union army began to employ blacks that, in the South, that raised a specter that haunted Southerners for generations—the idea of race war. He saw the Emancipation Proclamation as an utterly brutal act that endangered southern civilians, particularly women and children. By 1862, when the South had been invaded, and he saw what he called this brutality, and what modern historians call the hard War, he wanted the North defeated. He wanted northern civilians to know what they were perpetrating on the South, and the only reason northern civilians didn't feel it was because he didn't have the wherewithal to make them feel it.

You argue in this book that Davis saw the fight for the Confederacy as a "holy mission." The Union had failed and so the principles of 1776 had to be secured through a "revolution against politics" as George Rable has put it. Did Jefferson Davis foresee an eventual return to a more traditional form of politics or would fealty to the Confederacy always amount to a "holy mission" even after independence had been gained?

WJC: I can't answer that. His great goal was to have an independent Confederacy. If the Confederacy had in fact won its independence, none of us knows what would have happened. I simply can't answer that question, but he certainly believed that as long as the Confederacy was in balance that the old politics had to disappear.

CWBR: You argue that as the conflict progressed, political concerns dominated Davis's strategic thinking, again linking the idea of politics and war aims. To what extent did these concerns about politics hamper the Confederate war effort?

WJC: I don't think that he got more concerned about the political aspects of the war as the war progressed. I think that was in the forefront from the very beginning. I argue that Fort Sumter was his first great political strategic act, because Fort Sumter was a political act more than a military act in my judgment. I think if Davis never had to concern himself with politics he might have done things differently. But in some ways I think that's a false question, because he himself said there was no way to separate the two. He existed in a world in which politics had to play a part. Probably if politics wasn't involved at all, you could say well he may have jettisoned the Trans-Mississippi early on. He did say that it was a tough job to have politics and war at the same time. Maybe he would have concentrated more on other issues as some of his critics said he should have done, but I'm not sure. That's a hard question to answer.

CWBR: You mention in the book, too, though that one of the problems that Davis faced was that he felt he had to keep troops throughout the Confederacy.

WJC: That's right, he did.

CWBR: And he had to do that, in your opinion, to maintain the political balance?

WJC: He had to do that to maintain loyalty. Davis knew there was no Confederate nationalism in 1861. He said on one occasion that Confederate nationalism was being created in the cauldron of war. He looked to the Revolution. He saw American nationalism being created in the American Revolution. So he thought it could be done—that Confederate nationalism could be created. But it didn't exist when the war began in his own mind, nor in mine. He looked at portions of his country and he was told by politicians and by soldiers that in places like Arkansas, for example, that if he didn't defend Arkansas that it would probably leave the Confederacy. And if Arkansas left who might be next? As he explained to one of his generals, he said, "When we give up on a place we not only lose territory, we tend to lose men as well," because their loyalty had not yet been secured by the Confederate government in his own eyes. And I think he was right.

CWBR: You also discuss in here that Davis tended to be a micromanager.

WJC: Only in one sense. He was a micromanager in Richmond in directing the war. He had several Secretaries of War and all but one was quite able. But in

dealing with his generals he was not a micromanager. I argue emphatically that he was not, that in fact, he should have managed them more carefully and more closely. When he appointed a senior general to a major post he basically left that general alone. He might make suggestions and he did make suggestions, but he was not a micromanager of his generals in the field—“not at all. I would argue that Lincoln was much more of a micromanager over his generals in the field than Davis. But in running the general war, letters left the War Department with the Secretary of War's signature and with the adjutant general's signature, but all the decisions were Davis's decisions. You can look at the materials he looked at, and as president the stuff that came across his desk you can see his endorsements. Does a piece of artillery go here or there? He liked to talk to his Secretaries of War and would have long conversations with them. He wanted them to talk and he wanted their opinions, but he made the final decision on almost everything. But once appointed somebody as a general—“even people he didn't really like very much—“he left them out there to do what they would do.

CWBR: In Davis's estimation the Confederacy faced "victory and liberty, or defeat and enslavement." Did he ever talk of defeat and enslavement, in particular, in the postbellum years?

WJC: No. During the war he did say we that if we lose, we will become slaves of a horrible North. After the war he kept very quiet about public questions, particularly because he had been imprisoned and he had never become reconciled to the new order of things in terms, for example, trying to get his citizenship back. He refused to do that. He realized that if he made any comments about public matters, it would only serve to hurt those he cared most about, that is, the South and the southern states. So he didn't comment publicly on public matters. In terms in what was happening inside the South, privately he did feel that during the Reconstruction years that the South was basically in servitude. He applauded the end of Reconstruction; he applauded the restoration of white supremacy. And if you look at his public speeches in the 1880s, he is not a fellow who is standing up bemoaning and lamenting. He is looking at the future; he is talking about the future. He says he is proud of his country. I think that's because by 1880, he saw that the South was back in the hands of those people that he thought should have control of it. But during Reconstruction, he never made a public comment about Reconstruction that I know of.

CWBR: Now in sort of the same vein, you state that Davis believed that Northerners, especially the Republicans, challenged the Americanness of the

South. Did Jefferson Davis see his "holy crusade" as a way to prove that Southerners were true Americans, and in Davis's mind was the true America lost with the death of the Confederacy?

WJC: Davis saw the Confederacy as the true America without any question. He believed that. When the Confederacy failed, as Davis said toward the end of his life, many of his hopes and aspirations fell with it and his conviction about the future fell. But then I think, as I try to argue, that by 1880 his view had changed; that he is much more optimistic, that he applauds his country. He says that all Southerners should be proud Americans. I think he thought by the end of Reconstruction that the America he had cherished was in fact gone, but there was an America there that deserved southern loyalty and southern allegiance. And it had his loyal allegiance, though he refused to do those things that would have given him his citizenship back, because in his own mind he said, "those people didn't have the right to take it, so I don't have the right to hold it; I'm not going to give them the opportunity to give it back to me or reject me." You can say that was pretty stiff-necked, but that was holding to a dogma he had about the legitimacy of what he had done in 1861, its constitutionality, and the correctness of it. But if you look at the last public address he gave to a group of young men near his home on the Mississippi coast in the last years of his life, he tells those young people that they need to look forward, that they can't be trapped by the past and they should be proud of being Americans.

CWBR: Now in your last essay you raise a really fascinating point about the creation of the Lost Cause ideology, and you mention in there that the Lost Cause ideology was based in some part on omitting slavery from the history of the Civil War. What role did Davis play in creating that Lost Cause ideology and in trying to create it in part by omitting the idea of slavery from the causes of the Civil War?

WJC: In that last essay, I argue that Davis had a very important role to play. He was not young enough, as some of the men who historians normally point to as the real founders of the Lost Cause ideology, but was an older man and older generation. If you look at his memoir, *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government*, which was published in 1881, he specifically says in it that slavery was not the cause of war. If you look at the remarks he made in Montgomery in 1886, which was the focus of that essay, again there is nothing said about slavery. But if you contrast those remarks with the remarks he made in Montgomery in 1861, when he was the provisional president, in both his actual

inaugural address and the remarks he made in public before that in Montgomery he put slavery at the very forefront of what was going on. So I think he was absolutely in sync, if you will, with the general thrust of southern opinion at that time that was putting slavery and race out of it. The unity of North and South was coming, was taking place and nobody wanted to talk about slavery, and Southerners certainly didn't.

CWBR: Thank you.