



Lincoln Lore

January, 1986

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Number 1763

LINCOLN AND JEFFERSON DAVIS

I was asked recently to participate in a panel discussion on Lincoln and Jefferson Davis, and when I sat down to prepare for it, I was in for a couple of surprises. I was not particularly well versed on the subject, but I assumed that it would be easy to find books and articles which would, as the saying goes, quickly get me up to speed. The first surprise was finding so little literature on the subject. There are not as many comparisons of these two famous rivals as one might think, and the quality of the few works I could lay my hands on was rather disappointing.

At the heart of the problem lies the absence of a one-volume life of Jefferson Davis that equals those of his great northern rival written by Benjamin P. Thomas, Reinhard H. Luthin, or Stephen B. Oates. The nearest Confederate counterpart of these good books is Clement Eaton's *Jefferson Davis* (New York: Free Press, 1977). It is a more than serviceable work by a great historian of the South, but it is not quite their equal, perhaps because Professor Eaton was a little past his prime when he wrote the book.

Whatever the cause, the result seems indisputable: there are few easily accessible, substantial comparisons of Lincoln and Davis. For almost a hundred years after the Civil War, the literature comparing Davis and Lincoln had a polemical tone and focused mostly on questions of who was right and who wrong, whose cause was just and whose unjust. Mildred Lewis Rutherford's *Jefferson Davis and Abraham Lincoln*, published in 1916, exemplified this polemical approach. Ms. Rutherford was the Historian General of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, and her pamphlet contains about what one would expect from such a source. She praised Davis for nearly everything he did, including, among his antebellum achievements, "responsibility for construction of the aqueduct system in the Nation's capital" and "responsibility for 'Armed Liberty' on the Capitol having a helmet of eagle feathers

instead of the cap of a pagan goddess." It should be said, incidentally, that Ms. Rutherford's work is not at all representative of serious Southern literature on Davis, much of which, from the days of Edward A. Pollard on, has been highly critical of the Confederate president.

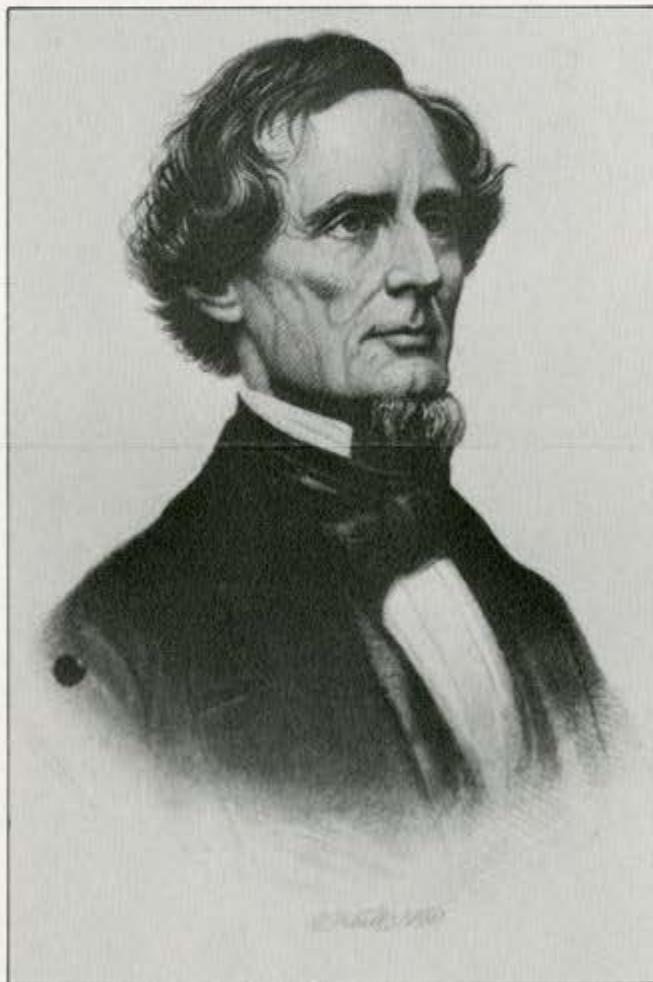
A more recent and larger work, Russell Hoover Quynn's *The Constitutions of Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis: A Historical and Biographical Study in Contrasts* (1959) exemplifies a similar approach to Ms. Rutherford's. The dedication page of *The Constitutions* tips the reader off to what will follow: "To the memory of my grandfather John Henry Skinner Quynn . . . Trumpeter . . . First Maryland Cavalry . . . Army

of the Confederate States of America . . . Prisoner 1865, Fort Delaware . . . Died 1916, Confederate Home, Pikesville, Maryland." One is not surprised, after reading this dedication, to find that Chapter V is entitled "The Republican Dictatorship of Lincoln." Quynn typified a century of polemical writing on the subject when he said, "Admiration was more due to him 'who pursues the course he thinks to be right than to one who succeeds by methods which reason and conscience condemn.'"

Much of the writing on Lincoln and Davis for a hundred years dwelt on questions better described as theological than historical. It is the province of clergymen rather than historians to tell us who was right.

It was 1960 before anyone asked the important historical question about Lincoln and Davis. The man who first did it was David M. Potter in an essay called "Jefferson Davis and the Political Factors in Confederate Defeat," which appeared in *Why the North Won the Civil War*. Potter asked whether, if the North and South had exchanged presidents, the Confederacy would have won the war.

Taken literally, Potter's question is not really historical either, for Lincoln could not have won election in the South nor Davis in the North. One must construe it to mean



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FIGURE 1. Davis as he appeared in a wartime history.

whether the Confederacy could have won with a man of Lincoln's abilities in the presidency. And it should be said also that many useful and interesting comparisons can be made between Lincoln and Davis without attempting to answer Potter's question.

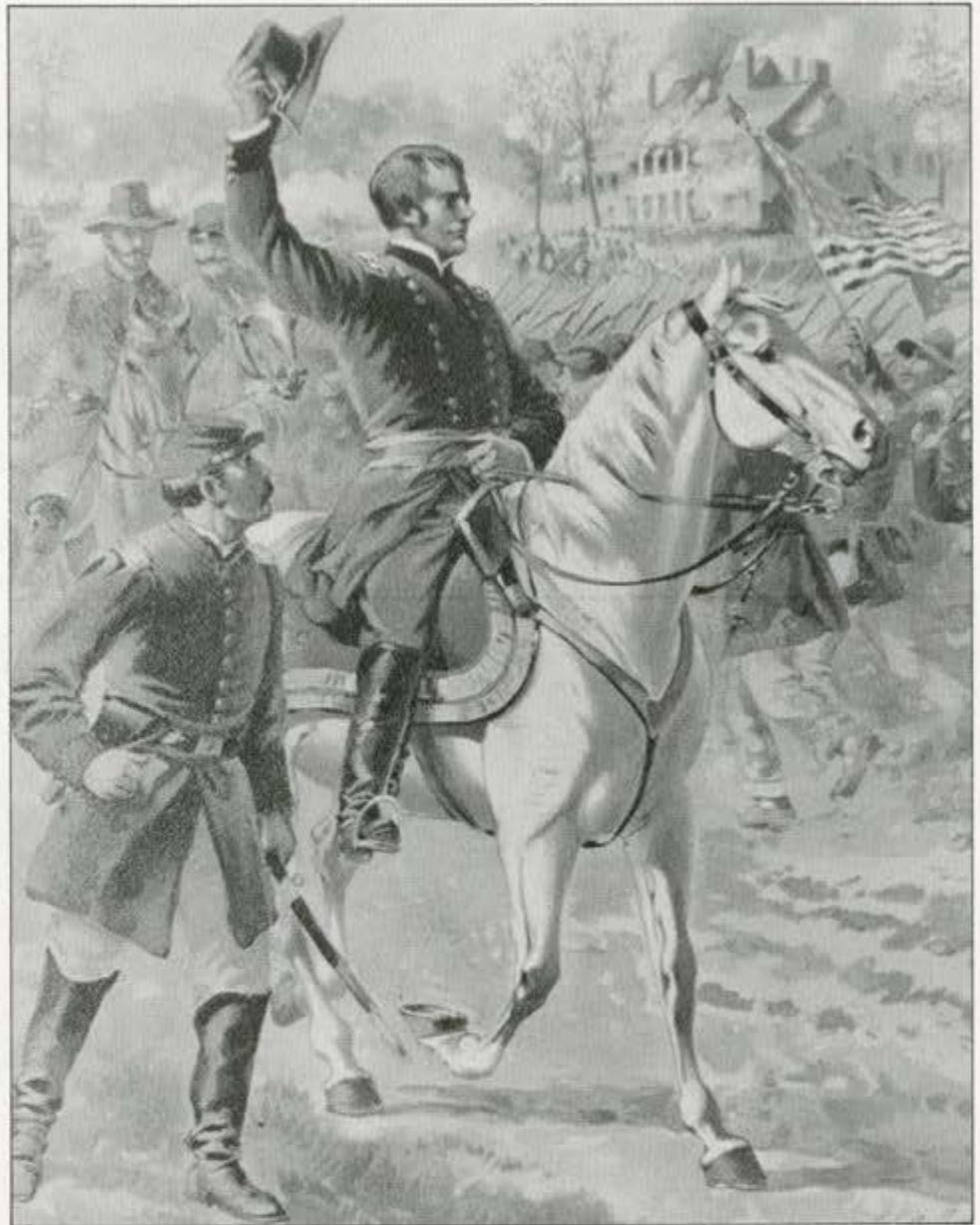
As personalities, for example, Lincoln and Davis were quite different, and personality does matter in running a popular government. Any Lincoln student, I think, would be astonished to read Jefferson Davis' letter of March 31, 1864, to North Carolina Governor Zebulon Vance, ending a long dispute over various policies by requesting that Vance, because of recent unpleasant remarks and continuing unprofitable arguments, end all correspondence with the Confederate president except on official matters.

It is simply inconceivable to think of Abraham Lincoln's writing such a letter. What comes immediately to mind by way of illustrative contrast is Lincoln's famous letter to Joseph Hooker, of January 26, 1863:

I have placed you at the head of the Army of the Potomac. Of course I have done this upon what appear to me to be sufficient reasons. And yet I think it best for you to know that there are some things in regard to which, I am not quite satisfied with you. I believe you to be a brave and skilful soldier, which, of course, I like. I also believe you do not mix politics with your profession, in which you are right. You have confidence in yourself, which is a valuable, if not an indispensable quality. You are ambitious, which within reasonable bounds, does good rather than harm. But I think that during Gen. Burnside's command of the Army, you have taken counsel of your ambition, and thwarted him as much as you could, in which you did a great wrong to the country, and to a most meritorious and honorable brother officer. I have heard, in such way as to believe it, of your recently saying that both the Army and the Government needed a Dictator. Of course it was not for this, but in spite of it, that I have given you the command. Only those generals who gain successes, can set up dictators. What I now ask of you is military success, and I will risk the dictatorship. The government will support you to the utmost of it's ability, which is neither more nor less than it has done and will do for all commanders. I much fear that the spirit which you have aided to infuse into the Army, of criticising their Commander, and withholding confidence from him, will now turn upon you. I shall assist you as far as I can, to put it down. Neither you, nor Napoleon, if he were alive again, could get any good out of an army, while such a spirit prevails in it.

And now, beware of rashness. Beware of rashness, but with energy, and sleepless vigilance, go forward, and give us victories.

Although this letter is well known to all Lincoln students, what Hooker thought of it is not as well known. In April, Hooker showed the letter to newspaper correspondent Noah Brooks, describing it as "just such a letter as a father might write to his son." Instead of cutting off all but official



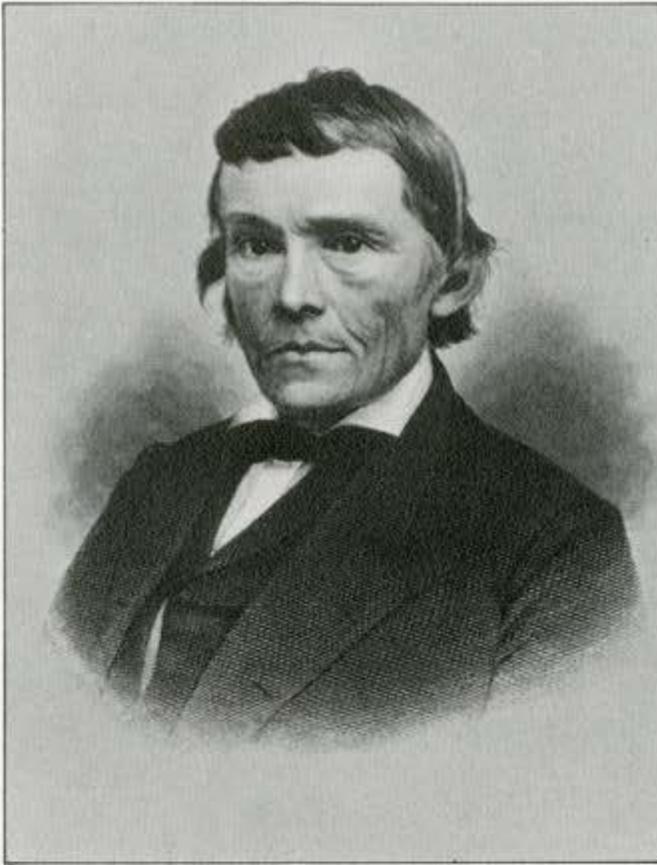
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FIGURE 2. Joseph Hooker at Chancellorsville as depicted by military artist H. A. Ogden in an 1896 chromolithograph.

correspondence with this troublesome general, President Lincoln reduced his critic to nearly teary-eyed reverence for him as a father.

Thus Lincoln handled criticism much better than the thin-skinned Davis, but, in the Hooker episode at any rate, this useful trait did not directly help Lincoln win the war; Hooker went on to spectacular defeat at the head of the Army of the Potomac. Keeping Professor Potter's question in mind, one must look at other comparisons between Lincoln and Davis.

And giving the traditional comparisons a hard look, I think one must say that many of them have been somewhat unfair to Jefferson Davis. For example, it has often been said that Davis, unlike Lincoln, was a poor communicator. Cold, aloof, lacking the common touch, Davis, some say, could not or would not inspire the citizens of the Confederacy to sacrifice for the cause. This assertion falsifies the record in two ways, for, although Lincoln left an unparalleled legacy of undying prose, one cannot be as sure of what kind of a communicator he was. For one thing, Lincoln did not communicate directly with the people of the North in the way Davis did with the people of the South. Lincoln made no speaking tours of the North and gave very few speeches in Washington, relying on letters written for publication, proclamations, annual messages to Congress, and his official inaugural addresses. The fame of



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FIGURE 3. Alexander H. Stephens.

the Gettysburg Address and of the Lincoln-Douglas Debates tends to obscure the fact that Lincoln did not spend much time as president communicating directly with the people.

Jefferson Davis, by contrast, made several speaking tours of the South as president of the Confederacy. And though these trips did not bequeath to posterity any speeches or phrases to be memorized by school children for generations to come, they were, some of them at least, regarded as quite effective in their own day. The best of them, apparently, came on his trips to Georgia and Mississippi in the last year of the war. Alexander H. Stephens, the vice-president of the Confederacy but no friend of Davis', heard one of his speeches in Richmond toward the end of the war and commented: "It was not only bold and undaunted in tone, but had that loftiness of sentiment and rare form of expression, as well as magnetic influence in delivery by which the people are moved to their profoundest depths. Many who had heard this master of oratory in his most brilliant display in the United States Senate said they never before saw Mr. Davis so really majestic. The occasion . . . the circumstances . . . caused the minds of not a few to revert to like appeals by Rienzi and Demosthenes." Stephens was a good speaker himself (Lincoln thought so) and so bitterly critical of Davis' policies by this time that this compliment is the equivalent of the likes of Clement Vallandigham saying that Lincoln spoke like Demosthenes.

If it was not Davis, then something else surely inspired sacrifice on the part of the Confederacy's citizens. The Confederate States of America managed to mobilize about a third of all of its white males, and of that 900,000 or so men, over a fourth died for the cause. This constituted a casualty rate which would almost certainly not be tolerated by any twentieth-century Western industrialized nation.

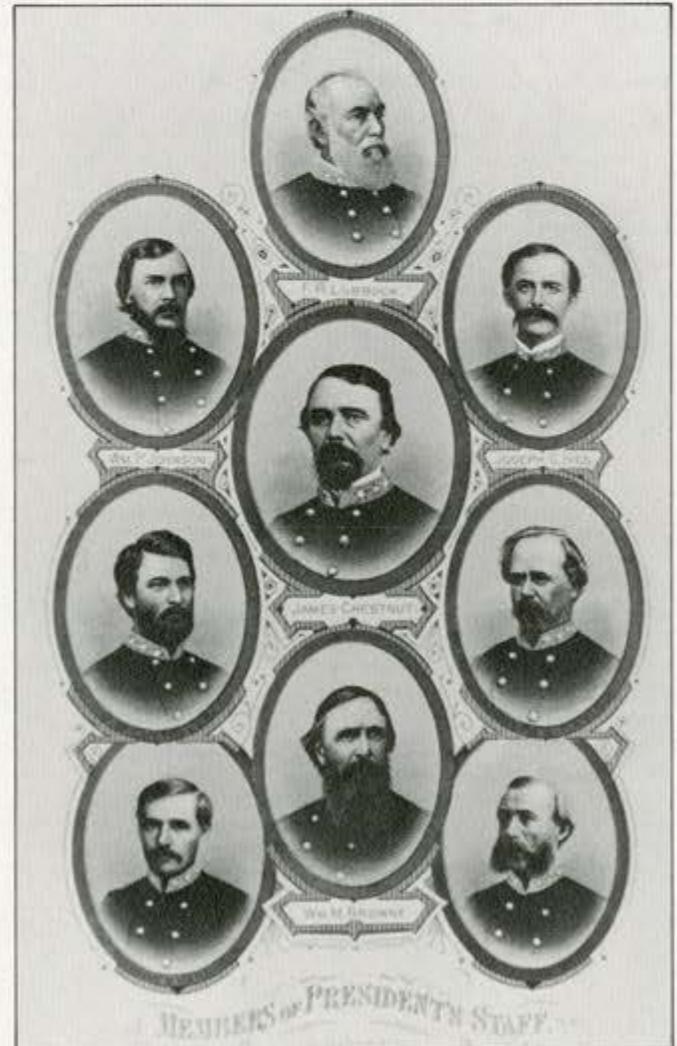
It would probably be wrong to give Jefferson Davis credit for the courage of the Confederate soldier, but he deserves more credit than he has received to date. For example, historians have frequently contrasted Lincoln and Davis in their ability to "grow" in office. This is a term to whose use

I have objected on many occasions in the past on the grounds that one man's "growth" is another's "unprincipled inconsistency." Nevertheless, historians have contrasted Davis' constitutional rigidity with Lincoln's capacity for growth, for example, in racial matters — from thinking emancipation illegal in 1861 to issuing the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation in 1862 to accepting freedmen in the armed services in 1863 to suggesting the enfranchisement of some blacks by the end of the war.

Davis grew too, as Clement Eaton has rightly pointed out, from states-rights conservatism to instituting virtual state socialism in the Confederacy: government manufacture of arms and ammunition, control of overseas trade, impressment of crops, limiting the profits of textile mills and other essential war industries, and controlling the white labor force through the manipulation of exemptions from conscription. And Davis moved more quickly toward these policies than many numbers of the Confederate Congress.

Even after correcting the balance, I think that Lincoln's skills as a politician would so outweigh Davis' as to leave the Confederate leader rather far behind. And though Davis' military experience far exceeded Lincoln's, very few military writers have been willing to say that Davis' expertise led to anything more than military meddlesomeness; whereas Lincoln seems to have learned quickly and to have left the military details to the generals.

Ultimately, however, I think the answer to Potter's question is that success or failure in the Civil War cannot be explained by looking at two men only. Broad institutional, administrative, social, statistical, and political studies are needed to



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FIGURE 4. Davis is said to have immersed himself in military detail and used his staff poorly.



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FIGURE 5. Much of the infamous destruction of the South would have been avoided by a sensible surrender in November 1864.

explain mobilization rates, casualty rates, desertion rates (that of the North exceeded the South's), the stability of party structures, and organizational ability in this first gigantic American war (in which American dead exceeded in number all the Americans who died in World War I, World War II, the Korean War, and Viet Nam put together).

But there is still room for fruitful comparisons between Jefferson Davis and Abraham Lincoln. Many historians have described Lincoln as a practical realist and Davis as an idealist, but here is one criticism of Jefferson Davis along these lines that I do not think has been often enough raised. Throughout the Civil War, the Confederate president was forced by Southern military weakness to opt for a defensive strategy. Authorities disagree, to say the least, as to whether he dispersed and departmentalized the Confederate forces too much instead of concentrating them for defense. And they disagree in regard to the usage of the tactical as opposed to strategic offensive by Confederate generals on the battlefields.

Leaving those disputes aside, I think there is another less conventional but important criticism of Davis' defensive strategy which needs to be made. If Davis were to win the war by a defensive strategy, there were only two likely ways of doing so: first, by diplomacy (the same way America gained independence from England back in the Revolution) or, second, by simply holding on until the North lost the political will to fight any longer. Diplomacy failed early for the Confederacy — by mid 1863, anyway, and probably earlier.

After diplomacy failed, the South could win only politically, that is, if political forces for peace in the North grew too great for Lincoln and Congress to sustain a war effort. On November 8, 1864, all hope of that disappeared, because Abraham Lincoln was reelected president. At that moment, any prospect of the North's giving up the war effort was lost. All hope for victory by Davis' only strategy was gone. There was no way then that he could win by the only strategy he ever embraced.

Every person in the Union and Confederate armies who died after November 8, 1864, died because of Jefferson Davis.

He should have surrendered on November 9, 1864, but instead oversaw the useless slaughter of perhaps 60,000 men. Defeatism was so widespread in the Confederacy by that late date that Davis would have had little trouble convincing Southerners to negotiate a peace. It might be said that history should hold Davis personally responsible for these casualties.

Since this article began with a criticism of history books that dealt essentially in theological questions, it should end here before it enters that same forbidden realm.

A CORRECTION

Historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., wrote on December 26, 1985, in regard to *Lincoln Lore* Number 1761:

... I doubt that Andrew C. McLaughlin foresaw Roosevelt's court plan when he addressed the Abraham Lincoln Association on 12 February 1936. FDR did not announce the plan until 5 February 1937. Either the 1936 date for the talk is wrong, or McLaughlin added the passage about the court plan after delivering the talk but before publication in the Abraham Lincoln Association Papers.

I certainly made a mistake when I assumed that McLaughlin's statement of February 12, 1936, referred to the Roosevelt plan, and I thank Professor Schlesinger for calling it to my attention.

M.E.N., Jr.

NOTICE

Because of copyright restrictions, the date on the masthead of *Lincoln Lore* must correspond more closely than it has over the last few years to the actual date of issue. Therefore, this issue is dated January 1986, and there will be no issues bearing 1985 dates. The numbers will continue consecutively from Number 1762; this is Number 1763. I regret this inconvenience for readers and, especially, for librarians and bibliographers, but I must confess to some relief at rectifying this problem even at such cost to system.

M.E.N., Jr.