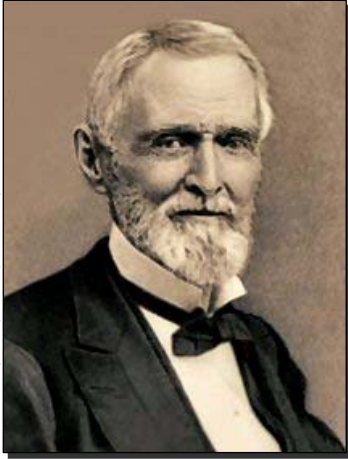


JEFFERSON DAVIS

in the memory of history

by Donald E. Collins



Courtesy of Grady Community & Town History

How does one view a national figure of the stature of Jefferson Davis over his lifetime and after? The former Confederate president rode a roller coaster of opinions in the eyes of his contemporaries and historians. Either one likes him, or one does not. There appears to be little middle ground. This characteristic continues to this day.

Various book titles indicate these variations, be they *Jefferson Davis, American* or *Jefferson Davis, Confederate President*. Davis died at the age of eighty-one years. For fifty-three of these, he was seen as a nationalist, one who was viewed favorably by a majority of Americans regardless of their state of origin. Building on a reputation gained as a military hero at the battles of Monterey and Buena Vista in the Mexican War, he became an exceptional and well-liked U.S. senator, secretary of war and, in 1860, potential Democratic presidential nominee with intersectional support. Had he died at that moment, Jefferson Davis would be remembered positively in American history.

Unfortunately for Davis, the Civil War fixed his image in the minds of Americans then and now. He was a patriot or a traitor, an incompetent president or the only man who could have held the Confederate states together for the four years of the war, and a proponent of slavery or the man who was willing to end the practice in the interest of southern independence. At the war's conclusion, he was neither liked nor admired by Americans of any category - northerner, southerner, black, or white. Had Jefferson Davis died at that point, there is little likelihood that if his image could or would have been resurrected certainly he would not have gained the stature that southerners and some northerners accorded to Confederate generals Robert E. Lee and Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson. Yet shifting memories over a span of decades raised his status among southerners to the equal of those two military heroes.

A current school of historiography attempts to determine how time and memory affected both the occurrence of events and how those events and their participants were viewed at the time and are viewed now by people living in the present. Studies by such memory historians as David W. Blight, in his *Race and Reunion : The Civil War in American Memory*, and Bertram Wyatt-Brown, in his *The Shaping of Southern Culture : Honor, Grace, and War, 1760s-1880s*, take a geographically broad view of the effects of memory on history. The present study of Jefferson Davis's final years benefits by the findings of those regional studies but also demonstrates that Davis was in a class by himself, different from the great military heroes of the Confederacy. While Lee and Jackson came to be remembered even in the North as national heroes, Davis remained a sectional one. And as this author shows, southerners initially resurrected Jefferson Davis in their memory not as their former political leader but as the man who suffered for them and the South and whose continued defense of the constitutionality of secession, the war, and the Confederacy justified their own participation in it.

"Martyr," more than any other word, describes Davis's rise from the obscurity of 1865. An unnecessarily harsh two-year imprisonment in Fort Monroe by the victorious Union cemented his position in the late nineteenth-century southern mind. This was noted as early as 1886 by Connecticut's *Hartford Courant* as "*the spirit which inspired the Southern people.*" In

writing of Davis's introduction to the crowds in Montgomery during the Southern Tour, that newspaper quoted "a prominent Southern general" as telling his audience that although "we [Southerners] were well treated by the North, ... and admitted into the circle of a new nationality..., it was different with Mr. Davis. Failure left him no future He had borne our burdens with grace, and it is but fitting that ... the Southern people whom he represented, should pay a tribute to his devotion and sacrifice."¹ "He suffered for us" became a constant theme in the resurrected image of Jefferson Davis. His wartime presidential record was mentioned sparingly. Constant references to suffering for and in place of the southern people undoubtedly raised his estimation with white southerners. By the 1890s, Davis had reached par with Lee and Jackson, and in the eyes of some was even above them. He remained as one of the Confederate greats well into the twentieth century, with the erection of the Davis monument in Richmond, the incorporation of his features in the Stone Mountain carving alongside those two generals, and the naming of a transcontinental highway that stretched across the country into the state of Washington.

Yet, as both Blight and Wyatt-Brown point out, it is clear that Davis could not have regained his former status with southerners had it not been for the way in which ex-Confederates chose to lead the country to accept a southern-friendly interpretation of the war in which Confederates were not traitors and their military leaders were in fact national heroes.² The New South movement, which they created, dominated southern remembrance of the Confederacy from 1871 until World War I and after.

Without the nostalgia of white southerners for the Lost Cause that supplanted the defeatism of 1863, the Confederacy might have been a cause to forget rather than one to remember. For a few years, the returning veterans had little concern for remembering. There was, according to Blight, a crisis of confidence in the leadership ranks of the fallen Confederacy.³ Davis, whose wartime presidency had been rejected in 1865, shared their suffering in his prison cell, thus giving southern whites of the postwar generation and their children reason to remember him. In 1866, the gathering nostalgia for the Confederacy acquired a name from Alfred Pollard's *The Lost Cause*. This movement, led for the first two decades after the war by what Blight terms the "die-hards," set out to reverse negative interpretations of the war and the Confederacy written by their former enemies.⁴ These men dedicated their lives to combating northern histories of the war and to presenting southern-friendly histories - the truth as they saw it.

The Lost Cause grew alongside a movement for reconciliation between the former enemies that developed in the 1870s and continued through the following decades : joint commemorations of Memorial Day, friendly reports written by northern travelers in the South, romanticized stories of the war written by veterans of both armies in which the horrors were forgotten, and joint reunions by former combatants who came to see each other as honorable men who had fought nobly helped reunite the country. Lost Cause adherents eventually accepted reconciliation while at the same time celebrating the Confederacy and its soldiers. Initially, however, the movement was in the hands of the die-hards, who included Jefferson Davis as one of their own. Both the die-hard and the reconciliationist factions of the Lost Cause movement, however, used Davis's memory to further their cause, thereby helping to bring him out of the obscurity of 1865.

Concerned that "Yankee" histories would distort the truth of the war, former Confederate military and political leaders dedicated themselves to retelling the war's history in their own version of the truth. This was done through books and articles in popular magazines and through such organized efforts as the Southern Historical Society (SHA), which published and

¹ Reprinted in the *Atlanta Journal*, May 1, 1886.

² David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion : The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass.; Belknap Press, 2002), 265.

³ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 256.

⁴ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 258-59.

documented Confederate history in its *SHA Papers*, and magazines such as the *Confederate Veteran* and *The Land We Love*. Since the end of the war, every organ of the Lost Cause declared itself a bulwark against prejudiced Yankee history.⁵

Davis and the SHA exalted and benefited from each other. The former president looked to the society and its publications as the guardians of truthful Confederate history. The society in turn wrote about and to Davis: “*Nothing will give us more pleasure than to do everything in our power to put right on the record the able statesman, gallant soldier, pure patriot, and accomplished gentleman who presided over the Confederacy.*”⁶ Although Davis did not create the Lost Cause, Blight credits him with providing the movement’s lifeblood.⁷

From his release from prison in 1867 to his death in 1889, the former president set the tone for the die-hards’ historical interpretation. He placed responsibility for secession and the war entirely at the feet of the North. The South’s action was merely to protect its natural rights against the “tremendous and sweeping usurpations” the “unlimited, despotic power” of the federal government. His fierce defense of states’ rights and secession, his pleas for “Southern honor,” and his mystical conception of the Confederacy gave ideological fuel to die-hards. Using Davis’s rationale, the term “rebellion” became a misnomer. In 1874, he wrote, “*Sovereigns cannot rebel.*” Davis provided the die-hards with endless expressions of solemn faith. “*We may not hope to see the rebuilding of the temple as our Fathers designed it,*” Davis wrote to a friend in 1877, “*but we can live on praying for that event and die with eyes fixed on the promised land.*”⁸

If Davis exercised as much influence on the Lost Cause movement as Blight credits him, the ex-southern president received as good as he gave. His resurrection could not have taken place without it. Although he was undoubtedly in the die-hard camp, he also faced the reality that the future was in reunification, and toward the end of his life, he accepted, if perhaps grudgingly, reconciliation with his former enemies.

During the final years of the 1880s, leadership in the Lost Cause movement shifted from the die-hards to a faction that endorsed both reconciliation with the North and devotion to Confederate memory. A primary leader among the reconciliationists was former Confederate General John B. Gordon of Georgia, who in 1889 brought together the numerous state, local, and unit veterans’ organizations, that is, “the grassroots of the Lost Cause” movement, into the newly formed United Confederate Veterans.⁹ It was particularly the reception of Davis by the veterans during his Southern Tour of 1886-1887 that first revealed to the South through its coverage in the southern press and to the former president himself that he had once again reached the top rung of southern leadership. Yet the primary memory of the man revealed during the tour and in numerous southern editorials then and afterward was less that of a former president than that of a hero of the Mexican War and a postwar martyr for the Confederacy. Gordon, in speech after speech, spoke of loyalty to the union in the same breath that he praised the memory of the Confederacy. While Davis was associated with the die-hards, he was by the end of his life also at home with the reconciliationists, as demonstrated by his close relations with northern publishers and the fiancé of his own daughter Winnie.

When Davis died in 1889, there is little doubt that his enhanced memory among white southerners had been influenced by the efforts of both the die-hards of the 1860s-1880s and the reconciliationists of the late 1880s and after. These men continued to stress Davis’s memory not only for his stalwart defense of the Confederacy but also for his heroism in the war of 1846-1848 and for his postwar suffering at the hands of the federal government. The transition of southern memory of Davis away from this martyr/American military hero view to being primarily a Confederate hero was strongly influenced by the transfer of the Davis

⁵ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 277.

⁶ William J. Cooper, *Jefferson Davis, American* (New York: Knopf, 2000), 621.

⁷ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 260.

⁸ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 259.

⁹ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 259.

memorial from the all-male United Confederate Veterans, Southern Press Association, and Jefferson Davis Monument Association to their female counterparts, particularly the newly formed United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Confederated Southern Memorial Association in the late 1890s. From this time forward, Davis was to be remembered in history primarily as the political leader of the southern Confederacy. As evidenced by the monument erected to his memory in 1907, he was no longer Davis the martyr but Davis the hero of the Confederacy, on par with Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson.

However, Davis never won the hearts of northerners, as did the previously mentioned Confederate military leaders. As president, he had led the rebellion. After the war, he refused to seek a pardon, and he refused to admit that he, the Confederacy, secession, or states' rights were wrong. Whereas there was overwhelming agreement among white southerners in regard to Davis's positive image, opinions toward him in the North varied according to population groups. African Americans excoriated him for his role in defending slavery and in attempting to continue it by means of a proslavery Confederate government. Northern whites were divided. Many Democrats, most of whom had not given enthusiastic support for the war, never felt a strong antagonism toward Davis and were willing to forgive and forget. On the other hand, Republicans were loathe, largely for political reasons, to forgive. His image was used in the party's "Bloody Shirt" propaganda to attack the Democratic opposition in every election into the 1890s. Yet even Republican hostility tended to vanish as memories of the Civil War were pushed further into the background as the United States moved into the twentieth century. If anything, popular culture rejuvenated the image of the Confederacy as films such as *Gone with the Wind*, the publication of Civil War novels, and post-World War II reenactments tended to romanticize the Confederacy and southern soldiers.

Yet history does not stand still. Presentism, or the tendency to examine the past in light of the realities of the present, has resulted in a return of the negative image of immediate post-Civil War years of the Confederacy and its leaders. However, this time, even the military leaders were not to be spared condemnation. The vehicle for the return was the post-World War II civil rights movement, led by such organizations as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. As these organizations won the necessary battles against legal discrimination by the 1980s, the emphasis shifted to an attack on slavery and the Confederacy as a vehicle for its perpetuation.

Davis, like the Confederate flag, became a symbol to be repudiated as demeaning to the African American population. The political and social culture of the 1990s and into the twenty-first century called increasingly for an end to symbols that held negative meanings for minorities of all kinds. As the Civil War moves further into the past, those individuals and organizations that honor the memory of the Confederacy grow - and will probably continue to grow - smaller in numbers and influence. It is not likely that the southern Confederacy will rise again as a positive image. Jefferson Davis's place in the sun has, with little doubt, sunk below the horizon.

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The above article is the conclusion chapter of Donald E. Collins' book "The Death and Resurrection of Jefferson Davis". It is reproduced with the kind permission of its author and his publisher, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., Lanham, Maryland.

