

Lincoln and Davis as Commanders in Chief: A Review

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In the one hundred and thirty seven years since Appomattox, scholars, and students of early American History have studied the backgrounds of Jefferson Davis and Abraham Lincoln, as if they expected to glean from the volumes of works written about each man, a critical leadership quality in Lincoln, or a flaw in Davis' character which resulted in the defeat of the Confederacy. To the less observant the two men were similar in only two obvious ways; both were native Kentuckians, and both were about the same age.

From the outset of the Civil War, few men in America, and most certainly in the South had enjoyed many of the advantages life could offer, and seemed better prepared to lead a struggle for independence than did Jefferson Davis. (Smith pg. 181) Invoking the words of Douglas Southall Freeman, Smith lists several of Davis' more qualifying traits. He had been educated at West Point, had served in the regular army, and had commanded regulars as well as volunteers in combat, to the point of suffering a battle wound at Buena Vista

during the Mexican War. Although throughout his work (Jefferson Davis and His Generals) Steven Woodworth focuses upon Davis' character flaws and ill health as serious impediments to his leadership skills, he also gives Davis credit for his pre-war service in political as well as administrative positions within the government. The degree of which no other southerner could likely lay claim. (Woodworth pg. 305)

Woodworth draws a strong contrast to Davis in noting that Abraham Lincoln had no military training, and in fact, very little military experience, including no administrative experience prior to assuming the presidency. According to Woodworth, Lincoln brought with him to the office abilities that enabled him to rise above the limitations of his background and grow into the job, and with the job as its demands changed or became greater. He was a quick study, especially in matters of military strategy, quickly grasping new concepts and new ways of doing things. A character trait that Jefferson Davis proved woefully lacking. (Woodworth pg. 305)

Stephen Sears gives us a glance of what Woodworth is talking about in his comments about how Lincoln was thrown in to a boiling caldron of turmoil and force educated in military science, to some extent from the pages of Halleck's book (*The Elements of Military Arts and Science*), but to a great extent, was forced to swallow his pride and learn from a teacher who was anything but a political ally, George McClellan. (Borritt pg. 22) While possessing these many fine qualities, Lincoln is made to appear not infallible by Mark F. Neeley Jr., in pointing our Lincoln's error in underestimating the terrain at Chancellorsville

urging Joe Hooker to attack, then relieving Hooker of his command upon defeat. Neeley favorably compares this misunderstanding of terrain at Chancellorsville with a similar miscalculation a century later in Vietnam. (Borritt pg. 61)

In his effort to focus upon how Lincoln and Davis were different, he also points to their physical dissimilarities. According to Woodworth, unlike Davis, Lincoln possessed an ability to withstand pressure and fatigue and yet maintain good judgement, as well as an innate ability to get along with people and cut to the heart of most any problem. In short, Lincoln had plenty of self-confidence as well as the gumption to take decisive action, while Davis was often indecisive, and did not work well under pressure. Thus, to Woodworth, it was in areas such as these that Davis' abilities, though considerable, just didn't quite measure up to the demands of his office. (Woodworth pg. 305)

As a political leader Davis failed at his most important job as president, that of keeping the flame of nationalism alive in the people of the South. Perhaps it was just Davis' personality, or perhaps it was due to his physical infirmities; whatever it was, he appeared brittle, and inflexible to the common man. In the words of southern historian David M. Potter, Davis "seemed to think in abstractions and to speak in platitudes."

On the other hand, according to Douglas Freeman, Lincoln was the master politician, and communicator. Despite the fact that in all of his life, Lincoln had barely a full year of schooling, he spoke plainly and had an innate ability to communicate the meaning and purpose of the war to the people of the North. (Smith pg. 35) By age seventeen Lincoln could barely point to a dozen books he

had read, but numbered among those were the King James Version of the Bible, Aesop's Fables, Pilgrim's Progress, and Shakespeare's plays, all of which were full of figurative language, allegories, and parables. (Smith pg. 35) Thus from his childhood, Abraham Lincoln learned to speak the language of the common man, easily relating to people who remained close to their rural roots and well understood stories of the barnyard or cabbage patch.

Not only did Abraham Lincoln possess superior language skills he also had the advantage of the noble cause. He could use his ability to speak figuratively to convey to his listeners the true meaning of the cause for which they were being asked to sacrifice in terms they understood. According to Douglas Southall Freeman, the key to Lincoln's greatness was his "self-mastery of mind and spirit," a far cry from Jefferson Davis who tended to become erratic and displayed disagreeable behavior when placed under pressure or fatigued. (Smith pg. 33) Possibly the best way to summarize the differences between the two men is in paraphrasing the words of Douglas Southall Freeman. While Davis brought with him the military background and the ability to understand the military "grand strategy" of the Confederacy, Lincoln was a communicator who brought to the office with him political savvy, as well as an insight into the ultimate objective of preserving the Union. (Smith pg. 182) Probably the most apt description of the two commanders in chief is that as the war drew out into its third and fourth years, Lincoln grew into his job. While during this same period, Davis grew in his duties as an administrator, understanding the need for diffusing decision making

in the administrative, as commander in chief, he grew little, never able to get hold of the concept of delegating authority. (Vandiver Rebel Brass pg. 40)

The constant study of the dissimilarities of the two men tends to obfuscate the common problems shared by both, most certainly in dealing with field commanders. Both had to deal with military commanders who failed to understand the differences between military and political considerations, and encroached upon the purview of the commander in chief by taking ill-advised actions which resulted in dire consequences for each. In Lincoln's case, Fremont's unilateral decision to abolish slavery in Missouri, and for Davis, Polk's decision to militarily occupy Kentucky. Both instances posed good illustrations of the differences in character of both men as leaders. While Lincoln immediately relieved Fremont of his command and revoked his mandate, Davis allowed his policy regarding Kentucky to drift aimlessly for several days, eventually sending troops to reinforce Polk's occupying army. (Woodworth pg. 307)

At the outset of the war both faced command problems, but from very different directions. By December 1861, the Federal army numbered no more than seventeen thousand men, most of who were scattered along the Mexican frontier. This force was commanded by seventy-four year old Lt. General Winfield Scott who was in declining health. It is said that Scott was so fat by the outbreak of the Civil War, that he could not mount a horse. From this, it was obvious to Lincoln that he not only had to build an army, but a command structure as well.

While Lincoln had early visions of the modern warfare to come, he had inherited commanders, i.e., John Pope, Ambrose Burnside, and Joseph Hooker

who were products of the Mexican War who possessed few, if any characteristics of the more modern thinking commanders who would emerge in the last two years of the war. (Connelly pg. 118) Although he began the war with a third rate command staff, as the war progressed into its third and fourth years, men like Grant, Sherman, Sheridan, and James Wilson were identified and promoted to command Lincoln's new modern army. (Smith pg. 188)

Jefferson Davis had problems with his commanders as well. Early on, Davis became committed to a defensive strategy but lacked the command staff to effectively implement such a strategy throughout the Confederacy. In the East, Davis began the war with a decided command advantage, and possibly, at least during the early year(s) of the war, he enjoyed a slight advantage in the west as well. According to Connelly the defensive strategy to which Davis was firmly committed was undermined by his over-reliance upon Lee's offensive approach in Virginia where the Confederacy lost fifty thousand men from June through August of 1862. In fact, Connelly questions whether the Confederacy could afford Robert E. Lee, pointing to the terrible statistic that during the Seven Days Campaign of 1862, Lee lost more men than had been assigned to Albert Sidney Johnston's Army of Tennessee the previous fall. (Connelly pg. 118) I do believe that this issue needs to be examined considering where the Federal Army was located when Lee took command.

To Woodworth, although Davis brought personal strength to the presidency, his great weakness was that he also brought many old friendships upon which he often relied contrary to the exercise of good judgement.

(Woodworth pg. 305) He was often blinded by personal feelings in his selection of men like Leonidas Polk, David Twiggs and Samuel Cooper, his greatest transgression was allowing incompetent commanders to remain in the armies long after their incompetence had been proven. In the case of the Army of Tennessee, Polk was allowed to remain in command long after his incompetent invasion of Kentucky undermining and ultimately causing the removal of its commander Braxton Bragg. The interesting paradox here is while Lincoln built a leadership corps as war progressed, Davis allowed his leadership corps to deteriorate by leaving older officers in command positions who had proven to be incompetent, and failing to identify, develop and promote younger officers such as Pat Cleburne or Alexander Stewart. Consequently, in the last year of the war, Lincoln had plenty of good commanders from which to choose and Davis had left himself with little better choice than Joseph Johnston to command the Army of Tennessee. (Woodworth pg. 313)

Both men also had to deal with commanders of their significant armies who were so conservative they simply would not fight. Lincoln relieved McClellan at Harrison's Landing in August 1862, but reinstated him to command the following month, then relieved him for good in November 1862 after McClellan failed to pursue Lee after Antietam. Although initially spared the indignity of relieving the retreating Joseph Johnston on the Virginia Peninsula by his wounding at Seven Pines, Davis ultimately had to relieve Johnston at the outskirts of Atlanta, but subsequently restored him to command when Hood allowed his army to be all but destroyed at Franklin, Tennessee.

Frank Vandiver probably best describes Jefferson Davis and the other leaders of the Confederacy as a victims of a system they helped to create, and points to the Confederacy as likely the best example of Clausewitz's notion that a nation will fight a war that resembles its social system. (Vandiver Rebel Brass pg. XV)

Notwithstanding all of the talk about destinies, however, when one considers the many advantages enjoyed by the Union in manpower, resources, military organization, sea power, leadership, and the economic ability to see a war effort to a conclusion (Smith pg. 186) the Confederacy was consigned to ultimate defeat.