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*James M. McPherson*

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From the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Battle Cry of Freedom*, a powerful new reckoning with Jefferson Davis as military commander of the Confederacy.

History has not been kind to Jefferson Davis. His cause went down in disastrous defeat and left the South impoverished for generations. If that cause had succeeded, it would have torn the United States in two and preserved the institution of slavery. Many Americans in Davis's own time and in later generations considered him an incompetent leader, if not a traitor. Not so, argues James M. McPherson. In *Embattled Rebel*, McPherson shows us that Davis might have been on the wrong side of history, but it is too easy to diminish him because of his cause's failure. In order to understand the Civil War and its outcome, it is essential to give Davis his due as a military leader and as the president of an aspiring Confederate nation. Davis did not make it easy on himself. His subordinates and enemies alike considered him difficult, egotistical, and cold. He was gravely ill throughout much of the war, often working from home and even from his sickbed. Nonetheless, McPherson argues, Davis shaped and articulated the principal policy of the Confederacy with clarity and force: the quest for independent nationhood. Although he had not been a fire-breathing secessionist, once he committed himself to a Confederate nation he never deviated from this goal. In a sense, Davis was the last Confederate left standing in 1865. As president of the Confederacy, Davis devoted most of his waking hours to military strategy and operations, along with Commander Robert E. Lee, and delegated the economic and diplomatic functions of strategy to his subordinates. Davis was present on several battlefields with Lee and even took part in some tactical planning; indeed, their close relationship stands as one of the great military-civilian partnerships in history. Most critical appraisals of Davis emphasize his choices in and management of generals rather than his strategies, but no other chief executive in American history exercised such tenacious hands-on influence in the shaping of military strategy. And while he was imprisoned for two years after the Confederacy's surrender awaiting a trial for treason that never came, and lived for another twenty-four years, he never once recanted the cause for which he had fought and lost. McPherson gives us Jefferson Davis as the commander in chief he really was, showing persuasively that while Davis did not win the war for the South, he was scarcely responsible for losing it.

## Embattled Rebel: Jefferson Davis as Commander in Chief Details

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# **From Reader Review Embattled Rebel: Jefferson Davis as Commander in Chief for online ebook**

## **Doug Hibbard says**

How do you handle presenting a biography of the President of the Confederacy? Very carefully.

After all, Davis became the leader of treason, the face of a would-be nation that desired to retain slavery, and in the end, a failure, for his new nation never came to be.

That it never came to be is a fact of history that we should be grateful for, and McPherson makes it clear that he is. Yet is there not something to be learned from Davis and his time at the helm of the Rebels? It does seem odd that I have seen more effort to extract viable lessons from Germany and its leader 1932-1945 than I have any effort to seek value from Davis' life.

All of that aside, Embattled Rebel looks as much at Davis' faults as it does his good parts. With the hindsight of history, we can easily see the mistakes, but McPherson has done well in setting the stage of seeing through Davis' eyes.

I was enlightened to Davis' skill-much of the history I have read of the era squarely casts Davis as an incompetent. Neither Northern victors nor Southern vanquisheds were in the mood to speak well of him, and he is scapegoated perhaps more than anyone else. I have often heard of Lee's valor and honor, but never of Davis' honor.

Yet here McPherson paints us a man who tried, and yet was beset by the same challenges that hit us all. His health, his limited access to communications, and the egos of others. That the Confederacy lasted 4 years is a testament partially to him--without his efforts, the war would have likely been more vicious and shorter.

I also appreciated the look at how Davis attempted to coordinate a unified strategy for the South, and how he maintained his commitment to Southern independence. He even, at one point, allowed for the possibility of ending slavery--if the South would be set free to be its own nation. That was a year before the war ended, but the North would have none of it.

In all, I liked this read. It was worth my time, and as history nerd, I was enlightened in an area I have not considered before: Jefferson Davis as a successful leader.

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## **Mac says**

James McPherson is one of the best historians of the American Civil War. He has a gift for explaining complex events clearly and concisely. In one of his recent books, Tried by War, McPherson recounted the war from the perspective of Abraham Lincoln. In Embattled Rebel, he does the same thing for Jefferson Davis.

It was enlightening for me to see familiar events in the war from the other side. The Confederacy started from a strong position in that it already controlled a vast swathe of territory. Would there have been any way to hold it all together? One early mistake by Davis was in trying to defend every corner of his territory,

spreading the rebel forces thin, rather than concentrating in certain strategic locations. But if he had acted differently, the governors and populace of undefended areas would have possibly withdrawn their support for the war.

I have a bit more respect for Davis after reading the book. He was not simply an arrogant, inept leader. Yet he stuck to a rigid and loathsome ideology, and had great difficulty delegating authority to anyone outside his close circle. But would anyone else have been "better"? Probably not.

It is worth noting that Embattled Rebel features excellent maps. These add to the story in that McPherson rarely goes into detail about specific battles. Instead the maps help to show what was happening.

This is a good, and fairly quick, read. If anything I wish there had been more detail at times. But I would recommend it to anyone interested in the Civil War, especially Union partisans like me.

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## **Donna Davis says**

Book review Embattled Rebel: Jefferson Davis as Commander in Chief, by James M. McPherson\*\*\*\*\*

This was my first biography of Jefferson Davis. I have studied and taught about the American Civil War for decades, and read biographies and memoirs of and by some of the other principals in this conflict; I have avoided biographies and memoirs of Southern generals and politicians that smacked of nostalgic yearning for that Lost Cause. I would swear some of them would cheerfully go back to the enslavement of people of color given half a chance, the way they carry on. In any case, when I found this gem recently released by one of my favorite historians, I knew I had to read it. Sadly, I didn't get the ARC when I requested it; hey, it happens! But my spouse popped through the door with a copy of it and I was in business at last. It was well worth his time and effort. James M. McPherson won the Pulitzer for Battle Cry of Freedom, the best single volume treatment of the Civil War I have read. He didn't disappoint this time either.

If you read this biography, don't skip the introduction. All of the details that follow are succinctly outlined in interesting and readable form; in fact, I read it before I read the book, and then I read it again afterward.

The book is punctuated by photographs of commanding generals in excellent resolution when read on an e-reader. I was also pleased to see that the maps could be zoomed to where I could generally tell what was on them when I held the e-reader near the light. This is a huge improvement over early history texts produced digitally. I used to suggest to those reading military history that they spring for a paper copy so that they could read these, which are often key to understanding what is being said. If you buy this one digitally, it will serve just fine.

The thing I was most curious about was whether it was true that Davis was insane by the time the war ended, and that the proceedings were mostly left to Robert E. Lee. Whereas Lee made his own decision to surrender to Grant, Davis, though undoubtedly in denial and out of touch with the reality of Northern conquest, was not insane nor near death, as the terrible textbook I was assigned to use with my teenagers had it. Happily, I noted that the sections on the Civil War had a number of other incorrect entries, and so I greatly limited my use of that book. Now I am really glad I did. Davis didn't want the presidential nod, but he got it and took it; in fact, he died many years later, entirely unrepentant. McPherson believes he was a strong politician who did a creditable job with a damnable task; Lincoln was a better president, but the Confederacy did not lose the war because of Davis's failures. It was going to lose anyway.

Prior to reading this biography, I had believed that the south held on for as long as it did because its military leaders were stronger than those of the Union. This actually isn't saying much about Confederate leadership. McClellan cost both sides a lot of years and bloodshed that didn't have to happen. It isn't so much that the South had amazing generals; it was more that the Union had nobody who was dedicated and proven. In fact, says McPherson, the Confederate military was practically tearing itself apart through gossip, infighting, and rivalry. Jefferson probably was guilty of promoting his friends beyond their level of competency; yet the cabals and gamesmanship practiced by those assigned to answer to General Bragg were at best a morale-draining waste of time, and at worst may have cost the Confederacy some battles. And the now-venerated Robert E. Lee was castigated in the Southern press for the number of dead Confederate soldiers who didn't walk away from his battles. He was dubbed "the king of spades" for the graves that had been dug.

One Confederate general I had wondered about was John Bell Hood. My impression of him, I admit, was that he was a bad-ass general. He never seemed afraid to attack, even with one leg and one arm gone. Who does that? But this is one more hole in my scholarship that McPherson quickly rectified. Hood would fight unwinnable battles. He destroyed an army during the last-ditch effort to save the Confederacy, losing a full fifty percent of the tens of thousands of men he led, and most of the rest of them soon thereafter. The "reserves" consisted of old men; children too young to sign up initially; and those proud wealthy souls who had originally paid someone else to fight on their behalf. (I can imagine how well the latter took orders!)

I was familiar with a lot of the primary information provided here and was therefore free to focus on, and enjoy, the details. One new bit of amusing minutiae was that Southern women saved "the contents of chamber pots to be leached for nitrate to produce gunpowder". Those of you more familiar with chemistry will know whether they were lined up with their number one or number two. For me, it was a stitch to envision all those fine ladies dressed up in their hoops and bonnets standing in the potty-donation line!

I was particularly interested in what McPherson had to say about guerilla warfare. Lincoln was intent upon making it as easy as possible for the Confederate states to rejoin the Union. Some of us, had we been present, would have made a strong case for executing Davis and some other leaders—particularly those in South Carolina who started the whole mess—for treason. And some who were in Washington DC at the time made that case, too; but the decision was for quick, peaceful reunion. One reason for this was the concern that rebels made bitter by the price of losing the war might take to the hills and wreck endless havoc upon the offices of government and the economy long after the war had officially ended. But guerilla actions during the period when the Confederate government was in place and holding out for official recognition would have been unwise. Says McPherson:

"Guerilla actions as the main strategy are most appropriate for a rebel force trying to capture the institutions of government, not defend them. And a slave society that practices guerilla warfare is playing with fire, for it opens up opportunities for the slaves to carry out their own guerilla actions against the regime."

But what of Beauregard? What about General Johnston and General Johnston? (Of course, there were two.) Bedford Forrest? What was the deal with Kentucky? Ah, there's so much more to discuss.

I write really long reviews. If you are still with me by the end of this one, your interest is sufficient to go out and get this wonderful book. I don't recommend it for those unfamiliar with the Civil War; for that, you ought to read *Battle Cry of Freedom* first. But once the basics are in your tool kit, you will find this biography accessible, interesting, and rewarding. Go for it!

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## Patrick Macke says

mcpherson is solid and with his very tight focus - strictly davis as CinC - he revealed some interesting points ... i appreciated that he never backtracks to facts and stories covered in so many places elsewhere, and what stood out to me among his insights were that: davis was a control freak dedicating time to minutia that could have been better utilized elsewhere, that while union officers are most often slammed as plodding, indecisive and cautious, many rebel leaders in the field hurt their cause in much the same way, that davis was fearless and many times road into harm's way - into battles - as president, and that davis, perhaps ultra committed, perhaps delusional, seemed to truly believe the south would win the war and be allowed to pursue its own national pursuits - well beyond the point where the opposite was clearly reality

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## Sam says

James McPherson is an excellent historian and writer. I have enjoyed his other books, most notably "Battle Cry for Freedom", likely the greatest single one volume history of the Civil War. When I saw him on Charlie Rose promoting his new book about Jefferson Davis, someone about whom I knew too little, but wanted to know more since he served a fascinating role in history as leader of the Confederacy, I immediately purchased this book.

I wish I still had the receipt so I could return it. Don't buy it. Don't even waste time reading it if you can borrow a copy for free from the library or a friend. Harsh, but fair.

First off, this book isn't really even a book. It's 252 pages minus 39 pages for maps and illustrations. Each of the eight chapter breaks is two pages long. It's a long essay.

Second, it's not that informative. It's basically just a recap of some Civil War battles and what Davis was doing or thinking during that time.

Third, it's a boring Civil War recap at that.

Overall, a major disappointment. Save your time and money.

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## Aaron Gutman says

"Embattled Rebel" comes in at a little over three hundred pages, minus over 80 pages of notes and photographs it is basically an extended essay. I had high hopes for this book after reading "Battle Cry of Freedom" but it is so thin both in pages and analysis that it is little more than a survey history of the Civil War. In his introduction, McPherson says he will judge Davis's performance as Commander in Chief on five criteria: "Policy", "national strategy", "military strategy", "operations", "tactics". These five criteria are superficially examined by McPherson with almost no in-depth analysis or original conclusions. I recommend this book if you want a fast, readable survey history of the Civil War from the Confederate perspective. If you are looking for a more in-depth analysis of Davis and the Confederate war effort you should look elsewhere. A better title for "Embattled Rebel" would be: "A (Very) Brief History of the Confederacy."

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## John Daly says

With the thousands of books out there about Lincoln there are few about his counterpart Jefferson Davis. In comes James McPherson's latest book *Embattled Rebel*. McPherson who's *Battle Cry of Freedom* is a staple for students of Civil War history especially contained in a single volume.

This is a quick read I started it Saturday night and finished it Monday afternoon. It also just jumps into its point which is an examination of Davis' leadership and the execution of his role as Commander and Chief. There is no backstory and McPherson works off the assumption that if you are reading this book you are familiar with the major players in the Civil War and does not waste the readers time explaining them.

McPherson does not compare and contrast Davis to Lincoln stating at the beginning of the book that he has too much bias towards Lincoln and wanted to provide the reader an un-obstructive view of the President of the Confederacy.

Davis will always suffer from a what-if examination and second guessing simply because his side lost the war. Could the CSA have done better who knows. But this book does bring some perspective into how Davis conducted the war from his side.

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## Steven Walle says

This book was a very fair account of the charictor of Jefferson Davis.

McPherson does not succome to the temptation to compare the man with Lincoln but let's his charictor stand on its' own.

The author goes into detail on Davis's charictor, his micro management style of leadership as well as his pleague of illnesses including Cornial ulsers which caused him debilitating headaches, bad stomach troubles as well as a bout with Malairia.

I recommend this to any historian who would like a fair and unjudgmental rendition of Jefferson Davis's life. Enjoy and Be Blessed.

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## Jill says

This book is in many ways a “mirror image” of McPherson’s book on Lincoln as Commander in Chief of the Union Army (*Tried by War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander-in-Chief*).

As with the book on Lincoln, McPherson organizes the book around five functions performed or overseen by Davis in his capacity as Commander-in-Chief: the formulation of policy, national strategy, military strategy, operations, and tactics.

McPherson calls Davis’s operational preference an “offensive-defensive” strategy, which the author defines as an effort “to seize opportunities to take the offensive and force the enemy to sue for peace.” Of Davis’s



generals, only Stonewall Jackson (who died early on however, from complications of friendly fire) and Robert E. Lee had much interest in the “offensive” part of the equation. Joseph E. Johnston had an attitude matching George McClellan’s in the North; neither of those generals seemed interested in fighting, much less defending. [As an interesting aside not included in the book, after the war, Johnston became friends with both Grant and Sherman. He served as a pallbearer for Grant’s funeral, and also served, in very inclement weather, as a pallbearer for Sherman’s funeral, dying of pneumonia he subsequently contracted. One might say that in a way, Sherman finally killed Johnston.]

Davis was much more involved than Lincoln in the minutia of planning battles. He had graduated from West Point, and actually would have preferred to be out in the field. But Lincoln’s efforts at self-education had made Lincoln into a brilliant strategist, in spite of his lack of formal education or battle experience to match that of Davis. Nevertheless, knowledge and insight helped neither Commander in Chief. Just as Lincoln experienced, Davis’s suggestions, requests, and even direct orders were often ignored. Also like Lincoln, Davis was constrained from replacing these recalcitrant generals by political pressures and/or the lack of suitable replacements.

Unlike Lincoln, Davis rarely employed tact in dealing with commanders he didn’t like, and as a result, many of them ended up loathing him. In addition, Davis had a personality that was described as - to take one example of a detractor’s evaluation - “conceited, hypocritical, sniveling, canting, malicious, ambitious...” Others similarly excoriated him for being haughty, disagreeable, peevish and egotistical. McPherson largely dismisses these assessments of Davis, pointing out his many painful medical conditions, which may have explained Davis’s behavior, but certainly doesn’t render it null.

My primary objection to this book is that McPherson makes it sound as if the main criterion differentiating Lincoln and Davis is the fact that Lincoln commanded a winning army, and Davis did not. I have to say that this tone sort of gave me the creeps.

Davis was absolutely and irrationally rabid about the “fact” (as he saw it) that whites were meant to rule, and that “property” was meant to serve. Lincoln was a corrupt abomination in Davis’s view for wanting to free the slaves, thereby making “slaves” of white Southerners. (If this sounds totally psychotic, there are many quotes by Davis in this slim volume that sound as if he is certifiably insane.) Did this impact Davis’s decisions as a leader? I contend that it did, and should have been addressed.

Take, for example, how Davis insisted that keeping the right to slavery intact was worth fighting for, even if every single home and city were destroyed by fire. Or consider the 1862 passage of the so-called Twenty Negro Law, according to which one able-bodied white male could be exempted from the draft for every twenty slaves on a plantation. This law, which benefitted the small rich white planter minority and alienated the more numerous white men who had no recourse but to fight and send their sons to die, was passed out of necessity *to protect slavery*. If the whites were all off to fight and no one was left at home but weak old men, women, and children, it was hard to maintain control. Slaves began to run away to the Union lines and/or put up more resistance to the authority of those left on the plantations. Yet manpower was desperately needed, and the additional spur to desert among those not offered exemptions was crippling. In this way, Davis’s priorities parallel those of Hitler, who allowed his deranged obsessions to guide his policies and strategies repeatedly, such as the way he took away much-needed trains from his army so that he could push through the transport of Jews to extermination camps.

McPherson also makes very little of the fact that many of the policies inspiring Davis’s rants against Lincoln were policies adopted by Davis as the war progressed. (To McPherson, this was just part of the natural evolution of war. Perhaps it is, but it doesn’t gainsay the hypocrisy and irrationality of Davis, whose venom

towards Lincoln only increased as he found he needed to take similar measures.) Davis even, near the war's end, advocated arming slaves. (When Lincoln began recruiting former slaves into the army, Davis declared it to be "the most execrable measure recorded in the history of guilty man...") In Davis's first message to his congress, he derided the North for their continuing efforts to impair the security of property in slaves and "thus rendering the property in slaves so insecure as to be comparatively worthless, and thereby annihilating in effect property worth thousands of millions of dollars."

If one accesses this speech of Davis's online, one can read how he further demonstrates his divorce from reality as he continues:

"In the meantime, under the mild and genial climate of the Southern States and the increasing care and attention for the well-being and comfort of the laboring class, dictated alike by interest and humanity, the African slaves had augmented in number from about 600,000, at the date of the adoption of the constitutional compact, to upward of 4,000,000. In moral and social condition they had been elevated from brutal savages into docile, intelligent, and civilized agricultural laborers, and supplied not only with bodily comforts but with careful religious instruction. Under the supervision of a superior race their labor had been so directed as not only to allow a gradual and marked amelioration of their own condition...."

Needless to say, in Davis's world, there was no violence involved in keeping slaves "docile." He makes no mention of how much difficulty the plantation owners had experienced keeping the slaves in place once the war started, which would hardly have been necessarily if what he said were true, or even *how* it turned out that the numbers of slave were so augmented without any more slave trade. This process must have been part of the "bodily comforts" to which he alludes....

As for the desperate consideration in 1865 of arming slaves, the mentality espoused by Davis led one editor in Alabama to opine that "We can make them fight better than the Yankees are able to do. Masters and overseers can marshal them for battle by the same authority and habit of obedience with which they are marshaled to labor."

McPherson reports these ravings, but doesn't comment on them. As he noted in his Introduction, "I have sought to transcend my convictions and to understand [Jefferson Davis] as a product of his time and circumstances." But there were plenty of people, even in the same time and circumstances, who did not suffer from the same delusions as did Davis. McPherson also offers no analysis of how a large portion of the South could be consumed by mass psychosis and monstrous barbarism toward people they shackled, raped, beat, and abused, and whose children, who were often the product of these rapes, were then also used as slaves. I believe such a study would have been much more useful as a historical look at what drove Jefferson Davis and those who supported him, and would have furthermore illuminated the reasoning behind some of Davis's decisions.

McPherson credits Davis with inspiring Confederate persistence, but at the same time allows that as the war went on, there was growing disaffection with the job Davis was doing. Again, McPherson totally ignores the fact that the doggedness of the Rebels may have been due more to their own hard-core racism and desire to keep slavery in place (free labor and free sex being difficult to part with for many).

Finally, McPherson touches only briefly on Davis's involvement with efforts of Confederates hiding in Canada to destabilize the Lincoln government. He does not mention at all the allegations that Davis approved plans to assassinate Lincoln. Given Davis's involvement in every little aspect of the Confederate struggle, it would be surprising had he not in some way at least have been aware of these efforts.

In any event, it is probable that none of Davis's strategies - no matter how good or ill-advised - could survive the combination of the Grant/Sherman juggernaut and the crippling lack of infrastructure and resources (including quite importantly, food) that plagued the South.

**Evaluation:** This examination of how Jefferson Davis fulfilled his role as a wartime Commander-in-Chief seems to be missing context. Jefferson Davis was not only the commander of a force opposing that of the loyal states in the Union. He was also a rabid racist, whose rantings are reminiscent of Hitler's in their insanely savage and malignant insistence that some human beings are not humans at all, and that if maintaining that demented delusion meant the destruction of all the land and homes of the South, it was worth it to him, just as Hitler was willing to let his own people die to uphold his similarly insane vision.

I do not agree with McPherson that the main sticking point in comparing what Davis did to what Lincoln did was the fact that Lincoln won and the South did not, and I deplore McPherson's decision to structure his analysis in this way. No one would claim that the main difference between Franklin Roosevelt and Hitler was that Roosevelt won and Hitler lost. To explain away Davis's psychosis as being just a "product of his time and circumstances" is to deny the very essence of what drove Davis, and why he made the decisions he did. It is also a shocking moral lapse.

Shortly after this book was published, we went to a book talk featuring McPherson. I asked him how he would rate Davis as a president. He seemed rather annoyed or at least defensive on Davis's behalf, pointing out that Lincoln would inevitably rate higher just because he was on the winning side. I don't agree at all. Lincoln would rate higher even if he lost.

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## Socraticgadfly says

Disappointingly thin.

Like many other 1- and 2- star reviewers, I was very disappointed when actually looking at the book, versus the advance hype. It's barely paperback novel length, stretched to book size by using at least 16-point font on 20-point leading, wide margins, large-sized mugshot photos of generals, and more. But, there's little actual analysis, and nothing new in the analysis that's there.

For example, McPherson could have engaged in some alt-history type analysis in the Western theater. Whether Longstreet was angling to replace Bragg after Chickamauga, or after Missionary Ridge, or not, should Davis have considered him? Or when he nominated Hardee and Hardee said no, should Davis have told him, "Eventually I'll promote somebody (like Hood) over your head."

And, in the East, especially post-Gettysburg, how much did Davis talk with Lee about the big picture vs. Virginia?

More than McPherson tells us, surely.

Like one reviewer notes, I expected more in part of the name "McPherson," and didn't get it. He seems to have "coasted" on some mix of his reputation and churning out one more volume for the Civil War sesquicentennial.

I first gave this a two-star, then moved it down a notch.

That's in part because I think some people are upvoting it based in part on McPherson's reputation, and in part because someone like McPherson knows better. From a newly-minuted Ph.D., this might almost get three stars; from someone who's taught a few years but, for whom this is his or her first Civil War book exercise, a slightly charitable two stars.

But, I refuse to let McPherson coast on his reputation.

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### **Kusaimamekirai says**

This is a short but interesting look at the four year tenure of Jefferson Davis as the president of the Confederate States of America. What jumps off the page immediately is that Davis is quite unlikeable. Let me rephrase that. He is petty, vindictive, short tempered, a micro manager, "ambitious as lucifer", cold...and yeah. Not a particularly good guy.

In fairness to McPherson, he doesn't explicitly make these conclusions and even argues that to a point, Davis was placed in an impossible situation where he had few resources or troops to fight a war or defend a vast territorial coastline. What resources he did have were often demanded by member states to protect their own borders rather than the collective. This is the story of the Civil War as well as Davis's presidency. You can't fight a war under the banner of states rights and then refuse to acknowledge those rights.

But back to Davis being a bad human being for a moment. There are some who seek through historical revision to rehabilitate Davis (who unlike Robert E. Lee who was loved by the South at least has undergone a similar revision) yet anyone who truly looks at Davis's body of work would find this difficult. As McPherson writes, it's highly unlikely the South could've have won under any commander yet Davis didn't help his cause at times. From showing favoritism to his often inept but preferred generals to trying to micro manage battles better left to his more competent generals, Davis made more than his share of mistakes that can be attributed to matters of an oversized ego and pride.

For me however, it was Davis's order in regard to 6 black Union soldiers that really shows who we are dealing with here:

*"They cannot be recognized in any way as soldiers subject to the rules of war and to trial by military courts. Summary execution must therefore be inflicted on those taken"*

I can find many admirable things in otherwise unlikable people. Andrew Jackson for all his faults was a staunch supporter of the Union. Robert E. Lee was by all accounts a gentleman and a generally humane person despite some other serious flaws. Davis was vindictive, racist, and a murderer.

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### **Shelley says**

This is a popular biography of Jefferson Davis during the war years, and it's an odd little book. It's not exhaustive, it's more military than biography, and it's not a full picture of Davis during these years--to my disappointment, because my great-great-great grandfather (27th Mass Infantry, Company F) was his orderly after he was captured. If you thought Lincoln had trouble with his generals, I think Davis had it much worse. Davis made an interesting leader during the war, given his extensive military experience and sickbed command. Would things have been better if he'd relied on other generals? It's an open question.

The author felt compelled to put a bit in about his personal beliefs: this short biography is, in some ways, an

apologia for Davis. (He's clearly on the Union side.) I think we're all pretty clear on this one. Davis's views on slavery are reprehensible now, and they were for my Yankee family in 1861. Does he deserve the blame for the defeat of the confederacy? I came away from this amazed that--given McClellan's repeated screwups--the Confederacy lasted as long as it did. Davis put generals in play who didn't deserve to be there, out of personal and political loyalty--but he had to deal with the the politics of the confederate states, limited manpower and materiel. The author adds a lot of nuance to this part of the story.

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## **Louise says**

This is a short overview by a top (or may be THE top) Civil War scholar. Civil War buffs will know most of the content and be dissatisfied. Those knowing nothing about the Confederate Army would and should start elsewhere. Those like me, who know about most generals, some battles and a bit of strategy will find a short book like this comfortable.

The South could hardly have won this war, and Davis should have known it. In the end, when there was clearly no winning path, he became even more delusional. He was deeply committed to the war working day and night, micromanaging, giving speeches, visiting encampments, telegraphing and delivering orders, consulting with his cabinet/generals and changing Secretary's of War. What could have he done differently?

One of the biggest problems was being outmanned 2:1 (or more). The Confederate Congress only reluctantly passed a conscription bill, and at that a restrictive one. The resulting army had to defend a huge border and given that the war was about "state's rights" governors were reluctant to have their troops defend anything but their own state. Procurement of any manufactured goods from weapons to shoes was difficult in this agrarian region. Later with drought and economic collapse procurement of food and horses also became problems. Were these problems even solvable?

McPherson takes you through a raft of personnel problems facing Davis. While he may have had to make some political appointments, his discretionary appointments may not have been the best. Some generals clamored in the press for more troops putting Davis in a tough position since there were no troops to send and one piece of strategy was to bluff on the Army's size. Davis was undermined by the popularity of some of his generals, one being Joseph E. Johnston, who, had he followed the chain of command, might have stopped Sherman at the start of his march to the sea.

You get the feeling that Davis has little insight into people. He is often sick, buried in details and may not see the forest for the trees.

This appears be have been an essay or a lecture that the author and/or publisher decided to print and stretched to 250 pages with photos maps and blank page chapter introductions. This is OK with me, since it was just the right size to give me some understanding Davis, his relationships with his generals, how he attempted to implement his strategy and his overall management of the war.

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## **Praxedes says**

Most of my knowledge about the US Civil War has come from the winning party, the North. I am quite familiar with Lincoln's life during this confrontation, but never really saw things from the other side.

This book explores the leadership style of Jefferson Davis, Lincoln's opposing president in the South, at this time of strife. It chronicles Davis' wartime decisions and the unceasing challenges to his term in office. It was interesting, but hardly delved into the inner workings of Davis' mind. It mostly recounts battles, memos, and the struggle to keep everyone on board.

The book is not bad; I wish there was more of Davis' introspection and personal life included in it.

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## **Sarah Bierle says**

An easy to read history book about Jefferson Davis's role as commander in chief of the Confederacy. Very straightforward text, quite objective, and minimal interpretation from the author.

I particularly thought it was interesting that Mr. McPherson was very honest in his introduction about his views of Davis while also explaining his desire to examine Davis's commander in chief role as a counterbalance to Lincoln's.

The book is good overview of Davis's military wartime influence. I did not realize the extent of his "advice" to his generals - particularly in the Western Theater. Very little examination of the political and social conflicts President Davis faced, but the goal of the book was military focused...so it did stay on target which was nice.

For a fast-paced overview of Davis's military goals, trials, failures, and successes, this is the book to read.

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## **victor harris says**

As always, a quality effort by McPherson. Davis was and is one of the most misunderstood figures in the Civil War and always suffers in comparison to Lincoln; as anyone would. This is a somewhat more charitable view of the Confederate president as it addresses the overwhelming tasks he faced in dealing with the daunting administrative problems confronting the Confederacy and the personality conflicts among politicians and generals. McPherson also quite properly notes that Davis made matters worse by being a micro-manager with a very thin skin who easily took affront to minor slights. He also suffered from chronic health problems that affected his already difficult disposition.

Must-read for Civil War aficionados.

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## **Jerome says**

Although the premise sounds interesting, this is basically just another general military history of the war, albeit a well-written one. It's something MacPherson obviously does well, especially in relating everything

to the big picture, but there isn't anything new or original here. His treatment of Davis though, is actually pretty evenhanded, although it largely reinforces the image of Davis as an arrogant, prickly, thin-skinned, argumentative micro-manager quick to take offense to perceived slights.

MacPherson is a great writer, but the book is somewhat dry, short on analysis and, again, there isn't anything new here. Upon completing the book, a cynic will call it a ploy by MacPherson to cash in on his well-deserved reputation. The book is also surprisingly short (the type and line spacing are pretty generous). Oddly, MacPherson doesn't dwell much on the internal politics of the Confederate war (although he does dive into army politics), the role of slavery, or the role of Confederate governors or legislators.

Basically, Davis was an emotionally sensitive man overly concerned with maintaining his reputation and winning minor arguments with his rivals (unfortunate since so many southerners considered Davis pathetic and contemptible anyway). At the same time, he was unwilling to delegate authority and often he engaged in passive-aggressive feuds with his generals, who were more than eager to reply in kind. He could be remarkably patient with incompetents, but never kind. Still, MacPherson suggests that a different commander-in-chief could not have done a better or worse job; the ill-defined Confederate "offensive-defensive" strategy would probably have been adopted by any other leader due to political considerations. MacPherson suggests that the Confederate war effort was almost singlehandedly sustained by Davis after their hopes for victory were dashed.

The book feels pretty padded, given the short length, large font, wide margins, blank pages between chapters, and large photos. Also, a better editor is in order: one of the maps claims that First Bull Run took place on July 31, 1869. A pretty fast and probably not essential read. It's not bad given who the author is, but it's definitely not top-drawer material. Still, a clear, efficient, and engaging read.

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## **Jean says**

Civil War scholar and Pulitzer winning ("Battle Cry of Freedom" 1988) author James M McPherson has taken a fresh look at a subject with whom he is eminently familiar: the life and times of Confederate President Jefferson Davis. With open minds in short supply these days the author takes a big risk in challenging past postulations. Many still consider Davis a traitor.

McPherson has methodically, without emotions written this short book. It is obvious he has conducted an enormous amount of research in preparation to write this story of Davis. This is not a biography in the traditional since as details of Davis's life before Secession and his fate during Reconstruction are not covered.

McPherson claims Davis was not an inept leader as many historians have claimed. Davis was a graduate of West Point and had served in the Mexican War. The author states that the south also had problems with its Generals. He compared the tentative George B. McClellan to the backpedaling Joseph E. Johnston. While he documents that Davis made his share of mistakes and was an impolitic politician, McPherson concludes that Davis devised a credible strategy for fight the war. The South's material and manpower handicaps are well known, but McPherson list other obstacles such as the Southerners were anything but united. The "States Rights" mantra often inhibited coordinated military tactics. The author covers the 1862 threat by Arkansas to secede from the Confederacy and in 1863 North Carolina's leaders favored negotiations. On top of this Rebel soldiers deserted in droves.

McPherson's overall evaluation of Davis is fair-minded. He criticizes Davis but also points out some

favorable points. The book's worth a read particularly for those interested in the Civil war. I read this as an audio book downloaded from Audible. Robert Fass did a good job narrating the book.

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### **Nancy Ellis says**

James McPherson is one of the absolute best ever Civil War historians/authors! This book gives him the opportunity to go into minute detail about Davis as President of the Confederacy, much more so than a total biography or history of the war would provide. He begins by stating that history has not been kind to Davis. That's an understatement. However, it is also not as widely recognized that Davis had as much trouble with his politicians and his generals as Lincoln did. I had no idea Joseph Johnston was such a thorn in his side, as McClellan was to Lincoln, and I laughed at the quote by historian Richard McMurry that if Johnston had remained in command, the final battle to save Atlanta would have been fought in Key West! Davis gave new meaning to the term micro-management, or perhaps he invented it. He certainly was an interesting man, if a difficult one, and unfailingly dedicated to his cause. An excellent book, it is a must-read for all those interested in gaining an understanding to the Civil War.

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### **Jason Koivu says**

Wow, that was incredibly adequate! If you don't want to be overly impressed with a historical work on the American Civil War, *Embattled Rebel* is where it's at!

Who wants deep insights, anyhow? I'd rather hear a broad recap of the entire war with the occasional tenuous link to Jefferson Davis' role as President of the Confederate States of America. Sure, James McPherson might've dug deeper to given the reader a more meaningful account of Davis. We might've learned more about the man's motivations. However, McPherson stuck to his guns and kept his subject at a distance. Bravo!

Yes, yes, this was a rather thorough retelling of the Civil War from the South's perspective and I definitely have a better understanding of their strategy as well as Davis' reasoning for the moves he made, but let's be honest, I didn't know jack shit about the South's side of the story prior to reading this book, so anything would've been more than nearly nothing. This was more than nothing.

Very serviceable writing here, as well. I don't recall the last time I read the placing of one word after another in such good order without them venturing into lyrical territory at least once in a while. McPherson laid it out pure and simple. No frills here folks! So few in fact, he might've been writing about the ancient Spartans.

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