

Game Cock of the South

Jefferson Davis Gets His Citizenship Back, by Robert Penn Warren, *Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1980. 114 pp. \$8.75.*

DURING THE PAST four years students of Southern history have been offered three studies of Jefferson Davis, soldier, planter, senator, Secretary of War, and President of the Southern Confederacy.¹ Although these studies vary widely in quality, they are unanimous in their conclusion that ol' Jeff Davis was, in quite fundamental ways, a remarkable man. And, by implication, they pass favorable judgment upon the society that produced him. What are we seeing here?

The latest, and by far the most complex, is Robert Penn Warren's meditation upon the ill-starred Davis and his fate at the hands of both scholars and the great

American public. This short essay is quite personal and subjective in a way not to be found in Cass Canfield's fragment or Clement Eaton's thorough and scholarly biography. Warren's maternal grandfather had been a Confederate soldier (and no great admirer of Davis). Sitting under a cedar tree in his yard the old man helped Warren locate himself in time and place by talking about the war and the men from our "immoderate past" who dominated the Confederate nation. The place was Guthrie, Todd County, Kentucky, about twenty miles south of Fairview, Jefferson Davis' birthplace. Warren grew up in Guthrie, vaguely aware that someone of renown had been born close by, but also aware that the local Jeff Davis was a dirty, shiftless specimen of poor white trash. Nor did the unfinished monument erected to Davis at Fairview satisfy the young Warren's curiosity. It evoked complex feelings of "pain, vision, valor, human weakness, and error of the past..." but it did not tell him what kind of man Jefferson Davis was. The wonder persisted, and the consequence is this essay.

Honor was Jefferson Davis' "guiding star." This idea dominated his life and directed his every action as a man; of course it also brought him low. He was a gentleman, a slaveholder (of the worst sort—he was humane and just), a planter, and a Christian stoic. Such a combination of qualities, if successfully integrated, might well foster arrogance and intransigence—the two attributes most often noted by Davis' critics. It may also yield magnanimity, fortitude, a sense of justice, a high sense of duty, and great civility—traits equally prominent in the President's character and, incidentally, excellences that are lauded by Aristotle in his description of the great-souled man.

We are, Warren emphasizes, dealing with a character (and a society) that was profoundly and fatally out of touch with the modern world, and thus committed suicide. Lincoln, Grant, and Sherman, on the other hand, were "modern" men who understood that wars are not won by chivalric gestures but by campaigns of

calculated attrition, the bombardment and pillage of civilians, and the suspension of all constitutional guarantees. Davis could not comprehend such thinking. He did not, like Lincoln, "steer from point to point" but settled upon principles and then held to them tenaciously. Significantly, he was called the "Game Cock of the South," with all that that epithet implies concerning will, discipline, and honor.

Davis was also caught up in the double paradox that conservatives cannot often manage revolutions successfully, although our own War for Independence was in most respects a conservative affair. Thus the Founding Fathers presented a seductive but dangerous example for the Confederate leadership, some of whom were truly men of the eighteenth century.

After Appomattox Davis was imprisoned and there was talk of trying him for treason. President Johnson and Secretary of War Stanton also inspired efforts to humiliate him, including manacling and constant observation. It should come as no surprise that it required four men to hold this fifty-six-year-old man while the chains were being riveted upon his limbs. Many of his former enemies now rallied to his cause, however, and he was released after two years at Fort Monroe. Although by no means a popular man during the war, Davis was now hailed (quite appropriately) as a symbol of Confederate honor, and he received gracious attention wherever he went. His last years were comparatively peaceful and he died in November, 1889, having never regained the civil rights taken from him in 1865.

These rights were finally restored in 1978, thanks to the efforts of Senator Mark Hatfield of Oregon. Would Davis have gratefully accepted the restoration of citizenship? Warren thinks not. Davis never sought a pardon (which would have preceded restoration) because he never thought he had done anything wrong. Why, then, was a pardon necessary?

The society that Davis and his kind created and defended is gone forever. Warren writes in excruciating detail of the unsuccessful efforts of Kentuckians (and,

by extension, other Americans) to come to terms with a character, and a world, so very remote from their own. Gentlemen, though still extant, are not often met with; instead the guffaw of the good ol' boy is heard throughout the land. The idea that one possesses a "sacred honor" to be risked in behalf of feminine virtue or in national defense is considered wildly eccentric. Heroism is *passé*.

Poised as he is on the boundary between two worlds—the world of his childhood reaching vicariously back to the War for Southern Independence and the world of 1981 lurching toward God knows what, Warren's pain and wonder are our own. Disillusioned with the secular manias of the day, often out of habit with our faith, we turn to the American past for intimations of intelligence concerning who and what we are, and what we may be.

Warren's tragic vision sets him at sharp variance with modern historians, many of whom find his classical approach both in-

comprehensible and uncomfortable. Yet such a vision may be the rediscovery of wisdom for our generation. An acute sense of man's limitations coupled with admiration for his power to endure with fortitude the bitter dregs at the bottom of the cup ought to fix our attention and excite our admiration. Honor and heroism may not be enough, but it is all we have got. Warren's examination of the Southern past has been the most intense and successful of any living American novelist. In part, his historical awareness is unique because he was born a rural Southerner into a conservative society only moments before it was destroyed by World War I and the Model T. Just in the nick of time, and how fortunate for us all.

Reviewed by J. W. COOKE

¹The other two are Clement Eaton, *Jefferson Davis* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), and Cass Canfield, *The Iron Will of Jefferson Davis* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Jovanovich, 1978).