



Look Away!: A History of the Confederate States of America

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William C. Davis, one of America's best Civil War historians, here offers a definitive portrait of the Confederacy unlike any that has come before. Drawing on decades of writing and research among an unprecedented number of archives, "Look Away!" tells the story of the Confederate States of America not simply as a military saga (although it is that), but rather as a full portrait of a society and incipient nation. The first history of the Confederacy in decades, the culmination of a great scholar's career, "Look Away!" combines politics, economics, and social history to set a new standard for its subject. Previous histories have focused on familiar commanders such as Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson, but Davis's canvas is much broader. From firebrand politicians like Robert Barnwell Rhett and William L. Yancey, who pushed for secession long before the public supported it; to Dr. Samuel Cartwright, who persuaded many Southerners of the natural inferiority of their slaves; to the women of Richmond, who rioted over bread shortages in 1863, Davis presents a rich new face of the Confederate nation. He recounts familiar stories of battles won and lost, but also little-known economic stories of a desperate government that socialized the salt industry, home-front stories of the rangers and marauders who preyed on their fellow Confederates, and an account of the steady breakdown of law, culminating in near anarchy in some states. Never has the Confederacy been so vividly brought to life as a full society, riven with political and economic conflicts beneath its more loudly publicized military battles.

Davis's astonishingly thorough primary research has ranged across the 800-odd newspapers that were in operation during the war, but also across the personal papers of over a hundred Southern leaders and ordinary citizens. He quotes from letters and diaries throughout the narrative, revealing the Confederacy through the words of the Confederates themselves. Like any society, especially in the early stages of nation-building and the devastating stages of warfare, the Confederacy was not one thing but many things to many people. One thing, however, was shared by all: the belief that the South offered a necessary evolution of American democracy. "Look Away!" offers a dramatic and definitive account of one of America's most searing episodes.

Look Away!: A History of the Confederate States of America Details

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Kalerney says

After collecting dust for more than a year on my shelf, I decided it was finally time for this book to get my attention. At first, It looked quite promising. After reading dozens of books dealing only with the military aspect of the Confederacy, *Look Away!* appeared to provide a fresh new point of view giving the opportunity to learn about some aspects of the C.S.A. history often overlooked: the life outside the battlefields, and how to run a rogue nation engaged in a desperate war for its independence.

The first few chapters are indeed extremely interesting, presenting the birth of the new "nation", the strong personalities behind its creation and their unbounded naivety. Although the founding fathers were already deeply divided on many important issues since their very first meeting in Montgomery, removal of political animosity was nothing but their assumed goal. The clash between their struggle for unity and their burning desire to self-promotion is admirably told in a narrative fashion that flows seamlessly. Had the book been as well written until the end, it'd have deserved a solid four stars rating.

As soon as Jefferson Davis and his cabinet move to Richmond, the author switches from the narrative style to the less entertaining, but sometimes as interesting, theme-oriented chapters. However from this point, and until the end, the book is a major let down.

Instead of developing clear subjects, the text is nothing but an accumulation of random (and extremely detailed) topics brought there with no justification whatsoever, and devoid of even the most basic form of chronology. Get ready to jump from 1861, to 62, then to 61 again, then to 65 etc. The text is so bogged down with its own total lack of structure, that the reader is left in a permanent state of confusion. Moreover, you'll read several times the same thing, as the same subject can be heavily detailed in a chapter, then brought back to the reader a second time one hundred pages later. I've counted at least four quotes from letters, or diaries, that are used word for word at least twice in completely different chapters.

Worse, the topic choice is so random, that some minor events or information can be detailed on ten pages, while major elements may sometimes be only briefly mentioned, if not completely absent of the text. The subject of the Unionists desire to "secede from the Confederacy" all around the South is fairly treated, yet not a single word is written about West Virginia, the only attempt of this kind that actually succeeded!

Oddly enough, even though the book doesn't provide any structure at all for the reader, the author fought judicious to write every four chapters or so a brief sum up of the war in a chronological fashion. While these short chapters are quite well written, they feel completely out of place in a book that doesn't respect chronology. What the point of explaining to your reader what happened at Appomatox Courthouse is you have already mentioned the surrender of Lee something like ten times before?

One last point, but not the least, the author (like so many American historian) doesn't seem to be an expert in the field of European history. It can be forgiven, but not when big factual errors impair the quality of the analysis. Napoleon III the nephew of Maximilian of Mexico? It's as close to the truth as to say that Abraham Lincoln was Queen Victoria's brother!

Anyway, the book is far from a total disaster. The beginning is very good, and some chapters are way, way better than others. Especially interesting is the author when he writes about slavery, Unionism in Texas and the giant difference between what the "Secech" wanted, and what actually happened. In fact, no subject

covered in the book is fundamentally uninteresting. The problem lay in the terribly confusing structure of the book and the seriously unbalanced coverage.

But in the end, the book was a disappointment. I recommend it for the academic historian, or the Civil War buff who is already very knowledgeable and craves to learn more about little-covered subject like law practice in the South during the war etc.

2.7/5

Andrew says

Look Away! is William C. Davis' social, and mainly, political history of the Confederate States of America. Davis explores the reasons the Confederacy came about, how its government and constitution were framed (and by whom), and how that government and society worked (and largely failed to work). The author provides short summary chapters as bumpers in between the main ones to cover the course of the war, which does nicely to provide context to the rest of the narrative while still focusing on the civil side of the Confederacy.

Davis is one of the most prolific and prominent current writers of Civil War histories. He's written dozens of books on the Civil War, and antebellum Southern history, and has even had a couple of Pulitzer nominations. The quality and experience of this writing and research really shows through in the depth and readability of this book. Shades of some of Davis' previous works show through, as well. John C. Breckenridge, about whom Davis has previously written a biography, receives maybe a few more mentions in the narrative (granting that he was an important figure, especially in the last couple years of the Confederacy) than he probably would have from other authors.

While Davis clearly admires some of the Confederate subjects he writes about, he is absolutely clear and honest about the Confederacy itself. The author makes quite explicit the fact that the Confederacy was founded to protect and perpetuate slavery. The anti-democratic, oligarchic tendencies of the pre-war South and the Confederacy, and the Confederate governments failure to maintain the democracy it sought to establish also receive thorough, unbiased treatment.

If you're looking for a one volume history of the Confederacy, that covers more than just the battles and campaigns of the Civil War, I can't recommend this book enough. The only reason I can't give it five stars is Davis' not so subtle favoritism of Breckenridge, and also the needless repetition of several quotes throughout the narrative. The author clearly did a lot of research, from a wealth of sources, and it just seems lazy to fall back on these repetitions, instead of quoting other sources to make the same point.

Ken says

This book is a must-read for so many of us who don't really know what the Confederacy was about, or what it stood for. I know many people have a vested interest in making light of slavery, and making excuses for the Confederacy.

I picked up this book figuring that there must be some positive reforms that came out of the Confederacy, but as Davis tells it, the founders were selfish hypocritical rationalizers. The Confederacy really was all about instituting a class of aristocrats to rule over the poor whites and oppressing the blacks. The book is at its best when it deals with race issues, and the incredible lengths Confederates would go to justify their “peculiar institution”. Despite their protests to the contrary, ultimately the South was fighting for principles that were unworkable, untenable, and even immoral, and so their cause was doomed from the start.

SteveDave says

Actual rating 3.5 stars.

I gave it 4 stars because of the depth of research and the attention to detail by the author.

Unlike other history books on the Civil War, this one is far less focused on the war itself, instead examining the political, economic and social history of the Confederacy. It was interesting to see how quickly the values of the Confederacy were lost in the quest to win the war - state rights gave way to a central Confederate government that began to pass laws in direct contrast to the libertarian ideals of the Confederacy's founding fathers. In areas like taxation, the virtual nationalization of some industries, and even the central government's offer to the European nations to emancipate the South's slaves in return for diplomatic recognition of the Confederacy, the very reasons for the Confederacy's secession were ignored by the Confederate government in an attempt to win the Civil War.

At the same time, the demands of war saw the breakdown of law and order, and even the slave system. With most men fighting the war, few remained to maintain law and order or control the slave population. What was remarkable through all this is the ongoing support for Independence by so much of the south's population.

The history was interesting. However, I did feel a problem with this book was its structure. Instead of giving a chronological account of the history, most of the chapter focused on particular themes - the economy, law and order, etc. This was fine in itself, and is probably the best way to approach this type of history. However, this did make it hard to follow the course of events. It also meant that parts of the book felt repetitious; some stories and evidence were repeated across chapters. Similarly, it felt that the author occasionally got bogged down in the minutiae of events, which caused the narrative to become fairly dry in parts. Nonetheless, the story of the rise and fall of the Confederacy was interesting enough to keep my attention and keep me reading.

Luke says

I was a bit disappointed in this book, I bought it expecting a civil and social history of the CSA told in a somewhat chronological manner, i.e as a story. Indeed, the book starts out that way, telling the story of secession and the formation of the provisional government in Mobile, but then just as the move to Richmond is taking place (and getting really interesting to a Virginian), the author changes style and for the rest of the book each chapter covers. The topics and their coverage, which goes into excruciating detail, revolves around the authors central premise that Confederate democracy as born in Mobile and conceived to

maintain the slave-holders oligarchy was nothing more than a farce due to the inability to maintain social order and the need for socialization to maintain the war effort. Virginia, is all but ignored, i suspect because there was too much social order to fit the authors premise, so to say the least i was a little upset. The book is well researched and does present some interesting facts and points, I found the chapter on salt and cotton and spirits nationalization particularly interesting, but overall I am glad to have finished the book finally.

Woodrow says

The didactic nature of the book makes it lose a star, but it's worth reading, to be certain. Works that focus on the cultural and political side, rather than the military side, of the Civil War are too rare on the ground, and too often filled with Lost-Cause-esqe justifications that lack primary sources.

In contrast, this work is so full of such sourcing it risks drowning in them. If you want a work that breaks down the actual concepts behind secession, explains its impact on the people (including African-Americans) of the region, and helps navigate the rise and fall of the Confederate government, this one's for you.

Susan Miller says

I found this book added significantly to my understanding of political and business interests in the south (primarily the slave owning oligarchy) prior to and during the civil war and how these interests led to the destruction of the government and their interests. Many points made in the book shed light on attitudes about race today.

R G says

Generally a good read, but by the end I felt as though each chapter was an essay that had been published elsewhere and then gathered together for this book. Facts and quotes are repeated so many times that I could almost sense them coming. I think this book could have benefited from losing about a hundred pages and just presenting the story chronologically instead of being broken down by subject matter. I'd still recommend Look Away for any serious student of the War Between the States, but not for someone who's just looking for a popular history of the Confederacy.

Jason King says

There aren't too many books I'm aware of that are written specifically from the Confederate POV, so this book is definitely a needed one. And the book underscores some critical elements about the Confederacy that often go underreported: that many of the states in the CSA entered into it with deep reluctance (and pockets in many of those states, especially in the poorest regions, tended to be the most pro-Union), that the Confederacy was populated with poor leaders and poor generals (only Lee, the book offers, was really any good), that the aristocratic oligarchy that made up much of the South was philosophically very much against democratic institutions and laissez-faire governance de facto, and that this oligarchy was as much its own enemy as was the Union.

Almost immediately the Confederacy's inadequacies became noted: Texas became essentially a military dictatorship, the need to turn over so much of the non-slave labor force to the military meant that law and order were always problematic and the economy was plundered with or without Union attacks, being so dependent on cotton for export meant that the South's days were already numbered when exports from Egypt and India in the British Empire inevitably incentivized.

These are all deeply worthy of mention. But the book itself is written in a disorganized, repetitive manner. At times it feels chronological, but the chapters themselves are organized thematically, even if the themes (except at the beginning and end) all bleed together so as to be difficult to tell apart. As a result, the book often repeats itself and one wearies of hearing about how upset the rural South was at the sacrifices it was continuously asked to make - because it's brought up in each new theme, in almost the exact same way.

I definitely learned new information from this book but the signal to noise ratio was too high for me to recommend it.

Rick Edwards says

Most of the historical work one finds on the Civil War period relate to the military and naval conflicts. Davis gives us a revealing look behind the war at the politics of the Confederate States of America. Pick up this book and learn about the different factions within the Confederacy, opposition to Jefferson Davis's presidency, and problems structuring a central government in a "confederation" as against a "union" of states. Discover problems collecting taxes, managing revenues, and dealing with tax resistance, along with the problems presented by armed resistance on the part of Union sympathizers. One problem that led the Confederate government along unexpected pathways was ensuring and managing the salt supply, a basic necessity to the fighting men of the South as well as their families back home. Davis argues that the state so completely "inserted itself into the demand and supply equation, replacing both manufacturer and retailer", as to create a regime of "salt socialism," placing the CSA in the vanguard of state socialism! "Throughout the salt story, the outward forms of traditional American and Southern laissez-faire capitalism draped themselves on a framework that represented something far more radical, something as remote from the intent and aspirations of the secessionist founders as emancipation itself" (p. 292). The ups and downs of Confederate diplomacy also receive attention. Most gripping among the stories told, perhaps, is Davis's account of the last days of the Confederacy -- the flight of the government away from Richmond, the plan of Davis and several other principals to escape into exile, foiled by their generals' decision to sue for peace with dignity. Most of the fleeing leaders wound up in Union captivity.

Caroline says

Most histories of the American Civil War are very heavily skewed towards the Northern point of view, particularly in terms of the behind-the-scenes political machinations and general governance of the war. That makes this book all the more interesting since a lot of the information about the politics and debates and discussions within the South about secession was completely new to me, and it was refreshing to see the alternative point-of-view from the usual Lincoln/Washington/North/abolition standpoint.

One thing Davis is very clear on is his position on the reasons behind the war. It seems to be fashionable these days to downplay the role of slavery in the secession movement; to insist that whilst it may have been

the catalyst, it wasn't the cause; to argue that slavery was simply the most visible of the arguments, but that the real reason was States' Rights. Davis really delves into a lot of the resolutions and conventions and paperwork and makes it clear that slavery was front and centre, so much so that it was hardwired into the new Confederate Constitution and not even the President or the individual States had the authority to abolish it, even if they wished to.

This book also brings to the forefront just how much of a contradiction the Confederacy really was. He argues that the slavery/planting oligarchy was the driving force behind secession and that the entire Confederacy was designed by these very same people to benefit them above all others; it was designed as a democracy that limited the power of the vast majority of the population in favour of a small minority. The war also meant that in its conduct of the war the national government proceeded to trample over many of the rights and privileges that had only just been enshrined in the Constitution, the same rights and privileges that impelled many of the States to leave the Union in the first place!

It's a very well-written book, readable and engaging, and absolutely fascinating to read. I'd never before realised just how contradictory the Confederacy was and how doomed it really was from the start.

Jim Bouchard says

Northerners, you won't truly know the South until you read this book!

The Civil War continues to shape our culture and society even today. To really appreciate your American heritage, you must learn it from various perspectives. America has no single culture, but rather has several amazing legacies. This is a wonderful look at one of them.

Stephen says

While most Civil War histories concentrate on military campaigns, *Look Away!* chronicles the history of the Confederacy from a political and social perspective. Its attempt to ignore military matters is almost futile given that the Confederacy was born in war and perished amid it, as its every institution (civic, social, economic) was ravaged by the war and driven into failure. The story of *Look Away* is one of a doomed nation, riven in contradiction from the start. Examining the feuds between the southern Congress and its president, the implosion of slavery, the breakdown of law and order, the trials of women and economic woes, it looks at the southern nation that lay behind the battlefield. Though I initially avoided reading this on suspicion that it was the work of neo-Confederate ideology (I've seen it sold beside titles like *The South was Right!*), it proved appropriately moderate, neither overtly friendly nor hostile -- not that its presentation of slavery as the driving force of the war pleased the sputtering reviewer who announced that *Gone with the Wind* was a superior text to consult.

Davis begins with the crisis leading to the secession of the southern states, and their gathering together to create a new constitution. The form of their confederate government makes plain slavery's role as a cause of the war; even if one ignores all of the defensive rhetoric from the time, the fact that no Confederate state could ever dispense with slavery within its borders has challenged the "states' rights" crowd who maintain slavery was incidental. The southerners attempted to create a modified version of the US Constitution which emphasized the sovereignty of the individual states, but the stresses of war would undo the dream.

Attempting to forge a nation from scratch in the midst of a war is no easy feat; while the Continental Congress accomplished it, their task was somewhat easier. Their foes was an ocean away, its resources and attention scattered, its means of communication and transport largely the same as in the days of William the Conqueror. The north and south, however, were intimate neighbors with intertwined borders: both could and would field armies in the hundreds of thousands, supported by the best of modern technology -- trains, telegraphs, and a robust factory system. The war would be total from the beginning, as Davis' account bears out.

His examination of the home front demonstrates how widespread military enlistment and conscription led to much of society simply failing apart for want of the men needed to maintain it. Not only were civil servants like postmen, peace officers, and the like taken, but so many men were absent either through enlistment or conscription that the farms were left undermanned and vulnerable not only to slave insurrections but raids from bands of highwaymen and deserters.

Complicating matters from the start was the divided political sentiment of the southrons who, though avowing agrarian democracy and political liberty, were led by a plantation elite jealous of their own power and dependent on slavery. The Confederacy was an oligarchy in the form of a democracy, Davis writes, and as the war continued the form of democracy wore off. Civil order collapsed, leaving parts of the south running on martial law, naked power, and the government proved no less dangerous to struggling farmers than raids as it began seizing crops as quickly as they could be grown. Not only was the army of little use in countering the violence of highwaymen, beset on all sides by the Union force, but the state it served had become an agent of abuse itself. The best of the south's political class had fled Congress for the Army (war being less distasteful than the tenor of debate), leaving the government in the hands of woefully inferior personalities who were only too happy to spend their time bickering while Rome burned, and corrupted by all of the power coalescing in their hands. The longer the war wore on, the more power Richmond collected; not only through self-willed expansion, but by people depending on it as a last resort. The Confederacy, having begun as a decentralized confederacy, was by war's end a welfare state; an astonishing journey that only war could taken a nation.

Although it offers brief military recaps to give readers an idea for the general course of the war, *Look Away!* is first and foremost a history of the southern country at home as it attempted to be a people and a nation at war. Not only does it offer readers a view of the chaos that the average family would have been enduring through the war years, it imparts an understanding of the Confederate government far different from the one which exists in popular myth. It's a grimmer view, but one softened by the fact that Davis is plainly sympathetic to his subjects. *Look Away* should definitely be of interest to anyone fascinated by the Civil War or southern politics.

Related:

[Bitterly Divided: The South's Inner Civil War, David Williams](#)

Brian Neumann says

After seeing the front cover (a Confederate battle flag), I was worried this book would be a simplistic, neo-Confederate story of resistance against "northern tyranny." It's actually a nuanced exploration of the flaws and contradictions inherent in Confederate democracy, a system that trampled on the very rights it professed to defend. The Confederate government imposed intrusive new taxes, conscripted men to fill its armies, and seized crops and supplies to feed those armies. Confederate ideology enshrined individual rights even as the

government suspended the writ of habeas corpus and imposed martial law. It enshrined private enterprise even as it socialized the economy--nationalizing entire industries, overseeing production, setting wage and price controls, and controlling distribution and exportation. It enshrined self-help and individualism even as the Confederacy became a "virtual welfare state," providing bread and clothing to its starving citizens. Most revealingly, it enshrined state sovereignty but "set slavery above sovereignty." William Davis quotes Confederate leaders, states' Ordinances of Secession, national legislation, and the Confederate Constitution itself to show that slavery--not states rights or economics--was the ultimate cause of secession. As Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens proudly proclaimed, the Confederacy "made African inequality and subordination...the chief cornerstone of the Southern Republic" and the Confederacy's "foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man."

Steven Peterson says

Well known historian of the Civil War, William Davis, has written a nicely done political history of the Confederate States of America. While, as the author notes (page ix), "The campaigns and battles are here," the main thrust of the book is (page x) ". . . seeks to present a comprehensive view of everything else that went into making the Confederate national experience. . . ."

There is a useful discussion early on of the nature of the Confederate Constitution. My own sense is that this could have been developed better, placing that document in a larger context. Nonetheless, one comes away from the discussion with a reasonable view of the nature of that document--and with an understanding of the importance of slavery for the south.

There is good exposition of the variety of internecine conflicts among the leaders of the Confederacy. President Jefferson Davis' prickly personality scarcely helped out here.

Davis also does a serviceable job of discussing the political economy of the south, from its economic base to the challenges facing its economy as the Civil War unfolded.

All in all, a useful book.
