



An Honorable Defeat: The Last Days of the Confederate Government

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In February 1865, the end was clearly in sight for the Confederate government. *An Honorable Defeat* is the story of the four months that saw the surrender of the South and the assassination of Lincoln by Southern partisans. It is also the story of two men, antagonists yet political partners, who struggled to achieve their own differing visions for the South: Jefferson Davis, the autocratic president of the Confederate States, who vowed never to surrender whatever the cost; and the practical and warm General John C. Breckinridge, Secretary of War, who hoped pragmatism would save the shattered remnants of the land he loved so dearly. Noted historian William C. Davis traces the astounding flight of these men, and the entire Confederate cabinet, from Richmond. Using original research, he narrates the futile quarrels of Davis and Breckinridge as they try to evade Northern pursuers and describes their eventual--and separate--captures. The result is a rich canvas of a time of despair and defeat, a charged tale full of physical adventure and political battle that sweeps from the marble halls of Richmond to a dingy room in a Havana hotel.

An Honorable Defeat: The Last Days of the Confederate Government Details

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Jerry Landry says

A decent book describing the dissolution of the Confederate government as it fled south in a desperate attempt to escape and possibly fight another day. While the reader of this book will get a good sense of Jefferson Davis and John C Breckinridge, I think that some of the other players in this story get lost in the text. Though Judah P Benjamin is also one of the main figures whose journey is chronicled, I don't ever feel that we get a good sense of the man. We get many instances of other people's bad impressions of him, and it seems to serve to elevate Breckinridge as the hero in comparison. Also, I found myself getting lost at times in the bouncing around from one journey to the other. I almost think that I would have preferred either getting it as "on such-and-such date, this person was here and that person was there" or a complete section on one person's journey followed by a complete section on another person's journey. Overall, it was an interesting subject and I think a worthy read for anyone interested in the Civil War, but I think there are some stylistic points in which it could have been done better and provided more clarity to the reader.

Keith says

William C. Davis' book, *An Honorable Defeat*, chronicles the little-known last days of the Confederate government. It was a dramatic and traumatic time for the Confederacy's president and cabinet members, and the author tells the story in a well-paced, cogent manner. The book resembles an action yarn as the Confederate officials try to escape the Yankee cavalrymen.

The author, however, takes the old-school view of the Civil War: Reading the book, you'd hardly know that the South supported slavery. None of the key figures seem to own any slaves themselves (except back home). If any slaves accompanied the cabinet officers on this odyssey, they are rarely mentioned. (Though that is assuming that the men and women the author calls "servants" are indeed slaves – that isn't made clear.) Except where mentioned below, no slave is named in the book – not as part of the group trying to escape or even seen along their escape route. There is a picture of an African American, Thomas Ferguson, who reportedly stayed with Breckinridge "on the escape," but he's only briefly mentioned three or four times in a 400-page book – and he's most often described as a "servant." (He's called a "slave" once in the book toward the end.) Where was he the entire time? I don't know.

Additionally, when it becomes clear that there will no longer be slavery in the South as a result of their defeat, the Confederate officials are portrayed as essentially shrugging their shoulders and saying, "Oh well." (What in the world were they fighting for?) Did no one among the entire cabinet deeply cherish slavery? Think of it as an important institution? Profit from its existence? Think it should be preserved? Have a single racist thought or statement? Not according to this book.

Like many "popular" (i.e., non-academic) Civil War books, this volume bends over backward to be inoffensive to those with Southern sympathies (who are the likely audience for this book). The unsightly issue of slavery is flattened and, dare I say, white washed until it barely exists on the margins of the story and no one's great-great-great grandfather is offended by the label "racist" or "slaveholder." It is now the sesquicentennial of the Civil War. Can we be finally be honest about what the war was about?

It seems to me the only “honorable” thing about the Southern defeat was the freeing of the slaves and the generous amnesty the victorious Yankees offered to the men who took arms against their country. An “honorable victory,” yes. But “honorable defeat”? Hardly.

One additional note: The suspense of the book is built around the Confederate cabinet’s fear that the Yankees would hang them (or worse) if captured. In fact, none of them were hanged, and some didn’t even go to jail. Those who did go to jail were only there for a couple months. Jefferson Davis spent the most time in prison – a whopping two years. (Interestingly, his bail was paid by Northerners.) The worst that the author could say about Davis’ treatment was that he was manacled for a while (which is bad) and that the Yankees humiliated Davis with false stories he was captured in a dress. (How inhuman!) Overall, the North’s generous amnesty undercuts the drama and suspense at the center of the book, turning the entire desperate escape into a farce.

Mary says

Great fast & interesting read

Samantha says

This book wasn’t as good as I had hoped it would be or as good as some of the reviews make it sound. I felt like this author tried to make a story of it but he didn’t have enough factual evidence and background about what happened to truly make it interesting. I felt his writing style dragged on and he was repetitive. He rambled a lot at the end of the book and flipped around to the different players in the Confederacy without really getting anywhere. Just wasn’t what I thought the book was going to be or should be.

Bobby D says

William Davis wrote one of my favorite books, 1998s THREE ROADS TO THE ALAMO which I highly recommend. I have also read his 1995 A WAY THROUGH THE WILDERNESS, the Natchez trace and the civilization of the southern frontier which I recall being a bore and an unfortunately forgettable read. So here, for a long while, sat on my book shelf this book about the end of the confederate government. Which I found fits somewhere between these other two volumes. The book’s first half is well done, interesting and educational and the second half slow and mostly difficult to get through.

The thrust of AN HONORABLE DEFEAT was the personality and policy differences between Jefferson Davis, the President of the Confederate government and his last Secretary of War, John C. Breckinridge. As the world is crumbling around them and Richmond surrounded and Lee about to surrender Davis and Breckinridge prepare to escape Richmond and argue how the war should end, or if it should end at all. Davis comes off as a ridged and unpopular President who can’t come to terms with defeat and tries over and over again to keep Generals from surrendering and encourages a guerrilla insurgency. Breckinridge who had been the Vice President of the United States just before Lincoln’s election (Breckinridge ran against Lincoln and carried the south in 1860) is the “hero” of Davis’s book. Breckinridge was never a big advocate for succession and now does not want the war to end in a farce adding more death and destruction to his beloved

South. (The real hero in all this is Lincoln, Grant and Sherman who were willing to negotiate very "honorable" terms and only hoped the leaders of the Confederacy would just escape and leave the country. Lincoln, of course, was assassinated just before this all came to an end.)

So the first part of the book is about these two men, Davis and Breckinridge and their fight over how to proceed. This is all very interesting and well done. As they escape they take the treasury and slowly the book turns into an escape adventure story. This could have been entertaining but the level of detail just undermines the momentum of the narrative. We learn almost where they slept each night on the journey, how much money was secured, distributed and perhaps most interesting was that the disbanded and deserting Confederate soldiers became the biggest threat to Davis and Breckinridge. Soon Davis is caught wearing a woman's overcoat and shawl pretending to sneak off to get water. (For years the rumor and facts of his trying to escape in woman's clothing would haunt Davis and his reputation.)

As Davis is captured we follow Breckinridge as he escapes to Cuba, England and eventually returns to his home in Kentucky. But when Davis and Breckinridge are no longer in conflict a lot of the story loses its steam. This is not the fault so much of the author but of how history played out the story he set out to tell. So there you have it, a good and educational book that might be 50 to 100 pages to long. Yet, if you know nothing of the Confederate Government and its fall you will find plenty of interesting information here. One other point I would make is that I had just read **OUR MAN IN CHARLESTON** just before reading this book. That book was all about the South's love of slavery and how those who pushed for succession were never going to give up the wealth of their slaves and even wanted to re-institute the slave trade. In **HONORABLE DEFEAT** there is very little about slavery except that the idea of having slaves fight in the southern army in exchange for their emancipation. Not till the end do we learn of a slave that traveled with Breckinridge (he had been loaned to him by a friend) and nowhere do we learn how Davis viewed slavery or if he owned any. I think this is a serious oversight in this otherwise interesting book.

Bill says

There are historical myths I prefer to keep, one of them is Jefferson Davis being caught disguised as a woman. So what if it isn't true?

The scheming of Breckinridge to bring the war to a quick end while Davis wanted the armies to take to the hills was an aspect of the war I wasn't too familiar with. That and the subsequent escape attempts of the Confederate cabinet make for an exciting tale.

Glenn Robinson says

The last remaining months of the Confederacy is a fascinating time. This is a wonderful book that brings to life the turmoil, the politics, the larger than life characters and the complete average people that dealt with the last few months of Richmond and then the months on the run. I learned a great deal about the Cabinet members. After the fall of Richmond, Davis kept the Cabinet in place and held meetings in each city as they stopped to try to regroup. Imagine being on the run and following a president that had the illusion that he could regroup? Thankfully, General Lee and General Johnston did the right thing by surrendering and did not go the guerrilla warfare route that Davis advocated. Even when Davis was down to 1500 men, he still had the thought that he could come back to defeat the Union. In the end, he was captured in the woods outside a tent trying to walk away in a shawl (not a dress as rumor had it).

Well written with the aftermath of the lives led after the war, I found this to be a very good book on the subject.

Rocky says

Another of those books that makes you slap your head and wonder aloud "Why didn't they teach me that when I was in school?"

Brandon Benner says

Interesting and very detailed, but unfortunately rather plodding at times. Davis did very well illustrating the logistical nightmare of the final weeks of the war and the Confederate cabinet's scramble to hold onto the tiniest shred of hope. However, the narrative of the various individual escape routes of the cabinet members seemed hard to follow and a bit tedious. Altogether, this was a worthwhile read for the Civil War scholar, but likely not something I would suggest to a casual reader of history.

Chris Brown says

If you are a student of History or you just have a love of the Civil War then this book is a good read for you. William C Davis does an excellant job in bringing the final days of the War in Northern Virginia as well as the chaotic last days of the Confederate Government to print. You will witness the Fall of Petersburg, which lead to the fall of the Confederate Capital in Richmond. Confederate President Jefferson Davis's unwilling to seek a peace with the Union and his steadfast determination to continue the fight for southern independence. I dont want to give to much away, and I can promise you will not be disappointed.

Tom Darrow says

A solid book that covers the last months of the Confederate government and how it met it's rather non-glorious end. Beginning at the start of 1865, when Grant's Union army is slowly surrounding Lee's army at Petersburg, it covers the governments final attempts to help the situation. When Lee abandons Richmond in April, the government flees to the south in an attempt to keep the rebellion alive. Wagons of gold and records are taken through the Carolinas, while chased by Union Cavalry. Over time, government officials leave and the government officially surrenders more than a month after Lee surrendered at Appomattox.

I enjoyed this book because it was easy to read and covers a topic that is not frequently covered in other history books. For example, most people kind of assume that once Lee surrendered the war ended and Reconstruction began. This book covers the gap between the two.
