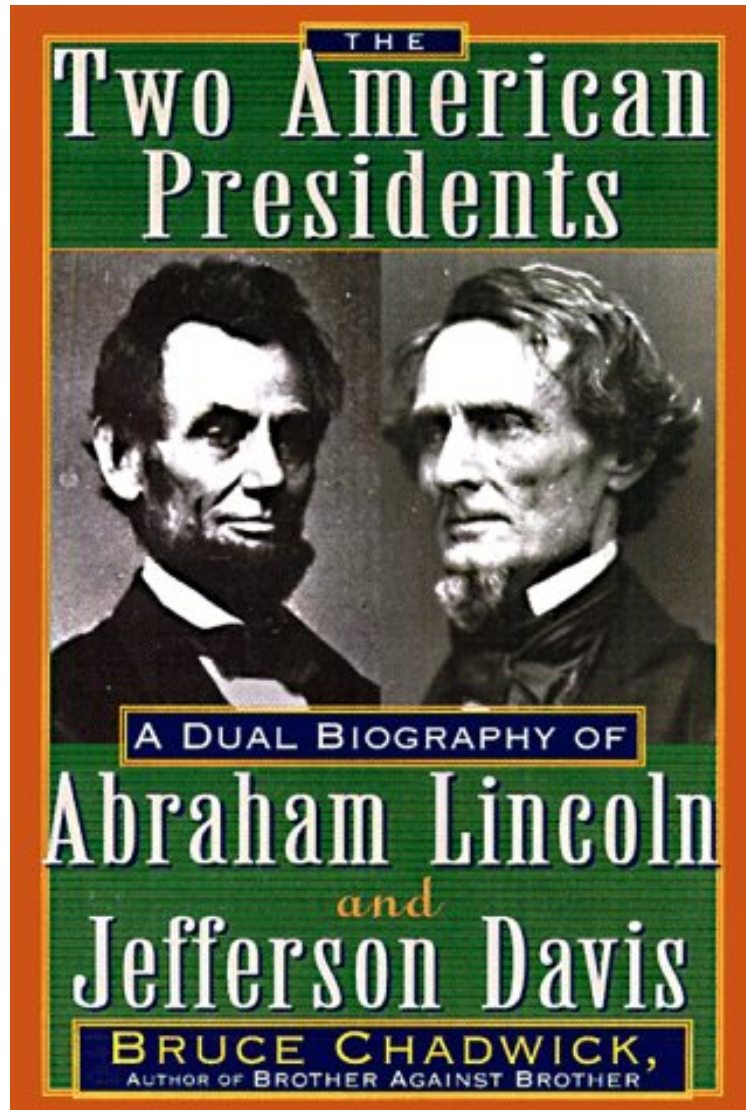


# The Two American Presidents: A Dual Biography of Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis

*Bruce Chadwick*

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**Bruce Chadwick : The Two American Presidents: A Dual Biography of Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Two American Presidents: A Dual Biography of Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five StarsBy josh hysellThis10 of 10 people found the following review helpful. Beware This Book!By David T. WilliamsIt seemed like such a good concept -- parallel bios of the two

great antagonists of the Civil War. However, after a promising beginning, this book becomes so wildly inaccurate and in parts so "Oliver Stone-ish" that I personally will submit my copy for recycling rather than allow anyone else to read it. Some errors are errors of detail (the General commanding the Confederate troops on Marye's Heights at Fredericksburg was James Longstreet, not "Stonewall" Jackson). Some are chronological. Chadwick places Jackson's Shenandoah Valley Campaign after the Seven Days' battles, where in reality it was the indispensable prelude. Sometimes the chronology becomes so muddled that events seem to occur twice. The way the text reads, it seems that Union General John Pope was beaten at Second Bull Run twice. And can anyone truly imagine Salmon Chase leading Union forces in the field? I was particularly disturbed by the assertion that Ohio "Peace Democrat" Clement Vallandigham was arrested on President Lincoln's authority. Every other source I've ever seen asserts that General Burnside acted without any authority other than his own, and that he quickly received orders to arrest no other politicians and suppress no more newspapers without consulting Washington first. What evidence did Chadwick find that eluded Allen Nevins, Shelby Foote, and Stephen B. Oates (to name but three)? When Chadwick comes to the Kilpatrick/Dahlgren raid to Richmond, things get very worrisome for anyone who's read much Civil War history (and I have). No one else that I have read has ever asserted that the raid's purported goal of killing or kidnapping Jefferson Davis and/or other members of his administration was authorized by Abraham Lincoln himself. What evidence has Chadwick unearthed that hundreds if not thousands of other historians had never found? In addition, Chadwick is the only author that I have read that flatly pronounces the papers purportedly found on Ulric Dahlgren's body genuine. All others have at least acknowledged the possibility that they were forgeries. Robert E. Lee cautioned Jefferson Davis not to act on the discovery of the orders, stating that there were good reasons to doubt their authenticity. (For the record, incidentally, Judson Kilpatrick's not-too-flattering nickname was "Kill Cavalry", not "Kill Patrick".) I gave up on this book at page 340. My time is too precious to waste it on conspiratorial pseudo-history. I'll bet yours is, too.

12 of 12 people found the following review helpful. Mediocre Bio of Davis, Mediocre Bio of Lincoln

By A Customer

Where's the Beef? With all of the attention lavished by historians on Abraham Lincoln, and with the growing number of works on Jefferson Davis, it is curious that there have been so few comparative studies of the two men. Aside from Bruce Catton's *Two Roads To Fort Sumter* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), and a few scattered articles and monographs, no scholar of the Civil War has attempted a comprehensive, systematic comparison of Lincoln and Davis. Bruce Chadwick has attempted to fill this hole with *The Two American Presidents*. As the title suggests, this is a dual biography, a two-track narrative which switches back and forth between Lincoln's and Davis's stories. These twin narratives are not bad history in the sense of being inaccurate or sloppy. Chadwick wrote competently and with occasional dramatic flair, he made good use of the available primary sources, and he utilized an impressive amount of newspaper research. A casual reader without much prior knowledge of the Civil War could read *The Two American Presidents* and come away with a basic understanding of each man's life and career. But Chadwick really unearthed nothing new about either man; his book is for the most part merely a pedestrian rehashing of oft-told tales. His story of Lincoln follows the standard arc which one could find in a dozen other biographies: Lincoln the savvy politician and prairie lawyer with the large measure of common sense who is smarter than most everyone around him, and who is dedicated to finding a pragmatic means to the idealistic end of killing slavery and establishing a new birth of freedom. Likewise, Chadwick's Jefferson Davis is not very original: he is the Calhounian planter and Mexican war hero who never questions slavery; a principled yet rigid man who relentlessly pursues Confederate victory but is hobbled by serious character flaws and political ineptitude. Chadwick's narrative is sprightly, but in the end this is still old wine in a new bottle. It is so old, in fact, that I found very little material worthy of substantive criticism; hence the brevity of this review. According to the book's dust jacket, Chadwick argues that "one of several reasons why the North won and the South lost can be found in the drastically different characters of the two presidents." This is perhaps a reasonable--though by no means foregone--conclusion. It is not the "fascinating new perspective" and "startling answers" the book's jacket claims; Davis Potter made this exact argument forty years ago in a widely read essay which Chadwick does not cite (see Potter, "Jefferson Davis and the Political Factors of Confederate Defeat," in David Donald, ed., *Why the North Won the Civil War* [New York: Collier, 1960]). But where does Chadwick draw these conclusions, let alone support them with evidence? I have quoted the book jacket at some length because in 490 pages of text I was unable to locate anything resembling an actual argument. *The Two Presidents* is a comparative study with no substantive comparative analysis. Chadwick seems to have assumed that the mere placing of a mediocre biography of Davis and a mediocre biography of Lincoln within the same cover somehow constitutes an "argument," an original contribution. It does not. Chadwick somehow missed the point of his own book. The only value such a study might possess would lie in the new light it shed on either Lincoln and Davis themselves, or on larger subjects -- presidential leadership, for example -- which are illuminated by but transcend the two men's individual stories. Chadwick did neither, and in the end wrote a book which is of little real value to serious scholars of Lincoln, Davis or the Civil War.

Reviewed by Brian Dirck, Assistant Professor of History, Anderson University .  
Published by H-South (September, 2000) Copyright © 2000, H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission questions, please contact [hbooks@h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@h-net.msu.edu).

From 1861 to 1865, there were two American presidents, one in the North one in the South. Abraham Lincoln Jefferson Davis led their nations through a bitter civil war that changed the course of American history. Both were brilliant, patriots, convinced they were right. One of several reasons why the North won the South lost can be found in the drastically different characters of the two presidents. The electric flexible personality of Lincoln enabled him to build coalitions among warring political factions become one of the strongest most successful presidents in history. The inability of the uncompromising Davis to do the same contributed to the South s losing the war. Illustrations.

From Library Journal Civil War histories range from the insightful and the profound to the mundane and the mistaken. This comparative study of Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis falls into the latter category. Chadwick's previous experience as the editor of a Civil War diary (*Brother Against Brother: The Lost Civil War Diary of Lt. Edmund Halsey, Birch Lane, 1997*) does not serve him well here. The narrative displays a haphazard acquaintance with recent scholarship and is riddled with factual errors, questionable judgments, plodding prose, and simple sloppiness; its analysis of the leadership skills of Lincoln and Davis recapitulates traditional interpretations, belying the publisher's overwrought claims that this is a "comprehensive, heavily researched work" that "offers a hitherto different perspective" on the Civil War. This deeply flawed volume will soon join the growing pile of ephemeral Civil War books. Not recommended. Brooks D. Simpson, Arizona State Univ., Tempe Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc. From Booklist In many ways, Lincoln and Davis led parallel lives, but, at the same time, they certainly came from far different backgrounds, possessed opposite types of personalities, and ultimately became foes of the highest order. The early 1860s was a watershed period, and one of the peculiarities of the time was its witness of dual presidencies: Abraham Lincoln of the United States and Jefferson Davis of the Confederate States. A provocative and revealing way of looking at the era, which Chadwick does with very engaging results, is to simultaneously study both presidents' paths to leadership--"their work as legislators, commanders-in-chief, politicians, husbands and fathers" --and the effect of their very distinctive characters on the quality of their administrations, particularly as each faced a nation-annihilating war. Lincoln knew poverty intimately, Davis was wealthy; Lincoln was barely schooled, Davis had a good education; Lincoln had charm, Davis was abrasive; and the comparisons go on and on. Brad Hooper From Kirkus s Chadwick (*Brother Against Brother, 1997*) recounts what are by now well-known details in the lives of Lincoln, the prairie stalwart, and Davis, the gentleman farmer from Mississippi, who respectively led the United States and the Confederate States during the Civil War. His conclusion: that the two leaders were different, and that their personalities influenced the outcome of the conflict. Lincoln was stern, austere, in control of his emotions, although ambition burned in him like an incandescent candle. Davis, mercurial and violence-prone, was a steaming cauldron, although he was governing as a humanitarian interested in preserving individual liberties and running the army as an enlightened commander. Stir in cannons, and you have Appomattox. Chadwick does hit on a note of interest, for just a moment, when he briefly examines the unfolding scholarly literature on various attempts by the two leaders to have each other assassinated (one thinks of Kennedy and Castro); he cites Federal papers captured by Confederates at Richmond that ordered the immediate execution of Davis and his cabinet, and he suggests that John Wilkes Booth was under Daviss orders, but only to kidnap Lincoln from the Ford Theatre. Chadwicks unapologetic reversion to the Great Man theory of history will not impress professional historians, who have long since attributed to other causes superior firepower, control of the sea the eventual Union victory over the secessionists. Neither, because the book is so poorly written, will it likely impress Civil War buffs, who will already have almost all the information Chadwick presents. Relentlessly disappointing. (24 pages photos, not seen) -- Copyright ©1998, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.