

Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis: Rivals in Popular Prints

By Harold Holzer

In the summer of 1863, New York City picture publisher J. Hall & Co. issued an irreverent caricature depicting a haggard Confederate president Jefferson Davis, dressed in ragtag patched trousers and dilapidated old shoes, hands thrust dejectedly into his pockets, and staring forlornly at a road sign that proclaims: “Surrender of Vicksburg. Retreat from Pennsylvania. Fourth of July. 1863” (*Fig. 1*). The caption below the image explained Davis’s glum expression: “How happy could I be with either!”¹

The image was not unique among the barrage of caricatures issued in the North to assail Davis during the Civil War: from 1861 through 1865 he was depicted variously as a traitor, a coward, and a tool of Satan. What set this particular image apart was the fact that a *carte-de-visite*-sized copy wound up in Abraham Lincoln’s own personal photograph collection. It was the only caricature, and the only portrait of his adversary, that Lincoln and his wife ever obtained for their family photo album, which otherwise brimmed with formal portraits of relatives and the Union civilian and military celebrities of the day. Lincoln loved to laugh, however, and one can easily imagine him in a merry uproar at the sight of this mocking image of his Confederate counterpart devastated by two Northern victories that had pleased Lincoln enormously. It is far more difficult to conjure up an image of Davis laughing aloud at the

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¹Mark E. Neely, Jr., and Harold Holzer, *The Lincoln Family Album: Photographs from the Personal Collection of a Historic American Family*, orig. pub. 1990, rev. ed. ((Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), 92–93.

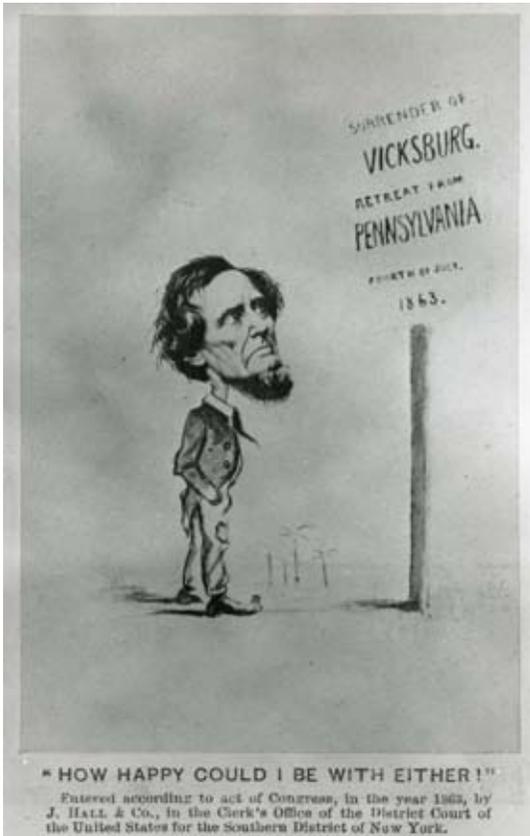


Fig. 1. J. Hall & Co., *How Happy I Could Be With Either!* Carte-de-visite copy of a lithographed cartoon, New York, 1863. (The Lincoln Museum, Fort Wayne, Indiana; Neg. No. 4034)

many Lincoln caricatures that abounded in the marketplace during the same period. But many picture buyers, North and South alike, found comfort in such lampoon: a reason to laugh—*any* reason—in the midst of devastation and heartache.

For the first few years of the Civil War, anyway, until Confederate printmaking faded with the erosion of the southern domestic economy, Lincoln and Davis waged a war of images that was almost as competitive as their war of armed might. The inaugurations of Abraham Lincoln in the North and Jefferson Davis in the South launched not only a war between the states but a war between presidential images that was to last as long as the guns fired and beyond, into the quest for national memory. Two hundred years after their births—and a century and a half after the fame of one eclipsed that of the other—it is difficult to

imagine that the two once competed robustly in the realm of American popular prints.

No previous war was ever so well illustrated. From the outset, talented military and marine painters depicted its battles and leaders. Illustrated newsweeklies dispatched “special artists” to the front to make sketches that were copied and published in the press. And for the first time, photographers covered the war, too, making horrifying records, if not of the battles themselves, at least of their grisly aftermath. But no other medium produced so many depictions of the Civil War and its leaders, in so many variations, for so many tastes, as did that of popular prints.

By war’s end, the New York lithographers Currier & Ives could confidently boast, “Pictures have become a necessity, and the price at which they can be retailed is so low, that everybody can afford to buy them.”² By the dawn of the Civil War era, the walls of thousands of American homes bore witness to the beliefs of those who lived within **them**. Prints earned display on the parlor walls of innumerable family homes, a sacred domestic setting once dominated by religious icons alone.

Remarkably few of these images ever showed the rival commanders-in-chief doing direct battle against one another—brandishing swords in the manner of ancient gladiators. These were topics for cartoons like *The Great “Cannon Game,”* a caricature that appeared in *London Punch* in the spring of 1863 (*Fig. 2*), showing Davis and Lincoln engaged in a billiard game as “England” watches dispassionately in the background for the final outcome. Since Davis seemed to many observers Lincoln’s superior in dignity, many northern printmakers proved reluctant to compare them directly except in comic drawings of this kind. Other examples of the genre showed Lincoln and Davis doing battle in the boxing ring, or engaging in unlikely hand-to-hand combat (*Fig. 3*), with the Confederate president toting a rifle and the Union president a large log rail. Though this particularly inventive print was copyrighted in May 1861, it was never issued; only a single incomplete draft copy survives, indicating that its artist believed it would attract too small an audience to publish.

Such accoutrements remained staples of Lincoln imagery for years and set him distinctly apart from his more rigidly formal Confederate

² Harry Twyford Peters, *Currier & Ives: Printmakers to the American People* (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1942), 12.

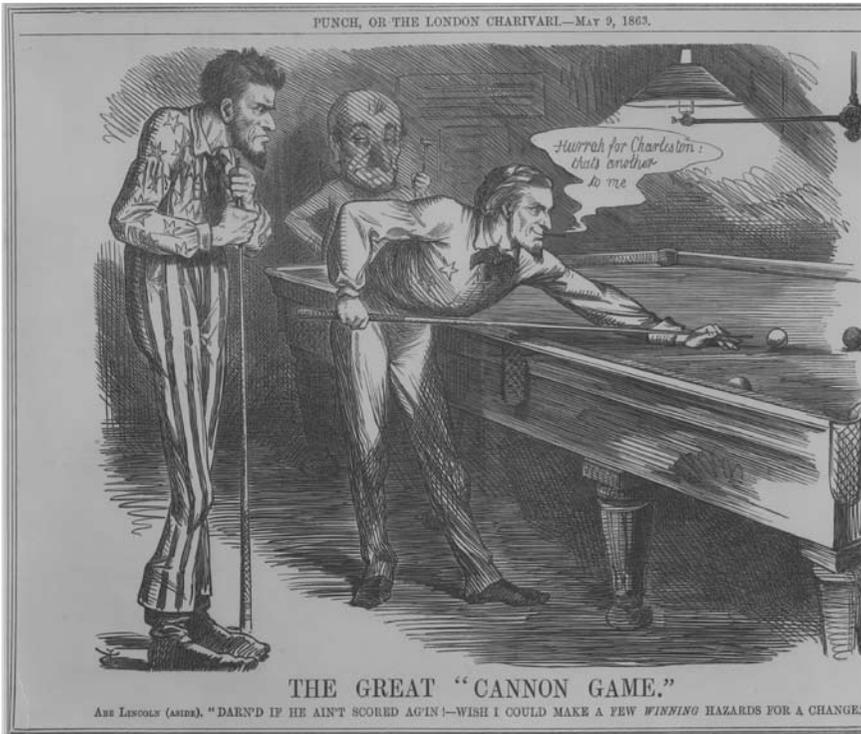


Fig. 2. *Printmaker unknown, The Great “Cannon Game.” Woodcut engraving, published in Punch, or the London Charivari, May 9, 1863. (Author’s Collection)*

counterpart, whom one biographer called “the aristocratic type of Southern politician.”³ Endearing frontier symbols identified Lincoln as a man of, by, and for the people. Yet, surprisingly, they did not give him an automatic image advantage over Davis—at least not at first. Only after Lincoln was widely credited with liberating the slaves, won re-election to the presidency, and was transformed into a national martyr after his assassination, would his image fully overcome the longstanding challenge from his Confederate counterpart.

Throughout the war, Lincoln prints outnumbered Davis prints, if only because Union **printmakers** continued churning out graphics long after Confederate presses were stilled. But volume alone does not guarantee predominance; **otherwise** the Union side would have won the war between images—not to mention the war between sections—within

³ Clement Eaton, *Jefferson Davis* (New York: Free Press, 1977), 89.

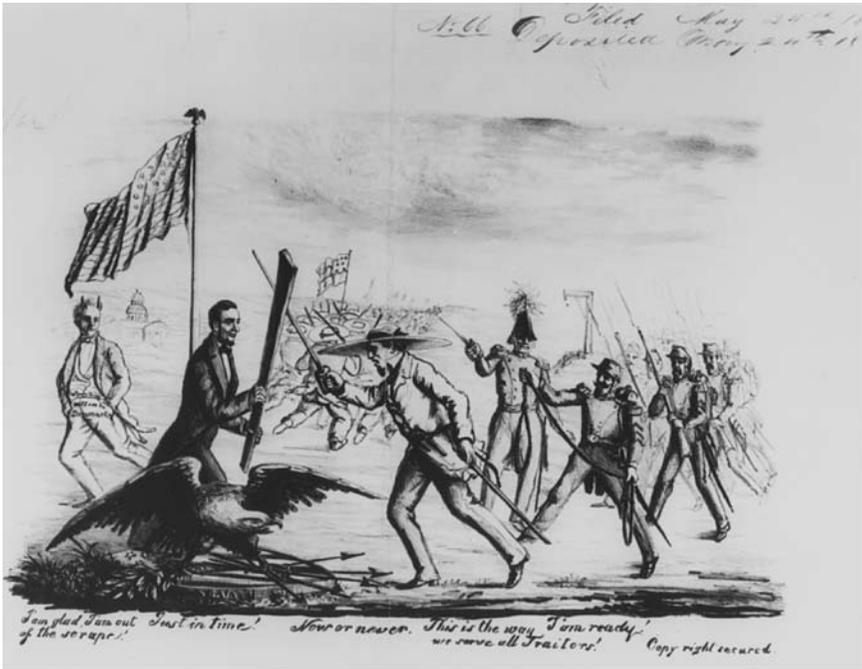


Fig. 3 Carl Anton, I am glad, I am out of the scrape! Just in time! Lithograph, Cincinnati, 1861. (Library of Congress)

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months. For a surprisingly long time, at least in the graphic arts, the time was decidedly ripe for both.

Perhaps nothing helped more to elevate the early Davis image than the fact that he was virtually anointed president of the Confederacy. He neither fought for nomination at a party convention, nor competed for votes in a national election. Some scholars have suggested that it was precisely Davis's lack of experience in campaigning among the people that made him an insensitive leader once installed in the presidency.

But standing above the fray helped Davis seem more dignified. Friends had talked to Davis about running for the Senate in 1853, but he remained in Washington "drinking champagne" in the words of a rival, Albert Gallatin Brown. By contrast to Davis's inactivity, Brown traveled 3200 miles, gave 115 speeches, and won the state legislature's nod for the Senate seat. (Davis was never really in the running, and had to wait three more years to return to the Senate.)⁴ To the prospect of assuming the Confederate presidency in 1861, he could say, with

⁴ Ibid., 90–98.

credible Washingtonian modesty, “I had no desire to be . . . President. When the suggestion was made to me, I expressed a decided objection . . . against being placed in that position.”⁵ It was not lost on many that, like George Washington himself, in true Cincinnatus fashion, Davis had to be summoned to duty.

Lincoln was granted no such coronation. Lincoln, by contrast, had engaged Stephen A. Douglas in a series of rip-roaring political debates in his own quest for a Senate seat in 1858. And while he did not campaign directly for the presidency in 1860, no one doubted that the taste was in his mouth a little.⁶ Unlike Davis, who was virtually unopposed and certainly unelected, Lincoln faced three rivals that year.

Thus, Lincoln’s earliest images introduced him as a figure of contention in his own section. Sensing that an audience existed among those who opposed as well as those who favored him, the same printmakers who published idealized portraits also issued critical lampoons. A typical campaign caricature by Currier & Ives might dress him in a homespun shirt and arm him with a log rail to remind viewers of his humble origins and to imply that if Lincoln could rise, so could any ordinary American. But the same print could also burden him with unpopular viewpoints, in one notoriously racist example suggesting that he favored black equality, enough to regard a well-known Barnum attraction of the day, the half-human African “What Is It[?]” as “a worthy successor to carry out the policy which I shall inaugurate.”⁷

It was a struggle for image domination, as the modern viewer must remember, that neither leader had the power to control; such was the nature of nineteenth-century commercial printmaking. Had Lincoln and Davis themselves, or their political allies, enjoyed the ability to craft pictures of their own design, or had it been common at the time for political parties to commission the images they wanted, as they routinely do today, our archives would be filled with early pictures showing Lincoln and Davis beside George Washington. But in mid-nineteenth-century

⁵ Jefferson Davis, *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government*, 2 vols., orig. pub. 1881; rpt. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1990), 1:176–77.

⁶ Paraphrasing Lincoln to Lyman Trumbull, April 29, 1860, in Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 8 vols. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953–55), 4:45.

⁷ See *An Heir to the Throne, Or the Next Republican Candidate* in Harold Holzer, Gabor S. Boritt, and Mark E. Neely, Jr., *The Lincoln Image: Abraham Lincoln and the Popular Print* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1984), 39.

America, independent, bipartisan, commercially motivated publishers, not politicians, created political prints. These for-profit entrepreneurs echoed, sometimes anticipated, public taste and demand. Invariably they reflected the ebb and flow of popular opinion toward their subjects and perhaps influenced it as well.

Occasionally, what is today called “breaking news” affected the presidential image. In February 1861, convinced by his advisors during his inaugural journey that an assassination plot awaited him in hostile Baltimore, Lincoln put aside what he called “fear of ridicule” and agreed to rush through the city in secret.⁸ He had a brand-new top hat, but he set it aside. Instead, he admitted, “I put on an old overcoat that I had with me [and] a soft wool hat the likes of which I had never worn . . . in my life.” Changing trains in the dead of night, he sped south, as he put it, “without being recognized by strangers, for I was not the same man.”⁹ Only later did Lincoln come to regret “stealing into the capital like a thief in the night,” although to one visitor he stubbornly insisted: “It ain’t best to run a risk of any consequence for look’s sake.”¹⁰

Lincoln paid an enormous price for his caution. The pro-secession newspaper, the *Charleston Mercury*, gleefully scoffed, “Everybody here is disgusted at this cowardly and undignified entry.”¹¹ And the disgust only increased when the *Illustrated London News* suggested that Lincoln had fled Baltimore wearing a military cape and a Scottish tam for a hat. Within weeks, picture weeklies were filled with caricatures like *The Flight of Abraham* (Fig. 4), showing the president-elect sneaking into Washington in a ridiculously exaggerated disguise.¹² Never had an American president begun his administration shackled with so humiliating a public image. Lincoln’s swearing-in, unlike Davis’s, did not inspire a single separate-sheet display print for the American home. Such was the sorry state of Lincoln’s image on assuming the presidency. Almost

⁸ Benson J. Lossing, *Pictorial History of the Civil War in the United States of America*, 16 vols. (Philadelphia: George W. Childs, 1866), 1:279–80.

⁹ Don E. Fehrenbacher and Virginia Fehrenbacher, eds., *Recollected Words of Lincoln* (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1996), 324, 293.

¹⁰ Allen Pinkerton, *History and Evidence of the Passage of Abraham Lincoln from Harrisburg, Pa., to Washington, D.C.* (Privately printed, 1882), 22.

¹¹ Herbert Mitgang, ed., *Abraham Lincoln: A Press Portrait* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971), 234.

¹² *Harper’s Weekly*, March 9, 1861. For a fine analysis, see Gary L. Bunker, *From Rail-Splitter to Icon: Lincoln’s Image in Illustrated Periodicals, 1860–1865* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2001), 90–91.

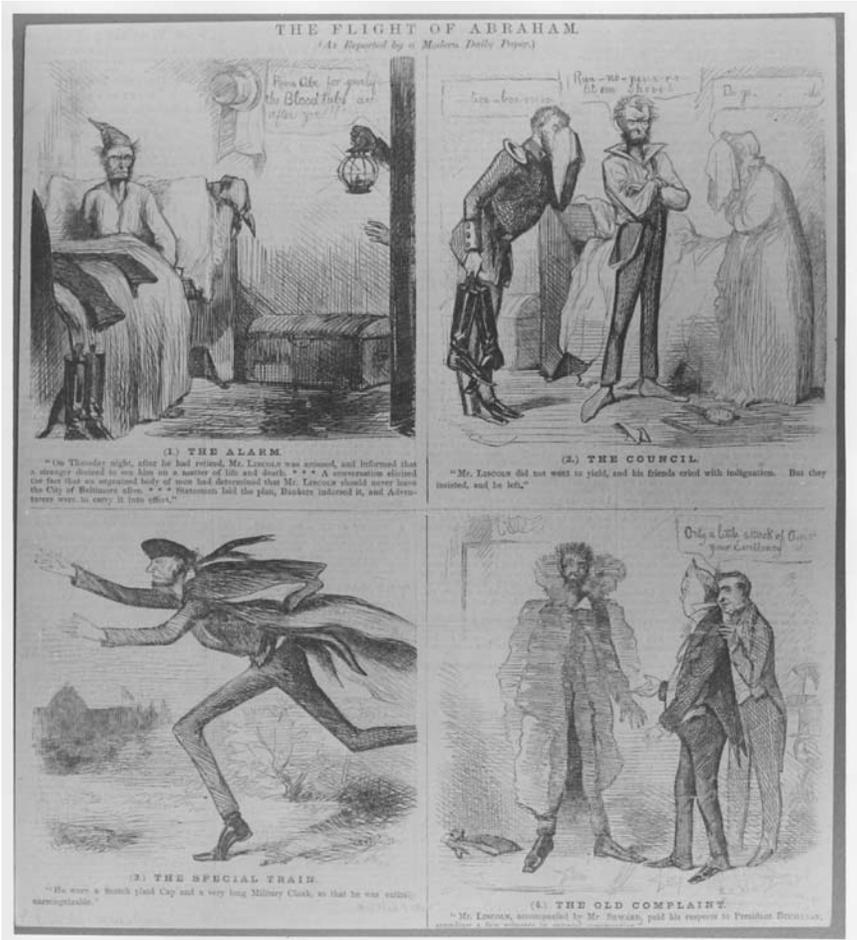


Fig. 4. John McClenan, The Flight of Abraham. Woodcut multi-panel cartoon, published in Harper's Weekly, New York, March 9, 1861. (Author's Collection)

mercifully, Lincoln was soon thereafter eclipsed in the realm of Union image-making, with the emergence of such new heroes as Major Robert Anderson of Fort Sumter and early martyrs such as Colonel Ephraim Elmer Ellsworth, the first Union officer killed in the war.¹³ Public curiosity about new wartime celebrities ran so high in the North that New York lithographers Jones & Clark issued a series of prints depicting Confederate leaders—among them, a handsome portrait of Jefferson Davis himself. No similar picture was ever published in the Confederacy to introduce Lincoln to southerners. But the Jones & Clark lithograph

¹³ See Mark E. Neely, Jr., and Harold Holzer, *The Union Image: Popular Prints of the Civil War North* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 23–56.

turned out to be the first as well as the only Union-made print portrait of Jefferson Davis. No printmaker thereafter dared to invite public wrath in the North by sympathetically portraying the leader of the South.

Perhaps the most effective images of Lincoln early in the war were group portraits that reminded viewers that he was heir to a tradition that harked back to Washington himself—the American presidency. As historian Noble Cunningham has put it, “Popular prints offering portraits of all the presidents in a grand design not only celebrated the presidency but also subordinated individual presidents to the institution of the presidency.” Cunningham believed that such attitudes allowed Americans to criticize individual presidents “without threatening the presidency” itself.¹⁴ But in Lincoln’s case, prints placing him among his predecessors allowed him to be associated usefully with presidential tradition at a time when the presidency and the Union itself were both under siege.

Davis, however, fared at least as well as Lincoln in early images stressing the connection to George Washington. In the total absence of a similar presidential tradition in the new Confederacy, Davis became, just like Washington, the first president of a new nation. He quickly emerged in Confederate iconography as Washington’s only true heir: the father of his own new country. The lithographers A. E. Blackmar & Brothers of New Orleans contributed an illustrated cover for sheet music called *Our First President Quickstep* (Fig. 5). For southerners, such images could not help but neatly illustrate what the *Richmond Enquirer* reported in 1861: “The confidence manifested in our President . . . shows that the mantle of Washington falls gracefully upon his shoulders. Never were a people more enraptured with their Chief Magistrate than ours with President Davis.”¹⁵ Comparative sheet music imagery for Lincoln introduced him as a political candidate, appealing to one ethnic group or the other with schottisches and polkas (Fig. 6).

Davis enjoyed yet another similarity to Washington with which Lincoln could not hope to compete: military tradition. “By preference,” Davis always insisted, “I was a soldier.” In his postwar autobiography he went further, explaining that he did not feel “well suited to the office”

¹⁴ Noble E. Cunningham, *Popular Images of the Presidency from Washington to Lincoln* (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1991), 283.

¹⁵ Steven E. Woodworth, *Davis and Lee at War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 9.

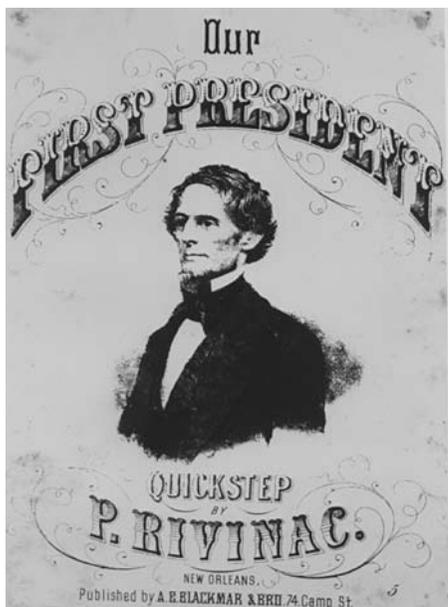


Fig. 5 (left), A. E. Blackmar & Bro., *Our First President Quickstep*. Lithographed sheet music cover, New Orleans, ca. 1861. (Library of Congress); Fig. 6 (right), Ehrgott, Forbriger & Co., *Lincoln Polka*. Lithographed sheet music cover, published by J. Church Jr., Cincinnati, ca. 1860. (Library of Congress)

of president, because “I thought my self better adapted to command in the field; Mississippi had given me the position which I preferred to any other—the highest rank in her army.” Writing to a delegate to the 1861 Montgomery convention, Davis admitted he had little confidence in his “capacity” to serve as president. “I think,” he hastened to add, “I could perform the functions of genl.”¹⁶ Indeed, Davis seems to have accepted the presidency believing it was only “temporary,” insisting, “I expected soon to be with the army of Mississippi.”¹⁷ Impressed by his “military bearing” and “martial aspect,” Richmond matrons like Constance Carey were convinced that Davis felt “quite out of place in the office of President . . . in the midst of such a war. His own inclination was to be with the army.”¹⁸

¹⁶ William C. Davis, *Jefferson Davis: The Man and His Hour—A Biography* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 55.

¹⁷ Jefferson Davis, *Rise and Fall*, 1:176, 198.

¹⁸ Katharine Clinton, *Heroines of Dixie: Confederate Women Tell Their Story of the War* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill, 1955), 148.

Like Davis, Lincoln had seen his first—and in Lincoln’s case, his only—military service in the Black Hawk War. But there the similarity ended. Davis attended West Point and achieved glory at Monterey and Buena Vista in a war with Mexico that young Congressman Lincoln opposed. As president, Lincoln eventually assumed active management of the Union war effort. But though he was depicted in councils of war, neither printmakers nor print audiences ever mistook him for a military president. “War council” prints of the president together with his uniformed generals took care to present Lincoln as a civilian magistrate, not a commander in chief. He was shown conferring with generals and admirals, but even when depicted sitting on a rock in an outdoor setting meant to suggest a battlefield, Lincoln was always pictured garbed in his trademark frock coat, white shirt, and black tie. He seemed to be inquiring, but not necessarily commanding.

From the onset of his presidency, Davis was viewed differently by printmakers in both the South and the North in pictures that inevitably reinforced his connection to George Washington. C. Goupil & Company’s richly colored lithograph of Davis—in uniform—alongside his generals (Fig. 7) placed him squarely among portraits of his leading officers. No



Fig. 7. Printmaker unknown, [Jefferson Davis and His Generals]. Hand-colored lithographed, published by Goupil et cie., Paris, and Michael Knoedler, New York, ca. 1861. (The New York Public Library; Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations)

attempt was made, certainly not in the title of the print, to separate him from his military subordinates. He was not only one of them, but also first among command equals. And even after printmakers learned quite a few things about the Confederate high command—that Lee and Jackson had grown beards, for example, and more important, that Davis had never donned a uniform to lead them—they updated the image only peripherally by giving beards to Lee and Jackson and changing the color of the uniforms from Union blue to Confederate gray. But in subsequent revisions, Davis remained front and center, fully garbed for military action.¹⁹

The man and his iconographical hour met at Bull Run. In late July 1861 word spread through the Confederate capital that Davis had left Richmond for Manassas, where the two armies stood face-to-face. “I always thought he would avail himself of his prerogative as commander in chief, and direct in person the most important operations in the field,” Confederate war clerk John B. Jones wrote in his diary. “I . . . believe he will gain great glory in this first mighty conflict.”²⁰ Three days later the Confederate president’s wife told her friend Mary Chesnut, “A great battle had been fought—Jeff Davis led the centre, Joe Johnston the right wing, Beauregard the left wing of the army.” President Davis, Mrs. Chesnut later complained in her journal, seemed “greedy for military fame.”²¹ But she was in the minority. One southern newspaper referred to Davis as “our noble warrior President.”²²

When Mrs. Chesnut published her diary years later, this critical line was expunged. By then the myth of Davis’s dramatic appearance at Manassas had been punctuated by the widely disseminated Hoyer & Ludwig print, *President Jefferson Davis. Arriving in the Field of Battle at Bull’s Run*. It gave the indelible impression that the commander in chief was personally responsible for the Confederacy’s first great military success.²³

¹⁹ See, for example, F. Bourquin, *The Generals of the Army*, 1879, in Mark E. Neely, Jr., Harold Holzer, and Gabor S. Boritt, *The Confederate Image: Prints of the Lost Cause* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 19.

²⁰ John B. Jones, *A Rebel War Clerk’s Diary at the Confederate States Capital*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, J. P. Lippincott, 1866), 1:164.

²¹ C. Vann Woodward and Elisabeth Muhlenfeld, eds., *The Private Mary Chesnut: The Unpublished Civil War Diaries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 105.

²² William C. Davis, *Jefferson Davis*, 553.

²³ Neely, Holzer, and Boritt, *The Confederate Image*, 16.

In truth, Davis arrived near the scene of the action by train, not on horseback, and was told at first that his army had suffered a major defeat. He saw only the smoke and dust of distant fighting, but after commandeering a horse and riding out closer to the field of action, which by then had shifted farther away, he learned that Union forces, not Confederate, had been routed. The battle was over. There is no evidence that Davis wore a uniform that day, as the print suggested, nor any reason to believe that his arrival played any part in rallying dispirited troops.

When he returned to Richmond, however, Davis merely “alluded to his own appearance on the field . . . in a delicate manner,” according to war clerk Jones. In other words, he probably did little to deny reports that he had led the army. Although Davis eventually did correct the myth of his appearance at Bull Run in his autobiography, the book did not appear for twenty years. This may explain why the loyal clerk Jones worked himself into “a passion” when he first read in the local press “a dispatch from . . . Manassas stating that the President did not arrive upon the field until the victory was won; and therefore did not participate in the battle at all. From the President’s own dispatch . . . we had conceived the idea that he . . . had directed the principal operations in the field.” Jones’s first instinct was not to doubt Davis but to express the hope that “another paper ought to be established in Richmond, that would do justice to the President?”²⁴

Only later did Jones learn “that the abused correspondent had been pretty nearly correct in his statement. The battle had been won, and the enemy were flying from the field before the President appeared.” But he quickly added, “The people were well pleased with their President.” Davis eventually told the full truth about Bull Run, but he clung tenaciously to the military image he had cultivated. As yet another diarist confided, “I have long ago expressed my conviction that the President is not endowed with military genius, but who would have done better?”²⁵

In terms of ability to inspire troops with equestrian grace, real or imagined, Abraham Lincoln was no match for Jefferson Davis. A few weeks before Bull Run, Mary Chesnut conceded of Davis: “His worse enemy will concede that he is a consummate rider, graceful and easy in

²⁴ Jones, *A Rebel War Clerk’s Diary*, 1:65.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 65–66.

the saddle.”²⁶ Around the very same time, a New Yorker wrote directly to Lincoln to complain, “Soldiers write home to their friends in this town with reference to their disappointment in your bearing and manners when reviewing them.” The critic insisted, “You ought to assume some dignity...even though your breeding has not been military.”²⁷

If Lincoln eventually learned to inspire his soldiers in military review, no pictorial evidence survives. The only wartime prints to depict him with his military chieftains showed them in war councils, usually in civilian settings like the White House (*Fig. 8*). The only important contemporary print to show him on horseback was as outlandish in its way as the print of Davis at Bull Run. Entitled *Mr. Lincoln, Residence and House*, it purported to show him returning home from his 1860 presidential campaign. But in reality, Lincoln had never left his home to campaign. Nor had he grown his famous beard, shown in the print in defiance of chronology, until after the votes were counted.²⁸

While the war raged, it might be pointed out, heroic portraiture was nearly overwhelmed by caricature. By and large, few American leaders were ever as relentlessly lampooned as the two presidents of Civil War America. Not surprisingly, the most hostile anti-Davis graphics came from the North and the most hostile anti-Lincoln work from the South.

To one Confederate printmaker, Lincoln deserved nothing less than execution for his satanic crimes against the South. In the crude but venomous picture, *Masks and Faces. King Abraham before and after issuing the Emancipation Proclamation* (*Fig. 9*) Lincoln is shown revealing himself as Satan, on his way to the gallows to be hanged for treason from a scaffold constructed of Lincolnian log rails. But northern pictorial venom could be equally overt: more than a few such prints showed the Confederate president in similar peril (*Fig. 10*). In one such print, a sniveling Davis was shown going to his death wrapped in the Confederate flag, lamenting, “O dear! O dear! I don’t really want to secede this way.” Traitors were seldom shown dying bravely.

²⁶ C. Vann Woodward, ed., *Mary Chesnut's Civil War* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1981), 84.

²⁷ R. Colby to Abraham Lincoln, March 18, 1861, Abraham Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

²⁸ Holzer, Boritt, and Neely, *The Lincoln Image*, 185.

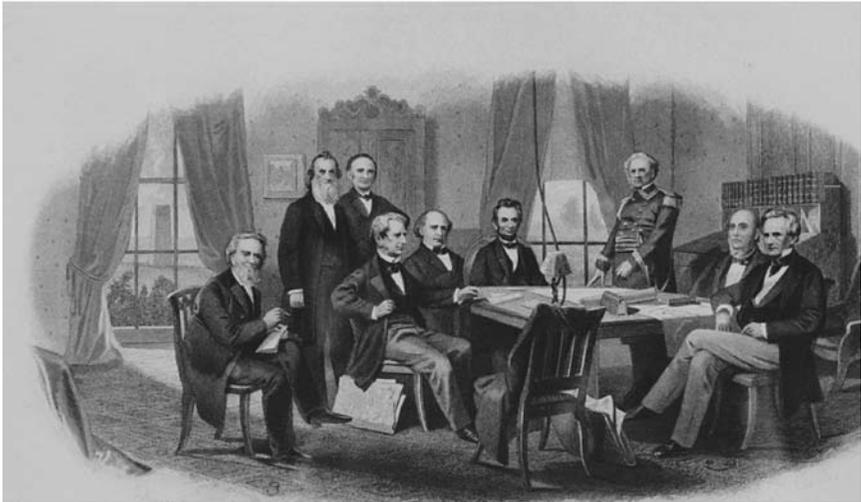


Fig. 8 (top), [Robert] Whitechurch & Co., after Christian Schussele, President Lincoln and His Cabinet, With Lt. Genl. Scott, in the Council Chamber at the White House. Steel engraving, Philadelphia, ca. 1861. (Author's collection)



Fig. 9. (left), Printmaker unknown, Masks and Faces[.] King Abraham before and after issuing the EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION. Woodcut engraving, published in the Southern Illustrated News, Richmond, November 2, 1862. (The New York Public Library; Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations)

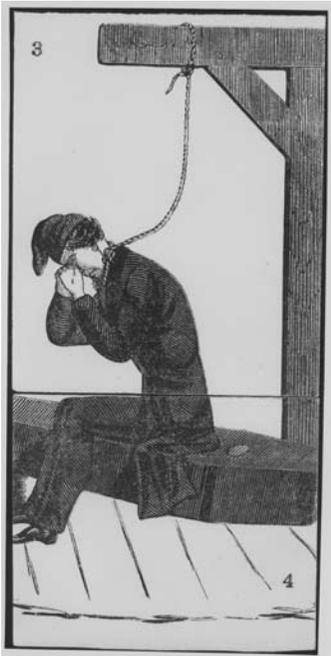


Fig. 10. Printmaker unknown, [Jefferson Davis weeping on the Gallows]. Multi-panel, fold-out lithograph, ca. 1865. (Library of Congress)

Davis also appeared prominently in the print by Benjamin H. Day, Jr., *The Emblem of the Free*, which showed the devil—this time decidedly not Lincoln—placing a crown on the sleeping Confederate president’s head. Here the Washington image was employed against Davis. The ghost of the first president looks on in despair, pointing to the goddess of liberty in the center and to the Revolutionary War veterans huddled in the cold at the left, to remind Davis and viewers alike of the sacrifice that had been required to create the Union. In the words of the song that accompanied the picture, “The Traitor’s Dream,” Davis is warned that he has in fact sullied Washington’s heritage:

The shade Of WASHINGTON
 Condemns you from above;
 His calm, majestic brow
 Denotes his country’s love;
 E’en Royalty could not,
 With all its tinsel glare,
 Induce him to betray
 Our nation’s banner fair...

Beneath those brilliant stripes
 Your fathers fought and bled;
 Resplendently they shone

Above each warrior's head.
Then, traitor, pause! Beware!
A felon's death will be
Yours if you dare destroy
That Emblem of the Free!²⁹

A similar assault awaited Davis in *The Soldier's Song—Unionism vs. Copperheadism*, promoted by Ohio printmakers Smith & Swinney as “a token of disapprobation and contempt of Home Traitors.” The Confederate president was not mentioned by name in the vilifying poem that accompanied this picture, but he was portrayed as the mother of all Copperheads: a huge snake topped by Davis's head, coiled around a symbolic southern palmetto tree and staring into the barrel of a Union cannon.

By the end of 1861, America's two Civil War presidents had developed startlingly different images. Davis had evolved into a warrior-president—a traitor in the North, but the second coming of Washington in the South. Lincoln had progressed in prints from railsplitter to coward and later to the statesman-heir to the Washington tradition, though no Washington himself. Both had been exalted in flattering pictures and assaulted in abusive ones. But there was a significant difference. Davis regularly suffered pictorial abuse at the hands of northern printmakers and Lincoln from southern printmakers. Yet while Lincoln was also routinely maligned in prints published in his own section—as in the cartoon attacking him for allegedly responding to horrifying casualty reports with yet another funny story—Davis completely escaped pictorial criticism at home. It was not that he was above criticism there, at least of the written and verbal kind. But Davis was fortunate in that his image began to be tarnished most just as the Confederate printmaking industry began to disintegrate.

What might have become a “great cannon game,” in the words of the title of the 1863 *London Punch* cartoon—that is, an epic struggle for image predominance between two concurrently serving American presidents—instead became a landslide victory for one, once printmaking all but ceased to exist in the country of the other. If Davis's side was “overmatched” in “the cannon game,” it became even more outdistanced

²⁹ Original in the Library of Congress. For a view of the image and the text of the entire verse, see Bernard F. Reilly, Jr., *American Political Prints, 1766–1876: A Catalog of the Collections in the Library of Congress* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1991), 495.

in the picture game. Paper, ink, and artists became scarcer in the Confederacy than bullets and uniforms. Demand for Davis's image might have persisted but supply did not. And in northern-made prints, Lincoln soon seemed the dominant combatant. In the Currier & Ives cartoon, *Caving In, or a Rebel "Deeply Humiliated,"* and in J. Tingley's series of so-called *Champion Prize Envelopes*, subtitled *Lincoln and Davis in 5 Rounds*, the Union president was shown pummeling his Confederate counterpart in the metaphorical arena of the boxing ring. In prints, Lincoln emerged as the undisputed champion even as the outcome of the war itself remained in doubt.

Dwindling Confederate manpower required that all able-bodied southern men serve in the military, and printmakers were not exempted. Those few who remained in civilian life were assigned to the production of Confederate stamps and currency, which soon boasted the only new images of Davis in circulation. As shortages in engravers and lithographers compounded the chronic shortages of paper and ink, the once-robust *Confederate Illustrated News* began advertising desperately for printmakers.³⁰ None stepped forward, and the illustrated weekly, along with separate-sheet printmaking anywhere in the Confederacy, died out.

Lincoln distanced himself further from the non-elected Confederate president by seeking reelection in the midst of the Civil War. Predictably, his candidacy unleashed another torrent of image-making, much like the caricatures, portraits, and posters that had proliferated four years earlier. Again, a substantial portion proved critical, like *The Grave of the Union*, showing Lincoln presiding over the mass burial of the Constitution, Union, habeas corpus, free speech, and free press. Such prints typically featured stock characters who found their way into most anti-Lincoln imagery of the period: the controversial Horace Greeley, Henry Ward Beecher, and William H. Seward, to name a few.

Similarly, caricature critical of Lincoln's Democratic challenger, George B. McClellan, began featuring its own recurring cast of principals; the suggestion of their rise under a McClellan presidency was designed to frighten the voting public. What set this body of images apart was that some of it featured a sworn enemy of the Union: Jefferson Davis himself. Ironically, it was in this genre that Davis finally found his way into campaign graphics—not as a candidate but as an issue: the

³⁰ Neely, Holzer, and Boritt, *The Confederate Image*, 3–10.

living symbol of peace at any price. It was arguably the most remarkable development in Davis image-making, although few people in the South ever saw the results.

According to one lithograph by New York printmaker M. W. Siebert, (Fig. 11), the contrast between candidates was indeed stark. Under McClellan, the Union would surrender and return to the days of slave auctions. A Lincoln victory would ensure freedom and education for all working men and their children, black and white. In these and other 1864 campaign prints, Davis was relegated to the background or used as an emblem of retrograde policies.

When Jefferson Davis finally did return to prominence in popular prints, it was not as a symbol of southern rights, or of a Washington, a commander, or a peacemaker. Instead, in the greatest irony of all Civil War iconography, he was portrayed leaving office exactly as Lincoln had been portrayed entering office: in disguise. The fate that awaited him proved even worse than that which had greeted Lincoln after Baltimore.

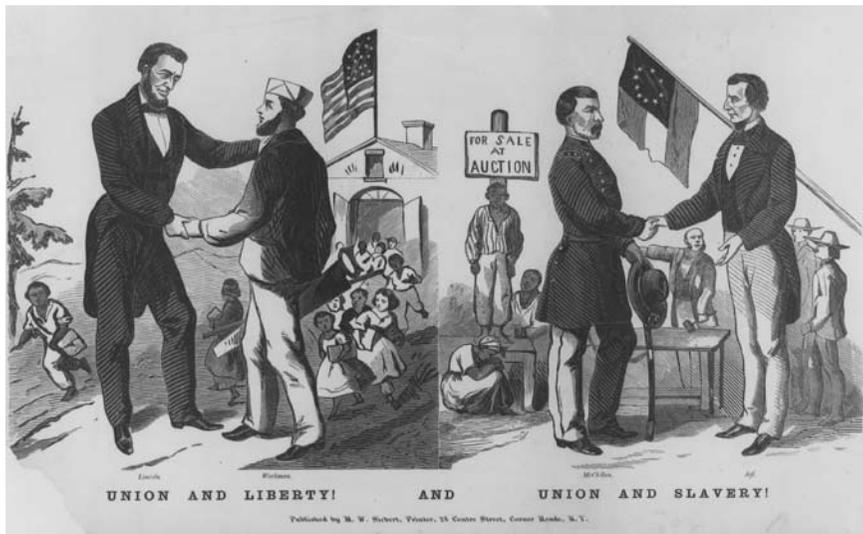


Fig. 11. M. W. Siebert, *Union and Liberty! And Union and Slavery!* Lithograph, New York, 1864. (The Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington)

At least the disguise that image-makers had invented for Lincoln in 1861 was male, not female.

The exact details of the event that inspired this final burst of Davis prints have been in dispute almost from the moment it was first reported

in May 1865. One point is certain: while Lincoln lived, he did nothing to discourage Davis from fleeing Richmond. He hoped Davis would “die in peace on his southern plantation,” he told one associate.³¹ And to his private secretary, Lincoln confided, “I hope he will mount a fleet horse, reach the shores of the Gulf of Mexico, and drive so far into its waters that we shall never see him again.”³² Obliging, Davis escaped Richmond ahead of Union invading forces. On May 10, Federal cavalry caught up with the fugitive near Irwinville, Georgia.

In the dark, as he was preparing to flee his tent, he admitted in his autobiography, “My wife thoughtfully threw over my head and shoulders a shawl.”³³ Davis got only fifteen or twenty yards before he was seized, and to his captors, the first, last, and only president of the Confederacy looked to be in women’s disguise. Days later, the *New York Herald* reported on Davis’s “ignominious surrender” wearing his wife’s raglan.³⁴ Within weeks, the disguise somehow transformed itself in the popular mind—exactly as Lincoln’s soft hat had metamorphosed into a Scottish tam after Baltimore: through the graphic arts. On June 3, 1865, *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* crossed the dividing line between fact and fiction by portraying Davis fleeing his captors in a dress and bonnet.

Soon, separate-sheet prints were flooding the North, portraying Davis in hoopskirts, featuring titles like “Jeff’s last shift,” “The Chas-ed Old Lady of the Confederacy,” and the especially ribald *Jeff’s Last Skedaddle Off to the Last Ditch: How Jeff in his Extremity Put His Navel Affairs and Ram-parts Under Petticoat Protection* (Fig. 12). In a matter of months, Davis’s lifelong, aristocratic reputation was wrecked and replaced by the image, in diarist George Templeton Strong’s words, of an emasculated coward “in the cumbrous disguise of hooped skirts”³⁵—in blunter terms, a coward in drag.

³¹ Fehrenbacher and Fehrenbacher, *Recollected Words of Lincoln*, 143. Lincoln made the remarks to New York lawyer Abram J. Dittenhoeffer.

³² Theodore C. Blegen, ed., *Abraham Lincoln and His Mailbag: Two Documents by Edward D. Neill, One of Lincoln’s Secretaries* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1964), 40.

³³ Jefferson Davis, *Rise and Fall*, 2:701–02.

³⁴ *New York Herald*, May 15, 1865.

³⁵ Allan Nevins and Milton Halsey Thomas, eds., *The Diary of George Templeton Strong*, 3 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 3:598.

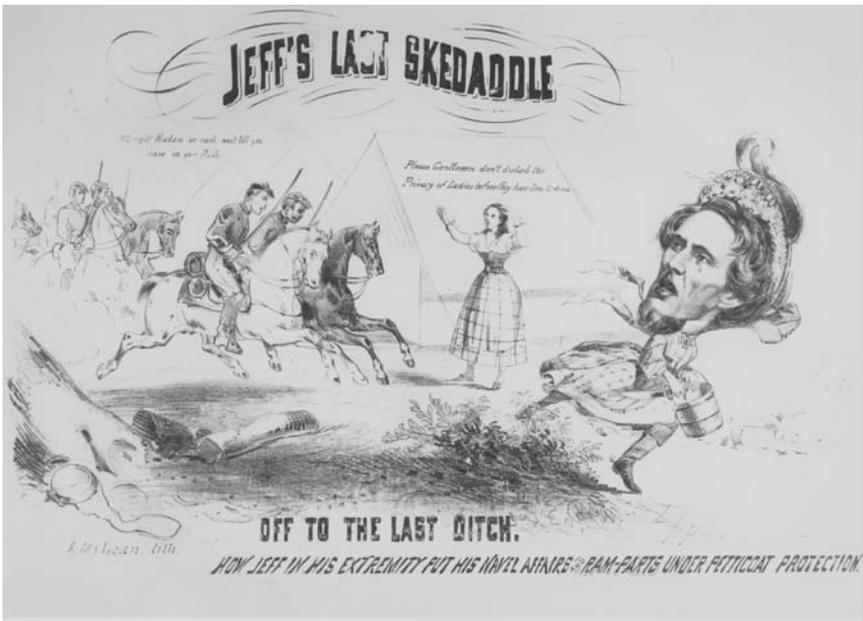


Fig. 12. A. McLean, *Jeff's Last Skedaddle Off to the Last Ditch. How Jeff in His Extremity Put His Navel Affairs and Ram-Parts Under Petticoat Protection.* Lithograph, ca. 1865. (*The Lincoln Museum, Neg. No. 3586*)

These charges, written and visual alike, did enormous damage to Davis's already shattered reputation. And at the very time such prints were proliferating through the North—and undoubtedly filtering into the South as well, once surrender and peace reopened commerce between the sections—Abraham Lincoln morphed from a political figure into a national saint, now portrayed as the conquering hero of the Civil War, riding triumphantly into Richmond or ascending to heaven. Envisioning the afterlife of both Civil War presidents, printmakers showed Davis (in women's clothes, of course) meeting the ghost of John Brown (*Fig. 13*), while Lincoln not only regained his claim to the mantle of Washington but had also emerged as his peer in the national pantheon in prints showing the two presidents together as equals (*Fig. 14*), their captions celebrating Lincoln for having “saved” what Washington “made.” In the “coming days,” one Lincoln eulogist said of the founder and preserver of the Union, “their portraits shall hang side by side.”³⁶ No prophecy about the American graphic arts was ever more quickly fulfilled.

³⁶ David B. Chesebrough, *No Sorrow Like Our Sorrow: Northern Protestant Ministers and the Assassination of Abraham Lincoln* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press,



Fig. 13. G. Querner, John Brown Exhibiting His Hangman! *Lithograph*, Washington, D.C., 1865. (Library of Congress)

Of course, Jefferson Davis could never hope to achieve the image transformation that Abraham Lincoln earned with his assassination. But in prints Davis proved resilient. **Although his image died aborning with the decline of Confederate printmaking, the southern cause lived; once the cause was lost, however, his image rose again from the dead.** In prints showing Jeff Davis in prison, manfully enduring his confinement, he became a martyr himself—a living martyr to the Lost Cause, a part he played for the rest of his life.³⁷

Gibson & Company of Cincinnati was one of the first northern firms to recognize this postwar commercial potential of Davis's second iconographical act. Its 1865 lithograph, *The Last Act of the Drama of Secession*, was the only known separate-sheet print to treat the flight of Jefferson Davis without malice. Instead, Davis was shown in a dra-

1994), 57–59.

³⁷ Neely, Holzer, and Boritt, *The Confederate Image*, 169–90.

matic torch-lit scene taking leave of his despondent military family to keep the Confederate flag flying in exile. Surely this singular image could not compete with the sheer volume of hoopskirt depictions that convulsed the country with derisive laughter around the same time. But it may have been of more long-lasting importance, if only to reopen the national market for heroic images of Davis. Once northern printmakers realized that southerners still yearned for such portraits, they gladly filled the need, with new straightforward portraiture and sympathetic history scenes.

Further proof of Davis's rebounding image could be glimpsed, for example, in a series of bizarre allegorical history prints by Kimmel &

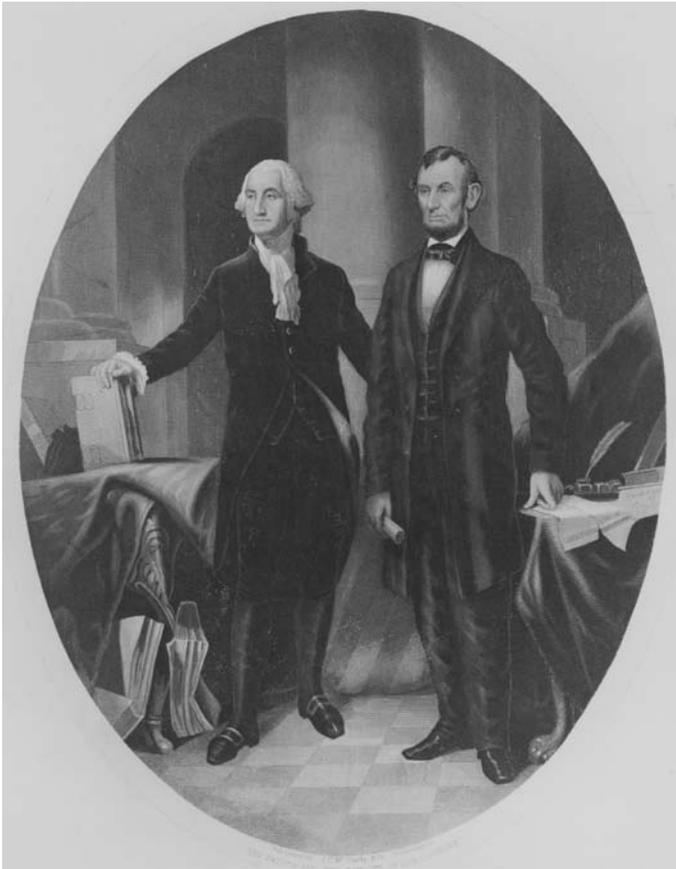


Fig. 14. John C. McGoffin, The Father and the Saviour of our Country. Lithograph, published by J. C. McCurdy, Philadelphia, 1865. (The Lincoln Museum, Neg. No. 3449)



Fig. 15. Kimmel & Forster, *The Last Offer of Reconciliation*[:] In Remembrance of Prest. A. Lincoln's "The Door is Open for All." Lithograph, published by Henry & Wm. Voight, New York, 1865. (*The Lincoln Museum*, Neg. No. 2803)

Forster of New York that may have sweetened the bitter history of war in order to appeal to Davis's admirers as well as Lincoln's. The first of these, *The Outbreak of the Rebellion*, seemed to propose that greedy capitalists, not hot-headed secessionists, had brought on the rebellion. Davis was included in the complicated scene, portrayed under a palmetto tree around which a serpent coiled. But his image was so small, and placed so deeply in the background, that it seemed almost an afterthought. Davis not only escaped blame, he may also have escaped notice.

As for the publisher's equally unusual companion piece, *The Last Offer of Reconciliation* (Fig. 15), it implied only that Davis could have avoided further bloodshed at the end of the war by accepting Lincoln's invitation into a symbolic, eagle-festooned temple of liberty.³⁸ Davis's gesture indicates that he rejected this offer, yet he is portrayed as dignified, not defiant. Such prints were principally designed to enhance

³⁸ For both of the Kimmel & Forster history prints, see Reilly, *American Political Prints*, 563–65.

Lincoln's reputation—this Kimmel & Forster lithograph was “Dedicated to the Memory of our most lamented late President Abraham Lincoln.” But merely by allowing Davis to be portrayed side-by-side with Lincoln as his wartime equal, the prints subliminally encouraged the reconstruction of Davis's shattered image.

The Davis image had risen again. He remained a regional hero, of course, while Lincoln blossomed into national, even international fame. A substantial number of northern-made prints continued to depict Davis as a traitor even as Lincoln entered the realm of national sainthood. And certainly the few examples examined here do not truly reflect the preponderance of Lincoln images throughout the war and into the twentieth century. There were countless more Lincoln prints than Davis prints, and after 1865 the image dominance was virtually overwhelming. Yet Davis and his image stubbornly endured, if only in the hearts of his most loyal followers; and what historian Roger Fischer has called “the struggle for the American soul” continued, in visual terms, in cartoon-laden humor magazines long after Appomattox and assassination suggested the possibility of sectional reconciliation.

And not all postwar observers judged Davis harshly. Writing in 1868, *New York Tribune* editor Horace Greeley, once a staple character in pro-Lincoln prints, conceded sympathetically that “each was thoroughly in earnest, thoroughly persuaded of the justice of the case whereof he stood forth.” But he added, “Mr. Lincoln was remarkably devoid of that magnetic quality which thrills the masses with enthusiasm, rendering them heedless of sacrifice and sensible to danger; Mr. Davis was nowise distinguished by its possession . . . But Mr. Davis carefully improved—as Mr. Lincoln did not—every opportunity to proclaim his own undoubting faith in the justice of his cause.”³⁹

In 1881, not long after his return to partial image respectability, Jefferson Davis published his own memoirs. Readers may have failed to notice his brief but almost poignant admission that once he had feared the burdens of the presidency because so few American presidents had ever “left the office as happy men.” He knew “how darkly the shadows gathered around the setting sun” of former presidents, “and how eagerly the multitude would turn to gaze upon another orb . . . rising

³⁹ Horace Greeley, *Recollections of a Busy Life* (New York: J. B. Ford & Co., 1868), 410–11.

to take its place in the political firmament.”⁴⁰ Throughout the war and as long as the fashion for their display endured, Americans turned to gaze on their northern and southern presidents, as the sun of reputation alternately rose and set. Popular prints not only illustrated this cycle; it influenced it.

⁴⁰ Jefferson Davis, *Rise and Fall*, 1:177.