



Lincoln and Davis: Imagining America, 1809-1865 (American Political Thought (University Press of Kansas))

Brian R. Dirck

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Abraham Lincoln: the Great Emancipator, savior of the Union, and revered national hero. Jefferson Davis: defender of slavery, leader of a lost cause, and forlorn object of scorn. Both Lincoln and Davis remain locked in the American psyche as iconic symbols of victory and defeat. They presided over a terrible war that decided the fate of slavery and severely tested each man's resolve and potential for greatness. But, as Brian Dirck shows, such images tend to obscure the larger visions that compelled both men to pursue policies and actions that resulted in such a devastating national tragedy.

Going well beyond most conventional accounts, Dirck examines Lincoln's and Davis's respective ideas concerning national identity, highlighting the strengths and shortcomings of each leader's worldview. By focusing on issues that have often been overlooked in previous studies of Lincoln and Davis—and of the war in general—he reveals the ways in which these two leaders viewed that imagined community called the American nation.

The first comprehensive and detailed study to compare the two men's national imaginations, Dirck's study provides a provocative analysis of how their everyday lives—the influence of fathers and friends, jobs and homes—worked in complex ways to shape Lincoln's and Davis's perceptions of what the American nation was supposed to be and could become and how those images could reject or accommodate the institution of slavery.

Dirck contends that Lincoln subscribed to the notion of a "nation of strangers" in which people never really knew one another's hearts, reflecting his wariness of sentimental attachment, while Davis held to a "community of sentiment" based on honor and comradeship that depended a great deal on emotional bonding. As Dirck shows, these two ideals are very much a part of the current national conversation—among citizens, scholars, and politicians—that has brought Davis back into the fold of great Americans while challenging many of the clichés that surround the Lincoln myth.

Ultimately, Dirck argues, the imagined communities of these two remarkable men transcend the experience of war to illuminate the ongoing debates over what it means to be an American. Through this engaging and original work, he urges a restoration of balance to our understanding—not only of *Lincoln and Davis*, but also of the contributions made by North and South alike to those debates.

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