

HOW THE SOUTH REALLY LOST  
THE CIVIL WAR

# DIXIE BETRAYED



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## Southern Magnolias

avid Eicher's latest work, *Dixie Betrayed: How the South Really Lost the Civil War* (Little, Brown and Company, 2006), attempts to dismantle an inherent romanticism he finds in southern views about the War of Northern Aggression. I encountered this romanticism recently when I flew to my alma mater in Columbia, South Carolina, for the American Conference for Irish Studies. Arriving from Colorado Springs, I my skin readily absorbed the humidity like a sea monkey. The founding fathers of the state made Columbia the capitol because of the situation between the mountains and the sea: good for a government seat in an agrarian age, bad for a pale hairy man with a propensity for perspiration. This is the South Carolina I remembered. I did not feel truly at home until, driving my rental sedan, I saw a bumper sticker on the Escort in front of me: SECESSION: STILL A GOOD IDEA.

I come from the eastern panhandle of West Virginia, so I have a natural fascination with the Civil War, being no less than one hour from Harper's Ferry, Manassas Junction, Monocacy, and Sharpsburg. I have what I fancy is an objective interest, so the sense that the war continues, however subtly, in the hearts and minds of the sons and daughters of the Confederacy strikes at an odd angle with me. As I once heard a Yankee plumber say to a Virginia Carpenter: "I'm from Pennsylvania. We know we won. Get over it." I carried the same sentiments in my first visit to South Carolina and into a regional barbeque chain, whose owner (unknown to me at the time) vehemently opposed integration, holding out until the law forced him to allow people of color to mingle with good, hard-working white folk. In the restaurant, I purchased several pamphlets simply for their entertainment value, including "What the Confederate Battle Flag Really Means" and "Abraham Lincoln was a liar."

*Dixie Betrayed* seeks to dispel the revisionism inherent in fiery pamphleteering. The author engages in the same exchange of grape shot that has become an academic extension of the war, postulating and answering the "what ifs" that would have led General Lee to victory. I am not fond of any history that claims prominence as "the" alternative history instead of "an" alternative

history, as the subtitle *How the South Really Lost the Civil War* suggests. Eicher claims the “real” reason the Confederacy succumbed in the spring of 1865 was not because of northern superiority in men and materiel, but the incompetence and infighting in Richmond’s Capitol building. Richmond’s divisions (as Eicher presents them) provides further reasoning to the old South’s downfall, but Eicher has great difficulty persuading that Jeff Davis’s headaches were any more severe than the troubles the Lincoln presidency handled: Lincoln cobbled together a tenuous cabinet full of rivals (who hated him and thought they deserved the role of appointer more than appointee), suspended habeas corpus, and faced his former commander of the Army of the Potomac, George McClellan, in the 1864 election. Eicher gives slight acknowledgement to the North’s political difficulties in his prologue:

It would be silly to think that the Confederacy’s family arguments were unique or to ascribe the Confederacy’s loss of the war entirely to them. But, in the case of the Confederacy, the political and military arguments that echoed throughout Richmond’s streets and onto the battlefields made Confederate military success—and independence—far more difficult than it might have been, maybe even impossible. State rights wounded the United States but destroyed the Confederacy. (13)

The brief paragraph rebuttal emphasizes the true argument of the book, engaging in the historical novelist’s trade of converting “what happened” into “might have been.” Instead of “How the South Really Lost the Civil War,” the title becomes “How the South Really Could Have Won the Civil War,” an apposite but different issue.

Through all the difficulties of his overall argument, Eicher’s prose reads more like historical fiction than ossified history. Once he gets away from atmospheric considerations (three mentions in the first ten pages describe the weather of an important day) and repetitive passages (noting twice in eight pages, with slightly new phrasing, that John Calhoun gave birth to the Constitutionality of succession), Eicher’s prose style drives what could be a regurgitation of bureaucratic letters into a more enjoyable read.

The elegant descriptions of *Dixie Betrayed* confuse the narrative at times, sacrificing clarity for entertainment. Eicher typically introduces each chapter with character descriptions (I did not know so many people had “steely eyes”), which hasten the narrative but often leaves the reader confused in the sequence of events. In the chapter “A Curious Cabinet,” Eicher introduces Judah Benjamin as

the attorney general, and later in the chapter mentions his function as secretary of war without transition. Only in the next chapter does he clarify when and why Benjamin became the secretary of war. Eicher has a historian's sense of humor, educated but dry. He mentions the Confederate Congress' inability to pass legislation due to "a disease that pervaded much of the new Southern law: debatitis" (inflammation of the debatorial gland?).

After the first one hundred pages (bogged down by unnecessary descriptions of the fall of Fort Sumter and the architecture of Confederate office buildings), Eicher unfolds a solid case against revisionist history. He demonstrates the difficulties Davis faced in creating a federal force in a country founded on states' rights (including his own obduracy), and how the Confederate Congress' refusal to pass legislation led directly to problems in the field. *Dixie Betrayed* makes a convincing argument in the portrayal of men like newspaper editor Henry Cleveland, Georgia governor Joe Brown, and Vice President Alexander Stephens, who seriously considered leading a Georgian effort to secede from the Confederacy. The portraiture of Stephens solidifies the overall thrust of the book, depicting a weak man who surreptitiously undermined his president and the Confederacy.

Eicher bears down on what he terms "revisionist elitism," claiming southern generals and politicians after the war created the idea that the Union overwhelmed the Confederacy by manpower and industrial resources, a romanticized view of the war that the south quickly embraced and the north dully ignored. Eicher presents his argument as a divergent path from accepted history, but one only has to look as far as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and William Faulkner for a dismissal of the romanticized south. Consider this passage from Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*

Chickamauga and Franklin, Vicksburg and Corinth and Atlanta—battles lost not alone because of superior numbers and failing ammunition and stores, but because of generals who should not have been generals, who were generals not through training in contemporary methods or aptitude for learning them, but by the divine right to say 'Go there' conferred upon them by an absolute caste system[.]

I imagine the "true" reason why the Confederacy lost falls closer to Faulkner's analysis than Eicher's.

*Dixie Betrayed* reinforces Faulkner's suspicion of romance with historical fact and documentation. Eicher backs his assertions with primary sources, usually published correspondence. He should be commended for incorporating

unpublished correspondence as well, the kind of source that will render a researcher myopic by week's end with only one sentence he can actually use. He displays the importance of his book in more theoretical terms, questioning the possibility of a government founded on individual state's rights succeeding over a federal force. As history, *Dixie Betrayed* looks more like a popular work than a piece of serious scholarship (not necessarily a disparaging remark). I find real value in the book as a study in political science, a valuable facet in a grand study of a failed state, but *Dixie Betrayed* does not provide any new voice to the continuing discussion of southern defeat.

During one of my conference breaks, I walked the two short blocks from the USC campus to the South Carolina state house. When I lived in Columbia, I loved walking the capitol grounds, mostly for the peculiar layout of the monuments, an exacting study of the sub-consciousness of the Civil War in South Carolina. The south lawn of the capitol building features a young Strom Thurmond, walking away from the building and towards the Daughters of the Confederacy monument. The African-American Memorial flanks the east wing, and features prominent contributors to American history and culture, including my favorite, John Burkes "Dizzy" Gillespie. A confederate battle flag flies fifty yards in front of the capitol steps, moved there from the top of the house in 2000 after a series of protests and a boycott of the state by the NAACP. At the base of the state house steps stands a statue of George Washington (who owned slaves and property in my home town of Bath, West Virginia) leaning on a cane with the lower half missing, looking like he is wielding a shiv in a prison brawl. A plaque describes the deficiency:

During the occupation of Columbia by Sherman's army Feb. 13-19, 1865, soldiers brickballed this statue and broke off the lower part of a walking cane.

The stately magnolias are my favorite part of the grounds, and the trees (whose oblong, perpetually shiny leaves remind me of slick green fish) mark for me what it means to be southern. In Bath, at base of the lower Shenandoah Valley (the Shenandoah River, like the Nile, runs south-north), the sweetgums, white oaks, and sugar maples burst into a tableau of red, orange, and yellow mid-October before releasing the leaves for winter. Autumn has always been my favorite time of year because of the crisp sound of leaves underfoot, and the opportunity for renewal in the spring, as Philip Larkin's "The Trees" states, "Last year is dead, they seem to say, / Begin afresh, afresh, afresh."

The magnolia, that most southern of trees, does not allow for such relief. I recognize the "South Will Rise Again" mythos pervasive on T-shirts and bumper

stickers, but this sentiment is less vernal renewal and more akin to dead leaves crawling up a trunk and reattaching themselves to the branches. My first November in South Carolina, I wondered why the magnolias retained their leaves deep into autumn and through the winter, as if they represent a memory that cannot die, bred by a salubrious climate that allows for two hundred years to seem like a day. An ice storm pummeled Columbia in January, and the caked leaves brought huge branches down in the middle of the night, draped on power lines and cutting electricity to half the city for two days. I thought if only the magnolias gave up their leaves in late autumn, they could have survived the storm.

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