

***The Confederate Nation: 1861-1865.* By Emory M. Thomas (1979) New York: Harper & Row, Pp. xvi + 384, ISBN 0-06-131965-1 (paperback) \$15 00 U.S.**

"To fulfill Southern nationalism, Confederate Southerners had to slaughter some of the sacred cows and overturn some of the shibboleths that had previously defined them as a people." (p.144) The clear summary of Professor Emory M. Thomas' 1979 work captures the angst and challenge the South faced as notions of Southern sectionalism rose with radical fervor, congealed into a new confederate government, gave way to Southern nationalism, transformed into a Confederate identity, and failed both on the battlefields of the civil war and in the minds of Southerners. Thomas received his PhD from Rice University in 1966 and prior to publishing *The Confederate Nation* published *The Confederacy as a Revolutionary Experience* and *The Confederate State of Richmond* in 1971 followed in 1973 by *The American War and Peace: 1860-1877*. He is a prodigious Civil War scholar who taught at the University of Richmond and retired as the Regents Professor of History Emeritus at the University of Georgia. He grew up in Virginia and primarily taught in the South throughout his career.

As a scholar of the Old South during the Civil War, he is a conservative writer seeking to expand understanding of the South and with *The Confederate Nation* successfully charts the genesis, rise, maturation, collapse, and fall of Southern nationalism. In this pursuit, *The Confederate Nation* is an extension of arguments he published in *The Confederate State of Richmond* and his dissertation, *The Confederacy as a Revolutionary Experience*. *The Confederate Nation* is a well-written and engaging book that charts the internal revolution of Confederate ideals that initially elevated Southern sectionalism into nationalism as a

conservative revolution centered on protecting the Southern way of life that ultimately caused Southern nationalism to crumble as protecting the Southern way of life became impossible.

In developing the foundation to his arguments for conservative revolution, Thomas insightfully describes an Old South that in the mid 1800s began to close their minds to alternatives to their way of life and drew the conclusion, "Questions about the Southern way of life became moral questions, and compromises of the Southern way of life became concessions of virtue and righteousness." (p. 4) The ubiquitous Southerner was developing a bi-polar interpretation of the world around him. He was at once for all things Southern and against all things Yankee. While the argument is logically plausible, Thomas does his work a great disservice by not better defining who this Southerner is. There are weak attempts to define the Southerner as statistically white, non-slave owning, supportive of anti-democratic ideals of aristocracy and puppets of the landed aristocracy, and mobile. Southern mobility is his most damaging argument. He offers no evidence to their mobility and no evidence of the Southern everyman's political agency yet he presses the issue by describing the Southern everyman as a middle class in an agrarian society. Without proven mobility or agency it is hard to assign the moniker middle class to an uneducated, politically silent (or at least complicit) agrarian class.

Thomas attempts to set the stage for a general wellspring of common zeal that held a common view of the Southern way of life and yielded a common voice eager to protect that way of life. Unfortunately, one has to accept significant claims on weak evidence in order to move forward with the book. Accepting Thomas' argument, however, yields a picture of a conservative revolution that rises in the mid-1800s with the increasingly strong development and adherence to a Southern regionalism. Thomas successfully paints the picture of a South

identifying itself as Southern simultaneously as it identifies itself as American. Gradually, over the antebellum period, the Southern identity takes primacy over an American identity as Thomas argues Southerners felt betrayed by the greater American identity which, at its core, is more liberal and open to change. Thomas convincingly uses the Brooks-Sumner incident in 1819 as a herald to the Southern identity and associated honor which must be protected and later with Robert E. Lee's decision to fight for the Southern cause in 1861 as the full development of this psychological shift.

Thomas builds on the establishment of antebellum Southern identity to 1861 when South had to develop its own government in the wake of secession. While Southern nationalism was crucial in creating a Confederacy, Thomas says, "the fundamental goal of the Southern revolution was the preservation of the Southern life style as Southerners then lived it" (p. 65). It was at this point the challenge of radical conservatives began to surface as embodied in the Montgomery Debate. The radicals who spurred the South to secession faced the very limited objectives of the revolution they facilitated. Southerners wanted to preserve *status quo antebellum*, not institute a new way. As a result, the Montgomery Debate's cautious movement forward coupled with a Confederate Constitution that was very similar to the one it meant to disband set the stage for a very defensive approach to Southern independence, militarily and politically. The cautiousness was displayed by other Southern states who did not rush to join the Confederacy until after Lincoln called for volunteers to go to war.

Once hostilities began, Thomas describes the South as caught between the world it wants to protect and the world it must become to survive. Survival won the political day. The South needed a strong central government, a unified strategy, and most importantly, victories

on the battlefield. The cries for independence fell quiet to a Confederate President Davis who ran the government and the war effort with singular effort, rapidly cashiering any who would oppose him or show independence of thought without due deference. As the war drew on, continued sacrifice would alter the character of the South so much that Thomas describes it as “more Confederate and less Southern” in character (p. 166).

Ultimately desperation led to the abandonment of most of the Southern ideals. Southern war crimes grew in tragic scope, slaves were granted freedom in exchange for military service, the female ideal was abandoned in the harsh realities of war, and Southern honor was in doubt at the highest levels as even Davis supported notions of guerrilla warfare. The very ideals the war was fought over were abandoned in the desperate hours prior to the war’s conclusion. Thomas says, ““Having sacrificed or been willing to sacrifice most of the ideological tenets they went to war to defend, ultimately Confederate Southerners we willing to lose their national life in order to save itself” (p. 305).

Accepting his troubled definition of the Southern everyman allows the reader to follow an otherwise well-crafted argument that charts the rise and fall of a conservative revolution. Thomas argues it begins with identity and develops into cause as regionalism gives way to nationalism. He points out the risks to a nationalist movement constrained by conservatism, whereby change to secure the national ideals must come at a cost to the ideals of independence. The challenge to create a central government began the long process of compromise that Southerners themselves were fundamentally opposed to. Compromise led to desperation and the Confederate nation became nothing like the Old South it was formed to protect.

Thomas' argument was logically convincing and showed obvious flaws in Southern political thinking of the 1850s and 60s. Pulling from solid evidence, Thomas argues his points for an intellectual audience well-versed in the chronology of the Civil War. His is not an overtly narrative history of the war, but a political history of the birth and death of the Confederacy. Thomas' argument could be improved with a more careful definition of the South he examines. His reluctance to make many strong assertions throughout the book makes his curiously adamant assertion of the South as a mobile, middle class society all the more confusing. It did not seem that the South's mobility or middle-class mores had much to do with the rise and fall of the Confederacy and should have been avoided.

Regardless, the book is an excellent study in conservative nationalism and should be added to any library on the subject of the Civil War South. Although the book cannot stand completely alone as a seminal work, it offers a unique, conservative perspective to Civil War political study.

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