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Napoleon and French Ideology Had an Enormous Impact on Confederacy Founders

LSU Press to publish historian Jeffrey Zvengrowski's study in January

Baton Rouge, LA— In this highly original study of Confederate ideology and politics, Jeffrey Zvengrowski suggests that Confederate president Jefferson Davis and his supporters saw Bonapartist France as a model for the Confederate States of America. They viewed themselves as struggling not so much for the preservation of slavery but for antebellum Democratic ideals of equality and white supremacy. The faction dominated the Confederate government and deemed Republicans a coalition controlled by pro-British abolitionists championing inequality among whites.

Like Napoleon I and Napoleon III, pro-Davis Confederates desired to build an industrial nation-state capable of waging Napoleonic-style warfare with large conscripted armies. States' rights, they believed, should not preclude the national government from exercising power. Anglophile anti-Davis Confederates, in contrast, advocated inequality among whites, favored radical states' rights, and supported slavery-in-the-abstract theories that were dismissive of white supremacy. Having opposed pro-Davis Democrats before the war, they preferred decentralized guerrilla warfare to Napoleonic campaigns and hoped for support from Britain. The Confederacy, they avowed, would willingly become a de facto British agricultural colony upon achieving independence. Pro-Davis Confederates, wanted the Confederacy to become an ally of France and protector of sympathetic northern states.

Zvengrowski traces the origins of the pro-Davis Confederate ideology to Jeffersonian Democrats and their faction of War Hawks, who lost power on the national level in the 1820s but regained it during Davis' term as secretary of war. Davis used this position to cultivate friendly relations with France and later warned northerners that the South would secede if Republicans captured the White House. When Lincoln won the 1860 election, Davis endorsed secession. The ideological heirs of the pro-British faction soon came to loathe Davis for antagonizing Britain and for offering to accept gradual emancipation in exchange for direct assistance from French soldiers in Mexico.

Zvengrowski's captivating new interpretation of Confederate ideology situates the Civil War in a global context of imperial competition. It also shows how anti-Davis ex-Confederates came to dominate the postwar South and obscure the true nature of Confederate ideology. Furthermore, it updates the biographies of familiar characters: Calhoun, who befriended Bonapartist officers; Davis, who was as much a Francophile as his namesake; Jefferson, who may have been a Napoleon I sympathizer; and Robert E. Lee, who as West Point's superintendent mentored a grand-nephew of Napoleon I.

Jeffrey Zvengrowski is assistant editor for the *Papers of George Washington* and assistant research professor at the University of Virginia.

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French History / Civil War

To request a review copy or set up an interview with the author,
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