By the end of 1864, many Southerners blamed Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederate States of America, for the almost certain defeat of secession. "No money in the Treasury, no food to feed General Lee’s Army, no troops to oppose General Sherman," Ordinance Chief Josiah Gorgas, a friend of Davis, complained. “When I see the President trifle away precious hours in idle discussion & discursive comment, I feel as though he was not equal to his great task.”

Did the South lose the Civil War because of Davis' incompetence? In "Embattled Rebel," James McPherson, professor of history emeritus at Princeton University and the dean of Civil War historians, provides a fine-grained, fascinating and judicious assessment of Davis' performance as commander in chief. Pointing to the substantial disadvantage of the Confederacy in manpower and resources, McPherson demonstrates that although President Abraham Lincoln and Gen. U.S. Grant won the war, Davis and Gen. Robert E. Lee should not shoulder the bulk of the blame for losing it.

McPherson acknowledges that Davis was all too often preoccupied with minutiae. His relationships with his generals (with the notable exception of Lee) were far from harmonious, but, McPherson suggests, in many cases he was more sinned against than sinning.

Most important, according to McPherson, was the dilemma Davis faced in choosing a military strategy. The demands of governors that their states be defended, McPherson points out, resulted in a dispersed army that limited Davis’ options. When troops were transferred from Arkansas to Mississippi in 1862, for example, the governor threatened to secede from the Confederacy. The offensive strategy pursued by Lee in Pennsylvania in 1863, for example, the governor threatened to secede from the Confederacy. The offensive strategy pursued by Lee in Pennsylvania in 1863, which Davis enthusiastically supported, “came closest to success,” but ultimately failed. And a “Fabian” strategy, in which the Confederacy yielded territory, concentrating forces to strike Union soldiers at opportune moments, and, in essence, trading space for time — with the hope of wearing down the will of the North to keep fighting — would not have worked. As the military historian Richard McMurry once quipped, with a Fabian strategy in place the Confederates would have fought the Atlanta campaign in Key West, Fla.

In early 1865, the Confederacy had 126,000 men present for duty, while the Union could count on 621,000. A desperate Davis considered the unthinkable — enlisting slaves as noncombatant soldiers in the Army and freeing them after "service faithfully rendered." A closely divided Confederate Congress agreed, but it was too little and too late. Davis fled the capital and urged Southerners to continue the struggle. He was arrested near Irwinville, Ga., on May 10. In the remaining 24 years of his life, McPherson reminds us, Davis “never recanted the cause for which he had fought and lost.”
Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.