After his presidency, relieved of political responsibilities, perhaps the time was now ripe at least to act the elder statesman and try to influence public opinion that he believed had to be changed before anything could be done. But no, now he was too old, Jefferson told a young Virginian who had invited him to speak out in the anti-slavery cause.

Jefferson was bitter about the Northern agitation over Missouri, which threatened the Union. The time had apparently not yet come even to limit the growth of slavery, although he wrote in 1821 that he was still as convinced as it had been "written in the Book of Fate . . . that these people are to be free."

The year before Jefferson's death in 1825 Lafayette visited his old friend. Noting an increase of racial prejudice in America, Lafayette tried to persuade Jefferson to use his prestige to call for the education of the slaves as a preparation for emancipation. Jefferson pleaded his age (he was eighty-two), but did agree to support teaching the slaves to read. Writing, however, was another matter; the ability to forge passes would undermine the institution of slavery! To this the radical of 1776 had come in fifty years. Slavery was doomed, but nothing should be done to undermine the institution—to advance the moment of doom.

Only two weeks before his death Jefferson defended his policy: "A good cause is often injured more by ill-timed efforts of its friends than by the arguments of enemies. Persuasion, perseverance, and patience are the best advocates in questions depending on the will of theirs." Perhaps. But in the previous forty years Jefferson had made no public efforts at persuasion, and if he had persevered, it was in ignoring the issue.

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It is surprising that Oliver Hazard Perry has not had more biographers. His victory over the British in 1813 is the stuff of which
biographies — and movies — are made. Perry, as every schoolchild knows, built his fleet in the wilderness at Erie, Pennsylvania (then Presque Isle). He sailed forth, undermanned, to meet a British squadron nominally his equal. At the height of the battle, his flagship Lawrence shot to pieces, he rowed to the Niagara, and with a few broadsides shattered Barclay’s vessels. This triumph ended forever the threat to the Old Northwest posed by the British and the Shawnee chief Tecumseh. “... Perry changed our history, our fate. ... It was Perry’s initial victory, not the [Treaty of Ghent], which rendered secure the frontier on the shore of a sea of space, an ocean of grassy prairies shimmering away to the sundown horizon” (p. x).

It is equally possible that the decisive victory on the lakes was not Perry’s, but Macdonough’s at Plattsburgh on Lake Champlain. Had Prevost succeeded in severing the New England states from the rest of the country, the Northwest might have been theirs for the asking. Perry’s victory also was as much due to the skill of his carpenters and contractors as to his own efforts. His success was visible proof that in 1813 the United States triumphed logistically on Lake Erie. Had the war continued into 1815 — had the British made a determined effort to reinforce Canada — nothing could have been done to interfere seriously with the flow of men and supplies. Perhaps Perry’s triumph was due to British strategic or tactical blunders as much as to his own unquestioned heroism. Finally, Perry seems but one of a crop of naval heroes: Hull, Bainbridge, Decatur, Lawrence, Rodgers. Was Oliver Hazard Perry a “typical” officer, if such a creature existed? None of this is intended to diminish Perry’s deserved reputation, but to suggest that both he and the navy of which he was a part need to be fitted into a broader matrix.

Unfortunately, Dillon seems unaware of these questions. The Perry which emerges comes straight from the pages of Marryat or C. S. Forester. “By studying the shape of Perry’s life we can see the contours and dimensions of heroism. By measuring his career we can discern the metes and bounds of true patriotism” (p. xi). Perry, we are told, showed “extraordinary moral courage” (p. x). He owed his success to “his steadiness of character ... his hard work, thorough planning and mastery of detail, and his enginelike energy.” He was “a genius of the matter-of-fact, completely in command of his professional skills of seamanship, discipline, tactics, gunnery and ordnance” (p. xi). If he did have a temper, or show a degree of “arrogance and vanity,” this can be excused in one who was “more concerned with duty, honor, and country than with glory. ...” (p.
xiii). Holding such views, the author perhaps can be excused from resisting the temptation to place Perry in a more dispassionate context.

The book lacks both footnotes and bibliography, and thus is of little value to serious scholars. Dillon did read earlier biographies of Perry, notably that of Alexander MacKenzie, published in the 1840s, and worked with the Perry papers (evidenced by too-extensive quotations from the commodore’s correspondence). He shows no evidence of having read Theodore Roosevelt’s or Alfred Thayer Mahan’s works on the naval war of 1812, or the more recent study of Reginald Horsman, The War of 1812, which is the best one-volume treatment extant. This is much to be regretted, for Perry deserves a good biographer. Dillon, with a deserved reputation as a historian of California and the West, would have been better advised to stick to the area he knows best. Finally, the absence of illustrations and diagrams of the Battle of Lake Erie makes it difficult for the average reader to follow the engagement. The first fifty pages of Samuel Eliot Morison’s “Old Bruin” : Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry, are far more enlightening on the subject of Oliver Hazard Perry and his remarkable family. Surely the field of naval history has outgrown hagiographic studies of the “drum and trumpet” school.

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Jefferson Davis’s name is among the most familiar in American history. At the same time, he is one of the least understood men in the nation’s past. He has been praised as the heroic figure who kept the Confederacy alive long after it was doomed, yet he has often been openly blamed for the Southern defeat. Each year, sections of the South still celebrate his birthday and his descendants meet to eulogize his memory, but at the same time most Southerners ignore both events. In the United States Congress, a body Davis belonged to but resigned from when secession came, a movement has finally restored United States citizenship to him. Apparently unknown to Congress, Davis would oppose such legislation were he alive today. His concept