**Jefferson Davis**

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Military hero and successful politician Jefferson Davis accepted the office of president of the Confederacy, said his wife, "as a man might speak of a sentence of death." He would have preferred a military command in the new Confederate Army and had little taste for political intrigue and infighting.

Born on June 3, 1808 in Kentucky but raised in Wilkinson, Mississippi, Davis attended several private schools before securing an appointment to West Point in 1824. The six-foot-tall, strong-willed and emotionally intense Davis thrived in the military. Upon graduation in 1828, he was stationed on the Northwestern frontier (present-day Wisconsin and northern Illinois). In the early 1830s, he served in the Black Hawk Indian War. After marrying Sarah Knox, the daughter of his commander, Zachary Taylor, on June 30, 1835, Davis resigned his commission to develop Brierfield, a 1,000-acre plantation in Mississippi. His wife lived only three months after their marriage, dying of malarial fever on September 15, 1835.

For the next 10 years, Davis committed himself to establishing his plantation out of the wilderness. Convinced that African Americans were biologically inferior and that the Bible supported the institution of slavery, Davis sincerely believed that slavery benefited slaves as much as white slaveholders. The profits he made from his plantation and the good care he took of his slaves corroborated his beliefs. He was a hard worker and expected a great deal from his slaves, but he also frequently worked alongside them in the fields, clearing trees and stumps from the land to make room for crops. During this period, he began to read history and politics voraciously, forming opinions on states' rights doctrines in response to abolitionists' attacks on the institution of slavery.

On February 26, 1845, Davis married again; his new wife was Varina Howell, a beautiful and vivacious southern belle with strong ties to the local aristocracy. In November of that same year, Davis was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives as a Democrat. Always partial to military life, he resigned from Congress to fight in the Mexican War the following June. Taking command of a volunteer unit known as the "Mississippi Rifles," Davis joined Gen. Taylor (his former father-in-law) in time to help negotiate the surrender of Monterrey. He and the Mississippi Rifles became heroes at Buena Vista for a decisive stand that quite possibly salvaged a victory for Taylor's army.

After the Mississippi Rifles disbanded in the summer of 1847, Davis was elected to the U.S. Senate. A loyal Southern Democrat, he supported President James K. Polk in his expansionist policies and opposed the admission of California as a free state. He also opposed the Wilmot Proviso. After the Compromise of 1850 was adopted over his protest, Davis resigned his Senate seat to run an unsuccessful campaign for governor of Mississippi. In 1852, he helped elect Democrat Franklin Pierce to the presidency, in recognition of which Pierce appointed Davis secretary of war in 1853.

While secretary of war, Davis increased the size of the army; improved military regulations, equipment, and salaries; and unsuccessfully attempted to replace seniority with merit as the basis for promotion. His greatest accomplishment lay in encouraging railroad construction by authorizing survey parties to prepare detailed reports on possible railroad routes. Davis supported a southern route for the first transcontinental railroad and played an important role in the Gadsden Purchase. He also favored annexing Cuba and Nicaragua.

After Pierce left office, Davis was reelected to the Senate in 1857 and quickly became the chief spokesman for Southern legislators advocating the extension of slavery into the territories. Davis believed that since the Constitution protected slavery and also protected private property, no federal legislation could be passed that inhibited the right of slave owners to take their slaves anywhere in the United States. Indeed, the Constitution made it the duty of the federal government to protect the property of slaveholders. A moderate advocate of secession, Davis argued that the United States was composed of sovereign states that, because they had voluntarily joined the Union, could also choose to leave it. By the 1850s, he had come to regard the South as a country within a country and himself as its spokesman.

After the Democratic Party split over the slavery issue in 1860, Davis supported the unsuccessful candidacy of John Breckinridge. Realistic enough to know that secession would not be accomplished peacefully, Davis supported efforts to find some kind of compromise solution to the crisis posed by Abraham Lincoln's election. When Mississippi voted on January 5, 1861 to secede, however, he resigned from the Senate and went with his state.

Back in Mississippi, Davis was appointed major-general of the state's troops and hoped to be selected as commander of the South's army. Instead, the general convention of seceding states elected Davis president of the newly formed Confederacy for a single six-year term. Although unhappy about his election, he accepted the position and was inaugurated at the Confederate capital of Montgomery, Alabama on February 18, 1861.

As president of the Confederacy, Davis frequently tried to force his own military strategies for victory upon his generals. His insistence upon the need for a strong central government in order to win the war (he favored general conscription and suspending the writ of habeas corpus) convinced many in the South that he was unsympathetic to states' rights doctrine. Davis justified his actions with the reply, "We are fighting for independence, and that, or extermination, we will have." Short-tempered and opinionated, Davis quickly amassed political enemies within the South, including his own vice president, Alexander Stephens. Throughout the war, he attempted to maintain control over the unwieldy Confederate government, frequently quarreling with both the Confederate Congress and state governments throughout the South.

After the Confederacy collapsed in April 1865, Davis fled from Richmond to the south, attempting to escape to Mexico. He was arrested by federal troops on May 10 in Georgia. Although twice threatened with indictment for treason, he was released after serving two years in the federal prison at Fortress Monroe, without ever going to trial or being convicted on any charge. During his imprisonment, his health suffered considerably as he was kept in irons for part of the time. Although President Andrew Johnson pardoned most ex-Confederates, Davis never asked for, nor was he ever granted, a pardon.

At first unpopular in the South and blamed for its defeat, Davis' harsh treatment while in prison and unfaltering devotion to the South gradually restored his popularity. Hollow-cheeked, gaunt, and blind in one eye, he supported himself as a private businessman and author (The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government, published in 1881) until his death on December 6, 1889 in New Orleans. He never wavered in his view that the South was a victim of Northern aggression, but shortly before his death he advised his countrymen, "The past is dead; let it bury its dead, its hopes, and its aspirations; before you lies the future of expanding national glory before which all the world shall stand amazed."