

JEFFERSON DAVIS

Early Years

Jefferson Finis Davis, was the first and only President of the Confederate States of America. He was a planter, politician and soldier born in Kentucky and raised in Mississippi.

Born June 3, 1808, Davis was the tenth and youngest child of Revolutionary War soldier Samuel Davis and his wife Jane Cook Davis (*Finis in Latin means final—the couple wanted no more children after Jefferson*).

Davis was just 16 when his father died and he was heavily influenced by his oldest brother, Joseph, who was 23 years older and a wealthy lawyer and planter, who saw to it that he was well educated. Davis attended college in Kentucky at Transylvania before entering the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1824.

As a military cadet, Davis' performance was only adequate. When he graduated in 1828 he placed twenty-third in a class of thirty-four. However, according to a contemporary description, Davis in his mid-20s was "handsome, witty, sportful, and altogether captivating". After graduating, Jefferson Davis served six years as a lieutenant in the United States Army, including serving briefly in the Black Hawk War in 1832.

While stationed under Colonel Zachary Taylor (future President of the United States) the following year, he met the colonel's daughter, Sarah Knox Taylor. Sarah's father was against their relationship as he did not want his daughter to be a soldier's wife. So Davis resigned from the Army and married Sarah in 1835 when he was 27 years old. They were both stricken with malaria soon thereafter, and Sarah sadly died after just three months of marriage.

Jefferson Davis led a secluded life for the next eight years on his cotton plantation at Davis Bend, Mississippi, which his brother Joseph had given him, and owned as many as 113 enslaved people. As a slaveholder, Davis firmly believed in the importance of the institution of slavery for the South.

Entry into Politics

In 1840, Davis first became involved in politics when he attended a Democratic Party meeting in Vicksburg and, to his surprise, was chosen as a delegate to the party's state convention in Jackson. In 1842, he attended the Democratic convention, and, in 1843, became a Democratic candidate for the state House of Representatives from the Warren County–Vicksburg district; but he lost his first election. In 1844, Davis was sent to the party convention for a third time, and his interest in politics deepened. He was selected as one of six presidential electors for the 1844 presidential election and campaigned effectively throughout Mississippi for the Democratic candidate James K. Polk

In 1845, aged 36, he married his second wife, Varina Howell, a young woman eighteen years old. Jefferson and Varina Davis eventually had six children—two girls and four boys—but only their daughters lived into adulthood.

That same year, Davis won election to the U.S. House of Representatives from Mississippi. It was the only electoral success of his career; all of his later posts would be appointed.

When the Mexican-American War broke out in 1846, Davis resigned his congressional seat to serve as Colonel of the First Mississippi Rifle regiment. As part of a force commanded by his former father-in-law, Davis distinguished himself in battle at Monterrey and Buena Vista with tactics that won plaudits even in the European press. General Taylor's praise of his heroism earned Davis national acclaim. He was offered a promotion to Brigadier-General in 1847 but refused it when in August 1847 the Mississippi governor chose him to fill a vacant seat in the U.S. Senate and he soon became chairman of the Military Affairs Committee.

In 1851, Davis resigned from the Senate to run unsuccessfully for Governor of Mississippi. Two years later, President Franklin Pierce appointed Davis as Secretary of War. During his tenure (1853-57), Davis focused on increasing the army's size and improving national defenses and weapons technology, as well as providing protection for settlers in the Western territories. As Secretary of War, Davis served with distinction and was recognized as one of the most capable administrators to hold the office.

Davis returned to the Senate in 1857. He frequently clashed with fellow Democrat Stephen A Douglas, arguing that Douglas' doctrine of popular sovereignty didn't do enough to protect the rights of slaveholders.

With the Democratic Party split between North and South, Republican Abraham Lincoln won the presidential election of 1860. Davis resigned from the Senate in January 1861, after Mississippi seceded from the Union.

President of the Confederacy

When the Confederate Congress met in Montgomery, Alabama the following month, Davis—undoubtedly the Southern leader with the most impressive political and military record— was elected provisional Confederate President by acclamation. Alexander H. Stephens was chosen as vice president, but he and Davis feuded constantly.

Tall, lean, and formal, Davis was considered to be an ideal leader of the Confederacy upon his election in 1861, despite the fact that he neither sought the job nor particularly wanted it. He had hoped for a military command. Davis was a war hero, slaveholder, and longtime advocate of States Rights who nevertheless was not viewed to be a radical “fire-eater,” making him more appealing to the hesitating moderates in Virginia.

His first act was to send a peace commission to Washington, D.C., to prevent an armed conflict. Lincoln refused to see his emissaries and the next month decided to send armed ships to Charleston, South Carolina, to resupply the beleaguered Union garrison at Fort Sumter. Davis reluctantly ordered the bombardment of the fort (April 12–13), which marked the beginning of the American Civil War. Two days later Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers, a move that brought about the secession of Virginia and three other states from the Union.

When Virginia joined the Confederacy, Davis moved his government to Richmond in May 1861. He and his family took up his residence there at the White House of the Confederacy later that month. Having served since February as the provisional President, Davis was elected to a full six-year term on November 6, 1861, and was inaugurated on February 22, 1862

Initially, Davis was a popular President with the Southern people. He had a dignified bearing, a distinguished military record, extensive experience in political affairs, and—most importantly—a dedication to the Confederate cause. Unfortunately for Davis, these attributes were not enough to triumph over the harsh challenges posed by his new position. His early popularity was a result of war fervour and he did not have the personality necessary to sustain it. He was impatient with people who disagreed with him, and he had the unfortunate habit of awarding prominent posts to leaders who appeared unsuccessful. Davis' loyalty to these people led to bickering and quarrels throughout his administration. In addition, he was plagued by chronic illness.

Davis had poor health for most of his life, including repeated bouts of malaria, battle wounds from fighting in the Mexican–American War and a chronic eye infection that made bright light painful. He also had trigeminal neuralgia, a nerve disorder that causes severe pain in the face; it has been called one of the most painful known ailments. . Searing headaches, caused in part by the neuralgia, exacerbated an already prickly personality. “I have an infirmity of which I am heartily ashamed,” David said. “When I am aroused in a matter, I lose control of my feelings and become personal.

Davis had innumerable troubles during his presidency, including a squabbling Congress, a dissident vice president, Alexander H. Stephens, and the constant opposition of extreme states' rights advocates, such as North Carolina Gov. Zebulon Vance, who objected vigorously to the conscription law he had enacted over much opposition in 1862. But despite a gradually worsening military situation, unrelieved internal political tensions, a continuing lack of manpower and armament, and skyrocketing inflation, he remained resolute in his determination to carry on the war, and Lee remained both his most valuable field commander and his most loyal personal supporter. General Lee spoke for many when he said, “You can *always* say that few people could have done better than Mr. Davis. I knew of none that could have done as well.”

As President of the Confederate States of America, however, he is widely viewed as an ineffective wartime leader. Many historians attribute some of the Confederacy's weaknesses to Davis's poor leadership. His preoccupation with detail, reluctance to delegate responsibility, lack of popular appeal, feuds with powerful state governors and generals, favouritism toward old friends, inability to get along with people who disagreed with him, neglect of civil matters in favour of military ones, and resistance to public opinion all worked against him.

Historians agree he was a much less effective war leader than his Union counterpart, President Abraham Lincoln. According to historian William J. Cooper, Jr.:

“Lincoln was flexible; Davis was rigid. Lincoln wanted to win; Davis wanted to be right. Lincoln had a broad strategic vision of Union goals; Davis could never enlarge his narrow view. Lincoln searched for the right general, then let him fight the war; Davis continuously played favourites and interfered unduly with his Generals, even with Robert E. Lee. Lincoln led his nation; Davis failed to rally the South.”

On April 2, 1865, Davis and the other members of the Confederate government were forced to flee from Richmond before the advancing Union Army. The Confederate President was captured by Northern soldiers near Kwinville, Georgia on May 10, 1865 and was imprisoned at Fort Monroe, Virginia for two years. He was never tried for treason but was released on bond in May 1867.

Post-War

After being released Davis made five trips to Europe in an effort to regain his health, and for a few years he served as president of an insurance company in Memphis, Tennessee. In 1877 he retired to Beauvoir, a small Gulf-side estate near Biloxi, Mississippi, which a patriotic admirer provided for him. There he wrote *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government* published in 1881.

Mississippi tried to return him to the U.S. Senate, but he was not legally qualified to serve since he refused to request an official pardon from the United States for his role in the Civil War. He felt he had done nothing wrong in fighting for States' Rights under the Constitution, and he never regained his citizenship. However, Davis's citizenship was restored posthumously in 1978 by President Jimmy Carter.

By the late 1880s, he began to encourage reconciliation, telling Southerners to be loyal to the Union. The year before his death the former President of the Confederate States of America beseeched the young men of Mississippi to "lay aside all rancour, all bitter sectional feeling, and to make your places in the ranks of those who will bring about a consummation devoutly to be wished—a reunited country."

Ex-Confederates came to appreciate his role in the war, seeing him as a Southern patriot. He became a hero of the Lost Cause of the Confederacy in the post-Reconstruction South.

Jefferson Finis Davis died in New Orleans, Louisiana on December 6, 1889 of acute bronchitis. Some 200,000 people lined that city's streets for his funeral, held in Metairie Cemetery, the grandest funeral ever seen in the South. In 1893, Davis' body was relocated and reinterred in Hollywood Cemetery, located in the former Confederate capital of Richmond.

Jefferson Davis served in many roles. As a soldier, he was brave and resourceful. As a politician, he served as a United States Senator and a Mississippi Congressman and was active and accomplished, although he never completed a full term in any elected position. As a plantation owner, he employed slave labour as did most of his peers in the South, and supported slavery. After the war, he contributed to reconciliation of the South with the North, but remained a symbol for Southern pride.