Jefferson Davis

Born June 3, 1808
Southwestern Kentucky
Died December 6, 1889
New Orleans, Louisiana

President of the Confederate States of America

Jefferson Davis served as the president of the Confederate States of America during its four years of existence. He was the South’s political leader during the Civil War and the counterpart of U.S. president Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865; see entry). “On each side there was one man who stood at storm center, trying to lead a people who would follow no leader for long unless they felt in him some final embodiment [expression] of the deep passions and misty insights that moved them,” Bruce Catton wrote in The Civil War. “This man was the President, given power and responsibility beyond all other men . . . Abraham Lincoln, in Washington, and Jefferson Davis, in Richmond.”

Davis faced an extremely difficult job as president of the Confederacy, but he was well qualified to do it. He had proven himself as a military leader during the Mexican War (1846–48), and he was a respected U.S. senator who had also served as secretary of war. Davis also had some shortcomings that made his job more difficult. For example, he was stubborn, he found it difficult to admit when he was wrong, and he had trouble dealing with other strong personalities. Although he could not lead

“The Union is a creature of the states. It has no inherent power. All it possesses was delegated by the states.”

Jefferson Davis. (Photography by Mathew Brady. Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration.)
the South to victory in the Civil War, Davis remained deeply committed to the Confederate cause until the end.

**Supports slavery as a youth**

Jefferson Davis was born on June 3, 1808, in southwestern Kentucky. He was the youngest child in a large family. His father, Samuel Davis, was a tobacco farmer and horse breeder who moved the family to Louisiana when Jefferson was two years old. A short time later, the Davises bought a plantation (a large farming estate) near Woodville, Mississippi. They also purchased a number of slaves to work in their cotton fields.

Black people were taken from Africa and brought to North America to serve as slaves for white people beginning in the 1600s. The basic belief behind slavery was that black people were inferior to whites. Under slavery, white slaveholders treated black people as property, forced them to perform hard labor, and controlled every aspect of their lives. States in the Northern half of the United States began outlawing slavery in the late 1700s. But slavery continued to exist in the Southern half of the country because it played an important role in the South’s economy and culture.

Growing up in Mississippi, Davis came to believe that slavery offered the best possible life for black people. He felt that blacks were incapable of living on their own, so they needed white people to give them food, clothing, shelter, and religion. He thought that black people in Africa lived as savages, while black slaves in the South were relatively civilized. Compared to many other slaveowners, the Davis family treated their slaves well. For example, they taught their slaves to read and write and allowed them to handle discipline among themselves, rather than resorting to whipping and other harsh punishments. Since his only experience was with his family’s slaves, however, young Davis did not realize that many other people were cruel to their slaves.

**Receives military training**

After Davis’s father died in 1824, his older brother, Joseph, took over care of the family and the plantation.
Joseph was a successful and respected man, and he managed to obtain an appointment to the prestigious U.S. Military Academy at West Point for his youngest brother. But Davis proved to be a troublemaker at the school. He often skipped class, kept his room messy, and hung out at a local tavern that was strictly off-limits to students. Davis managed to graduate from West Point in 1828, but he finished near the bottom of his class.

Like most West Point graduates, Davis took a position with the U.S. Army. His first assignment was as a frontier soldier in the Pacific Northwest, where his job was to keep the peace between white settlers and Indians. He served in the infantry (the military division in which soldiers fight on foot) until 1833, then transferred to the cavalry (the military division in which soldiers fight on horseback). During this time, he developed a reputation for arguing with his superior officers.

In 1835, Davis resigned from the army in order to marry Sarah Knox Taylor. She was the daughter of his commanding officer, future U.S. president Zachary Taylor (1784–1850). Zachary Taylor was not impressed with Davis and discouraged the union, so the young couple eloped (ran away secretly to get married). Davis convinced his new bride to move to his family’s plantation in Mississippi. Shortly after they arrived, however, they both contracted malaria (a serious disease carried by infected mosquitoes). Davis recovered, but his wife died just a few months after their wedding. Since he had asked her to move to the South, he felt responsible for her death. He spent the next several years in seclusion on his family’s plantation. In 1845, he married Varina Howell, the nineteen-year-old daughter of a Mississippi landowner. They eventually had six children together—four boys and two girls.

**Argues for states’ rights in the U.S. Congress**

Also in 1845, Davis was elected to represent Mississippi in the U.S. Congress. At this time, he became known as a defender of slavery and of states’ rights. The role of the national, or federal, government was still being defined in the mid-1800s. People who supported states’ rights wanted to limit the power of the federal government. They wanted individual states to have the right to decide important issues for
themselves without interference from the national government. “The Union is a creature of the states,” Davis once said. “It has no inherent power. All it possesses was delegated [granted] by the states.”

In the eyes of Davis and other Southern politicians, one of the most important issues that should be decided by the states was slavery. Growing numbers of Northerners believed that slavery was wrong, and they urged the federal government to take steps to limit it. Some people wanted to outlaw slavery altogether, while others just wanted to prevent it from spreading beyond the Southern states where it was already allowed. But slavery played a big role in the Southern economy and culture. As a result, Davis and many other Southerners felt threatened by Northern efforts to contain slavery. They believed that each state should decide for itself whether to allow slavery. They did not want the national government to pass laws that would interfere with their traditional way of life.

After serving two years in the U.S. House of Representatives, Davis resigned to join the army fighting the Mexican War. The United States fought Mexico to gain territory that eventually formed parts of Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, and California. As colonel of the First Mississippi Rifles, Davis proved himself to be a good military leader who maintained his cool under fire. His performance earned the respect of his former father-in-law, Zachary Taylor, and several other important military men. By the time a foot wound forced him to leave his command, he had become a well-known war hero.

**Backs the decision of Southern states to secede from the Union**

Upon leaving the army in 1848, Davis was elected to the U.S. Senate. In 1853, President Franklin Pierce (1804–1869) asked Davis to join his cabinet (a group of trusted advisors who head various departments of the government) as secretary of war. Davis performed well in this position. He increased the size of the U.S. Army in a short period of time, and also introduced new, state-of-the-art weapons. When Pierce’s term ended in 1857, Davis reclaimed his seat in the U.S. Senate.
Davis continued to argue in favor of slavery and states’ rights in the U.S. Congress. Along with other Southern lawmakers, he warned that the Southern states would secede from (leave) the United States if an antislavery candidate was elected president in 1860. “We would declare the government at an end, even though blood should flow in torrents throughout the land,” Davis stated.

Davis knew that the North would not allow the South to leave without a fight. For this reason, he hoped that the federal government would agree not to interfere with slavery in the South or in new states and territories. But his hopes for compromise were dashed when Abraham Lincoln, who opposed slavery, was elected president. The Southern states reacted by seceding from the United States and forming a new country that allowed slavery, called the Confederate States of America. With their enemies in control of the U.S. government, they felt that the only way they could protect their rights as independent states was to leave the Union.

**Becomes president of the Confederate States of America**

Davis and the other Southern lawmakers resigned their seats in the U.S. Congress in January 1861. Then Davis went home to his plantation in Mississippi. He told his family and friends that he did not want to play a role in the political leadership of the Confederacy, but that he would accept a military command if the North and South went to war. In February 1861, however, a messenger arrived at Davis’s home and informed him that he had been selected as president of the new nation. He was stunned by the news, but felt it was his duty to accept the position. Davis became provisional (temporary) president of the Confederacy on February 9,
The Two Civil War Presidents: Davis and Lincoln

Jefferson Davis and Abraham Lincoln never met. But the two men are forever linked in history as the presidents of the opposing sides in the American Civil War. They share a number of striking similarities, but also some notable differences.

Both men were born in Kentucky, separated by only one hundred miles in distance and eight months in age. But Davis moved south to Mississippi as a boy, while Lincoln moved north to Illinois. Davis’s family grew prosperous by using slaves to work on their cotton plantation. As a result, Davis became a strong supporter of slavery. In the meantime, Lincoln raised himself from poverty through education and hard work. He strongly opposed slavery.

When the Civil War began in 1861, Davis seemed to be more qualified to lead his country’s war effort. After all, he had graduated from West Point, proven himself as a military leader during the Mexican War, and served the U.S. government as secretary of war. In contrast, Lincoln had very limited military experience. Although he had joined the Illinois militia during the Black Hawk War (a war between the Sauk tribe and the U.S. government in 1832), he later joked that he had “fought mosquitoes and led a charge on an onion patch.”

Although Davis had more military training, Lincoln possessed many other traits that made him a great commander in chief. For example, he was able to analyze situations quickly and make good decisions. He was also better at dealing with difficult people than Davis and more able to handle the extreme pressure of the job. Both men faced well-organized and vocal opposition to their policies during their time in office. In fact, both are more highly regarded and popular now than they were during the Civil War.

Since the two men played opposite roles during a crucial period in American history, historians have often drawn comparisons between them. In most cases, these comparisons reflect negatively on Davis. But as William C. Davis, Brian C. Pohanka, and Don Troiani noted in *Civil War Journal: The Leaders*, “It is unfair in many ways to criticize Davis because he was not Abraham Lincoln; nobody else has been Abraham Lincoln either.”

1861, and then was elected to a six-year term as president on November 6, 1861.

Despite Davis’s protests, many people in the South believed that he was the most qualified man for the job. “Few men in the United States in 1861 seemed better prepared by
training and experience to undertake the leadership of a nation at war than Jefferson Davis,” Steven E. Woodworth wrote in *Jefferson Davis and His Generals*. “Davis had graduated from West Point, managed a large plantation, commanded an entire regiment in battle . . . , and been an unusually active secretary of war and an effective senator. He was honest, courageous, determined, and completely devoted to his duty as he understood it.”

For six weeks, Davis tried to negotiate a peaceful settlement with the North. He still wanted to avoid a war if possible. One of the issues he hoped to resolve was the presence of federal troops at Fort Sumter, located in the middle of the harbor at Charleston, South Carolina. He viewed these troops as a symbol of Northern authority and asked Lincoln to remove them. When negotiations failed, Davis ordered Confederate forces to open fire on Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861. The Confederacy gained control of the fort, but the Civil War had begun.

**Faces difficult task as president during the Civil War**

Davis faced a number of challenges once the war started. He had to appoint military leaders and raise an army to defend the Confederacy. Since the United States Army was controlled by the North, he had to convince individual Southern states to send men, weapons, ammunition, and supplies for the war effort. One of Davis’s first mistakes involved choosing his close friends to be generals in charge of the Confederate Army, regardless of their qualifications. For example, he appointed his West Point classmate Leonidas Polk (1806–1864) as commander of all Confederate troops in the West (the area west of the Appalachian Mountains). But Polk had never served in the military. After leaving West Point, he had immersed himself in the study of religion and become an Episcopal bishop. After a few early victories in minor skirmishes, Polk turned out to be a disaster as a general.

On the other hand, Davis failed to take advantage of the talents of other military men. For example, the flamboyant Pierre G. T. Beauregard (1818–1893; see entry) had led the capture of Fort Sumter and had been a hero at the First
Battle of Bull Run (also known as the First Battle of Manassas) in Virginia. But Davis and Beauregard did not get along. As a result, Davis went out of his way to avoid giving Beauregard any significant responsibility after mid-1862. Of course, Davis also had some notable successes in his choice of generals. For example, he placed another fellow West Pointer, Robert E. Lee (1807–1870; see entry), in charge of the Confederacy’s most vital army. Lee won a number of important battles over much larger Union forces and became the South’s greatest general.

Part of the problem Davis experienced in selecting Confederate military leaders was due to his own personality. He trusted his own abilities far beyond those of others, and he found it difficult to admit that he was wrong. “Davis was all iron will and determination, a rigid man who might conceivably be broken but who could never be bent, proud almost to arrogance and yet humbly devoted to a cause greater than himself,” Catton explained. The president was highly involved in military matters throughout the war. He made frequent visits to troops in the field and often consulted with his generals about strategy. As a result, the Southern people and media tended to place the blame on him when things went badly.

Another problem Davis encountered in leading the Confederacy during the war years involved the culture of the South. The Southern states had seceded from the Union in order to assert their right to make important decisions for themselves, without interference from the national government. Yet Davis needed to create a strong national government for the Confederacy in order to manage the war effectively. The South would have no chance of winning against larger, better organized Union forces if each state insisted on fighting on its own. “The kind of government Southerners wanted was not the kind that could fight and win an extended war,” Catton noted. “The administration had to have broad wartime powers, but when Davis tried to get and use them he was bitterly criticized; fighting against strong centralized government, he had to create such a government in order to win.” This issue created problems between Davis and the Confederate Congress.

Davis also suffered personal tragedies during the Civil War. In 1863, Union forces conquered Mississippi and destroyed his plantation, forcing members of his family to be-
come refugees. In 1864, his six-year-old son, Joseph, fell from the balcony of the Confederate White House in Richmond, Virginia, and was killed. But the pressures of his job as president did not allow Davis to grieve for his son. At that time, Union general Ulysses S. Grant (1822–1885; see entry) had pushed the Confederate Army back almost to Richmond. The responsibility of sending thousands of young men to their deaths in battle also wore on the president. He developed physical problems, such as severe headaches and stomach ulcers, that were related to the stress of his job.

**Refuses to admit defeat**

In April 1865, it became clear that Union forces were about to capture the Confederate capital of Richmond. Davis and other leaders of the Confederate government fled south to Greensboro, North Carolina. Once they arrived, they learned that the South’s main army had given up the fight—Lee had surrendered to Grant at Appomattox, Virginia. But Davis refused to admit defeat and vowed to continue fighting. Some of his advisors worried that the president had lost touch with reality, because everyone else seemed to recognize that the Southern cause was lost.

As Union forces approached Greensboro, Davis took his family even further south. He was finally captured near Irwinville, Georgia, on May 10, 1865. As Union troops surrounded their camp, Davis’s wife, Varina, threw her shawl over him to hide his face. The Northern press changed the story in order to humiliate Davis and make him seem like a coward. They claimed that he had tried to avoid capture by wearing women’s clothing.

Davis was charged with treason (betraying his country) and put in prison. At first, his captors treated him very harshly. They chained his legs, limited his food and exercise, and prevented him from seeing his family. But this treatment only made Davis a hero in the eyes of the Southern people. The U.S. government eventually offered to pardon (officially forgive) him for his crimes, but Davis refused to accept the offer. He insisted that he had committed no crime because the South’s secession was legal. He wanted to make his case before a Virginia jury. But Northern leaders did not want...
Davis’s case to go to trial, because they were afraid a jury would decide he was right. Instead, the government dropped the charges and released Davis in 1867, after he had spent two years in captivity.

**Shows no regret for his actions**

Davis recovered in Canada for a while after his release from prison, then returned to Mississippi. Since his home had been destroyed and he had very little money, he relied on the help of Southern supporters to care for his family. In 1881, Davis published a book about the Civil War from his point of view, called *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government*. He justified his own actions and refused to apologize, which made some people angry. “Were the thing to be done over again, I would do as I then did,” he stated. “Disappointments have not changed my conviction.” Davis lived out his remaining years near Biloxi, Mississippi, and never tried to have his American citizenship reinstated (it was eventually restored by President Jimmy Carter [1924–] over one hundred years later). He died on December 6, 1889, at the age of eighty-two. His was the largest funeral ever held in the South, with an estimated two hundred thousand mourners attending.

Immediately after the Civil War, many people blamed Davis for the South’s defeat. But historians now believe that there was nothing Davis could have done to bring victory to the South. “Davis certainly made mistakes, but no one can point to one thing or another that he could have done that would have changed the outcome of the war,” William C. Davis, Brian C. Pohanka, and Don Troiani wrote in *Civil War Journal: The Leaders*. Davis’s popularity grew over time, as Southerners came to regard him as a representative of everything that was good about the Old South. He did the best he could in a difficult situation, and he remained devoted to the Confederate cause until the end of his life.

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