

“Beast” Butler

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During the last full week of 1862, Confederate President Davis issued a proclamation declaring Union General Benjamin Butler “a felon, an outlaw, [and] a common enemy of mankind,” and ordering that Butler upon capture was to be executed immediately by hanging. Davis’ proclamation was the result of a number of provocative actions made by Butler, a controversial general appointed to his position primarily because of his political influence. Born in New Hampshire in 1818, Butler attended what is now Colby College in Maine before studying law and being admitted to the bar. He also became interested in politics, winning election to the Massachusetts state legislature as a Democrat. In 1860 he initially supported Jefferson Davis for the Democratic nomination for president, before eventually supporting the southern Democratic candidate John C. Breckinridge over northerner Stephen Douglas. Nonetheless, following the secession of the Deep South, Butler became a staunch advocate for the preservation of the Union. His power within the Democratic Party made a valuable resource for the new Republican administration, and he soon received appointment to brigadier general.

In early 1861, Butler was stationed in Maryland where he created enemies among the secessionist element in the state. He occupied railroads to keep open communication between Washington D.C. and the northern states, and then garrisoned Annapolis and Baltimore, even seizing the official state seal to prevent southern sympathizers in the legislature from affixing it to an ordinance of secession. Butler was then transferred to Union-occupied Fortress Monroe in Virginia, where again earned notoriety for proclaiming escaped slaves to be “contrabands of war” and refusing to return them to their owners.

From the southern perspective, Butler’s most controversial measures took place in New Orleans, Louisiana, which he commanded following its occupation in the spring of 1862. On his

own authority, Butler called on the local “free” black militia to enroll in the Union army. His treatment of the local white southern population was considerably more strict and controlling than that of other Union Generals occupying southern cities. Butler applied elements of the Confiscation Acts on the civilians of New Orleans without going through federal courts. He seized personal and public property, arrested prominent citizens and shut down newspapers in the city. Butler’s most memorable and infamous action in New Orleans was a proclamation he made in regard to white women in the city. On the city’s streets during the early period of the Union occupation, women would spit at, insult and generally behave poorly towards his troops, Butler’s response was to specify that any woman caught insulting or harassing a Union soldier would be treated as a “woman of the town plying her avocation,” or in other words a prostitute. Not surprisingly, the proclamation caused outrage in the south, though it did lead to an improvement in the behavior of women in the city towards their northern occupiers. It was for these actions that Jefferson Davis proclaimed Butler an outlaw subject to execution and throughout the south he became known as “Beast” Butler. Fortunately for the northern general he never fell into Confederate hands and he remained on active duty until early 1865.

. In addition to the proclamation directed against Benjamin Butler, there was heavy fighting at Chickasaw Bayou, north of Vicksburg, Mississippi, when a Union force under William T. Sherman was repulsed in an assault against a strong Confederate position. It marked the first serious land operation against the Confederate citadel on the Mississippi River. Also, in Tennessee, Union forces under William Rosecrans moved towards the Confederate positions at Murfreesboro, which in several days would become the location of the next major battle of the war.

