

Jefferson Davis—Confederate President **<http://civilwar150.longwood.edu>**

Jefferson Davis of Mississippi took the oath of office as Provisional President of the newly-formed Confederate States of America at Montgomery, Alabama on February 18, 1861. Over the next four years he served as the only chief executive of the new government formed by the seceded states. A prominent Mississippi senator in the years preceding the Civil War, Davis had advocated a strong southern, states' rights political philosophy, but he was not among the most ardent "fireaters" of the antebellum era.

Born in rural Kentucky in 1807 or 1808, Davis attended schools in Kentucky and Mississippi before entering the United States Military Academy in 1824. Graduating from West Point in 1828, he subsequently served during the Black Hawk War before resigning his commission in 1835. That same year he married Sarah Taylor, the daughter of his ex-commanding officer and future president, Zachary Taylor, but his new wife tragically died three months later. Davis next developed a successful cotton plantation in Mississippi that bordered one owned by his older brother and confidant, Joseph. He also became interested in politics, and in 1845 was elected to the United States House of Representatives. At about the same time Davis married for a second time, to Varina Howell, a young woman eighteen years his junior. Together the couple had six children, though most died at a young age.

Davis' initial political career proved short-lived. Upon the outbreak of the Mexican War in 1846 he was elected colonel of a volunteer regiment from his adoptive state known as the Mississippi Rifles. Serving in the army of Zachary Taylor, his ex-father-in-law, Davis led his regiment through a number of engagements, including the battles of Monterrey and Buena Vista.

In the latter engagement in particular the Mississippians performed heroically, while Davis suffered a serious wound to the foot. He declined a commission as brigadier general and in 1847 instead accepted appointment to an open seat in the U.S. Senate from Mississippi.

During the debates over the Compromise of 1850, Davis opposed the admission of California into the Union, which would have upset the balance in the number of slave and free states. He subsequently ran as a gubernatorial candidate in Mississippi for the States Rights faction of the Democratic Party, but was narrowly defeated. Upon his election to the presidency in 1852, northern Democrat Franklin Pierce selected Davis for a position in his cabinet as Secretary of War. While Davis served throughout Pierce's term of office, his attempts at technological innovation and in reforming the War Department's bureaucracy led to conflicts with commanding general Winfield Scott. Among his achievements in office were the establishment of new forts in the west, the surveying of routes for a transcontinental railroad, and promotion of the Gadsden Purchase to obtain territory for a southern railroad route.

At the end of Pierce's administration, Davis won reelection to the senate from Mississippi and became a leading defender of slavery and southern rights during the late 1850s. He supported southern Democrat John C. Breckinridge during the Election of 1860, but did not immediately call for secession in the aftermath of Lincoln's election; in fact, he was a member of the senate's Committee of Thirteen that hoped to arrange a compromise in late 1860 and early 1861. He remained in Washington for a time following Mississippi's secession in early 1861, before delivering a farewell speech on January 21 in which he hoped for "peaceful relations" with the north. Davis did not attend the convention in Montgomery, Alabama that organized the Confederate government. Though he hoped for a military commend, he learned via telegram of his election as provisional president. He accepted the position reluctantly, understanding the

great advantages that the north held in relation to the south, but noting that he would “not shrink from the task before me.” In his inaugural address he stated that though he might make mistakes, “you shall not find in me either a want of zeal or fidelity to the cause.”