

War Comes to Virginia, Death of Stephen Douglas **<http://civilwar.longwood.edu>**

By late May and early June, 1861, military operations began to accelerate in Virginia, as Confederate pressure mounted against Washington, D.C., and as the Confederate government began the establishment of its new capital at Richmond. The divided nation also mourned the loss of one of the most prominent politicians of the past two decades.

On May 29, Confederate President Jefferson Davis arrived in Richmond after a long train journey from Montgomery, having made numerous stops along the way in response to the crowds who wanted to catch a glimpse of their new leader. A historian described the trip as “one continuous ovation.” Davis was met in Richmond by a large crowd that included Virginia Governor John Letcher. The president and his family settled into the Spotswood Hotel on Main Street for a time, though the City of Richmond eventually purchased a large home on Clay Street, originally built for banker John Brockenbrough in 1818, and then owned by Lewis Crenshaw, for the use of the Davis’s. It remained the “White House of the Confederacy” until the evacuation of the city in early April 1865.

With the Confederate government establishing itself in Richmond, small-scale military operations took place throughout the Old Dominion. On May 30, Union forces occupied Grafton, in western Virginia in order to protect the vital Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. That same day the Union War Department informed General Benjamin Butler, then commanding Fortress Monroe, that escaped slaves who reached his lines, soon to be referred to as “contrabands,” could be cared for and employed by the government. At the nearby Norfolk Navy Yard southerners raised the U.S.S. *Merrimack*, which had been partially burned by the

Federals when they evacuated the installation the previous month. The Confederates soon began converting the vessel to the ironclad C.S.S. *Virginia*. Over the next few days General P.G.T. Beauregard took command of Confederate forces in northern Virginia, Union ships fired on Confederate artillery trying to blockade the Potomac River, and skirmishes occurred at Arlington Mills and Fairfax Court House. In one of these engagements Captain John Marr became among the first Confederates killed in action during the war. Finally on June 3 a small Union force routed Confederates at Philippi in western Virginia, further helping to secure that part of the state for the north.

As military preparations went forward, Americans north and south were shocked in early June to learn of the death of Illinois Senator and former presidential candidate Stephen Douglas of Illinois. One of the leading figures of the Democratic Party during the late 1840s and 1850s, Douglas had, in the period after the Mexican War, been an advocate of Popular Sovereignty as a means of determining whether new territories in the American west would be slave or free. As such he was the major architect of both the Compromise of 1850 and the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. In 1858, he had won reelection to the Senate by defeating Abraham Lincoln, but his defense of Popular Sovereignty over the Supreme Court's recent Dred Scott Decision during the famous Lincoln-Douglas Debates cost him support in the south when he ran for president in 1860. Douglas's candidacy led to the break-up of the Democratic Party into two factions and the formation of the compromise Constitutional Union Party. In the four-man campaign that followed Douglas, realizing that the Democratic split meant the likely election of Republican Abraham Lincoln, made several campaign stops in the south, pleading against secession. When the votes were tallied, Douglas finished a disappointing fourth in the electoral college, though he was second to Lincoln in the popular vote.

After the election Douglas continued to preach moderation, while urging Lincoln to work for compromise. “Are we prepared in our hearts for war with our own brethren and kindred?” he lamented. His health broken by the campaign and his efforts to avoid Civil War, Douglas died in Chicago on June 3, 1861 at the age of forty-eight.