

Judah Benjamin: Confederate Jewish Statesman **<http://civilwar150.longwood.edu>**

On November 21 1861, Judah Benjamin was confirmed as Confederate Secretary of War. Benjamin, Confederate Attorney General since February 1861, had been appointed as acting Secretary of War in September of that year. Thus rose to prominence one of the most unusual figures of the entire war.

Benjamin was possibly the most prominent Jew in political circles in 19th century in America and how he rose to positions of power in a new country built at least partly around racial discrimination is a fascinating story. Born in St. Croix in what is now the Virgin Islands in 1811, Benjamin's family moved to North Carolina when he was a young boy. He later attended Yale for a short time and then made his way to Louisiana where he studied law and passed the bar in 1833. Over the next ten years, he became a successful lawyer and slaveholder.

He entered politics in 1842 when he was elected to the Louisiana state legislature. Ten years later, he became only the second Jewish person elected to the United States Senate. In this role he was known as a fierce advocate for Southern rights and also as a persuasive and eloquent speaker. Referring to his history as a slaveholder, another senator described Benjamin as a "Hebrew with Egyptian principles" and Benjamin shot back that "It is true that I am a Jew, and when my ancestors were receiving their Ten Commandments from the immediate Deity, amidst the thundering and lightnings of Mt. Sinai, the ancestors of my opponent were herding swine in the forests of Great Britain."

At the start of the Civil War, Jefferson Davis, who had been extremely impressed with Benjamin's intellect, appointed him as Attorney General for the new nation. This made him the first Jewish person to be appointed to a cabinet-level position in the Americas. While very intelligent, Benjamin was also somewhat argumentative and was quite willing to argue with Davis regarding his conduct of the war. Benjamin also strongly supported the idea later known as "cotton diplomacy", the strategy of shipping cotton to Europe in return for arms and supplies and denying cotton to nations that did not support the Confederacy.

The appointment of Benjamin as Secretary of War was a shrewd move by Davis. Since Davis had experience as Secretary of War, where he had served from 1853-1857, and since Benjamin had no military experience, the arrangement allowed Davis to essentially act as his own Secretary of War. The unfortunate result of the setup was that when there were failures on the battlefield, some of the Confederate generals considered Benjamin to be a bumbling and meddling amateur. This would come to the fore the next spring when Union forces took Roanoke Island in North Carolina without a fight. For reasons that we will discuss later in this series, Benjamin allowed himself to be the scapegoat for this loss and resigned as Secretary of War. For his loyalty and considerable abilities, Davis promptly appointed him as Secretary of State.

As Secretary of State, Benjamin would find a good fit for his talents. Having given up his slaves many years before, Benjamin appears to have been somewhat more enlightened than many other Confederate cabinet members on the subject. In fact, in order to secure alliance with England, Benjamin lobbied for Davis to issue his own Emancipation Proclamation later in the war. A modified version of this was passed very late in the war, but Richmond fell shortly after.

After the war, Benjamin would move to England and begin a successful career in international law. One of the smartest and most enigmatic men on either side in the Civil War, Benjamin was once referred to as the “Brains of the Confederacy.”