This Day in History… November 6, 1861

Jefferson Davis Elected Confederate President

On November 6, 1861, Jefferson Davis was elected president of the Confederate States of America. By then, Southern states had seceded, formed the Confederacy, and the Civil War was underway.

Davis was born in Kentucky on June 3, 1808, and grew up in Mississippi. He graduated from West Point in 1828 and served in the US Army, including during the Black Hawk War. After leaving the Army, he settled on a Mississippi plantation, where he enslaved people and grew cotton. In 1835, he married Sarah Knox Taylor, daughter of future president Zachary Taylor. She died of malaria three months later. Davis later married Varina Howell, with whom he had six children.



Though he led the Confederacy through the war, Davis had initially opposed secession.

Davis served in the US House of Representatives from 1845 to 1846, then resigned to command the First Mississippi Regiment in the Mexican-American War. He was wounded at the Battle of Buena Vista in 1847. After the war, he served in the US Senate from 1847 to 1851.

President Franklin Pierce appointed Davis secretary of war in 1853. In that position, he supported the Gadsden Purchase, which added land in what is now southern Arizona and New Mexico. He worked to expand the Army and update its equipment. He also oversaw construction of the US Capitol's new dome. After Pierce left office, Davis returned to the Senate in 1857.



Davis posed for a special photograph for this stamp

Davis frequently defended slavery and the political power of slaveholding states. In 1858, he spoke against secession at Boston's Faneuil Hall and argued for preserving the Union while still defending the right to enslave people. Davis's opposition to immediate secession reflected his view that separation would be dangerous and could lead to war. In 1860, he joined the Senate's Committee of Thirteen, an effort to find a compromise as the Union crisis deepened. The committee did not prevent secession.

After Mississippi seceded in January 1861, Davis resigned from the Senate. He accepted a commission as a major general in the Mississippi militia, but the Confederate Congress chose him to become provisional president of the Confederacy in February. Davis had said he preferred to serve as a general, but accepted the office as the new government organized. In April 1861, his administration demanded the surrender of Fort Sumter, a US military installation in Charleston Harbor. After the garrison refused, Confederate forces opened fire on April 12. The attack began the Civil War.



Faced with limited resources during the Civil War, the South used stone lithography to produce its first postage stamps.

In November 1861, voters elected him without opposition to a six-year term. He was inaugurated in Richmond on February 22, 1862. That year, the Confederate Congress enacted conscription, which led to disputes with state governors over the balance of Confederate and state authority. Davis's government faced shortages and financial strain. Military defeats, supply problems, and disagreements among political and military leaders continued through the war.



The postal department was the only CSA governmental agency to turn a profit.

In April 1865, Union forces captured Richmond, and Davis and members of his government fled south. Union troops captured Davis in Georgia on May 10. He was imprisoned at Fort Monroe in Virginia for two years and indicted for treason, but was never tried. In 1867, he was released on a $100,000 bond signed by a group that included Horace Greeley and abolitionist Gerrit Smith.

Davis spent much of his later life writing about the Confederacy. In his 1881 book *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government*, he continued to defend secession as constitutional. But in his final years, he urged white Southerners to remain loyal to the United States. Davis died in New Orleans on December 6, 1889.

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