

Jefferson Davis:

His Character, Leadership Style, and Race Relations

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INTRODUCTION

Jefferson Davis was the one and only president of the Confederate States of America. In this paper I will examine Davis's character, his leadership style, and his relations with blacks.

In the aftermath of the Civil War, Northern writers and leaders denounced and vilified Jefferson Davis in the harshest terms. Dr. Grady McWhiney explains:

Davis became, and remained to Northerners, the quintessential wrongdoer. Later generations of liberal progressives would consider him an American Hitler. Immediately after the War for Southern Independence Yankee authorities put Davis in jail and left him there for two years without a trial, while they tried to implicate him in the assassination of Lincoln, alleged cruelty to Federal prisoners, and treason itself. Though never brought to trial or convicted of any crime, Davis received abundant abuse in the Yankee press and on the podium. During and after the war the New York Times depicted him as a murderer, a cruel slaveowner whose servants ran away, a liar, a boaster, a fanatic, a confessed failure, a hater, a political adventurer, a supporter of outcasts and outlaws, a drunkard, an atrocious misrepresenter, an assassin, an incendiary, a criminal who was gratified by the assassination of Lincoln, a henpecked husband, a man so shameless that he would try to escape capture by disguising himself as a woman, a supporter of murder plots, an insubordinate soldier, an unwholesome sleeper, and a mean-spirited malingerer.

Anti-Davis sentiment was more than mere newspaper talk. Following the war the citizens of Sacramento, California, true to their vigilante tradition, hanged Davis in effigy. A few months later the Kansas Senate passed a resolution to hang him in person. More than ten years after the war ended, widespread opposition prevented him from speaking anywhere in the North. In 1876 a Yankee newspaper editor answered the question, should Davis be given amnesty, with a resounding "no," and in 1880 a man who cheered for Jefferson Davis in Madison, Indiana, was shot.¹

But not all Northerners felt this way, especially before the war. As Jefferson Davis began his public career, the *New York World* said he was "intellectually . . . the best equipped man of his age in the United States . . . fluent in world history, economics, and political theory."² In one of his debates with Abraham Lincoln, Senator Stephen Douglas of Illinois referred to Davis as an "able and eloquent statesman."³ Even after he had become a Union general, George B. McClellan said,

. . . Davis was a man of extraordinary ability. . . . He was the best Secretary of War--and I use best in its widest sense--I have ever had anything to do with.⁴

During the war, former President Franklin Pierce maintained his friendship with Jefferson Davis, and he criticized the North's invasion of the South as unjust and unnecessary. When federal authorities imprisoned Davis for two years after the war, Pierce came to visit him in prison. Once Davis was released from prison, Pierce offered him the use of one of his New Hampshire homes free of charge (Davis politely declined the offer).⁵ Senator Henry Wilson of Massachusetts, who served with Davis in the U.S. Senate, said he was "clear-headed" and "practical." None other than Senator Daniel Webster of Massachusetts praised the way Jefferson Davis conducted himself as part of the Congressional panel that had been tasked with investigating charges against Webster. Before the panel began its investigation, some expressed the fear that Davis might use this an opportunity to destroy an arch political rival. But Davis did nothing of the sort. He examined the evidence and concluded Webster was innocent of all charges. Thanks in part to Davis's efforts, Webster was cleared of the charges. Webster was so grateful for Davis's principled, non-partisan handling of his case that he paid Davis a visit to express his gratitude in person.⁶

Nearly all textbooks claim that Davis was a leader who couldn't stand to have his views challenged, and that he was a compulsive meddler who ineffectively micromanaged his generals and the Confederate war effort.⁷ Davis's modern critics argue that he was also a petty tyrant and a virulent racist. Even a few pro-Confederate authors have painted Davis as an overbearing, hot-tempered micromanager who insisted on having everything his way.⁸ However, the facts do not support this characterization.

My research has led me to conclude that Jefferson Davis was a good, noble Christian man, that he was neither a dictator nor a micromanager, and that he treated blacks with respect and received their respect in return.

One charge against Davis that will not be discussed in detail in this paper is the well-known accusation that Davis was a traitor because he supported secession and then became the leader of the central government that the seceded states established. I will comment only briefly on this accusation. First of all, it needs to be pointed out that Davis was not enthusiastic about secession; he strove mightily to avoid secession and came under fire from secessionist hardliners for doing so. Although Davis resigned from the U.S. Senate and cast his lot with the South once his state of Mississippi seceded, prior to that point he sought some kind of compromise that would hold the Union together. Furthermore, I believe one can make a strong case that the Southern states had the legal right to peacefully separate from the Union, and that therefore Jefferson Davis was not guilty of treason in eventually supporting secession and in agreeing to serve as the president of the Confederacy.

For example, Thomas Jefferson said he would permit a state that wanted to leave the Union to do so in peace, even if he didn't agree with the state's reasons for leaving. The right of peaceful separation was also recognized by Presidents John Quincy Adams and John Tyler. In fact, at one point President Adams himself advocated the secession of the New England states. Adams wasn't the only Northern leader who at one time or another advocated Northern secession. George Washington's Secretary of State, Timothy Pickering of Massachusetts, and U.S. Representative and Senator James Hillhouse of Connecticut, likewise advocated Northern secession for a time. Even the Federalist Hartford Convention concluded a state had the right to secede under certain circumstances. None other than Northern abolitionists William Lloyd Garrison and Lysander Spooner believed the Southern states should be allowed to go in peace. Garrison believed, with some justification, that the isolation of the South by secession would hasten slavery's demise. Spooner believed the natural right of self-determination demanded that the Southern states be allowed to separate peacefully.

The U.S. Constitution is simply silent on whether or not a state can leave the Union. Therefore, to carry the 10th Amendment to its logical conclusion, the right to secede remains with the states. Seven of the original thirteen states specified in their ratification ordinances that they were only granting to the federal government certain specific powers, and that they reserved all other powers to themselves; three of those states even said

they reserved the right to resume those delegated powers if they felt the need to do so. America herself was founded on the principle of secession--that is, separation from England. Virginia began the formal secession process by issuing a secession declaration in June 1776, one month before the Declaration of Independence was published.⁹

JEFFERSON DAVIS'S CHARACTER

Nearly everyone who knew Jefferson Davis considered him to be a decent, honorable man. His closest friends all held him in the highest regard.

Honesty and Integrity

None other than noted Civil War historian James McPherson has said that Jefferson Davis was "incorruptible to a fault."¹⁰

As a fellow Mississippian, Bishop Charles Galloway publicly sparred with Jefferson Davis over prohibition. Bishop Galloway strongly favored prohibition, while Davis believed banning alcoholic drinks was too intrusive and impossible to enforce. Galloway and Davis exchanged several sharp letters on the subject. Nevertheless, when asked to comment on Davis as a man, Galloway praised him as a pure, decent person:

Mr. Davis had his limitations, and was not without his measure of human faults and frailties, but he also had extraordinary gifts and radiant virtues and a brilliant genius that rank him among the mightiest men of the centuries. He made mistakes, because he was mortal, and he excited antagonisms because his convictions were stronger than his tactful graces; but no one who knew him, and no dispassionate student of history, ever doubted the sincerity of his great soul or the absolute integrity of his imperial purpose. . . .

Jefferson Davis began life well. He had a clean boyhood, with no tendency to vice or immorality. That was the universal testimony of neighbors, teachers and fellow students. He grew up a stranger to deceit and a lover of the truth. He formed no evil habits that he had to correct, and forged upon himself no chains that he had to break. His nature was as transparent as the light that shone about him; his heart was as open as the soft skies that bent in benediction over his country home. . . .¹¹

Some of Davis's fiercest political opponents became his friends once they got to know him. One such person was Senator William Seward, who regularly gave speeches in which he harshly condemned the South over slavery, and whose famous speech "The Irrepressible Conflict," caused considerable alarm in the South. In early 1858, Davis was confined to his bed for several weeks with a severe cold and with inflammation in his left eye. During this time, Seward came to visit Davis every day and showed "earnest, tender interest" in Davis's condition.¹²

When former Texas governor and Confederate presidential aide Francis Lubbock first heard of the federal claim (later proven false) that Davis had been involved in the plot that killed Abraham Lincoln, he said the charge was,

. . . so preposterous to those of us who knew him that we were at a loss to account for its having been made until we became more fully acquainted with the blind rage that possessed the Northern people.¹³

Reference has already been made to Jefferson Davis's conduct in the investigation of Daniel Webster, a leading Whig politician from Massachusetts. This topic bears closer scrutiny. In April 1846 the chairman of

the House Committee on Foreign Affairs accused Webster of wrongdoing. Davis, then a member of the House, was appointed to a committee to investigate the charges. The night before the committee's report was to be released, a Northern Democrat visited Davis and urged him not to waste this opportunity to discredit Webster and his Whig allies. Davis biographer Felicity Allen describes what happened next:

Nothing fired Davis's temper more quickly than an underhanded appeal to selfishness. "Mr. Davis told him with much heat that if Mr. Webster was to be entailed upon the country for life, 'and no one could deprecate his policy more than I do, I would not make a false and partisan report or parley with my sense of justice and honor. . . .'"¹⁴

The next day the committee released its report, which completely exonerated Webster. Davis was the one who drafted the report. Webster later called on Davis and expressed his tremendous gratitude for the "manly manner in which he had defended him."¹⁵ In later years the Websters invited Davis and his wife Varina to their home in Marshfield, Massachusetts. Davis remarked that Webster "was very kind to me, and though some of our political views were thoroughly antagonistic, we always met as friends."¹⁶

During the Mexican War, Davis was a colonel and commanded a regiment. Davis became aware that his men were stealing ears of corn from a cornfield. He gathered his men together and sternly rebuked them. He told them that "private rights must and should be respected."¹⁷ Davis then found the owner of the cornfield and paid him for the crop.¹⁸

Charity and Kindness

As Secretary of War in Franklin Pierce's administration, Jefferson Davis was known for being generous to those who were less fortunate or who were in need. A young man on his way to West Point became sick in Washington. He wrote a letter to Davis and asked for help. Davis came to see the young man, engaged a nurse for him, and gave him "the kindest and most tender attention for three or four weeks until I was well enough to go on to West Point."¹⁹

Davis regularly sent money to a woman who sat outside his office knitting stockings. Davis's messenger told him that he believed the woman was a fraud, but Davis kept sending the money anyway; Davis also sent her a cushion "to prevent her taking cold."²⁰

Another recipient of Davis's charity was a "dwarfish insane man" who would frequently come to see Davis to ask for money. Varina Davis complained to her husband that she didn't know how he could stand the man. Davis, looking troubled, expressed sympathy for the man and said "it is a dreadful fate to be distraught and friendless."²¹ Mrs. Davis added that her husband made it a rule that "no one should be turned away hungry, however undeserving or unattractive."²²

The chief clerk in the War Office, Colonel Archibald Campbell, attempted to restrain Davis's charity toward beggars. He explained that "in anyone else it would be a mere yielding to opportunity" but that Davis would worry about them after he helped them, "and it wears him very much."²³ When Campbell complained that he feared Davis was letting phony beggars take advantage of him, Davis replied, "Brave and honest men are not suspicious."²⁴

Davis continued this pattern of being charitable and kind as the Confederacy's president. He gave of his own money to help the poor. He sent hot drinks and food out to his guards. He repeatedly granted pardons to soldiers who appealed death sentences to him. He took in an abused mulatto child and raised him as one of his own children. William Cooper discusses Davis's generosity toward those who were in unfortunate

circumstances:

Davis also demonstrated a genuine generosity to individuals serving the cause whom he discovered in unfortunate circumstances. One winter night he noticed that the sentinel at the front door of the Executive Mansion wore no overcoat. Informed that overcoats had not been issued, the president acted, and soon the garments were distributed. When he learned that a regiment camped in the city had received no breakfast, these soldiers had food delivered to them by noon. One morning an elderly woman came to him at the White House [the Confederate White House]. She identified herself as the oldest living relative to George Mason, a Revolutionary hero, and said that all her property was within Federal lines. To support herself, she needed a job. The president got her a position at the Treasury Department.²⁵

Davis's feelings of charity and kindness even extended to enemy soldiers. He urged Confederate troops to treat Union prisoners of war with courtesy and kindness. One Confederate private in the Twelfth Mississippi recalled what Davis said in a brief speech to his unit:

I wish to impress this upon your minds: Always be kind to your prisoners. Fight the enemy with all the power that God has given you, and when he surrenders remember that you are Southern gentlemen and treat him with courtesy and kindness. Never be haughty to the humble. . . .²⁶

When Davis became alarmed at reports of widespread death and disease among Union prisoners of war, he tried to purchase the needed medical supplies from the North and offered to pay for them in gold, cotton, or tobacco. Historian John Tilley continues,

The offer made plain that Union surgeons might bring the medicines down and use them solely to minister to Union prisoners. To this offer, there was no reply.²⁷

One noteworthy account of the effect that Jefferson Davis's kind and charitable nature often had on those who met him is the case of Mary Day from Ohio. She came to Fortress Monroe, the federal facility where Davis was being held after the war, in order to visit her brother. Out of curiosity, she decided to visit Davis as well. Back in Ohio, she had been singing a song that was quite popular in the North at the time, "Hang Jeff Davis on a Sour Apple Tree." After having heard so many horrible things about Davis, she expected "hoofs and horns" when she met him. When she finally did meet him, she was "speechless with amazement." She said his eyes were "lightened with a smile that was almost angelic."²⁸ She added that "the most arresting of all was a quality in his voice that seemed to go directly to one's heart." In time she became good friends with Davis. When she came to say goodbye, she wanted to tell him how her feelings about him had changed, but she was afraid to do so because she feared she would start crying. After an exchange of kind words, Davis walked her to the stairs and gave her a parting blessing that moved her to tears. She described the event, saying "[He] gave me a parting blessing such as I never before heard in my life. Of course I ran down the steps sobbing aloud."

Another former skeptic who came to deeply respect and admire Davis was Dr. John Craven, who was appointed to be Davis's physician when federal authorities imprisoned Davis at Fortress Monroe. Among other things, Craven said that Davis "impressed me more than any professor of Christianity I had even heard."²⁹

Toward the end of his life, when he was living at the Beauvoir Mansion in Biloxi, Mississippi, Davis was visited by a former *Union* soldier. When the visit ended, the former Union trooper explained that he had no

money with which to return home and asked Davis for assistance. Davis, though living on a very modest income himself, gave the man money for his trip home, and then told him, "If any more of the boys need help, tell them I'll do what I can to help."³⁰

Piety

Jefferson Davis was deeply religious. Robert E. Lee's religious faith is well known, but for some reason Davis's piety isn't. Davis was brought up to believe in the Bible. He studied the Bible carefully, in English and in Greek, and he quoted from it repeatedly in his letters.³¹ He attended church regularly. On two occasions after two of his children had died prematurely, he was heard to say, "Not my will, but thy will be done." When Davis saw the lewdness of French art and the immorality of French society in Paris, he expressed disapproval, saying,

My opinion of Paris as a place for education has not changed for the better, but rather for the worse. The tone cannot be delicate where living objects and inanimate representations so glaringly offend against decency. . . .³²

Reverend Charles Minnigerode, who knew more of Davis's "inner life" than "perhaps any other man," said Davis was "always pure," and that his "whole being" loathed "impure thought" or "anything low or corrupting," adding,

He was pure in heart and lived conscientiously in the sight of God. All his habits bore the stamp of that.³³

Francis Lubbock said that one reason that he enjoyed speaking with Davis was that Davis's conversation was "so chaste."³⁴

While Davis was away from home fighting in the Mexican War, he wrote to his wife and asked if she had remembered his request "on the subject of prayer" because he wanted to be sure she was being prayerful. He also advised her to "be pious, be calm, be useful, and charitable and temperate in all things."³⁵

As president of the Confederacy, Davis proclaimed national days of prayer and fasting. On more than one occasion, he was seen kneeling in prayer in the presidential mansion.

JEFFERSON DAVIS'S LEADERSHIP STYLE

Far from being the micromanaging, overbearing leader that many have painted him to be, Jefferson Davis was a considerate leader who gave his subordinates wide latitude.

Colonel Jefferson Davis in the Mexican War

Colonel Davis's regiment was in Mexico and facing danger when one of his captains, a Captain W. P. Rogers, refused an order to stay at Saltillo that day. Davis could have had the man court-martialed; at the very least he could have relieved him of his command and quite possibly have ruined his career. Instead, Davis was more than lenient with the insubordinate officer, even though he knew the captain had "no kind feeling" for him. Davis found the young officer and reasoned with him. Fortunately, Captain Rogers responded favorably to Davis's lenient approach. Rogers himself reported the following about what Davis said to him:

He further said that he knew I had for him no kind feeling but that endangered as we were he hoped that might be forgotten. The post he assigned me he said was a post of honor and that he desired that I might have the glory of leading an independent command to action. . . . I could

not again refuse.³⁶

Confederate President, Commander-in-Chief

Several pages could be spent discussing the many times when Jefferson Davis gave his subordinates wide latitude and declined to countermand the decisions of local commanders in the field. William Cooper notes that Davis felt strongly that he "could not give operational orders to his field commanders."³⁷ In addition, there were many occasions when Davis showed consideration and sensitivity toward opposing views from his cabinet, from his generals, and from various Southern governors. After years of studying Jefferson Davis's papers, Cooper rejects the claim that Davis was a micromanager:

These records do not reveal a Commander in Chief Davis as a micromanager who constantly interfered with his generals. Rather, they show a commander in chief who gave his generals significant latitude and discretion. . . .³⁸

Correctly perceiving that Union forces planned an early move into then-neutral Kentucky, General Leonidas Polk decided to move his army into the state and to occupy the town of Columbia, Kentucky. Polk knew that Jefferson Davis did not want Confederate forces in Kentucky unless Union forces moved into the state first. The governor of Tennessee wired Davis and urged him to order Polk to withdraw from Kentucky, lest his occupation hurt the Confederate cause in the state. Davis's initial reaction was to order Polk to withdraw. However, shortly after issuing the withdrawal order, Davis received Polk's explanation of his actions. Upon reading Polk's arguments, Davis reversed himself and decided to allow Polk to make the final decision. Cooper says the following about this episode:

Davis's response permitted Polk to make the final decision, and the general held his ground. Believing the individual on the spot best knew the immediate circumstances, Davis as commander in chief was always reluctant to overrule a field commander, and this one told the president that he absolutely had to act as he did.³⁹

At one point in the efforts to save Vicksburg from falling into Union hands, General Joseph E. Johnston urged Davis to order General Theophilus Holmes in Arkansas to take his forces and join General John Pemberton's battered forces at Vicksburg. Davis penned a letter to General Holmes. He stressed Vicksburg's critical importance, but he left the decision up to Holmes. Holmes replied that he felt such a move was impractical and that it would leave Arkansas unprotected. Holmes decided to stay in Arkansas. He wrote to Davis that he would of course obey Davis's orders if Davis chose to order him to Vicksburg, but he made it clear he felt the decision would be a mistake. In response, Davis told Holmes that if Holmes had accurately described and assessed the situation, then he had acted wisely in remaining in Arkansas, and Davis declined to countermand Holmes's decision. Cooper notes that Holmes "surely" was correct in his analysis of the situation, and that it most likely would have been a mistake for Holmes to attempt to join Pemberton.⁴⁰

Davis showed consideration and deference to his advisors, against his own better judgment, in the case of the appointment of General Joseph E. Johnston to be the commander of the Department of the West. It was no secret that Davis did not think highly of Johnston's skills as a general and that he felt Johnston was unwilling to work in harmony with others. But Davis's Secretary of War, James Seddon, insisted that Johnston be chosen for the assignment. Seddon managed to convince a majority of Davis's cabinet to support Johnston. After considerable discussion, Davis reluctantly made the appointment. In placing Johnston in this crucial position, Davis gave him "full power to direct the entire Western campaign and to assume personal command, at his discretion, of any of the armies engaged in it."⁴¹

When Judah Benjamin was serving as the Acting Secretary of War, he had "a virtually free hand."⁴² Even

when it came to formulating military plans, Davis and Benjamin worked on them together. "The charge that he was no more than a clerk in his department had no basis in fact," notes Rembert Patrick.⁴³

Another incident that throws light on Davis's leadership style is the dispute between Christopher Memminger and John Reagan. Memminger was the Treasury Secretary and Reagan was the Postmaster General. Patrick explains how Davis settled the dispute:

The way by which the controversy was settled was perhaps the most significant thing about it. When the two disputants were unable to come to an agreement, the matter was referred to the President, who brought it up in Cabinet meeting and referred it to the Attorney General, whose decision finally was forced upon Memminger. Disputes of this kind were rare. This one shows that the President allowed his advisers a great deal of freedom of action in settling their own differences.⁴⁴

After an extensive study of Jefferson Davis's dealings with his cabinet members, Patrick concluded that Davis did not render them "mere clerks," that they were free to express their views, and that Davis rarely overruled the majority opinion of his cabinet:

The members of the Confederate Cabinet were not spineless yes men; Jefferson Davis did not require of his secretaries an unquestioning conformity as a condition of remaining in the Cabinet. At the same time, a secretary who thought to dominate the government from his office was bound to be disabused of the idea; but it did not follow that the secretary was to be ruled, or dictated to, by the President. Davis wanted their counsel and encouraged them to present their views freely. A democratic atmosphere pervaded the meetings of the Cabinet, and the plans that took shape at them matured slowly after ample discussion and full consideration. The occasions when the President overruled the majority opinion of his Cabinet were rare. There were differences between him and them, as there were among the members themselves, but an amicable agreement was the rule rather than the exception.⁴⁵

Jefferson Davis certainly wasn't above forgiving an offense or apologizing when he believed he had wronged or offended a subordinate. For example, Davis blushed with embarrassment when he mistook the age of a young recruit, apparently because the soldier had no beard whatsoever. Fearing that he had hurt the youth's feelings, Davis hastily said, "Oh, excuse me. I beg your pardon. It was a long time before I had whiskers myself."⁴⁶ Davis showed he could swallow his pride and forgive intemperate behavior for the greater good when General Sterling Price reacted with rage after learning Davis had appointed someone else to a position that he wanted. Price "exploded spectacularly" at Davis and pounded Davis's desk so hard that the ink bottles jumped. When Price vowed to resign, Davis icily accepted the offer. However, the next day, Davis, "subordinating his pride to his sense of duty," met with Price and persuaded him to remain in the army.⁴⁷

JEFFERSON DAVIS AND RACE RELATIONS

Simply put, Jefferson Davis treated blacks with respect and received their respect in return. Critics will reply that Davis believed in white supremacy, i.e., that he believed that whites were superior to blacks. But these critics almost never explain that nearly all Americans in that day believed the same thing. This was true of the average man on the street right up to the nation's leaders in all parts of the country. For example, prominent Northern politicians like Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas repeatedly said they believed whites were superior to blacks. Douglas even said the Declaration of Independence's statement about all men being created equal referred only to white men, and Lincoln referred to the declaration as "the white man's charter of freedom." Fortunately, we have come a long way since then. But I don't think it's fair to condemn Davis because he held racial views that were shared by nearly all white Americans in his day. Cooper does a good

job of putting Davis's racial views into proper perspective:

At the end of his life, Jefferson Davis believed unequivocally in the superiority of his race. He also had serious reservations about black people ever achieving any kind of equality with the superior race. Yet he was no race-baiter or racial demagogue. . . . His conviction about the innate supremacy of his race did not require hatred or viciousness. . . .

While not all Americans joined his embrace of slavery, few dissented from his belief in the superiority of the white race, an outlook shared by almost all white Americans as well as Western Europeans."⁴⁸

Respectful and Respected

Jefferson Davis believed it was his Christian duty to treat blacks with respect. Cooper discusses Davis's treatment of blacks and their response to that treatment:

Without question he respected individual blacks and in turn received their respect. His dealings with his slave James Pemberton and with Ben Montgomery as both a slave and a freedman illustrate such a relationship. Inviting Davis to attend the Colored State Fair in Vicksburg in 1886, Montgomery's son Isaiah said he knew Davis would have an interest "in any Enterprise tending to the welfare and development of the Colored people of Mississippi." "We would be highly pleased to have you here," Isaiah Montgomery asserted, and he closed "with best wishes for your continued preservation."⁴⁹

When Davis had to leave his plantation suddenly in order to go to Montgomery to assume duties as the Confederate president, "He made a touching farewell speech to his quickly assembled slaves, who responded with expressions of devotion. . . ."⁵⁰

The year before Davis died, he received a letter from one of his former slaves, James H. Jones, who had since become a Republican and had had a successful career in the intervening fifteen years. Jones told Davis, "I have always been as warmly attached to you as when I was your body servant."⁵¹ Jones went on to say that he always defended Davis from "any attack of malicious or envious people." Another one of Davis's former slaves, Robert Brown, fiercely defended Davis after the war. In one instance, Brown was traveling with Mrs. Davis and the children on a ship headed to New York, when a Northern man approached one of the Davis children and began to attack Davis's character. Brown became so angry that he punched the man. The captain of the ship was called, and when he heard the full story of the incident, he said Brown's action was justified and demanded an apology from the Northerner.⁵²

Davis treated blacks with respect, and many blacks knew it. During a trip through the western part of the Confederacy, Davis got off his train at Griswoldville, Georgia, in order to meet with a group of slaves who had gathered in the hope of seeing him. These men worked at a local pistol factory and had come to the train station because they wanted to meet Davis. Informed of the gathering, Davis got off the train and circulated among the group, shaking each hand and speaking to each man individually.⁵³ When Davis returned to Richmond, Virginia, after the war, he was not only cheered by whites but also by blacks. One observer noted that Davis was "greatly touched" by the sympathy shown to him by the blacks in the crowd. In fact, some blacks climbed up on his carriage, shook and kissed his hand, and called out "God bless Mars Davis."⁵⁴

Jim Limber

Few people know that Davis and his wife informally adopted a mulatto (half-white-half-black) orphan during

the war. For those who care to know, the child looked like a young African-American boy, except that his skin was slightly less dark than the skin of most other black children; his facial features and hair were clearly African-American. Mrs. Davis rescued the young boy from a cruel guardian and brought him with her to live at the Confederate White House in Richmond. His name was Jim Limber. Davis and his wife raised him as one of their own children. Jim Limber and the other Davis children played together as normal siblings. Even in family letters, Jim's new family spoke lovingly of him, and he expressed his love for them.⁵⁵

Jefferson Davis went to the Richmond courthouse to file the necessary papers for Jim Limber's freedom. Davis wanted to be certain that the guardian who had abused Jim could never regain custody of him. When Davis learned that a group of boys down the street had been a little mean to young Jim, he personally went to talk to them about it. By all accounts, the boy was happy and loved in the Davis home.⁵⁶

Much to their sorrow, the Davises were forced to give up custody of Jim Limber after a vicious Union officer threatened to take the boy from them and to raise him to hate the South. Rather than see Jim Limber in this man's custody, Varina Davis asked family friend and Union general Rufus Saxton to take the child, and he agreed to do so. Years later, Jefferson Davis was still trying to find out about the boy's welfare.⁵⁷

Attitude Toward Slavery

Although Davis defended slavery prior to and during the war, he also admitted slavery had its "evils and abuses."⁵⁸ Davis believed that slavery, administered in a Christian manner, would prepare the slaves for eventual freedom and full equality with whites.⁵⁹

One reason that Davis disputed the abolitionist portrayals of slaveowners as vicious brutes who constantly abused their slaves was that he treated his slaves with the utmost respect. His first overseer was his friend and personal servant, James Pemberton. He permitted his slaves to accumulate property. He set up a system where any of his slaves who were accused of wrongdoing were tried and sentenced by a jury of other slaves. He gave gifts to each slave on special occasions like birthdays and weddings. Even during the war, he sent thousands of dollars to his brother, Joseph, in order to ensure that his slaves were properly provisioned. He expressed concern over the fate of his slaves in letters. In an amazing and telling show of trust, Davis armed his slaves when his plantation was threatened by a band of white criminals who were trying to make a cut-off behind his plantation.⁶⁰

Support for Emancipation

Toward the end of the war Davis led the fight to grant slaves their freedom in exchange for military service. When the Confederate Congress began to debate a bill that would allow slaves to serve in the army, Davis insisted that slaves who performed this service be granted their freedom, even if they didn't serve in combat roles. Davis wrote to Governor William Smith of Virginia that he promised ". . . to seek legislation *to secure unmistakably freedom to the slave* who shall enter the Army with a right to return to his old home when he shall have been honorably discharged from the Military Service."⁶¹

The Confederate Congress proceeded to pass a bill that permitted slaves to be enlisted into the army, but the bill did not guarantee emancipation—it allowed emancipation if the slave's state and master agreed, but it did not guarantee it. In response to this, Davis ensured that emancipation would be rewarded for faithful military service "by having the War Department regulations governing the enlistment of slaves *require that masters consent to freedom before slaves could be enrolled*."⁶² The regulation stipulated that no slave could be enlisted unless his master guaranteed his freedom in writing (it also specified that the slave had to join voluntarily). Davis could have easily just signed the bill and done nothing more, but he didn't. Instead, he went out of his way to ensure that slaves would receive emancipation for faithful military service.

It should be mentioned that in late 1864, Davis was prepared to abolish slavery in exchange for European diplomatic recognition in order to save the Confederacy. Davis informed Confederate congressional leaders of his intentions, and then sent Duncan Kenner to Europe to make the proposal. Davis even made Kenner a minister plenipotentiary so as to ensure he could make the proposal to the British and French governments and that it would be taken seriously.⁶³

Let Them Testify

At a time when many Americans, in all parts of the country, still opposed allowing blacks to testify in court, Davis favored allowing them to do so. He expressed this view in a letter to his wife in which he also expressed concern about the welfare of their former slaves:

I hope the Negroes' fidelity will be duly rewarded and regret that we are not in a position to aid and protect them. There is, I observe, a controversy which I regret as to allowing negroes to testify in court. From brother Joe [Joseph Davis], many years ago, I derived the opinion that they should be made competent witnesses, the jury judging of their credibility.⁶⁴

In another letter to his wife, Davis again spoke fondly of his former slaves:

Their good faith under many trials, and the mutual affection between them and myself, make me always solicitous for their welfare. . . .⁶⁵

CONCLUSION

Jefferson Davis was a man of principle, a man of conviction, and a man of faith. He was what many would call "a good soul." He was a man who strove to live his Christian faith. Throughout his life he was known for acts of charity and kindness. He earned the respect of many of his bitterest enemies once they got to know him. To a man, his friends adored him.

Contrary to the persistent myths about his leadership style, Davis was no micromanaging, intolerant tyrant--far from it. When it came to commanding his generals, he repeatedly left crucial decisions up to them and trusted their judgment. In working with his cabinet members, he sought their advice, encouraged a free exchange of ideas, and rarely countermanded the majority opinion among them. As far as his personal relations with subordinates, he was usually considerate and tolerant toward them.

Finally, although Davis shared the common belief of his day in white supremacy, his racial views did not lead him to treat blacks unkindly or disrespectfully. On the contrary, Davis believed he had a Christian duty to treat blacks, whether slave or free, with kindness and respect. Most of Davis's slaves loved him and spoke favorably of him till the day they died.

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2. Felicity Allen, *Jefferson Davis, Unconquerable Heart*, Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1999, p. 53.
3. Seventh Debate: Douglas' Speech in Don Fehrenbacher, editor, *Abraham Lincoln: Speeches and Writings 1832-1858*, New York: Viking Press, 1989, p. 787.
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5. James and Walter Kennedy, *Was Jefferson Davis Right?*, Gretna, Louisiana: Pelican Publishing Company, 1998, p. 111.
6. Allen, pp. 128-129.
7. See, for example, Bruce Catton, editor, *The National Experience: A History of the United States*, Second Edition, New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1968, p. 345.
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