

Jefferson Davis

Farewell to the Senate

January 21, 1861

On January 21, 1861, in a scene of high drama, [Mississippi Senator Jefferson Davis](#) and four southern colleagues rose on the Senate floor to offer final remarks before withdrawing from the body and returning home to their states.

Officials from the South had long supported states' rights as a bulwark against the central government. During the previous decades, southern senators had frequently used the threat of secession to encourage northern states to compromise on such issues as the spread of slavery into new territories. Believing that the election of Abraham Lincoln to the presidency threatened the institution of slavery and that there was no longer any hope of compromise, southern states began to act on the principle they had so often espoused—that states were sovereign bodies that had a right to withdraw from the Union or nullify offensive acts of Congress. South Carolina was the first state to secede in December 1860, followed in early January by Mississippi, Florida, and Alabama. On January 21, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas were still in the Union but seceded later in January and early February. Virginia, North Carolina, Arkansas, and Tennessee seceded in the spring of 1861 after the fall of Fort Sumter.

At the age of fifty-two, Jefferson Davis already had behind him a distinguished career in public service. Following graduation from West Point, he served in the army on the northwestern frontier for several years before returning to Mississippi as a planter. After a year in the House of Representatives in the 1840s, he commanded a regiment in the Mexican War. He served four years in the Senate as a Democrat from 1847 to 1851, then entered the cabinet of President Franklin Pierce as secretary of war. He returned to the Senate in 1857. Long a defender of slavery, Davis supported

Mississippi's decision to secede, as well as the plans to form a confederation of the states that had left the Union. He hoped this could occur peacefully but was prepared for war if necessary.

Although ill with severe headaches, Davis returned one final time to the Senate floor to bid farewell to his colleagues there before leaving Washington. As news spread that several southern senators would be making a last appearance, spectators filled not only the galleries but also the corridors outside the chamber. Davis' wife Varina watched anxiously from the gallery. One by one, the four senators—[David Yulee](#) and [Stephen Mallory](#) of Florida and [Benjamin Fitzpatrick](#) and [Clement Clay](#) of Alabama—rose and spoke, while Davis by prearrangement waited until last. When his turn came, he stood at his desk, tall and slender, his face drawn with pain and illness, as he made his statement in a voice that grew stronger as he progressed.

Davis did not attempt to argue his case but simply set forth his reasoning that states were sovereign entities and thus had a right to secede from the Union. His state, he declared, had reached its decision because “we are about to be deprived in the Union of the rights which our fathers bequeathed to us.” He stated, however, that he bore his former colleagues no ill will. His conclusion, “having made the announcement which the occasion seemed to me to require, it only remains for me to bid you a final adieu,” was met by brief silence, followed by a burst of applause, as many in the galleries wept. Then, in sadness, Jefferson Davis led his four southern colleagues up the aisle and out of the Senate chamber.

Stunned and confused about how to handle the unprecedented situation, the Senate allowed the members to depart peacefully and simply declared their seats vacant. It did the same with those of the Georgia and Louisiana senators who withdrew or failed to return to the Senate after their states seceded later in January and February. When Congress reconvened in July, however, war was in progress, and the Senate formally expelled members from the four states that had seceded in the meantime, as well as two senators from Texas and one from South Carolina.

In February 1861, Jefferson Davis became president of the Confederate States of America, a position he held throughout the Civil War. Captured by Union troops in May 1865, he was imprisoned until 1867, when he returned home to Mississippi.

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