Strategy Research Project

Strategic Leadership, Southern Style: Civilian Statesmen in the Confederacy's War

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Class of 2013

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

1. REPORT DATE *(DD-MM-YYYY)*	**2. REPORT TYPE**	**3. DATES COVERED** *(From - To)*
xx-03-2013	STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT	

4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE
Strategic Leadership, Southern Style: Civilian Statesmen in the Confederacy's War

5a. CONTRACT NUMBER

5b. GRANT NUMBER

5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER

6. AUTHOR(S)
Colonel Bryan E. Denny
United States Army

5d. PROJECT NUMBER

5e. TASK NUMBER

5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER

7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)
Dr. Richard J. Sommers
Army Heritage and Education Center

8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER

9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)
U.S. Army War College
122 Forbes Avenue
Carlisle, PA 17013

10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)

11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)

12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Distribution A: Approved for Public Release. Distribution is Unlimited.

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES
Word Count: 6,111

14. ABSTRACT

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15. SUBJECT TERMS
Civil Military Relations, Military History, Strategic Vision

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			**17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT**	**18. NUMBER OF PAGES**	**19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON**
a. REPORT	**b. ABSTRACT**	**c. THIS PAGE**			**19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER** *(Include area code)*
UU	UU	UU	UU	30	

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

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Title:	Strategic Leadership, Southern Style: Civilian Statesmen in the Confederacy's War
Report Date:	March 2013
Page Count:	30
Word Count:	6,111
Key Terms:	Civil Military Relations, Military History, Strategic Vision
Classification:	Unclassified

When Jefferson Davis accepted the position of Provisional President of the Confederacy in 1861, he would not go it alone. Just as his counterpart in Washington was surrounded by senior civilian statesmen and professional military officers, Davis too had his Cabinet. This inner circle had duties and responsibilities much like their counterparts today, including advising the President on diplomatic, informational, military and economic matters that could lead to the South's recognized independence. Of these cabinet officials, the most important for the embattled, wartime Confederacy was the Secretary of War. Six men, both civilian and military, held that crucial position, 1861-1865. This Strategy Research Project (SRP) analyzes the relationship between those key senior secretaries and President Davis. Conversely the paper also examines to what extent he acknowledged and accepted their recommendations. The paper also explores the impact of President Davis's leadership style on the Confederate war effort. Lastly the SRP gleans insights into enduring civil-military relationships that are just as applicable today as they were during the Civil War.

Strategic Leadership, Southern Style: Civilian Statesmen in the Confederacy's War

The President : The chief of the executive branch of the federal government and the commander-in-chief of the United States Armed Forces.

Secretary of War: The head of the U.S. War Department, customarily a civilian, responsible to the President for the organization, maintenance, equipment, and operations of the U.S. Army.

The position of Secretary of War was officially made part of the United States Government by President George Washington in 1789. Although the position, brought over from the British system, had existed in the Congress of the Confederation, under the Articles of Confederation, its importance was recognized by Washington, a man who himself possessed no small amount of military experience. Likewise, when the founders of the Confederate States of America set to making their own Constitution, they copied almost verbatim the U.S. Constitution. The Confederate government also mirrored the U.S. government in creating a Cabinet including a Secretary of War and allowing the President to pick whomever he thought might best fit the role. This latitude could be both a blessing and a curse, depending on how it was applied.

Serving as a strategic leader during war will always be difficult regardless of the perceived righteousness of one’s cause. A strategic leader must have a vision and the drive and energy to articulate and communicate that vision and a strategy to reach a desired endstate. The leaders, and particularly the Cabinet members, selected by the President can either assist in realizing that vision or, at worst, become a hindrance. The President is allowed to select the members of his Cabinet, thus surrounding himself with

those that he perceives can best help achieve his endstate. This “help” can come in the form of a competent and capable ally who, trusted with the authority of the office, can accomplish much in the name of the cause. A person so entrusted can make the overall burden of the President less cumbersome and allow for a broader and longer perspective. Again this assumes this is the kind of ally the president wishes to have. Jefferson Davis consistently chose another path in his selection of Confederate Secretaries of War.

In 1861, Jefferson Davis undertook one of the most difficult tasks imaginable. As the newly elected President of the Confederate States of America, he was required to form an inclusive government that respected states rights and yet that would prove sufficiently strong against adversaries determined to reestablish the Union at all costs. The Confederacy did start with a number of advantages not inherent in most rebellions. It possessed its own land, men and resources inherent in the initially seven, eventually thirteen states that seceded, and it also possessed skilled leaders in both the political and military arena who would prolong their cause. In the end, however, this was not enough. What was required was a leader of vision and ability who was willing to work through subordinates entrusted with the commensurate authority. The task of building and running the Confederate government, any government for that matter, was simply too great for one individual to hold all the reins. To be sure, the President is in charge, but his subordinates must act with authority to accomplish the tasks necessary to achieve a desired endstate that he articulates through his guidance. Jefferson Davis and his selection of cabinet offers an opportunity to explore one strategic leader, his ideology, the thought process that pushed six men through the Confederate Secretary

of War position, and the impact it had on the Confederate war effort. This paper will explore Davis's career, both political and military, to establish his record and determine his abilities both on and off the battlefield. It will also identify his six Secretaries of War in order to determine their background and contribution to the Confederate war effort. Essentially it will demonstrate that Davis, although a skilled leader, lacked balance and failed to bring aboard cabinet members, particularly the Secretary of War, to provide him balance or enough of a counterpoint to force him to become the leader required to build the Confederacy.

When Jefferson Davis learned he was selected to be the president of the Confederacy, it came with some surprise. He had neither sought the office nor campaigned for the position. It was not because he felt himself unqualified to lead as the senior civilian but rather because he thought his strengths lay elsewhere. Despite his demonstrated capability in a number of elected positions, he felt himself first and foremost a military leader, and the battlefield was where he thought he would best serve the Confederacy. Jefferson Davis did not grow up aspiring to be a military leader or politician but proved himself capable of both at certain levels.[1] He received the finest education of the day at Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky, prior to reluctantly accepting appointment to West Point.[2] His time at the academy was marred by incidents of frivolous indiscipline where his intelligence was subjugated to his willful disobedience of the rules. Drinking off post with friends and organizing unauthorized parties nearly cost Davis his cadetship twice. Commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant in July 1828, and posted on the frontier, he there developed his heroic vision of military service. His creative mind and adventurous ways enabled him to flourish in the expanding west

and brought him recognition that he relished. The semi-autonomous nature of Army service in the rough and tumble west balanced his level of responsibility with his sometimes flagrant disregard of the rules, challenged him and allowed him to grow unrestrained.

Despite the accolades received in his early military service, Davis resigned his commission in 1835 to marry Miss Sarah Knox Taylor, daughter of Colonel, later General and President, Zachary Taylor. Taylor would not consent to Sarah marrying a military officer, and the headstrong Davis would not take “no” for an answer, so he resigned his commission, ending what seemed to be a promising military career before it had really begun. Tragically, Sarah died of malaria barely three months into their new life together, leaving Davis alone and focused on his plantation. Davis became somewhat of a recluse and devoted most of the next ten years to running the plantation and to personal study. He immersed himself in the study of governmental operations and emerged in 1844 with a keen interest in politics. The next year proved exceptional as he married Varina Anne Banks Howell, 18 years of age and 18 years younger than him, and he also ran for and won a seat in the United States House of Representatives.

Davis won early praise as an orator, but his aloof and formal nature never provided him the emotion necessary to sway the masses. With less than a year in position, he resigned his seat in the House and offered his services to the Army in the war with Mexico. Twice now, Davis turned away from a successful path to seek the unknown. As Colonel of the 1st Mississippi Regiment, “Mississippi Rifles”, he won national recognition at Buena Vista where, despite being wounded and outnumbered, he led his soldiers in routing Mexican troops and turning the tide of the battle.

Davis returned to Washington in 1847 to fill a recently vacated seat in the Senate, where he witnessed the ever growing divide between North and South. In 1851 he again resigned his position and made an unsuccessful run for Governor of Mississippi. After losing that election, he once more retreated to his plantation and study.

In 1853 President Franklin Pierce persuaded him to serve in his cabinet as Secretary of War, where ironically he made many improvements in the Army. While serving as Secretary of War, he was again elected Senator, which he assumed in 1857. During this time he witnessed events that ultimately caused the Southern States to leave the Union. Although he felt very strongly about states' rights, he was not seen as a secessionist who favored war but rather as someone that was opposed to war and favored preservation of the Union.[3] When Mississippi seceded in January of 1861, Davis once again resigned his seat and returned to his plantation, where he imagined himself soon commanding Confederate forces in battle.

Jefferson Davis's experiences to this point played to his personality. Smart, driven, and studious, he had demonstrated a first-rate intellect, borne out by a fine and diverse education. His studies at West Point, as well as his exploits in the frontier and his actions in the Mexican War, had served him well. He was a soldier-scholar, who placed military duty above political ambition. His experiences had also left him fatally opinionated in his own infallibility. He had little time for those he did not consider his equal and was prone to taking advice only when it fit his way of thinking. He placed importance on those with whom he had developed friendships and failed to see their deficiencies, a trait that cost dearly in the years to come. These characteristics, when

left unchecked at the top of the strategic leader pyramid, proved tragic over the next four years.

In February 1861, Davis was informed that he has been chosen as the Provisional President of the Confederacy. This was not the news for which he had hoped. While his military experience has served him well in the public eye, it was his ability to serve as a politician, and particularly his appeal to pro-Union and pro-Secessionist Southerners alike, that won him his new office.

As Davis sought to select his cabinet, several other political leaders pushed to give him advice and guidance, Davis, however, set an odious tone with the retort: “You are all wrong,” he stated. It will be “for Secretary of State, Hon Jeff. Davis of Miss.; War and Navy, Jeff. Davis of Miss.; Interior, ex-Senator Davis, of Miss.; Treasury, Col. Davis, of Miss.; Attorney General, Mr. Davis, of Miss.”[4] Indeed his experience had created a person confidant in his abilities, to the exclusion of advice and guidance of others. He had become a monster of his own making.

Davis did not choose his vice president, Alexander Stephens of Georgia, who was the largest contributor to writing the Confederate Constitution, and his relations with him were lukewarm at best. They disagreed on most major political issues, and Davis did not take his council in picking cabinet members.[5] Regardless of whom he selected to fill his cabinet, it is unlikely they would have been in a position to influence Davis much, as he was looking for someone simply to execute his policy, versus an energetic, broad-minded war fighter.

Davis’s first Secretary of War was Leroy Pope Walker of Alabama. Walker had no formal military experience or training yet held a commission as brigadier general in

the Alabama militia. More importantly, Walker had served as Chairman of the Alabama Delegation to the Charleston Democratic convention, was a secessionist, and was very popular in his state. Davis was working in a time constrained environment, and the pressure to organize a new government was monumental. Forging the states into a new nation, mobilizing the military forces and preparing for potential war were tremendous tasks, and time was fleeting. His need to build a national government inclusive of representatives from every state was, in many ways, an acknowledgement of how hard was the task ahead of him. Walker appeared to be a popular choice and, without proper military experience, would willingly carry out Davis's direction. Davis himself had served successfully as Secretary of War for Franklin Pierce, so he knew what the right person with authority could do in the position. Instead he chose as his Secretary of War, Walker, to whom he delegated no authority and who sought none. Davis must have understood the importance of this position and its bearing on the outcome of the war, yet he intentionally did not accord it proper authority.

Walker's lackluster performance in the initial days and weeks of his appointment stemmed from his personal belief that there would be no war. He famously remarked that "he would wipe up with his pocket handkerchief any blood that eventually might be spilled over secession."[6] By the time he finally realized war would come, he sprang into action with much energy but still proved inadequate to the task. He had not developed relationships with the state governors, who were uneasy about committing state troops to the new Confederate Army. The absence of a grand strategy or consensus regarding the deployment of forces was far outside his grasp. This indecisiveness led to continuous controversy with states over who had the authority to deploy troops.

Ultimately Congress, frustrated by overwhelming confusion and disorganization spewing from the War Department, set its sights on Walker. Despite the success of the Confederate Army at First Manassas in July of 1861, Walker's time was up. On September 1st a clerk in the Confederate War Department recorded that the "press and congressional critics are opening their batteries on the Secretary of War, for incompetency."[7] Within the week Walker resigned, and by mid month he accepted a commission as Brigadier General in the Confederate Army. Assigned to duty in Alabama, he served barely half a year before resigning from the Army, also. His appointment as Secretary of War lasted less than a year, but the slow start in organizing the military would have lasting negative effect. Worse, the lesson to be learned was wasted on Davis. Despite the significance of the post he again filled it with an accomplished but unqualified subordinate who did not push to broaden the scope of responsibility in the office, thereby wresting authority away from the President.

Davis's next Secretary of War hardly fared better than the first. Judah P. Benjamin of Louisiana had served successfully as Confederate Attorney General when he was selected as Secretary of War. Benjamin, by comparison to Walker, was better suited to the role in many ways. Smart, capable and hard working, he threw himself wholeheartedly at every challenge. He had cultivated a friendship with Davis despite the two getting off to a rocky start. When fellow United States senators prewar, Benjamin had once challenged Davis to a duel on the senate floor. Davis appreciated Benjamin's council and his realistic, if not always optimistic, viewpoint. He was, however, without military experience which might have aided him in his task, nor did he develop

friendships with others as he had done with the president. These deficiencies cost him the credibility or consensus building capability needed to succeed.

Problems with the conduct of the war had not gone unnoticed. In President Davis's second inaugural address 22 February 1862, he "admitted that there had been errors in our war policy. We had attempted operations on too extensive a scale, thus diffusing our powers which should have been concentrated."[8] If Davis saw Benjamin as the tool required to apply focus and concentrate the army, he may have been alone. While heavy rain may have been a dark cloud underlining Davis's assessment of his war policy during his inaugural address, it was lead falling on Confederate forces at Roanoke Island, North Carolina, on February 8, which would have a more direct effect. When word arrived that Roanoke and its garrison had been captured, politicians, the Army and newspapers alike went reeling. The success of Union soldiers close to Richmond and Norfolk, a better vantage point for the Union Navy to enforce the blockade, and an unblocked road further into the South was scandalous.

Congress went to work in identifying why Roanoke Island had fallen. Ultimately the realization that forces were available that could have helped the defenders, but did not, brought unfavorable attention on the War Department. Although he was not directly responsible for that disaster, perceptions regarding Benjamin as "too suave, too cool, too competent to be real" would hurt him, as would a belief that he still harbored relationships with friends in the North.[9] An incident in January in which he inadvertently almost cost the South "Stonewall" Jackson's services also reflected on him unfavorably. Indeed, his inexperience with military matters and his inability to move around the easily bruised egos of senior military leadership did not serve him well. General Joseph E.

Johnston, who had the respect of civilian and soldier alike, stated in March that "there could be no hope of success as long as Mr. Benjamin was Secretary of War."[10] Davis, seeing what was to come, accepted Benjamin's resignation on 27 March and "promoted" him to Secretary of State the following day. This occurred only days before a Congressional report critical to Benjamin and his handling of the War Department was released.[11] Davis had indeed preserved his friend but at the cost of worsening relations with Congress, which was furious at his intentional snubbing.

Although Benjamin held the post less than six months, he brought a level of organization to the office that had been lacking. He also brought a level of credibility to the position, although he had not sought or been given the authority required for the task that needed to be done. He did set the stage for his successor in two ways. He turned over a relatively organized operation that under the right leadership might contribute positively to the war effort. He also helped better define the required skills and experience necessary to successfully hold the post. For all Benjamin's brilliance, drive and energy, he had no experience, military or otherwise that would lend itself to prosecuting a war. Indeed, in a congratulatory note to fellow Louisianan Brigadier General P.G.T. Beauregard after the capture of Fort Sumter, Benjamin stated that he "was only a poor civilian 'who knows nothing of war.'"[12] In word and deed, Benjamin had worked hard to prove that point.

Benjamin was quickly replaced by George W. Randolph. Although not well known, Randolph was a successful lawyer, politician, secessionist and, when war broke out, a soldier. He entered service as a major in 1861 and stood up a battalion of artillery. He was recognized for "skill and gallantry" at Big Bethel and was promoted to

colonel in June of 1861. In February 1862 he was promoted to brigadier general, and in March Davis selected him as Secretary of War. Davis, not known to handle independence in subordinates well, certainly took a risk in choosing Randolph, a member of a well known family and prominent member of Virginia society, as well as a combat veteran. With his background and experience Randolph was not likely to submit to Davis's direction.

Randolph also shared the sentiment of a number of prominent politicians that the Union "may overrun our frontier States and plunder our coast but, as for conquering us, the thing is an impossibility. There is no instance in history of a people as numerous as we are inhabiting a country so extensive as ours being subjected if true to themselves."[13] It is unlikely that Davis shared the same sentiment as he chose to defend the Confederate frontier states vehemently; in fact, his capital, Richmond, was located in one of them. Indeed, by this point questions regarding Davis's strategy were the topic of senior military leaders. Brigadier General D.H. Hill wrote to Randolph congratulating him on his selection to the position and offered him a few words of advice. He warned against the "scattering of our forces and batteries." And he further warned that "Mr. Benjamin (if he had any policy at all)" placed "a small detachment and a weak battery at every point where the enemy might land. The consequence is that we have been beat in detail."[14] If Randolph was to concentrate forces, he would have to persuade Davis to change strategies.

Where Benjamin had brought a level of organization to the War Department, Randolph sought to expand it. Randolph increased the War Department's original seven bureaus – War, Adjutant and Inspector General, Quartermaster, Commissary General

of Subsistence, Surgeon General, Ordnance, and Indian Affairs -- to nine, including Engineers and also the Nitre Bureau, focused on the procurement of gunpowder. Randolph also hired an additional twenty clerks to help handle the paperwork of war.[15]

Undeniably Randolph grew in the job. His observations, perceptions and determination to take action when action was needed ultimately forced his hand. In November after discussions with General Joseph E. Johnston regarding the Army's organization in the West, Randolph was ready to act. His decision to unite the armies of Lieutenant General Theophilus Holmes in Arkansas and Louisiana, Lieutenant General John Pemberton in Mississippi and General Braxton Bragg in Tennessee into one department under General Johnston brought him into confrontation with Davis, who had originally organized the Department of the West. Undoing what Davis had put his hand to and not bothering to consult him first on the matter drew a stiff written rebuke. Davis accused Randolph of exceeding his authority in the "transferring of generals commanding important military districts, without conference with him and his concurrence; … and, above all, the making of appointments without his knowledge and consent…."[16] Randolph, no longer satisfied with the limited authority his office allowed and the stifling controlling nature of Davis, tendered his resignation on 16 November. Although some people considered Randolph another of Davis's clerks, his resignation did not sit well with several members of the military who had enjoyed the communication and open mindedness that he had brought to the position. Likewise it was noted that "A profound sensation has been produced in the outside world by the resignation of Mr. Randolph; and most of the people and the press seem inclined to denounce the President…."[17] No doubt, Randolph had exceeded his authority;

however, had Davis chosen to resolve the matter in a less confrontational way, perhaps a different conclusion could have been reached. As the resignation for the third and most capable Secretary of War thus far lay on his desk, President Davis had an opportunity to recognize the need for competence in the position and to invest with authority a person who could be matured and groomed in the office and who could relieve him of much of the day-to-day running of the Army. Davis, however, was unyielding. Perhaps he even believed the Secretary of War position so inconsequential that he could win the war by continuing to direct action from his office. Regardless, the issue cost the Confederacy the first Secretary of War with the experience, energy, devotion and work ethic required to hold the position. Ironically devotion to the cause could not supersede subordination to President Davis.

Due to the speed in which Randolph left office, Davis quickly named Major-General Gustavus W. Smith, who was on duty in Richmond, as the fourth Secretary of War. He held the post in an acting capacity for less than a week and then resumed his military command.

While many in Congress and others within his cabinet offered counsel as to who was best suited to serve as the next Secretary of War, Davis already had a candidate in mind. Davis wanted James A. Seddon because he had ties to Virginia, which Davis desperately wanted represented in his Cabinet. Seddon had been a moderately successful lawyer, had served two times in congress where his record was “not notable for achievement,” and had attended the Peace Conference in early 1861, the last attempt by the states to prevent war.[18] He also represented the aristocratic planter class with which Davis felt some kinship. Others, however, were not convinced and urged the

President to look elsewhere. Seddon had no military experience, so he would have to work to establish rapport with the many senior military leaders he would be dealing with on a daily basis. Dealing with the peculiarities of the senior Confederate military leadership, not to mention the state governors and the president himself, could be mentally and physically taxing. Unfortunately, like many of the senior leaders in the Confederacy, Seddon was also in poor health. His condition, indeed, appeared "almost cadaverous."[19] It was also said that he was "neither by nature nor habit, a worker."[20] Based on the state of conflict, others tried to convince Davis that a more experienced military man would perhaps provide better counsel. Davis pretended to be open-minded in filling the position; however, premature announcement of Seddon's appointment worsened the President's relations with would-be advisors and the press. Davis, already not on good terms with the press or anyone else that questioned his authority, was undeterred. Seddon possessed all the qualities he was looking for in a Secretary: he would follow orders, not challenge the President's authority or develop his own thoughts on grand strategy and winning the war. Seddon was firmly entrenched in Davis's camp for the next two years as the Confederacy's longest serving Secretary of War.

Despite the rocky start Seddon was able to move quickly, organizationally if not physically, to improve the Army in the West. Whereas Randolph had worked without the president's consent, Seddon was able to use his influence to move Davis along lines necessary to better organize the western theater. Davis now responded positively, even urgently, to Seddon's proposals, which were similar to what Randolph attempted earlier and failed. This may have been because Davis had originally agreed with Randolph or because the battlefield tour he took in December 1862 helped highlight the necessity of

action. Regardless, Davis's trip out of Richmond did him good. Without the burden of bureaucracy brought on by the routine running of the government, he was renewed. In the field reviewing troops was always where he felt most comfortable. Along the trip he was noted for his "good humor and graceful manners," quite the opposite of how most that had daily contact with him in Richmond would describe him.[21] He spent a day with his friend General Braxton Bragg and Bragg's corps and division commanders, sharing his thoughts of the situation with him and promoting officers and inspecting the soldiers. He also visited General John C. Pemberton in Vicksburg, providing guidance and making recommendations on his defensive position, telegraphing Seddon and requesting heavy cannons be sent to Vicksburg as quickly as possible.[22] He offered guidance but again failed to clarify the command structure.

While his personal dislike for General Johnston, stemming from many prewar clashes back to their days together at West Point, may have been kept just below the surface, he sincerely sought to strengthen Johnston's command of both armies. Nevertheless, his issuance of specific guidance to commanders and then disapproving Johnston's tactical plan undermined the general's authority. Although more tactically aware of the situation than Davis, Johnston proved unable to accept the full weight of the responsibilities of his command. The officer, therefore, did not press the issue of differing tactics with Davis, so the war in the West continued to be fought with a conflicting command structure.

Davis also began to rethink his position on retaining territory and the cost of holding key terrain and maintaining the offense. His earlier position of giving up no ground had been challenged by Randolph, and the trip west convinced him of the need

to maintain the Mississippi River even at the cost of middle Tennessee.[23] Arguably Seddon, who favored a much more offensive war on enemy soil, may have influenced him. It is just as likely that Davis was beginning to rethink his position after two years of combat.[24] This slow but steady transition in the President's thoughts would become the norm for the Davis-Seddon team. If the ultimate qualifier of success is victory, then they fell far short. Yet they were able to work together. Although Davis, not able to delegate his authority, still made all the decisions, he permitted Seddon to influence him. Davis was not sharpened by the steel of a questioning mind, but he did allow himself to be guided if that guide was tactful and unchallenging.

Seddon would combine the best attributes of his predecessors to make the best of the President and Secretary of War teams. He was focused on the conduct of the war in the grand scheme of things. He was like Randolph in his offensive approach to strategy, and his ability to see the big picture gave him valuable insight that occasionally pulled Davis out of the details and allowed him to see the battlefield clearly enough to make the bigger decisions, much as he had done out west. He also possessed Benjamin's ability to get along with Davis and influence him more than others had. Perhaps it was because they were similar in their thought process and Davis was not intimidated personally or professionally by Seddon. Whatever the cause, they were able to work together to focus the war effort.

Davis was never in short supply of critics, and those that got along well with him tended to draw their fair share of criticism as well. The Virginia delegation had urged Davis on his position on the impressments of slaves to help dig defensive fortifications.

Such impressments drew, however, much unfavorable criticism from Davis's opponents, and Seddon finally resigned his position in January 1865 over this.

The last person to hold the War Secretary position was John C. Breckinridge. It was the sixth and final time the job would change hands and this time to an individual whose breadth of experience rivaled Davis's own. Like Davis, Breckinridge had served in a number of political positions, including Vice President of the United States. He had run for president in 1860 and finished second, behind Lincoln, in the electoral votes. Unlike Davis, however, he had also served as a Major General in the Confederate Army. He had seen combat in several major engagements from Louisiana to Maryland and had led troops to victory in Virginia. He was strong willed and firm, and he understood that to bring about the necessary governmental changes required both diplomacy and consensus building. With Breckinridge as War Secretary, Davis was not able to direct the day-to-day running of the war, nor was he able to sufficiently challenge Breckinridge as he had done his predecessors. Alas for the Confederacy, Davis was only able to share at the end of the war the authority that was already rapidly slipping through his fingertips.

Despite the obvious twilight of the cause, Breckinridge attacked his new responsibilities with the zeal and professionalism that had always made him successful in military and political situations. He quickly worked to reestablish the Confederate supply system in order to sustain the troops still fighting. His dismissal of the Commissary Department Chief, Colonel Lucius B. Northrop, was a decision that every senior military leader, and empty bellied soldier, in the Confederacy must have applauded. While it would be easy to envision the destitute condition of the South at this

stage of the war, the new Commissary Chief, Brigadier General Isaac St. John, would soon have a “flow of foodstuffs and meat coming in beyond his expectations.”[25] Breckinridge worked with General St. John to overhaul the supply system, prompting General Robert E. Lee to write in April 1865 that “his army had not been so well supplied for months.”[26] General St. John may have been new to the Department of Commissary, but he had been Randolph’s appointment to the Nitre and Mining Bureau in April 1862, over two years earlier. Breckinridge, unlike Seddon before him, recognized talent and punished inefficiency accordingly.

Yet as it became clear that even these major accomplishments could not save the South, Breckinridge, on his own accord, attempted to set conditions of surrender for the Confederacy that would end the great endeavor with the dignity and legitimacy with which it started. Davis, however, ignored his advice and encouraged resistance to the end; he even wanted the Confederate Army taking to the woods and hills and fighting a guerilla war. Davis did not surrender his office and cabinet in a formal ceremony but forced the Union Army to round up high ranking Confederate politicians after an extensive manhunt. Davis himself was captured in Georgia on 10 May 1865, almost one full month after General Robert E. Lee had surrendered at Appomattox. Ironically, Breckinridge eluded his pursuers and escaped by boat from Florida to Cuba.

So what is the lesson to be learned? What can be inferred from the relationship of President Davis and his chain of Secretaries of War, and did these relationships or the lack thereof contribute to the defeat of the Confederacy? Although each of the six Confederate Secretaries of War brought with him skills that had made him successful prior to the war, only one, Breckinridge, was allowed to exercise the authority necessary

to handle the President and his military commanders. In fairness, the credit was not all Breckinridge's, as others, notably Randolph, had attempted to exercise authority in the execution of his duties, however unsuccessfully. To be sure, Davis's own interpretation of the Constitution, which invested in him the duties of Commander-in-Chief, doomed the Secretary of War to a subservient position, as is often alleged, occupied by nothing more than clerks. Although Davis was entirely responsible for filling the position, his choices were always self serving. His only consolation in filling this key component of his cabinet was to attempt to be inclusive of the many different Confederate states. His primary criterion was not hinged on the individual's ability to accomplish tasks within the framework of guidance; it was rather the ability to perform as directed without challenging Davis's authority.

It would be untrue to say that each of his selections for the position was not successful in his own right. Walker and Benjamin were successful politicians before the war. Breckinridge was successful as a politician and military leader. Seddon and Randolph were successful lawyers, and Smith was a professional soldier of high repute in the prewar U.S. Army -- although serious health problems undercut his ability to contribute to the Confederate war effort. Indeed, capability or capacity to serve as Secretary of War seemed not to be the main requirement for the position but rather the ability to submit to Davis's absolute authority. Arguably, had Davis been a more accomplished military figure, the Confederate Army might have prevailed, but more likely, had he possessed a broader vision of what he needed to accomplish and the open-mindedness to grant authority to those men that could accomplish it for him, the Confederacy could have prevailed.

From his inauguration in 1861 to the bitter days of 1865, Davis served as President and de facto Secretary of War simultaneously, failing to do either position the justice that the office demanded. His preoccupancy with the details theoretically entrusted to the Secretary of War deprived him of the ability to see the war in totality and to make decisions that might bring about not just victories on isolated eastern and western battlefields but a series of victories that could win the war for the Confederacy. Because Davis did not quickly identify what was important, such as the destruction of the Union Army or the protection of key terrain such as the Mississippi River, he never envisioned a grand strategy to focus the entirety of his Army. Tragically, had he been able to envision that grand strategy, it would have been difficult to execute. The same personality that did not allow him to share authority would, likewise, not allow him to explain his strategic plan in a manner that would build consensus among the Confederate states. Davis, if he had a grand strategy, kept it a secret like most of his thoughts even from those in Congress with whom he worked.[27] Davis would explain nothing nor share his vision with Congress or the press, helping to alienate him from his constituents long before the war ended. Whereas political leaders elected to office typically undergo the rigors of scrutiny by the public, Davis was spared as he was initially elected in February 1861 by the secession delegates in Montgomery without having to campaign and then was chosen by the public the following November in an uncontested election. Had he been forced to campaign publically against an opponent, visibility of Davis's inability to see those that opposed him as anything less than wrong, may have seen another take office as the President. It is often said the Confederacy was doomed from the start because of Davis's undying belief in his own military

capability above all others or the Confederacy's rigorous hold on states' rights. It is also true that the principles that defined these qualities-- rugged individualism, confidence in one's own abilities and self reliance -- were ever present in Davis and catapulted him to the top of the Confederacy. In actuality, they served to alienate him from the one cabinet position he most desperately need to succeed, the Secretary of War.

Endnotes

[1] Herman S. Frey, *Jefferson Davis.* (Frey Enterprises, Nashville, Tennessee, 1978), 25.

[2] Ibid., 29.

[3] Herman Hattaway & Richard E. Beringer, *Jefferson Davis Confederate President,* (University Press of Kansas, 2002), 22.

[4] Ibid., 32.

[5] Ibid., 30.

[6] Ibid., 33.

[7] John B. Jones, *A Rebel War Clerk's Diary, VOL I.* (J. B. Lippincott & CO., Philadelphia, 1866), 77.

[8] Ibid., 111.

[9] Frank Vandiver, *Rebel Brass, the Confederate Command System.* (Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 1956), 47.

[10] Jones, *A Rebel War Clerk's Diary, VOL I*, 116.

[11] Ibid., 117.

[12] Robert Douthat Meade, *Judah P. Benjamin, Confederate Statesman*. (Oxford University Press, New York, 1943), 180.

[13] Robert G Tanner*, Retreat To Victory, Confederate Strategy Reconsidered*, (Scholarly Resources Inc., Wilmington, Delaware, 2001), 23.

[14] George Green Shackelford, *George Wythe Randolph and the Confederate Elite*, (The University of Georgia Press, Athens, 1988), 67.

[15] Ibid., 68-69.

[16] Jones*, A Rebel War Clerk's Diary, VOL I*, 190.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Burton J. Hendrick, *Statesmen of the Lost Cause; Jefferson Davis and his Cabinet*. (The Literary Guild of America, Inc., New York), 328.

[19] William C. Davis, *Jefferson Davis, The Man and His Hour, a Biography.* (Harper Collins Publishers, New York, 1991), 480.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid., 482.

[22] Ibid., 485.

[23] Ibid., 484.

[24] Vandiver, *Rebel Brass, the Confederate Command System,* 56.

[25] William C. Davis, *Breckinridge; Statesman, Soldier, Symbol*. (Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 1974), 489.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Bell Irvin Wiley, *The Road to Appomattox*. (Memphis State College Press, Memphis , Tennessee, 1956), 106.