

Overview of the Confederacy

Its ideology far more conservative than revolutionary, the nation of seceded Southern states faced a paradox in maintaining a centralized government comprised of entities whose very motivation for departing the Union was their objection to federal authority. On February 4, 1861, representatives from the seven states Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Texas-that had already seceded from the United States met in Montgomery, Alabama, to form a new republic. On February 8, the convention announced the establishment of the Confederate States of America and declared itself the provisional Congress.

The following day, Jefferson Davis and Alexander Stephens were unanimously chosen provisional president and vice president, two men moderate enough, it was hoped, to convince the eight other reluctant slave states to join the Confederacy. A committee spent the next five weeks composing a national constitution, which was approved on March 11. The document closely followed the U.S. Constitution-including its Bill of Rights-with a few notable differences. Language promoting "the general welfare" was omitted, while the right to own slaves was explicitly guaranteed although foreign slave trade was forbidden).

The president, serving a single six-year term, was given line-item veto power over the budget, and his cabinet awarded nonvoting seats in Congress. To guarantee Southerners their much-desired states' rights, the federal government had no authority to levy protective tariffs, make internal improvements, or overrule state court decisions, while states had the right to sustain their own armies and enter into separate agreements with one another, and were given greater power in amending the constitution. Although there was a provision for a federal Supreme Court, Southern legislators could never agree on its configuration or even the wisdom of its establishment, and so the Confederacy lacked a high court throughout its existence. The provisional Congress sent three envoys to Washington to try to negotiate a final, peaceful split from the United States, although at the same time preparing for combat by establishing an army.

Hopes for a nonviolent settlement died after the April 12 attack on Fort Sumter, and four more Southern states-Virginia, North Carolina, Arkansas, and Tennessee-joined the Confederacy once the war started. Secessionist governments were established in Missouri and Kentucky, two border states that officially remained in the Union, while the western counties of Virginia rejoined the North. The Confederacy's capital was moved from Montgomery to Richmond, Virginia, in May 1861, and regular presidential and congressional elections were held in November.

Running unopposed, Davis and Stephens were formally reinaugurated, quite pointedly, on George Washington's birthday, February 22, 1862. Although there were no established parties, Confederate politics soon divided along pro- and anti-administration lines, and the lack of designated factions only caused confusion and disorganization. Among the opposition, some merely objected to Davis' policies-or his personality-while supporting the war effort; others urged negotiations for peace with the North. Still others, the most ardent states' rights proponents, claimed that the president sought dictatorial powers and denied Davis had anything but the most cursory executive authority.

Some even advocated that their states secede from the Confederacy and form separate countries. After the next congressional elections, held over a nearly six-month period in 1863 due to the logistical problems of the Union military presence across the South, nearly two-fifths of the Confederate House and one half of the Senate were openly anti-administration. Besides

the actual waging of the war and futile attempts to win formal recognition from European nations, the Confederate government's main concern was raising money for the costly military effort.

Hampered by constitutional limitations, its attempts included issuing paper currency, which brought rampant inflation, seeking loans and selling government bonds, which did not produce sufficient revenue, and passing tax and tax-in-kind legislation, which was hugely unpopular. As the South suffered continued military setbacks, the government's daily operations were sorely impeded, with congressional members from Union-occupied territories unable to serve in the capital and much of the country essentially out of the Confederacy's jurisdiction.

When Richmond fell to Union forces on April 2, 1865, the Confederate government effectively collapsed. Davis and most of his cabinet, taking the remnants of the country's treasury, fled south by train. Against the advice of most, the president intended to reestablish a seat of government west of the Mississippi River and continue the struggle. But Davis' capture outside Irwinville, Georgia, on May 10 ended the pretense, and there was no longer any question that the Confederate nation-established little more than four years earlier ceased to exist.