

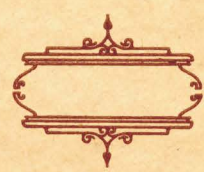
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FELLOWSHIPS

ROBERT DOUTHAT MEADE



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Kindly show to the
gentleman, ^(Mr. Paty) who is now
Fellowship Secretary.
RDM

The Relations Between Judah P. Benjamin and Jefferson Davis:

SOME NEW LIGHT ON THE WORKING
OF THE CONFEDERATE MACHINE

By ROBERT DOUTHAT MEADE

During the Civil War¹ it used to be said that Judah P. Benjamin and Mrs. Jefferson Davis "ran the machine at Richmond."² The statement has delicious implications. Even a professional Southerner should be amused at the thought of Benjamin, a Sephardic Jew born in the West Indies, and Varina Howell of the Yankee Howells³ running the new government set up by the proud Southern gentry.

Like many such gossipy sayings, this one is only partly true. The actual extent of Mrs. Davis's power is left to be determined by a historian with sufficient experience in the methods by which some of the so-called weaker sex influence their life partners. The field which we propose to enter in the present study is more tangible, more subject to the ordinary rules of historical evidence. It is the relationship between Benjamin and Davis and its connection with the result of the Civil War. This subject the writer will treat in some detail, emphasizing aspects not generally familiar to the war historians.

It is hardly necessary to point out how much we still have to learn about the little inner circle of men who ran the Confederate machine.

¹ This paper was read at a joint session of the American Historical Association and the Southern Historical Association in Chicago, December 30, 1938, and has subsequently been slightly revised.

² John W. Burgess, *Reminiscences of an American Scholar* (New York, 1934), 291.

³ Mrs. Davis's father was William Burr Howell, son of Richard Howell, Revolutionary governor of New Jersey. W. L. Whittlesey, "Richard Howell," in *Dictionary of American Biography*, 20 vols. and index (New York, 1928-1937), IX, 304.

Some excellent writing has been done on this subject, particularly in recent years. But the glamour of the gory side of war still lures many scholars into the study of insignificant skirmishes and minor brigadiers. The result is that to some of them such key men in the Richmond administration as George Wythe Randolph, James A. Seddon, and Lucius B. Northrop are little more than names. They know that these two Secretaries of War and the Commissary General held positions of vital importance to the Confederacy but are unable to give adequate appraisements of their work.

In the case of Judah P. Benjamin there is a similar lack of basic information. The Civil War historians have presented ample evidence that the bland, smiling little lawyer from cosmopolitan New Orleans had more influence with Jefferson Davis than any other Confederate. But important questions which remain are: In what fields was Benjamin's influence most significant? What was its nature and extent? By answering these queries we can explain many obscure yet momentous phases of Confederate history.

To begin with, it should be confessed that we are faced with a difficult task. We have not only to trace the footsteps of an important historical figure who worked "as few men have before or since" but to explain a subtle and often highly complex character. We can easily prove that Benjamin was the only genius in the Confederate cabinet. We can demonstrate that his career, with its American and English phases, was more glamorous than that of any other prominent Confederate. But we are still confronted with one perplexing problem: Judah P. Benjamin was an enigmatic figure—the most incomprehensible of all the Confederate leaders. Lee, Jackson, even Jefferson Davis, are crystal clear in comparison with the Jewish lawyer and statesman. The acrimonious dispute about his character began before the Civil War and has not ceased to this day.

Born at St. Croix⁴ of Spanish Jewish parents, Judah Philip Benjamin spent his early youth in the Carolinas, attended Yale, and at the age of

⁴Data in birth certificate sent to the writer by Moses Sasso, Reader of the Hebrew Congregation at Saint Thomas. Benjamin's birthplace is sometimes erroneously given as Saint Thomas instead of Saint Croix.

seventeen went to New Orleans to seek his fortune. In the great entrepôt of the Mississippi Valley he rose to be one of the leading lawyers at an able bar, a state legislator, and member of two state constitutional conventions. Elected to the United States Senate and performing with distinction the duties of his office, he still found time to placate local spoilsmen, to help promote a railroad on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, to represent in Ecuador the purported owner of guano interests in the Galapagos Islands, to make almost annual trips abroad, and to argue more cases before the United States Supreme Court than almost any other American lawyer. In short, Benjamin was not a Southerner of the provincial type but the sophisticated and none too squeamish representative of the new capitalism in the booming Louisiana port. Although conservative in matters of property rights, he was in some respects quite progressive. Above all, he was not the man "to die of an abstraction," as Henry A. Wise had feared would be the fate of Old Virginia.

Such was the bizarre figure whom Davis selected as attorney general of the new Confederacy. Since Benjamin had been a prominent member of the Southern party in the Senate, it might be assumed that the appointment to the cabinet had followed a prewar intimacy. But this was not the case. Benjamin and Davis had had little social intercourse before 1861 and had once been on the verge of a duel.⁵ Nor was the appointment made because of any pronounced predilection on Benjamin's part for secession and the formation of a new government. During the months preceding the withdrawal of South Carolina from the Union he was absorbed in a lucrative mining case. This required his presence in California, and he did not sail for the East coast until four days after Lincoln's election.⁶ He entered into secession reluctantly and, it seems, largely from reasons of expediency. In a confidential conversation on January 21, 1861, he is reported to have stated that the ablest of the secession leaders "really regard the experiment of a new Confederation as an effectual means of bringing the conservative masses of the North-

⁵ Mrs. Jefferson Davis to Francis Lawley, April 4, 1897, and other data in Lawley MSS. Courtesy of the owner, Pierce Butler of New Orleans, Louisiana.

⁶ He left San Francisco on the *Sonora*, bound for Panama, November 10, 1860. California dispatch to the New York *Times*, November 28, 1860.



ern people to realize the necessity of revising radically the instrument of union."⁷

Jefferson Davis must have had some inkling of Benjamin's real feeling about secession. He knew that the former Louisiana Senator was reluctant to accept the cabinet position. But this did not prevent him from securing Benjamin's services. Davis later stated that he selected Benjamin because of his "very high reputation" as a lawyer and the impression formed in the Senate of his ability and habits of industry.⁸ Doubtless he was also influenced by the desire to have a Louisianan in the cabinet.

The appointment was a mistake. As H. J. Eckenrode has pointed out, Davis should have sent Benjamin abroad with enough money to win over the European chancelleries.⁹ The attorney-generalship was too insignificant a position for Benjamin. His official duties were chiefly of a routine nature, and could have little effect on the results of the war. At a cabinet meeting in Montgomery, however, he did suggest that the Confederate government buy a large quantity of cotton, at least a hundred thousand bales, and ship it to England where the proceeds could be used to purchase munitions and to supply credit. But the cabinet laughed at Benjamin's fear of a serious war, and Davis did not attempt to carry out his plan.¹⁰

After this rebuff we have no evidence that Benjamin made any further proposals while attorney general which might have changed the course of the war. But the period of his tenure in this office was a fruitful time during which he studied Davis's character and ingratiated himself with him. High-minded as Davis was in most respects, we know that he was thin-skinned and at times even suspicious in his relations with others. On occasions he could be quite obstinate. No man could hold a position in

⁷ *North American Review* (Boston, New York, 1815-), CXXIX (1879), 134.

⁸ "Mr. Benjamin, of Louisiana, had a very high reputation as a lawyer, and my acquaintance with him in the Senate had impressed me with the lucidity of his intellect, his systematic habits and capacity for labor. He was therefore invited to the post of Attorney-General." Jefferson Davis, *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government*, 2 vols. (New York, 1881), I, 242.

⁹ Conversation with the writer.

¹⁰ Pierce Butler, *Judah P. Benjamin* (Philadelphia, 1906), 233-34.



the cabinet without submitting to the dominance of the President, as the able George Wythe Randolph was to learn to his sorrow.¹¹ This quality in Davis's character Benjamin seems to have quickly perceived. He decided to offer suggestions when he felt he could do so without causing undue offense, but he would not lay his head on the block. If Davis required him to pursue a policy which was against his best judgment, he would do so loyally and efficiently and hope for the best. At the same time he would seek means to increase his influence with the President. Robert Barnwell Rhett, a hostile critic, later wrote of Benjamin, "A man of great fertility of mind and resource, and of facile character, he was the factotum of the President, performed his bidding in various ways, and gave him the benefit of his brains in furtherance of the views of Mr. Davis."¹² There is much truth in Rhett's statement but it does not tell the entire story. Benjamin was the chief factotum of the President. He never dominated Davis. But by adapting himself to Davis's character and making himself extremely useful he did before the end of 1861 succeed in becoming the President's most influential adviser.

On September 17, 1861, Benjamin was appointed secretary of war.¹³ This was then the most important position in the cabinet. During the next six months he devoted all his great talents to securing enough men, ammunition, and supplies to prepare for the expected Northern offensive. Working long hours, even apparently on Sundays and holidays,¹⁴ he put his department on an efficient basis from which all his successors benefited. Jefferson Davis directed all the military affairs even to the extent of approving minor appointments. But Benjamin removed from Davis's shoulders an immense load of detail, and, ever loyal and uncomplaining, was a bulwark of strength in the President's mounting

¹¹ Information from Randolph's grandnephew, General Jefferson Randolph Kean of Washington, D. C. See, also, Robert D. Meade, "George Wythe Randolph," in *Dictionary of American Biography*, XV, 358-59.

¹² Robert U. Johnson and Clarence C. Buel (eds.), *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, 4 vols. (New York, 1887-1888), I, 105.

¹³ He was acting secretary of war until November 12, 1861, and the regular incumbent until March 18, 1862.

¹⁴ In one of his letters while secretary of war, Benjamin specifically stated that he was writing on Sunday. There is also other evidence indicating that he did an enormous amount of labor beyond normal working hours.

difficulties. He saw clearly the problems of the South as a whole and made a strenuous effort to prevent dispersion of men and materials to nonessential places.

The historians have generally agreed, however, that Benjamin proved a failure as war minister. Their verdict is just. He lacked sufficient tact and knowledge of military procedure to deal with sensitive generals, and he could not handle phases of his work requiring detailed military knowledge. But we do not appreciate how much he was blamed for actions taken at Davis's request, or how often he was really fighting the President's battles. For example, Benjamin was severely censured for the quarrel that nearly precipitated the resignation of "Stonewall" Jackson. But tucked away in one of Benjamin's letters in the *Official Records* is a statement that "at the President's instance" he had issued the order which so infuriated Jackson.¹⁵ During his bitter quarrels with Joseph E. Johnston, P. G. T. Beauregard, and Henry A. Wise, Benjamin was really taking up the gage for Davis.

By March, 1862, there was a strong popular demand for Benjamin's removal. General Johnston, who then commanded the main Confederate army in the East, stated at a dinner party in Richmond attended by several high officials, that the Confederacy could not succeed while Benjamin remained secretary of war.¹⁶ His conduct of the Roanoke Island affair was investigated by a hostile committee of the Confederate Congress. But Davis made him secretary of state in the very teeth of the criticism. To quote from a letter written by Mrs. Davis many years later, "The President promoted him with a personal and aggrieved sense of the injustice done to the man who had become his friend and right hand."¹⁷

When Benjamin assumed the duties of secretary of state in March, 1862, the rapprochement was complete. Davis and Benjamin were now working hand in glove, and the harassed President relied on the Secre-

¹⁵ *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 129 vols. (Washington, 1880-1901), Ser. I, Vol. V, 1059.

¹⁶ Henry S. Foote, *War of the Rebellion; or, Scylla and Charybdis* (New York, 1866), 356-57.

¹⁷ Lawley MSS.

tary of State as he did on no other man. In the absence of revealing data from Davis, another quotation is made from the account written by his wife:

Mr. Benjamin was always ready for work, sometimes with half an hour's recess he remained with the Executive from ten in the morning until nine at night and together they traversed all the difficulties which encompassed our beleaguered land. . . . Both the President and the Secretary worked like galley slaves, early and late, Mr. Davis came home fasting, a mere mass of throbbing nerves, and perfectly exhausted; but Mr. Benjamin was always fresh and buoyant. One day I asked him what kept him up and he said, "I always carry to these long cabinet meetings a small cake which I eat when I begin to feel fatigued and it freshens me up at once." There was one striking peculiarity about his temperament. No matter what disaster befel[1] our arms after he had done all in his power to prevent or rectify it, he was never depressed. No reverse tortured him exceedingly, as it did Mr. Davis, who though he was too reticent and self-controlled to betray his anguish suffered like one in torment. Mr. Benjamin was serenely cheerful, played games, jested and talked as wittily as usual. His demeanour puzzled us so much that at last I asked him what comfort came to him? Was he hopeful of a fortunate termination? He said he believed there was a fate in the destiny of nations, and it was wrong and useless to distress one's self and thus weaken one's energy to bear what was foreordained to happen.¹⁸

The testimony of L. Q. Washington, the assistant secretary of state, and of numerous others substantiates this evidence of the intimate relationship between Benjamin and Davis. To this day the historians have never been able to determine to what extent each man was responsible for the Confederate policies. In attempting to do so, the writer realizes that he is entering upon treacherous ground. He does feel, however, that it is possible to reach certain definite conclusions.

We can safely assume that Benjamin did not exert a very salutary influence in military affairs. He had learned much while secretary of war. But, as is sometimes the case with men who have unusually quick minds, he overestimated the depth of the knowledge he had acquired. We have an excellent illustration of this weakness in a letter he wrote to Davis after the war. Referring to the removal of General Joseph E. Johnston from the command of the army in front of Atlanta, Benjamin stated that he "was most anxious for his removal at a much earlier

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

date."¹⁹ Benjamin seems to have retained the layman's conception of military strategy.

Benjamin also failed to bring Davis needed political strength among the Southern people. A politician who talked to Benjamin in 1861 spoke of him as having "a distinctly French turn of thought." However much Benjamin may have been at home in New Orleans, he did not speak the language of the average Southerner. Many did not understand him and some actively disliked him. The descendant of a Confederate general says that the name of Benjamin is still "anathema" in his family. Undoubtedly, Benjamin increased the feeling of separation between the Davis administration and the masses of the people.

But if Benjamin was not omnipotent and omniscient as his apologists would have us believe, he was the one man in the administration most likely to make the break with the past that was needed to win the war. Years before, in Louisiana, he had learned to appreciate the political axiom that half a loaf is better than no bread. Even before he left the war office he told Reuben Davis that he was willing to have peace under the condition that each party keep the territory then under its control. The North could have all the territory in Tennessee north of the Memphis and Charleston Railroad. Reuben Davis was astounded and told Benjamin that if the South could hope for no better result he would rather go back into the Union without further bloodshed.²⁰

In his diplomatic relations with England and France Benjamin gave further proof of his coolly practical viewpoint toward Confederate problems. For this phase of his work he was almost ideally equipped by training and temperament, and Davis usually gave him a free hand, at least within certain limits. Unfortunately, Benjamin was seriously handicapped by the difficulties of communication with Europe. But it seems safe to attribute to his fine hand rather than to Davis the tempting proposal made to Louis Napoleon in the early part of 1862. Benjamin offered the Emperor one hundred thousand or more bales of cotton and the right to introduce French products into the South "for a certain de-

¹⁹ Judah P. Benjamin to Jefferson Davis, February 15, 1879, in Dunbar Rowland (ed.), *Jefferson Davis, Constitutionalist*, 10 vols. (Jackson, Miss., 1923), VIII, 355-56.

²⁰ Reuben Davis, *Recollections of Mississippi and Mississippians* (Boston, 1891), 431-32.



fined period" if he would recognize the Confederacy or break the blockade.²¹ After receiving this offer Napoleon made a determined effort to aid the South but could not secure British co-operation.

After Lincoln had issued his Emancipation Proclamation, it became clear that the South could not secure British recognition without "dishing" slavery. We know that near the end of the war Benjamin used his great influence to secure Davis's support for the proposal to arm the slaves and let them fight for their freedom. Furthermore, Benjamin's friend and messmate in Richmond, Duncan Kenner of Louisiana, was sent to Europe to offer emancipation in return for British recognition. These desperate proposals came too late. But a study of Benjamin's character and of his attitude toward the Negro problem leads one to believe that he would have favored emancipation a year or more earlier if he had felt Davis and the Southern people were ready for the measure.²²

There is ample evidence to prove that Benjamin was a very strong if not controlling force in the relations between the Richmond government and the Confederate agents in Canada and the North. He was also Davis's right-hand man in his negotiations with the two Northern emissaries, John R. Gilmore and James Jaquess, and in preparing the instructions for the Hampton Roads commissioners. It is worthy of mention that Benjamin is reported to have urged Davis to place Gilmore and Jaquess in Castle Thunder until after the Northern election, so that they could not influence the voters.

During the last desperate months of the war Benjamin hinted at the need for a dictatorship if the South could win by no other means. But we may presume that he wanted Davis, not Lee, to be the dictator. In February, 1865, Benjamin made a stirring speech in Richmond during which he publicly advocated arming of the slaves and stated that he would never surrender as long as a drop of blood flowed in his veins. During this final period he was bitterly attacked. On February 21 he

²¹ Benjamin to John Slidell, April 12, 1862, in *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, 30 vols. (Washington, 1894-1919), Ser. II, Vol. III, 387.

²² References to source material which are not supplied in this study will be given in a biography of Benjamin which the writer is now completing.

wrote a letter to Davis offering to resign if this action would rid him of embarrassment. To the best of the writer's knowledge this letter has never been published, and its text is inserted to show certain truly noble qualities in the man:

Confidential

Department of State

My dear Sir

Richmond 21 February 1865

I have been recently disturbed in mind on a subject which I can no longer refrain from placing frankly before you—

It is unnecessary to remind you that I accepted office with reluctance and have retained it solely from a sense of duty—Separated from my family for nearly five years past, my eager desire to see them has been repressed by the belief that my services were not without value to you: and I knew how impossible it was for any human being to sustain the burthen now weighing on you, without zealous and cordial aid—

For some months past however I have doubted whether my withdrawal from office would not rather promote the success of your administration than deprive you of useful assistance—It has been apparent that I have been the object of concerted and incessant assault by those who are inimical to me personally, as well as by all in Congress and the press that are hostile to you—These attacks have been regarded by me with entire indifference, except as suggesting the doubt above expressed—If our affairs were in a more prosperous condition, I should tender my resignation unconditionally, confident that if found desirable it would be in my power to return to your assistance in the Legislative Department of the Government—But in the present juncture I shrink from giving Color for an instant to the suspicion of a desire to shield myself from danger or responsibility by abandonment of duty—

I must therefore beg you to let me know your own conclusion with entire unreserve—Will your administration be strengthened or any opposition to it disarmed by substituting another in my place in the Cabinet?

If so, I will at once seek the sphere of duty above referred to, in which I know I can be serviceable in sustaining you in this great struggle—If not, I shall cheerfully continue the sacrifice of private inclination and family affection to the call of duty, at all hazards, and under all responsibilities—

I am with entire regard and respect

Your friend & obt st

J. P. BENJAMIN

To the President

Benjamin accompanied Davis in his flight southward after the fall of Richmond. At a cabinet meeting in Greensboro he was the only member who supported Davis in his determination to continue the war but he soon realized the futility of further resistance. After he had

escaped to London he continued his cordial relations with the former President. In a letter to the London *Times* he paid a high tribute to Davis's character. Later, he wrote Davis that although he would defend him against aspersions on his character he would not become involved in controversies regarding the Confederacy. That stormy period of his life was a closed chapter. "I freely confess that it is not agreeable to mix in any way in controversies of the past which for me are buried forever."²⁸ It was such sentiments that led some of Benjamin's enemies to accuse him of lack of deep feeling. But Jefferson Davis trusted him utterly. He wrote to the London *Times* some years after the war that he had learned to know Benjamin better perhaps than any other living man and added, "neither in private conversation nor in Cabinet council have I heard him utter one unworthy thought, one ungenerous sentiment." Davis told a Confederate veteran with whom the writer talked that he considered Benjamin the ablest member of his cabinet; that his career in England after the war justified his estimate of him.

Although the only genius in the Confederate cabinet, Benjamin was not infallible. Evidence which has been secured from a large mass of unpublished material as well as from the obvious sources proves that there were several dubious episodes in his career. He was given to quixotic enthusiasms and was sometimes too cocksure of his knowledge. But Benjamin was possessed of keen intellect, high courage, and rare qualities of devotion and self-sacrifice. He had a cosmopolitan background and wide practical experience, and viewed Confederate problems with a cool detachment. He knew from the beginning that the South was faced with a serious war, and was willing to take the radical steps necessary to obtain victory over heavy obstacles. He broke away from the theory of King Cotton and was even willing to "dish" slavery when he felt the war could be won by no other means. He was a bulwark of strength for the Confederate President, and during the last three years of the war was his most influential adviser. Davis was strong-minded to the last, and never gave him a free hand. But making the best of the opportunities that he had, Benjamin proved himself one of the coolest and most dangerous revolutionists whom the North had to face.

²⁸ Rowland (ed.), *Jefferson Davis, Constitutionalist*, VIII, 356.



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