

JUDAH BENJAMIN

By Marc Burofsky

One of the most misunderstood figures in American Jewish history is Judah P. Benjamin, whom some historians have called "the brains of the Confederacy," even as others tried to blame him for the South's defeat.



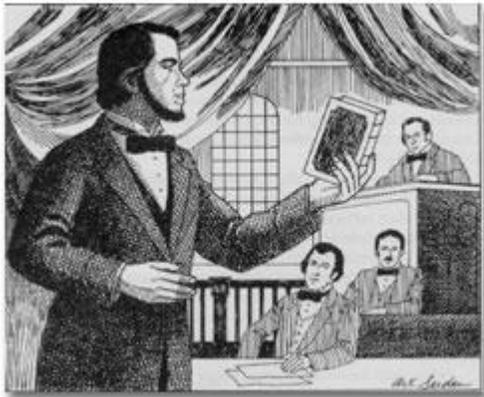
Born in the West Indies in 1811 to observant Jewish parents, Benjamin was raised in Charleston, South Carolina. A brilliant child, at age 14 he attended College and practiced law in New Orleans. A founder of the Illinois Central Railroad, a state legislator, a planter who owned 140 slaves until he sold his plantation in 1850, Judah Benjamin was elected to the United States Senate from Louisiana in 1852.

When the slave states seceded in 1861, Confederate President Jefferson Davis appointed Benjamin as Attorney-General, making him the first Jew to hold a Cabinet-level office in an American government and the only Confederate Cabinet member who did not own slaves. Benjamin later served as the Confederacy's Secretary of War, and then Secretary of State.

For an individual of such prominence, Benjamin's kept his personal life and views somewhat hidden. In her autobiography, Jefferson Davis's wife, Varina, informs us that Benjamin spent twelve hours each day at her husband's side, tirelessly shaping every important Confederate strategy and tactic. Yet, Benjamin never spoke publicly or wrote about his role and burned his personal papers before his death, allowing both his contemporaries and later historians to

interpret Benjamin as they wished, usually unsympathetically.

During the Civil War itself, many Southerners blamed Benjamin for their nation's misfortunes. The Confederacy lacked the men and materials to match the Union armies and, when President Davis decided in 1862 to let Roanoke Island fall into Union hands without mounting a defense rather than letting the Union know the true weakness of Southern forces, Benjamin, as Davis's loyal Secretary of War, took the blame and resigned. Anti-Semitism was a fact of life in North and South during the Civil War years and Benjamin was falsely defamed as having weakened the Confederacy by transferring its funds to personal bank accounts in Europe.



After Benjamin resigned as Confederate Secretary of War, Davis appointed him Secretary of State. Eli Evans, Benjamin's most perceptive biographer, observed that "Benjamin served Davis as his Sephardic ancestors had served the kings of Europe for hundreds of years, as a kind of court Jew to the Confederacy. An insecure President [Davis] was able to trust him completely because, among other things, no Jew could ever challenge him for leadership of the Confederacy." Near the end of the war, Benjamin privately persuaded Robert E. Lee and other Confederate military leaders that the South's best chance was to emancipate any slave who volunteered to fight for the Confederacy. When Benjamin repeated this proposal to an audience of 10,000 persons in Richmond in 1864, his remarks lit a firestorm. Georgian Howell Cobb observed, "If slaves will make good soldiers, our whole theory of slavery is wrong." Benjamin's idea, however valuable, was rejected as politically impossible. As Evans observes, "The South chose [instead] to go down in defeat with the institution of slavery intact."

When John Wilkes Booth assassinated Lincoln in 1865, Davis and Benjamin were suspected of having plotted the event and, as the martyred Lincoln was compared to Christ in the Northern press, Benjamin was pilloried as Judas. When the South was defeated, Benjamin -fearing that he could never receive a fair trial if charged with Lincoln's murder, fled to England, where he lived out his life as a barrister, publishing a classic legal text on the sale of personal property.

Evans speculates that, had Benjamin been captured by Union troops, the United States might have had its own Dreyfus Trial.

A solitary man, estranged from his wife, Benjamin died alone in England, and his daughter arranged to have him buried in Pere Lachaise Cemetery in Paris. Until 1938, when the Paris chapter of the Daughters of the Confederacy provided an inscription with his American name, his simple tombstone was engraved with the name "Philippe Benjamin."

While Judah Benjamin preferred such obscurity, his prominence as a Jew assured that he would come under harsh scrutiny, both during and after his life. For example, on the floor of the Senate Ben Wade of Ohio charged Benjamin with being an "Israelite in Egyptian clothing". With characteristic eloquence, Benjamin replied, "It is true that I am a Jew, and when my ancestors were receiving their Ten Commandments from the immediate Deity, amidst the thundering and lightning's of Mt. Sinai, the ancestors of my opponent were herding swine in the forests of Great Britain."

Perhaps the best-known posthumous caricature of Benjamin appears in the epic poem John Brown's Body, by Stephen Vincent Benet. Describing him as a "dark prince," Benet depicts Judah Benjamin

as "other" in Confederate inner circles:

Judah P. Benjamin, the dapper Jew,
Seal-sleek, black-eyed, lawyer and epicure,
Able, well-hated, face alive with life,
Looked round the council-chamber with the slight
Perpetual smile he held before himself
continually like a silk-ribbed fan.
. . . [His] quick, shrewd fluid mind
Weighed Gentiles in an old balance . . .
The eyes stared, searching.
"I am a Jew. What am I doing here?"

Early Years



Judah Benjamin was born a British subject in Christiansted on the island of St. Croix, British West Indies, Virgin islands on August 6, 1811. The child of Sephardic Jewish settlers, he was descended from families that could be traced back to fifteenth-century Spain. His father, Phillip Benjamin, was an English Jew, and his mother Rebecca Mendes, a Portuguese Jew.

His family moved in 1813 to Wilmington, N.C., and finally settled in 1822 in Charleston, S.C. Benjamin's boyhood was very much steeped in Jewish culture and tradition. His father was one of the twelve dissenters in Charleston who formed the first Reform Congregation of America. Although the records of Beth Elohim congregation were burned and no one knows for certain, he probably was one of the first young boys confirmed at the new reform temple, which was founded when he was thirteen years old. The character of a young Jewish boy reared by a deeply involved Jewish family would be shaped by that experience for the rest of his life.

As a precocious youth he attended the Fayetteville Academy in Fayetteville, N.C. Benjamin entered Yale College at the age of 14 and was admitted to the Louisiana bar in 1832 and practiced law in New Orleans where he also taught English and studied French in his spare time.

What followed next was a strategic marriage to Natalie S. Martin, whose family belonged to the ruling Creole aristocracy in New Orleans, which propelled him into financial success and subsequently into his political career. He actively participated in the explosive growth of New Orleans between 1820 and 1840 as a commercial lawyer and political advocate for banking, finance, and railroad interests.

Benjamin prospered for a time as a sugar planter, helped organize the Illinois Central Railroad, and was elected to the Louisiana legislature in 1842.

Education



Upon settling in North Carolina, Judah Benjamin's education began at the Fayetteville Academy in Fayetteville, N.C. From there he entered one of the world's premier schools, Yale College at the young age of 14. He left early in his junior year in 1827 and was admitted to the Louisiana law bar in 1832.

Senator



Benjamin was the first professing Jew elected to the U.S. Senate in 1852 and reelected in 1858). His reputation as an eloquent speaker and brilliant mind made his selection by the Louisiana state legislature was of little surprise. As he was said to be the most prominent American Jew during the 19th century, his term in the Senate was of most importance and effect on the country.

During his Senate term, the outgoing President, Millard Fillmore of the Whig Party, offered to nominate him to fill a Supreme Court vacancy after the Senate Democrats had defeated Fillmore's other nominees for that post, and the New York Times reported (on February 15, 1853) that "if the President nominates Benjamin, the Democrats are determined to confirm

him." However, Benjamin declined to be nominated. He took office as a Senator on March 4, 1853. During his first year as a Senator, he challenged another young Senator, Jefferson Davis of Mississippi, to a duel over a perceived insult on the Senate floor; Davis apologized, and the two began a close friendship.

He quickly gained a reputation as a great orator. In 1854 he was again offered a nomination to the Supreme Court by President Franklin Pierce, which he again declined. He was a noted advocate of the interests of the South, and his most famous exchange on the Senate floor was related to his religion and the issue of slavery: abolitionist and future Radical Republican Benjamin Wade of Ohio accused him of being an "Israelite in Egyptian clothing." (This is a reference to how Judah P. Benjamin's Israelite ancestors were held as slaves prior to the Exodus by the Ancient Egyptians yet Benjamin had himself been a slave-owner a mere four years previous thereby becoming that which those people whom he claimed as his ancestors fought against.) The future Confederate replied that, "It is true that I am a Jew, and when my ancestors were receiving their Ten Commandments from the immediate Deity, amidst the thundering and lightning's of Mt. Sinai, the ancestors of my opponent were herding swine in the forests of Great Britain."

In the final years before the war, Benjamin was widely admired nationally in both Jewish and non-Jewish communities for his prestige as a Southern leader and his eloquence as an orator. His election to the U.S. Senate was a watershed for American Jews. Because of the war, he became the first Jewish political figure to be projected into the national consciousness. Jews in the South were especially proud of his achievement because he validated their legitimacy as Southerners. A pivotal figure in American Jewish history, Benjamin broke down the barriers of prejudice to achieve high office. After him, it was more acceptable for Jews to be elected to office and to aspire to service in the councils of national power. He was again selected to serve as Senator for the term beginning in 1859, but this time as a Democrat. During the 34th through 36th Congresses he was chairman of the Committee on Private Land Claims. Benjamin resigned his seat on February 4, 1861, after the secession of Louisiana from the Union.

"It is a revolution," U.S. Sen. Judah Benjamin said, speaking in December 1860 of the South's determination to secede, "and it can no more be checked by human effort... than a prairie fire by a gardener's watering pot."

Confederate



Two Dollar Bill of the Confederate States of America picturing Judah Benjamin. Hebraic Section



Five Hundred Dollar Bond, Confederate States of America. Authorized by an Act of Congress, C.S.A., August 18, 1861. Printed sheet with coupons. Manuscript Division

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Davis decided in 1862 to let Roanoke Island fall into Union hands without mounting a defense rather than revealing the true weakness of Southern forces, Benjamin, as Davis's loyal Secretary of War, took the blame and resigned. Anti-Semitism was an unpleasant fact – North and South – during the Civil War years and Benjamin was falsely defamed as having weakened the Confederacy by transferring its funds to personal bank accounts in Europe.

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Evans speculates that, had Benjamin been captured by Union troops, the United States might have had its own Dreyfus Trial. He enrolled at Lincoln's Inn, London, as a barrister in 1866, and became Queen's Counsel for Lancashire County in 1872. He became so successful that by 1877, he would accept no case for a fee less than 300 guineas (\$1,500). Benjamin died on May 6, 1884, in Paris, where he and his wife were buried. His daughter returned to the United States to claim her father's assets which included vast real estate holdings. At the dedication of the Robert E. Lee monument in Richmond in 1890, Col. Charles Marshall, an aide-de-camp on General Lee's staff, read part of a letter from Benjamin, which revealed that President Davis had agreed to allow Benjamin to be publicly censured:

I consulted the President whether it was best for the country that I should submit to unmerited censure or reveal to a congressional Committee our poverty and my utter inability to supply the requisitions of General Wise, and thus run the risk that the fact should become known to some of the spies of the enemy, of whose activity we were well assured. It was thought best for the public service that I should suffer the blame in silence and a report of censure on me was accordingly made by the Committee of Congress. On the subject of slavery, both Davis and Benjamin were "enlightened" Southerners whose attitudes were evolving. Most Jewish historians have understandably reacted with revulsion to the fact that Benjamin owned 140 slaves on a sugar plantation, and they have been unable to consider the question of his views on slavery with anything but embarrassed dismay. To comprehend Benjamin on this score, one must put him into context as a political figure against a backdrop of planter dogmatism and abolitionist fervor.

England

In England, Benjamin established a new career in the law. He was called to the bar in 1866. In 1868, he wrote a classic treatise on commercial law in England (Treatise on the Law of Sale of Personal Property) known even today to law students as "Benjamin on Sales." In 1872, he became a queen's counsel, practicing with wig and robes in the House of Lords and appearing in 136 major cases. For an individual of such prominence, Benjamin kept his personal life and views somewhat hidden. In her autobiography, Jefferson Davis's wife, Varina, informs us that Benjamin spent twelve hours each day at her husband's side, tirelessly shaping every important Confederate strategy and tactic. Yet, Benjamin never spoke publicly or wrote about his role and burned his personal papers before his death, allowing both his contemporaries and later historians to interpret Benjamin as they wished, usually unsympathetically.

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posthumous caricature of Benjamin appears in the epic poem *John Brown's Body*, by Stephen Vincent Benet. Describing him as a "dark prince," Benet depicts Judah Benjamin as "other" in Confederate inner circles: Benjamin prospered for a time as a sugar planter, helped organize the Illinois Central Railroad, and was respected as a great orator throughout his life.

History has absolved both Benjamin and Davis from any responsibility in the assassination of President Lincoln. But the psychological and emotional impact on Benjamin of the long period of hysteria that followed the assassination must have taken its toll, especially since Lincoln's death fell on Good Friday and 2,500 sermons were given on Easter Sunday comparing Lincoln to a fallen Christ figure, as the nation acted out a passion play. There is no record of what Benjamin thought of the various published accusations against him.

If Benjamin's role in history has been misjudged by historians and was minimized even by participants, much of the responsibility for that lies with Benjamin himself. He chose obscurity early in the war with the unwavering decision that he could best serve the South by serving Davis and remaining in the presidential shadow. For reasons that have puzzled historians, Benjamin burned his personal papers--some as he escaped from Richmond in 1865 and almost all of the rest just before he died--and he left only six scraps of paper at his death. One historian has called him a "virtual incendiary."

Late in life, he retired and moved to Paris to be with his family. Benjamin died on May 6, 1884, and was buried in Pere Lachaise cemetery in Paris under the name of "Philippe Benjamin" in the family plot of the Boursignac family, the in-laws of his daughter. In 1938, the Paris chapter of the Daughters of the Confederacy finally provided an inscription to identify the man in the almost anonymous grave:



JUDAH PHILIP BENJAMIN

BORN ST. THOMAS WEST INDIES AUGUST 6,1811
DIED IN PARIS MAY 6,1884
UNITED STATES SENATOR FROM LOUISIANA
ATTORNEY GENERAL, SECRETARY OF WAR AND
SECRETARY OF STATE OF THE CONFEDERATE STATES
OF AMERICA, QUEENS COUNSEL, LONDON

Benjamin's image comes down through history as "the dark prince of the Confederacy," a Mephistophelian Jewish figure. Stephen Vincent Benet in John Brown's Body reflected the contemporary view of him:

Judah P. Benjamin, the dapper Jew,
Seal-Sleek, black-eyed, lawyer and epicure,
Able, well-hated, face alive with life,
Looked round the council-chamber with the slight

Perpetual smile he held before himself
Continually like a silk-ribbed fan.
Behind the fan, his quick, shrewd, fluid mind
Weighed Gentiles in an old balance. . . .

The mind behind the silk-ribbed fan
Was a dark-prince, clothed in an Eastern stuff,
Whole brown hands cupped about a crystal egg
That filmed with colored cloud. The eyes stared, searching.

"I am a Jew, What am I doing here?"

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<http://www.judahbenjamin.com/index.html>

For Comments & Questions please email:

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