Frank E. Vandiver interview regarding Jefferson Davis, for documentary "Jefferson Davis: an American President" 2008, by Flying Chaucer Films
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Frank E. Vandiver

PART 1

Other Speaker: It was, wasn't it.

Speaker 1: All right, that's okay. If we can –

Frank Vandiver: Heh, well.

Speaker 1: – let's start with your name and how'd you like to be identified, your title.

Frank Vandiver: Oh, my name is Frank Vandiver and I'm, uh, just glad to be called Frank.

Speaker 1: But when we identify you.

Frank Vandiver: Oh.

Speaker 1: At the bottom of the screen.

Frank Vandiver: Um, president of the Jefferson Davis Association, which I am.

Speaker 1: There you have it, and your academic, your academic title?
Frank Vandiver: My academic title is, uh, President Emeritus of Texas A&M University and Distinguished University Professor.

Speaker 1: Begin, your monologue. We're ready to hear it.

Frank Vandiver: I'm interested in talking about Jefferson Davis as president. It seems to me that, uh, of course, this is a very personal view, but it seems to me that most of the biographers, and he's had many, as you know, have worked at the same thing all the time. And it is what was he like inside? And I don't know what he was like inside, but I will tell you how he strikes me as a president. But can you, you can't just pitch in and start talking about him as president. It's, until you go back and realize his, his, uh, intellectual and philosophical background. Where did he come from, um, politically? And I'm sure you've already interviewed a lot of people who have told you a, much about his political background, his coming from a Mississippi family, that kind of thing.

Speaker 1: Give us everything. Pretend as if we're just learning.

Frank Vandiver: Well, what he inherited from his background was a, a very southern point of view of politics, which includes the idea that state rights were in a sense supreme. And as you know, he, uh, he inherited the mantle of John Calhoun, who was in many ways a, uh, I think the progenitor of the idea of, uh, state r, of secession as a, as a legal constitutional right. And he, he preached this, uh, constantly, Calhoun did. And of course it was taken up by a great many people in the, in the South and in the southern representations in Congress. So what I'm trying to get at is that Davis grew up with the idea that, uh, there was the state and there was the United States. And, uh, the state essentially came first and he certainly accepted the idea and without any doubt at all that it was constitutional for a state to secede from the Union. And that is a key to a lot of what he does. And of course, uh, when he did rise in the Senate and tell them that he had learned, uh, to a, to a sufficient degree that Mississippi had seceded and he would, therefore he could no longer stay in Congress and he went on to make his very remarkable farewell address. He was not doing anything that he considered revolutionary. It was not to him either revolutionary or treasonable for a state to secede from the Union. So he simply followed what he
thought was constitutional correctness, if I may use a modern word. And when he became, when he went South, as you know, he wanted to be commander of the Mississippi army and he was persuaded to become president of the Confederate States. And there was a well-known scene where he is at, uh, at his plantation and a messenger comes to give him a message, and his wife watches all this from the veranda. And he's down working on trees in the front yard and the messenger presents this paper to him and she says she noticed how depressed and all of a sudden terribly downcast he was. And he came up finally to the, uh, veranda and told her that he had been elected president of the Confederate States and he knew the burden of the office, but he took it. Well the burden of the office was, I think, even beyond his imagination. If you try to compare Davis with Lincoln and the jobs they faced, Lincoln said as he left, uh, Springfield that he faced a job harder than George Washington. Well, believe me, Jefferson Davis faced a much harder job than that. Uh, Lincoln had to take over a nation that existed, had a position in the world, and then direct it, pull it together and direct it to saving itself. Davis had to take an inchoate group of states that had just pulled themselves together and called themselves the Confederate States and make a cause, make a country and a cause, and then create an army and try to make a deal with the northern states not to go to war. But he was no political amateur. And when he listened to or read Lincoln's inaugural address, he considered that it was war. Now, of course, he had already been elected and inaugurated as president of the Confederate States. So Lincoln had had time to think about this and Davis knew that they were up against it. Well, what were they? What, how, how could they be up against it? What did they have? Um, you, you couldn't, you couldn't bring it up on television. You couldn't put it up on your PC what the resources of the Confederate States were, but they were considerably less than the northern states. Uh, he found out fairly soon that there were about 100,000 muskets available in all of the southern arsenals. Gunpowder was extremely short. It, uh, it was positioned mainly in the, the old forts along the coastline. Where do you make it? You have a powderworks? As he told his friends, we have a chore before us that is, whether or not we can succeed, I don't know. And he told his wife, you know, that he thought that it was, the odds were terrible against them, but he was willing to take it on. I think at first he had a hope, until Lincoln's inaugural, that, uh, they might negotiate with the, the northern states, they might make a deal. And of course he, one of his problems in addition to everything else was, he did not have a, uh--what am I looking for?--complete public support for the Confederate States. There were, there was a hard core of
southerners who believed in this cause, but there were unionists scattered all over the South and there were cooperationists, those who wanted to cooperate and make a deal with the North and had a hope they could come out even better than they were before. So he had to pull together a, uh, a sort of disparate collection of opinion and make a cause. And then he faced the, uh, if, if Lincoln is going to make war, what do you do as president of the Confederate States? You have to create an army and a navy and at least some kind of force for the field pretty quick. Now the old American tradition came to his aid here. The old American tradition had been, relied on the militia, and there was a big argument that went for years between the regular army and the militia about which was the best, but the southern states each had militias, which was a great idea except they were all under the governors. So he's going to have to deal with the southern governors in getting the militia in the field. What he does is he, um, goes before the Confederate Congress and asks for a call of 100,000 men. Lincoln had asked for 75,000. He asked for 100,000. Um, and the, the Congress, of course, permitted this and the states leaped right in to give their quotas. The problem is that this is the same thing that happens back when they pulled the militia together in the Whiskey Rebellion. They all came, but the most of them didn't have gunpowder. A lot of them didn't have weapons. None of them expected to stay more than 90 days. The militia was not the regular army, but Davis did a very interesting thing for a, for a state's righter. He turned the, the Confederate Constitution—which, as you know, was essentially a copy of the Union Constitution--he turned it against the states. It was the supreme law of the land. So he used it as the supreme law of the land, and under that he created a national army. Congress shall have the power to raise and support armies and it did, created a Confederate force. It, it made, what it finally did, and really alienated a lot of the southerner governors, who were, of course, not easily alienated, of course. They were not very sensitive people. What he did was, what the Congress did, was simply federalize, it's, if you want to call it that, “confederatize” the state militia and made them a national army. Now this is the basic thing that holds the country together. They, uh, they attempted to make a navy, which was under certain handicaps, since there were very few, uh, machine shops in the South that could make naval engines. Um, if you look at what arms were available, I just told you, about 100,000, there were those who could reach out and just take the musket off the wall like they were alleged to have done in the Revolution, but again, you, you, you collect a group of militia in Montgomery, the first Confederate capital, and here they are, all ready for you in the town square. But some of
them have muskets from 1812, some of them have flintlocks, few of them, believe it or not, had wheellocks that were so old nobody knew how to load the things. Each of these weapons had different caliber bullets. So aside from that, you have a wonderful group of militia just standing right there to be used. In addition to which, if you decide to send them somewhere, Davis had to figure out the transportation system of the Confederacy. He had to decide where you would put what few resources you had strategically in the field. The, uh, the South had 9,000 miles of railroad track. The North had 23,000. The South had two trans-southern rail lines, one in pretty far north in Virginia, going west over into Tennessee and then down, the other coming down from Atlanta and then going across Alabama and Mississippi to the, to the river. So Davis has got to figure out how to put the army together, what to do with it, how to transport it, most of all, how to supply it. All these things he tried to explain to his cabinet and to the Congress, but there was this overwhelming sense with the, with the exceptions of the unionists that I told you about, of well, you know, this'll all work out. Don't worry, we will, we will prevail. Sure. But Davis, uh, one of the reasons I'm so interested him, is that he understood all this better than almost anyone else in the whole Confederacy, and yet undertook the challenge to go on. Now I'm very impressed with that he did. I told ya, like, he turned the Constitution against the, the states, but he then faced another interesting problem. How do you deal with the Confederate Congress? Well, you deal with the Confederate Congress like you do with any body of, uh, ambitious politicians who are gathered together to further their own cause. But he wouldn't accept that, as he told Congress, this is a situation in which there could be no personal ambition. All the resources of mind and strength had to be given to the Confederate States and as I've always said, he became, when he took the oath of office, the first and foremost Confederate, and he kept pushing for the same devotion on the part of everybody else. And he kept being frustrated. He, and it, I think it often puzzled him why other people didn't react to the Confederacy like he did and try to, to support it, particularly Congress. But you have to remember and, and it, I think it, it, it came to him quickly but very sadly that this was a group of laissez-fairest positions. Their whole background was laissez-faire. And they were here to represent the Confederate States. What was the basis of this? State rights. So how much can they actually make of, of national legislation. And he kept feeding it to them. Look at his messages to Congress. He never let up. He began with urging the creation of the army. He began, he, one of his first messages suggested heavy taxation on cotton, land and slaves. Those th, well the three things Congress
threw up its hands at--How can you tax these things? These are fundamental. But he kept talking the necessity of serious taxation. There was an issue of, uh, of w, how much money was in the confederacy. There was $27 million worth of gold in all the banks of the Confederate States. How much can you build, to use a modern word, how much leverage does that give you with, uh, national currency? Very little. So the Congress began, they, they had a, th, he had a fairly tough secretary of treasury [C. G. Memminger]. But he too was a laissez-fairest. And unlike Albert Gallatin many years before, he didn't believe in heavy taxation. He believed you could, your national, uh, funds could be raised by bond issues. Does that sound familiar? Well, the first issue of Confederate currency came out in May of ’61, it was the only issue ever back by gold. And it was very, as you can imagine, very limited in amount. If you can find a gold certificate now, you can retire. One of those will put you in Easy Street. But he, the Congress decided to issue bonds and print money. Isn't that wonderful? Print money. The problem was from the beginning that the Confederacy did not start with the kind of financial backing that the president wanted them to have. And that was the beginning of the undermining of the government. And he knew it and he kept pushing for this and they kept pushing back. Later, well, uh, in 1863, he was actually to get Congress to enact the first income tax ever passed in the United States or the Confederate States. But it almost caused the various heart attacks on the floor of the Confederate house and senate. And they didn't tax land, cotton and slaves. Taxed everything else. And they got very good at it, uh, like we are today. They, they, they have sales tax on everything. And then they finally came to--Davis pushed this himself--Davis suggested that they ought to create a tax or levy a tax on entertainment, a sales tax on things like, uh, domestic, uh, items for, in, in the store, that sort of thing. Like the sales tax we have now. But by then it was, by 1863, the, uh, the tax, what are they gonna pay the tax in? Confederate money. And Confederate money is by then, seriously, uh, devalued. Davis then proceeds to suggest the possibility of a foreign loan. And he pushes it. He has a wonderful secretary of state, Judah Benjamin who is very, very “ept” at trying to figure out how to help the cause. And there was, you know, you look at politics today and you see how much family connections mean. Well, family meant a heck of a lot in the Old South. You know, you'd ask somebody first where they were from and who were their relatives. And that put, that put you in the step of wh, exactly where you fitted in the, the southern, uh, family circle. Well, the, the man that Davis had sent to be representative of the Confederacy in France was John Slidell, who had been a U.S. senator from Louisiana. Slidell
had a beautiful daughter and in Paris, uh, a man named Etion [Emile] Erlanger fell in love with her and persuaded Slidell to give him permission to marry her. Well Etion [Emile] Erlanger was part of the Erlanger Bank family. One of the big ones in Europe, certainly, probably the biggest in France at the time. It still exists by the way. It still has a basement full of Confederate States bonds but, uh, the Erlanger Bank considering the family connections, made a loan to the Confederate government of $15 million. Now Erlanger, the senior Erlanger, Emile, was appalled by this. He said I will, I will gladly lend you $500 million, with which you will win the war, but $15 million, I'm throwing away. But the Confederate Congress was still that laissez-fairest group and they had a, a wonderful attitude. They told Davis, how can we burden future generations of the Confederate people with a terrible debt? And his answer was just what you would have expected: Suppose there isn't any future for the Confederate people. With all this money, we could actually buy what we need in Europe. But they wouldn't do more than $15 million. So he turned again to his friend Benjamin and see, and they talked about how to get, how to get trade through the blockade, get their cotton out, and make some, uh, arrangements for, for trading cotton in Europe. And he and Benjamin and others worked very carefully to establish a remarkable blockade-running system that did not win the war but it certainly sustained the war for a considerable time. And blockade-running, uh, enabled the, the Confederacy to import a lot of the stuff it couldn't make. One of the things that's always fascinated me, that Davis himself worried about, was if we have telegraphs, and telegraph was the, was the big system then, as you know, first time it was ever used extensively in war, where do we get the battery acid? Now, where do you get the battery acid? You can't make it in the Confederate States. It has to be imported. So they, you'd be surprised at the amount of battery acid that came through the blockade. It looked like, it looks incongruous, well how do the, all these carboys of battery acid. Vital. Um, other things vital to the ladies--corset stays, very important. And a lotta the space on blockade-runners got taken up with things like corset stays and cigars, because again, Davis could not impose until late in the war a real control on blockade-running. Uh, everybody got a hand on a blockade-running ship. Everybody bought stock in blockade-running ships. The president pushed for control of blockade-running. He finally got it in 1864, uh, by a secret Act which they finally made public, he got permission to, or got authority to take over a certain amount of space on every blockade-runner for government cargo. Finally got it all. I told you, we spoke earlier about, uh, transporting the armies. Uh, this
bounces off of blockade-running. Um, I mentioned the small amount of railroad m, mileage available. If you want more railroad mileage, how do you get the rails? Well, there's a certain amount of steel you can get, uh, by tearing down things, and that was done to make some railroad iron. But you can't use all your steel for that, or iron. You have to use it for cannon, so again, a lot of rail was imported through the blockade, some of which was again melted down for cannon use because it became crucial as the war went on. Um, the railroads were allegedly, allegedly under the control of the quartermaster general, who reported to the president. When Davis finally realized that the quartermaster general didn't have the authority to impose any scheduling on the railroad, the railroad presidents were very cooperative except when it came to whether they would send their cars to another state. Then they got very sticky and Davis got absolutely furious about this. And he finally got an act controlling the railroads and each time the Congress would meet, he would present them with a new bill, uh, of necessities for victory, and each bill got tougher. And the Congress got furious realizing that they had a, a real anti-states rights man running the Confederate government. This man was trying to create a government like the North. He was trying to centralize the Confederate government and that, of course, turned against him. The poli, the politics, of Congress finally turned against him. And in the elections of 1863, uh, he lost a lot of support, and new congressmen and senators came in, uh, committed to support laissez-faire. And he had a rough time the last session of Congress. But he never gave up. The thing that fascinates me is, and I've always wondered about this, there had to come a day where he knew that they were losing. There had to come a day when he knew that. And still he has to go downstairs and go to the office every day, go to Congress and keep pushing for, you know, consolidating all the effort of this disparate state, also desperate state as the war went on, and not show that he knew that it was all over.

Speaker 1: When do you think he knew it was all over?

Vandiver: I don't know when he knew. Uh, you know, General Lee has been, um, criticized by some for continuing the war after he knew they couldn't win and thus killing an awful lot of troops. I don't know when Lee knew, either. I would, you know, Lee being the kind of man he was, I, I would suspect he thought they still had a chance up to 1865.
Speaker 1: When do you think the war was essentially over before this time?

Vandiver: Well, I think the war was, was probably, as, and again, I don't know, because there's always a miracle that could be pulled out of a hat, but surely after, uh, the siege of Petersburg began, the, uh, and the Army of Tennessee is destroyed in Nashville, uh, thing looks pretty thin, you know, hopes are, the only hope you have then is the thing Davis does. Uh, what I'm tryin' to get at is he never gave up, even though he, I'm sure he must've known, but he always had another rabbit in the hat. Uh, at the end, when everything was falling in on him, he sent, uh, an emissary to England with a, uh, with a deal. Um, the Confederate States would give up slavery in return for recognition by the British government. And they've been trying all through the war to get recognition, you know, by France. France wanted to do it, would've done it, but wouldn't do it alone, had to have England. England almost did it after Sharpsburg in 1862. The, although the, uh, Confederates didn't win it, it was a, a kind of draw. And they, the, they actually were gonna call the meeting of the British cabinet to vote on that, but the, they had one big opponent on the British cabinet, the Duke of Argyll. And the Duke of Argyll got what might be called a diplomatic illness and couldn't make the meeting. So they put it off and then the whole news of Sharpsburg arrived that the Confederates really had retreated back to Virginia and that Lincoln had issued the primary, uh, preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. So that dished the British going right then, but they still have some hope that the British and the, the French might recognize 'em. Um, if you, if you like to, um, nitpick, there is a possibility that the Papal States recognized them. Because the pope wrote to Davis as president of the Confederate States. Now that could be used as a, and was, and Davis tried to erect that into recognition. The Polish state in rebellion, uh, recognized them, but it too was on the way out. So that was the only, they had hopes for Russia but Russia would never do it either. Davis kept pushing foreign hopes, uh, he kept arguing, uh, accurately, that the blockade was not legal under the Paris Convention [Declaration of Paris, 1856], said that the blockade must be absolutely total, and the blockade leaked like a sieve for the first 3 years, you know. And Davis kept arguing, well, look, we, it isn't a legal blockade. Come on and open it up, help us open it up. Well, the British had a serious problem and I don't think Davis knew this at the time. The British Navy was a wreck. In 1861, if you had, if you had tried to get more than five frigates together that were able to go into action, you’d have been a genius that, uh, the na, the British Navy then were sorta like the
Spanish Navy in '98. It was a rusting, rotting collection of junk. And the British were tryin', knew this, and were gonna, trying to rebuild the navy, but they couldn't go to war right then. That was their problem. So Davis is pushing on the, in, international front; he's pushing on the domestic front. Uh, if you look at his legislation, he gets a lot of what he wants, too late. He wants to nationalize, like I said, the blockade-runners and the railroads. He wants to, uh, take control of manufacturing. Now, how do you do that with a laissez-fairest Congress, you can't go to Congress and say, let us nationalize, uh, manufacturing so that the Confederate government can run the whole thing. But there's another way to do it. What, what would you think how to do this? He thought of it. Get the, you have, you have the ultimate, you've gone and re, uh, achieved from Congress the ultimate authority and boy, did they hate to give it to him: conscription. The First Conscription Act was enacted by the Confederate Congress. So if you have the right to conscript people, you have the right to direct their usage. So through the secretary of war, Davis got the, the right, exercised the right to assign people to certain jobs and if you wanted to run your factory, say in Atlanta, Georgia, you had to get most of your workers from the Confederate army by assignment or from a pool of Confederate workers. So a lot, he, that's how they got control of manufacturing and that worked. That was the best deal they've done because it, it all, it worked very well. The Ordnance Department was remarkably, uh, adept at putting together a really functioning department. One of 'em, one of the reasons was how to use these men by detail, be, because the ordinance department could argue that, look, this is a very specialized department. We, we need scientists. We need chemists. We need real experts and if there are any out there in the army, we want 'em. And Davis agreed with that. He pushed that idea. So you, you, you have several people out there that, whose lives you save. Uh, Davis remembered that there was a man in the Confederate, uh, somewhere out in the Confederate Army around Richmond in '62 named Mallet, John William Mallet, who was a fellow of the Royal Society of England, a chemist. And he was out there as a, s, private soldier somewhere near Williamsburg. So they snatched him back and they began looking for people like that and brought them into the Ordnance Department. Mallet created a gigantic powderworks in Macon, Georgia which turned out to be as good as the, as the best British powderworks. And it solved the problem of powder for the war years. But it was unfortunate you couldn't do that with everything. There just wasn't enough. And even if you had all these, uh, um, experts working for the Ordnance Department, where do you get to lead? Davis was, didn't know any, how to
solve the problem of lead. And then he heard from one of his un-favorite generals, Beauregard. That was one of Davis's problems, which I'll get to in a minute. Uh, that they, the best idea was to take the window weights out of the large houses and make that into bullets, it worked. He also suggested a, another way to get bronze. Take all of the, the church bells and cast them into cannon, which did not go over very well with a lot of the clergy of the South. But it was a, it was an idea. And this is the kind of idea Davis is looking for, somebody who will do something like that and help the, the cause. His, uh, his success in, in getting, um--what's the word I'm looking for?--total, uh, total financial support, it never happened. He did get them to pass the income tax and one member of Congress, not actually, it was not, it was the secretary of the treasury, came up with an idea that, uh, I hope our current financial experts do not latch onto. It was called the tax-in-kind. And what it was, if, if you're growing, uh, so much wheat, you have to, you're taxed for that. But you, you can pay it in wheat. And that was the best idea, the idea was to, to get the food for the army. You know, tax those who raise hogs. Tax those, tax those who raise cotton. But the trouble is they had too much of that and they couldn't get it out. So what they were doing is, were taxing food and things like wagons and transportation items. And then he, Davis, pushed something that the Congress could almost not believe. He wanted a, uh, control price program. Can you imagine a laissez-faire Congress talking about price control? This man has lost his mind. But if you give the, uh, if you give the president the right to conscript people, uh, then comes the problem of how to sustain the people you have conscripted and, uh, Davis went to Congress with the argument that you hear every day today. We can't let the troops down. How do you sustain the troops? Well, you can't do it unless you take everything available. And you can't pay the going rate for the food. Uh, just a quick example. In, uh, late 1863, a 5-pound barrel of butter on the open market cost $300.00. The standing, the, the official price for that, they did come to price schedules, was $50.00. If you pay $50, if the government pays you $50.00, how do you feel about this? This, if, the price level didn't, it went over like a lead balloon. But it did hold the cost to the army down. Then Davis listened to his, uh, secretary, he got a new secretary of the treasury named Trenholm, who had another idea. And this may be something our, our, uh, Congress is working on. It worries me. Um, repudiate the currency. Not repudiate the currency, uh, diminish the currency.

Speaker 1: Devalue.
Vandiver: Devalue the currency. Thank you. Um, for every five Confederate dollars you got three back. The, the act of February [17,] 1864. That did a great deal for qu, uh, several months, boosted the s, strength of the Confederate dollar. But think what it did to the people [who] had all this money. And they suddenly don't have all this money. But actually the value went up, so it helped 'em. But Davis pushed that personally.

Speaker 1: Let's pause for, we need to pause for 1 second, make an adjustment. Throughout, um, your, uh, talk with us, you mentioned Mr. Davis's interaction with the Confederate Congress. Now he did seem to get his programs through, but he did engender tremendous antipathy from certain members of the Confederate Congress.

Vandiver: Oh yes.

Speaker 1: Why is it that Mr. Davis engendered such vociferous hatred or opposition or whatever term you wanna use during that era? But if you can, include names, you know.

Vandiver: Well, I think one of his problems is, in his relations with Congress, as I said, he was pushing a hard war program, uh, to a group of men who didn't want to fight a hard war. They wanted to fight a war but let's not go too far with this basic change business. Uh, Davis wouldn't let up. And also, he had a, he had a serious personal problem. He was so devoted to the cause that he, he could not really unbend with Congress. It was an old trait of Davis's which you probably have all run, always run into, that, that he had trouble, uh, speaking to a large group. He was usually rather stilted. And he stuck to what he wanted without trying to be pliable. Now in personal conversation, if he were sitting here, he would be the center of attention. He was scintillating and he had a marvelous mind and, and a great sense of humor which did not come through in his official messages. And he alienated people like, uh, um, oh, the senator from Texas, whose name I certainly ought to –

Speaker 1: Wigfall?
Vandiver: Pardon me?

Speaker 1: Wigfall?

Vandiver: Wigfall. Well, it's not hard to alienate Wigfall. Wigfall was, at one time was one of the leading dualists, so he had a lot of things he was agitated about, but Davis was, uh, was not a good politician. And I, I’ve wondered why, because he, he had this quality of being very persuasive. You know, he dealt with, uh, with this, the business of founding the, um, Smithsonian, but with careful negotiation with so many people. And he, he could be very persuasive but not in a, and, and I think his problem was this: You go to Congress and you know what needs to be done and you can't understand why they don't know what needs to be done. And if you tell them, why don't they do it? So he was more dictator, uh, a, more of a dictator to them, they thought, than a president. And that was a serious deficiency. Uh, not that it was fatal, but it certainly was not helpful. The quite, quite different with Lincoln, you know. Lincoln could joke his way through almost anything. And another difference was that, uh, Davis was not very, Davis was not personally eloquent, nor was he eloquent on paper. He wrote very well. You've read his messages. They're very good but they're not like Lincoln's messages. Lincoln had a, wrote on an entirely different plane of persuasion. Uh, I'm not just talking about the Gettysburg Address. I’m talkin' about the second, the second inaugural, things of that kind. These, this is almost prose poetry. Davis couldn't do that, but Davis could be clear and make exactly the statements he wanted to make. They don't sing, they march. And another problem he had was, uh, it, it goes to the one that we're talkin' about, um, he is a, he's very brittle in relations with people he doesn't like. That goes to the problem of Congress. If he doesn't like you, he d, just beats on you or, or drums on you for what he wants. And he had this problem with some generals. In military affairs, Davis was the commander in chief under the Constitution. And he knew that. Now, he had all kinds of experience for that job; as you remember, he had been a secretary of war. At times while he was secretary of war, he was secretary of the navy, acting secretary of the navy. So he knew the whole business; he'd been in the army, fought in the Mexican War, knew the whole thing, and sort of thought the w, the army was the place for him. Remember, as I said earlier, he wanted to, uh, uh, to command the Mississippi army. And he, at one time made the statement as I recall, if I could take one half of
the army and Lee could take the other half, we could sweep the field. Uh, but he, he, with certain generals, he couldn't do that. And it was sad and to a great degree because it cost him the services, the effective services of two, I think remarkable men, Beauregard, uh, the first military hero of the Confederacy for the opening shot at, uh, Fort Sumter, and Joseph E. Johnston. Uh, now Joseph E. Johnston is a very complicated character. I once wanted to do a biography of Johnston and I was, I had gotten a Guggenheim Fellowship to do this. But I had a great friend, uh, Douglas Freeman, who wrote the major life of Robert E. Lee, who wrote me and said don't do it. That is the most complicated Confederate general with the possible exception of Bragg and I'm not even sure of Bragg. Put it off for 20 years because he is so complicated. Well, you know, he's a, a lotta people think that Johnston was, uh, they called him Retreating Joe Johnston. Well, there were, Fabius retreated, also, but he retreated to victory. And we don't t know what Davis, what, Johnston might've done if he'd abandoned Atlanta. Davis removed him, but he, with people like, he, he, like that that he didn't really trust, he was brusque, argumentative and irritating.

Speaker 1: But many would argue that Joseph Johnston was petty, uh, he took everything that Davis said personally, uh, or do you disagree with that view that it was really Davis's responsibility to make this work and that Johnston was petty or catty, or whatever it was, that Davis had to deal with that in the best way he could?

Vandiver: I think that's a good, a good answer. That Davis should've been more pliable. The problem with Davis and Johnston is they're too much alike. That, you're, uh, they could hardly be friends because they're both brittle. They're both, uh, loaded with amour propre. You know, you were, if you, if you touch me wrong, I'm gonna hit you, and this exchange of correspondence that they had, uh, during the Atlanta campaign, before it began and during it, I, I've always called the “Confederalist papers” because they're trying to explain to each other what really the government is all about, and how it ought to be run. And it's, it's a very interesting dialogue, but the army is retreating all the way and Davis gets furious and thinks most of this correspondence is insubordinate, which to some degree it was. But his answers back were not conciliatory in any sense. So there wa, there was just bad, there just was no connection there. They did, they did not try to get along with each other. Beauregard tried to get along, but
Beauregard lost Davis's confidence after First Bull Run, First Manassas. He has to, has, is perfectly easy to see why. If, if you look, if you look at Beauregard in the way he wrote letters and the orders he wrote, as, as Davis once said, well, all of his plans would work if he had a 200,000 men and Xerxes is in command. Well there was this, you know, this great overblown kind of theory of war, but when he got down to fighting, he was fine. Look at, look at First Bull Run, First Manassas. The, the, his plan has gone to pieces, and in, in essence, he and the Union commander have the same plan, but his goes to pieces. And when it goes to pieces he takes over the battle and fights extremely well. That happened again in 1864 when he went up to help at Richmond. But Davis couldn't, he just couldn't accept the fact that this man was so flamboyant, yeah, this Creole flamboyancy was more than Davis could take. This, it was r, it musta been like chalk going backward on the blackboard to him. This kind of flowery, uh, emotionalism that –

Speaker 1: Uh, Johnston and Beauregard's decision to play out this battle into the press.

Vandiver: Well, that was, I think very unfortunate. Uh, and then the worst part was that Davis also sort of did that, you know. And, uh, they shouldn't've played it out in the press but, uh, you have to consider the kind of personalities they were. And Davis needed to think about that. But he, he, he just really, what he ought to have done, considering his attitude, was to have relieved both of them earlier, much earlier than he did. Uh, he, he shouldn't have relieved Johnston in Atlanta. That was not the time to relieve your army commander. And in essence, you know, in his circumspect way, Lee told him that. But Lee tried to stay out of anyplace but the Virginia sector, which I think was very sad. I've always wondered what would have happened if Davis had done what he wanted to do and that was send Lee to the west and replace Bragg. Wonder what that would've, how that would've worked out. Anyway, um –

Speaker 1: Talk to us about, uh, Robert E. Lee, about, um, Albert Sidney Johnson, Leonidas Polk, these are people that Mr. Davis very much preferred.

Vandiver: Well, let me start by saying that one of the duties of the president, which Davis did I think very well but never gets real credit for, is to devise a strategy to win the war. He is the commander in chief and there wasn't a, a general staff then. He was really, he was gonna
produce the plan with the advice of people that he liked. Now who did he have around him? One of the things you have to consider about Davis's problems is who does he have to work with? He often criticized with working with people like Bragg, um, Albert Sidney Johnston, people like that. But who does he have? You know, he, he can't, he has a few people that he can count on. He doesn't have boundless supplies of great generals. Now one of the great rumors of the civil war is that all the good officers resigned and came south. Certainly a lot of them did. A lot of them didn't. What he had to work with or, he turned to the ones he knew. Remember, he'd been secretary of war and he knew a lot of these people very well, personally and officially, professionally, excuse me. He liked Albert Sidney Johnston. Uh, remember, he created eight full generals, Davis did. And if I were a little sm, brighter than I am, I could remember all of them at the moment. Uh, Bragg was one of them, Albert Sidney Johnston, Robert E. Lee, Beauregard, Joseph E. Johnston, uh, Edmund Kirby Smith, John Bell Hood and Samuel Cooper. I did it. How 'bout that? Uh, Samuel Cooper was the oldest of them all. He had been an adjutant general of the U.S. Army and came to be adjutant and inspector general of the Confederate army. And he was almost so superannuated that he couldn't take the field. But Davis listened to him 'cause he had all this massive knowledge in his head, also massive balls of red tape. Um, Beauregard was too flamboyant and also you might, I haven't thought of this till just now. You might suggest that there was a bit of, uh, a bit of jealousy involved here because Davis, this was the first hero. Beauregard was the first military hero, the, the conqueror of Fort Sumter. And, uh, I'm not sure that Davis wasn't just a tiny bit jealous of the, the success that Beauregard had. And when he went north to take over the army in Virginia, his reputation still floated high. And after all, after the battle in the, and won first Manassas, who knew who won First Manassas. The people thought Beauregard had won First Manassas. They didn't know that actually Johnston and Stonewall Jackson had probably won First Manassas. But I think there's an element of personal jealousy I'd not thought of before that partly alienated him from Beauregard. There's no personal jealousy with [J. E.] Johnston. It's just animosity. Um, it starts, now one of the rumors is and I, I don't believe this but it's a rumor, that the animosity with Johnston started at West Point when, uh, they, he and, uh, Davis fell for the same girl and it, they, sort of alienated them early. And that the, another example of this later is that the suggestion is that Mrs. Johnston and Mrs. Davis did not get along. Uh, of course, if their husbands didn't, they probably didn't either. But this, this all sort of ties together, the personal
side of things. Robert E. Lee, uh, Davis knew fairly well from before the war. Remember, Lee had been superintendent of West Point when Jefferson Davis was secretary of war, and, uh, he had a high regard for him. Had the same kinda regard for him that Winfield Scott had and when he, you know, he wanted to make him commander of the Union armies, um, and he trusted Lee. Then, I think one of the reasons is Lee had, is a, you know, a lot of, you, you think Lee is very transparent, but Lee is a very opaque kind of man, I think. He's al, also very politically savvy. He knew how to get along with a prickly president. Their correspondence is nothing but amiable, as you, as you've heard. Uh, uh, Lee didn't always do what Davis wanted him to do at all, but he would sort of work his way out of trouble. I saw a letter from Davis, uh, several years ago that he wrote after the war about Gettysburg and he said something very interesting in this letter. He said General Lee never explained to me why the battle had to be fought there. So you, you can see that he didn't tell him everything. But –

Speaker 1: One thing on your list throughout, um, our research is that many of the generals essentially disobeyed orders, um, didn't convey orders or, or convey their plans to President Davis. I have to think if that happened today, these people would be court-martialed immediately. I mean, how is it, was this ha, was this this common in the 19th century, even most of the Union, the generals just did what they want, whether they told their commander in chief or not?

Vandiver: I remember that this is a generation of both politicians and warriors, heavily influenced by Napoleon. Uh, a lotta of what's taught at West Point in those days is the Napoleonic view of war. Napoleon said, Napoleon's maxims are bounteous, but one of those key ones is that there is a marshal's baton in the knapsack of every one of my soldiers. Now the other maxim that he pushed was that, and he wasn't the only one, uh, that, that man on the spot has to make the decision. You can't wait long enough to send a telegram to Washington. You have to act.

Speaker 1: Let's hold please. **** time. **** won't hesitate.

Vandiver: Oh, thank you.
Other Speaker: You're welcome. And you know ****, you know the one I was **** –

Vandiver: Yeah. I'll give it back to you. Thank you. Is this sorta what you want?

Other Speaker: Absolutely.

Other Speaker: Yeah.

Other Speaker: Oh yeah.

Speaker 1: Is there any, it, as we're changing the tape, is there any advantage to, to discussing the viewpoints, the dissenting viewpoints that Davis faced in the, uh, in the Confederate Congress. Like, for example, you can talk a great deal about what his plan was and that he, he faced some opponents who had a, had a different viewpoint. Is there any –

Vandiver: And shot down some of the ideas, yeah.

Speaker 1: Yeah. Is there any, is there any advantage to going and, and discussing what other people thought the Confederacy should be doing, how it should be –

Vandiver: That's not a bad idea. I, I can get into that, like, like, uh, Edward A. Pollard and his, his history of the war and how it was all, the loss was engineered by Davis.

Speaker 1: ****. Just a little ****.

Vandiver: Yeah.

Other Speaker: Yeah, I did.

Vandiver: But I wanna talk more about the, the strategy and the soldiers.
Speaker 1: Absolutely.

Other Speaker: We need that, we need to **** in there.

Speaker 1: Do you wanna talk about any specific battles, you know, for any specific ****, uh, during the Civil –

PART 2
Speaker 1: Is that spelled kismet?

Other Speaker: There you have it.

Speaker 1: You, you and this professor?

VANDIVER: Yeah.

Speaker 1: Kismet.

VANDIVER: That's about right.

Other Speaker: Okay, let's continue.

Other Speaker: Yeah.

Speaker 1: Thank you.

Other Speaker: We were talking about –

VANDIVER: Are you ready?
Other Speaker: Yes.

Other Speaker: Yes, sir.

VANDIVER: We were talking about, uh, as, as I mentioned earlier to you, one of Davis'S main tasks as president is to devise the strategy to win the war and he has sometimes been criticized by, uh [clears throat], those who don't know that he had no strategy. That's not the case. If you look at how the Confederate armies operated, he, he was following a course that's called the offensive defensive and I, I want, I got this idea from watching what the armies did, that he would try to pick a point where they could concentrate and attack and where they couldn't concentrate, they stood on the defensive, which is a, you know, a fairly still used strategy; and then to my surprise one day I was rereading his history of the Confederacy and he had a footnote in which he said, this was, I was following the, uh, offensive defensive strategy, and it's wonderful to know you were right. But he did. If you see how the armies operated. Lee, uh, took the offensive when he was able to, always. Lee was the constant attacker, and you know why, because he followed the Napoleonic dictum that the weaker side must always be the aggressor. They must keep the enemy off-balance by constantly attacking. Now, people have criticized Lee, saying that, you know, that cost far too many men. That constant attacking just ate up the Confederate army, but there's something to be said for the fact that the North couldn't organized. You know, they were always on the defensive in the east, and usually losing. And as I think James McPherson once pointed out, um, Lee's battles were the ones that really gave an opportunity for a victory. The battles in the west -- oh, a lot of people like to say the army is, the, the war is lost in the west -- I think the army, the war had a chance to be won in the east, and so the, the idea of attacking and defending, um, - Davis once argued, Davis once pointed out how much land the Confederacy had, and it was a lot of land. Just think in your mind of a map, uh, but where are the strategic points of this large amount of land? The ports are strategic points. Uh, Vicksburg is obviously a strategic point because the river, uh, the Mississippi and the state of Mississippi hinge there on the river. If you break through there, you've got a vast open space. If you break through at Chattanooga, you've got an open road, even with a railroad right down to Atlanta, so you have to pick out what strategic points must be defended. Davis is criticized, uh, for, on the strategy I think was ultimately absolutely sound. He just didn't have enough
resources to carry it out because the Federals were also attacking strategic points. They weren't stupid either. They knew where to put the pressure.

Other Speaker: Could the South have won the war?

VANDIVER: I think so. I think the South could have won the war. Um, it always seemed to me that the best chance they had, and again, you can argue that they weren't able to do it, was to push on to Washington after Manassas, First Manassas. Now, they were all disorganized. They were scattered all over the place and they could hardly believe they’d won. They didn't even know they’d won, but you know the Union army was really just totally, uh, not dismantled but demoralized. They couldn't believe they'd lost, and all these, all these congressmen are out there watching the, the “Bull Run races” and if the, even if a shadow force that followed them on into Washington and captured it, I think that would have brought foreign recognition. Their chance was then. Um, they had another chance, of course, if they'd won at Gettysburg, or if they had not fought at Gettysburg. As you know, Longstreet did not want to fight at Gettysburg, wanted to move around and fight somewhere else, maneuver.

Other Speaker: Back to, uh, Manassas. Who would you view at fault for not going to Washington? Was it Johnston, was it Davis, was it Beauregard, was it Bragg, ****?

VANDIVER: Um, I, I really don't fault anybody, because I think by, uh, Davis and Johnston and Beauregard and, uh, Jackson all realized they didn't have the transport ready to go north. They didn't have any supplies. They couldn't move the ammunition, and they didn't have enough cavalry to press the, the attack, so they were just – the problem was they were victims of success -- and although the opportunity was there, the capacity was not. That would be my argument. I think also if they had to have been able to hold out, uh, maybe if, you know, maybe if Johnston had stayed in command in Atlanta and the Confederates could have held out through the election, that might have done it. Although I'm one, I've always thought this, I'm not sure that had, had McClellan been elected, he would have made peace. I don't think he could have. You have to look at the platform of the Democratic party. They were the Union Democrats. They were not gonna pitch the war if he had won. Now, back to, to Davis and his generals, uh, he, as I, I was
talking to you a while ago about Lee. Uh, he trusted Lee, but he didn't – Lee did things that he didn't – you and I talked about that, that, that he didn't tell the president and a lot of generals did that. Well, you know, you say they don't know, yes they still do. The field commander has to have certain authority to act because even with lightning communications you, you have to make even more lightning decisions in the field. It would be nice to sit back and ask the general staff what you ought to do, but then the general staff would have to meet and think what that would mean. Um, I think devolving authority to the commander in the field is just natural and has to be done. Um, as a matter of fact, whether or not Davis would have been a good general in the field, I don't know. He thinks or thought he would have been. I'm not sure he would have been.

Other Speaker: Why didn't ****.

VANDIVER: Pardon me?

Other Speaker: Why didn't Jefferson Davis take the field?.

VANDIVER: Well, I, because he was president, he was president, and, uh, he is commander in chief. He could take the field, but that was simply unprecedented, “unpresidented,” if you will. Uh, he also thought, you know, - he went to the field several times. First Manassas is one of them. Um, the end of the Seven Days [campaign, 1862] he went to the field, and as I was, I was saying earlier, I think he would have loved to have gone to every field, but whether the experience of Buena Vista was enough to carry over, I don't know. I don't know what he would have been like as a field commander. Uh, Lee certainly had great respect for him as commander in chief, and he would occasionally, Lee would, try to, to educate, uh, the president about other generals. You remember when, uh, Davis was thinking of relieving Johnston in '64 and he's thinking of putting Hood in. Uh, he asks Lee what he would do and Lee says two interesting things. He says it's very difficult to change horses in the middle of the stream, i.e., the campaign. Two, General Hood is, I think, a splendid division commander. Now, if you, if you read subtleties: Don't do it. But Lee was not gonna tell the president not to do it. That was just not Lee's function, he, he thought. Um –
Other Speaker: If I could throw in, as, as we follow up on Lee, if **** when you answer just ****. Lee's surrender did not happen immediately. It was something that took a few days. He sent envoys, he sent word to Grant that there possibly could be a chance for talks. Why did Lee not communicate with Davis in that time?

VANDIVER: He couldn't find Davis. Davis was, you know, en route already from Danville; [Lee] didn't know where the president was, and again, uh, you have to remember his army is starving to death. He doesn't have the option of asking what to do. He's got, he's got the ammunition, the ammunition train arrived. Naturally, the Ordnance Department performed superbly, but the, the rations arrived too late, and the army is falling to pieces and if he waits another day, they're all gonna melt away. Now, a lot of’em, and what do you have? about 23,000 muskets? They would have, they would have been willing to charge again, as, as John Brown Gordon told him, but he, he knew they weren't gonna, they were, they were totally surrounded. There was no way they could get out, so he had to surrender. Uh, if he had, if he had reached Davis, what he would have had to tell Davis is that I have no hope, I have to surrender. Even if the president told him to go on, that would have been a, an order he could not carry out. I think, uh, in his relations with Albert Sidney Johnston, you asked me earlier about Albert, and they were old friends. They had known each other for many years. Albert Sidney Johnston had had a fascinating career that int, that Davis was very much interested in. He'd been in the Army of the Republic of Texas, uh, he had been leader of the Mormon Expedition, which had not turned out just real keen from the standpoint of the United States, but he was a senior general in the army, and they were, they were personal friends. Now, if you ask me what I think about Johnston, whether, whether his death was a tragedy, I've always had a personal prejudice, which I will voice here, that I think he was lucky he was killed when he was, because I'm not sure Albert Sidney Johnston had it for field command. He might have, I don't know. Uh, my view of, of Beauregard has shifted over the years and Johnston's attitude toward Beauregard at first influenced me greatly. I thought Beauregard was a, a dud because Davis thought so, but gradually over the years it's come to me that, I've come to believe that Beauregard had much to commend in his battle sense. He was a fine battle soldier and it's too bad David didn't realize that. For instance, in the siege of Petersburg, the fighting he did at Petersburg, unhelped by Lee for about 4 days, with a small militia force against 40,000 Union troops, is nearly miraculous and
he, he never really got the credit for that. And his defense of Charleston was simply marvelous for 3 years.

Other Speaker: But what about [the aftermath of Shiloh, when Beauregard took leave of absence]?

VANDIVER: Well, no, I think he had what you would call, uh, a, a breakdown. I think he, he just went – remember when everything went to pieces? They lost it at, uh, Corinth, uh, and he was getting nothing but complaints from Richmond. I think he lost confidence in himself. You remember Hooker said once after Chancellorsville, ”Well, for once, I lost confidence in Joe Hooker.” Well, I think, uh, Beauregard lost confidence in himself, and simply shirked responsibility. It was like Hardee. Hardee was a great corps commander in the Army of Tennessee, but he didn't want, he didn't want to command it. It, it, he didn't want the responsibility. For a while, I think that was true of Beauregard. I think Albert Sidney Johnston--I, I may be totally wrong about this--I, I know most people think he was, would have been a great success, but if you look at what he done up to that time, who had really, who had really saved his bacon? Beauregard had saved his bacon. Johnston had his forces scattered all over Mississippi and Tennessee, even into Kentucky, and they were little clumps of men, and Beauregard kept telling him, for God's sake concentrate the army, get it, or we'll have it all destroyed in little bits and pieces. So finally, somewhat reluctantly, he concentrated it and then went to the Shiloh campaign. And again, uh, suppose he lived that day, would they have been able to carry the field by evening? Was, was Beauregard simply too quick in not ordering another attack? I don't know, but you have to look at the field at the time. Bragg thought that they could have mustered one more attack. If Bragg thought it, I'm sure it isn't true. Bragg, I think, is one of the big, the best, one of the best Union generals in the Civil War, and of course, Davis loved him. [Looking aside:] What's happened? A problem?

Speaker 1: ****.

Other Speaker: Bragg was a great Union general.
VANDIVER: Well, I've always thought that. I did a sketch in the Oxford American History, the military history dictionary [Oxford Companion to American Military History (1986)], about Bragg and concluded it by saying he did much to defeat his cause, and, you know, his record is almost unblemished for failure. Uh, good grief, one of my complaints about Davis is, I can't imagine when he goes out to Tennessee to look at – you know, the army [Army of Tennessee] is in trouble. They have lost at Lookout Mountain. Now, they, they, they've lost at Perryville, excuse me, Perryville, lost at Perryville, and everybody, all the subordinate generals, are grumbly. Davis goes out to see what's going on and he meets a unanimous opinion of the corps and division commanders that Bragg is a butt--for God's sake, get rid of him. And he doesn't. He leaves him in command. That ain't smart.

Other Speaker: Why did he do that?

VANDIVER: I think he looked around to see who was going to replace him. Again, I said earlier, that you have to consider who he had to work with, and I think, uh, he, he didn't see anybody in the division or corps level that he would have trusted.

Other Speaker: Do you agree with that assessment?

VANDIVER: I think, well, I think, I think he even thought of this. I think Hardee was a possibility, but Hardee wasn't gonna do it, and I would have put it in charge of Cheatham or Cleburne. Heck, I would have, I would have done something very different. I would have put it in charge of win, uh, uh, Nathan Bedford Forrest, who I think would have been a superb army commander 'cause he had the imagination for it, but Davis worked with what he, what he had, and he thought Bragg was the best of the lot. The problem is all confidence in Bragg is gone, so it doesn't matter, it seems to me, how good he is, he's not gonna extract the best from his army, but Davis had this feeling about Bragg. Finally, when Bragg offered his resignation, he took it, but you note, notice later on he brings Bragg to Richmond as, uh, sort of a chief of staff, which caused everybody's eyebrows to raise, but it wasn't as stupid as it looks 'cause it was not a fighting position. You know, Bragg, I always thought was the McClellan of the Confederacy. He was, could organize a great army, he just didn't want, didn't want to fight it, but as, as chief of
staff he knew Confederate soldiers, he knew the strategic and tactical situation of the whole Confederacy, and he was a, a good advisor on what to do, and his advice in that role was by no means bad. Now, where he fails again, and tragically, is in the defense of Fort Fisher, where he has 6,000 men under his command. The attack is being carried out by 5,000 Union troops. Poor Colonel Lamb has only 1,500 to meet them with and he's waiting for Beauregard to come, and Beauregard doesn't go. Well, he gets several messages from, from Lamb, and if, once Fort Fisher is gone, you've lost Wilmington. You've lost the last of the blockade-running ports, so that I think is his ultimate degradation. Um –

Other Speaker: Are you answering questions or do ****?

VANDIVER: Sure, go ahead.

Other Speaker: Why don't you talk to us about, um, since we're so focused on the Civil War, Andersonville?

VANDIVER: Prisoners.

Other Speaker: Prisoners, um, if I can throw some comments at you **** Mr. Davis' view of how Union troops, Union prisoners should be treated, how Confederate prisoners were treated by the Union **** Andersonville, um, disaster, Elmira, uh, **** the lack of exchanges, the trial ****.

VANDIVER: Exchange sputtered back and forth, you know.

Other Speaker: The trial of Captain Wirz.

VANDIVER: Captain Wirz, yeah.

Other Speaker: ****.
VANDIVER: Yeah, let's start with, uh, an act that Britain carried out at the beginning of the war. The British cabinet did not recognize the Confederate States, but it did the next best thing. It infuriated Lincoln. It gave belligerent status to the Confederate States. Now, what does that mean? It means that, uh, the army and navy commissions are recognized. It means that the armies and its prisoners will be treated as prisoners of war, that its ships have the right to come in practique, to get 48-hour supplies, that sort of thing, that it will be treated internationally as a belligerent power and that is nearly recognition. Um, so it puts the prisoners of war under the Paris Convention of 1850 (I think that's the one). Uh, the prisoners will be treated, uh, humanely by both sides [First Geneva Convention, 1864]. Uh, Davis, uh, agreed with that. He had helped with those negotiations and he thought they would, they would certainly treat the Union prisoners that way. Um, there is some question in my mind, and I don't know whether this is right or not, that the Union took the same view toward Confederate prisoners. These were – you remember, the Union didn't believe they were belligerents anyway because there wasn't a, a belligerent Confederate government, so to say that they should be covered by the Paris Convention is going pretty far and it's something that, that certainly nobody in the, the North, certainly Seward hated it and doubted it from the start, but I'm not saying they deliberately, uh, under-supplied Confederate prisoners of war. What happens is that as, uh, after the war is over the stories of prisoners get out. The stories that are the worst are from Andersonville. First Libby, Libby Prison in Richmond was supposed to be the worst, and, and then they moved most of the prisoners, you know, was it, uh, '64, early to Andersonville, where the conditions are execrable. You know, the place is built for 13,000, has 30 or 40,000, has one stream running through it, that’s the water and everything else. The disease is, the death from disease is unbelievable. Um, conditions are, people are starving to death. Um, and after the war they, uh, try Captain Wirz, who was the commander, because of his fiendish treatment of prisoners of war, mainly because he didn't feed them. One of the problems is that they were getting the rations that Lee's army was getting. The Confederacy could only do what it could do, and it didn't have all the supplies it should have had. Um, now, there, there was exchange between the two sides for quite a time, but when Grant became commander he very wisely decided to cut off exchange because without that the Confederates had no chance for reinforcements of any kind, so he stopped that for quite some time. It was, was resumed later in the war. Uh, Confederate prisons were almost uniformly terrible. Libby Prison was awful. It was an old warehouse and it was
never designed to hold lots of people. Uh, its supplies were hard to get there because most of 'em passed right through to the army and the, uh, the man, what's the name, Winder, General Winder, who is the provost marshal of Richmond, is in charge of Libby Prison, and he is anything but a, a commendable figure, a, a real rotter. Well, he, he's probably guilty of as much as anyone could be in trying not to help Union prisoners. Um, the converse side of this is that the North had a very fine general, commissary general of prisoners, named, uh, Ethan Hitchcock, Ethan Allan Hitchcock, but he was stationed, he stationed himself in St. Louis, and he kept, he did great things for western prisons, but the eastern prisons were not nearly as well supervised, so you run into places like Point Lookout, like, um, Elmira, like, um, Johnson's Island, uh, where the conditions are anything but commendable; same kind of conditions as in Andersonville. Um, the difference being that the, the North had the capacity to supply the prisoners and didn't, and I'm not saying the Confederates didn't do that some of the time themselves, but mainly they didn't have the resources to give to the prisoners or war. You say well, they should have given them uniforms. They didn't have their own. Uh, uh, a real dis, disparity in resources for the prisoners, but, uh, if you became a prisoner of war, you were in desperate trouble. I would say your chances of survival – I, I was reading about this the other day-- in northern prisons were about, let's see, uh, you had a chance of about a 30 percent chance of survival. Confederate prisoners had about 20 percent chance of survival.

Other Speaker: Uh, during the trial of Captain Wirz, uh, many Union prosecutors were trying to get Captain Wirz to say that Jefferson Davis was involved.

VANDIVER: And he didn't.

Other Speaker: Talk to us about Jefferson Davis' alleged involvement in Andersonville and uh, Captain Wirz' decision not to ****.

VANDIVER: Well, there's no evidence that I've seen that Davis really knew what was happening at Andersonville. He doubtless knew what was happening at Libby because it's right there in his front yard. He was for fair treatment of the prisoners. He was also not for giving the prisoners more than his army was getting. He tried to be fair, except to slave prisoners. Well,
you had a very interesting problem, black troops in the Union army who became Confederate prisoners. This Davis looked upon as a constitutional problem and you, he gave an order, which you’ve probably have heard about, that black prisoners should be brought to his personal attention, records of each black prisoner, and if, if this prisoner turned out to be a former slave, he would be turned back to his master, so that was a real crunch that the, the North simply was furious about, and at one time for awhile threatened to shoot Confederate prisoners if any of this happened. So it was a sticky situation. Davis, believing he had to stick to the Confederate Constitution, did this. Uh, I, I, I honestly don't know what he thought about. I don't know whether he was for it or not, but I know he, he did it because he thought the Constitution forced him to. On the other hand, he said later, something that Lincoln said. Um, when someone said to him you sent Duncan F. Kenner to England to offer emancipation for recognition, did you have the constitutional right to do that? He said, no, but I thought that if we won it wouldn't matter and that's what Lincoln said, you know, early in the war. That's probably, I'm fighting an unconstitutional war, but if I win no one will mind.

Other Speaker: On the subject of slavery, give us a sense of ****.

Another Speaker: Let me, let me throw out one more question about the war. Was the war, in your opinion, a rebellion, a revolution, or a conflict between sovereign nations?

VANDIVER: Well, I would, I would take the view that it really was a, a, a conflict between two separate cultures, two different cultures, and then became a conflict between two separate nations. I don't think it was a rebellion, certainly in the mind of most southerners they weren't rebelling. They were seceding and that's quite different, and you'll notice there some, several cases of southerners feeling that, uh, uh, rebellion was a terrible thing. They wouldn't have done it.

Other Speaker: ****.

Speaker 1: Uh –
VANDIVER: Is that it?

Other Speaker: Yeah.

Speaker 1: One more question. Do you think the South would have been better off, and again, please answer to Brad, do you think the South would have been better off not having moved to Richmond? And staying in Montgomery?

VANDIVER: Uh, probably.

Other Speaker: Include the question.

VANDIVER: Oh, would this, would the, would the Confederacy have been better off if they hadn't moved their capital from Montgomery, Alabama, to Richmond? And that's putting it so close to, uh, the enemy's capital. Probably they would have been better off if, say, they had moved it to Atlanta, where they had the transport hub. But you have to remember why they did it. Again, the, so much of Confederate activity is forced upon them by circumstance. And they were concerned, very concerned about keeping Virginia in the war. Unless--Virginia is their big star in the crown. I apologize to all other Confederate states for saying that. But they had to keep Virginia, you know, in, committed. So moving Richmond, the capital to Richmond, makes perfect sense from that standpoint. It's a circumstance which they, which they reacted; now it had, it had serious downsides. Um, communications were difficult from Richmond. Uh, the rail transportation is limited. Uh, if you're going to have, you have to concentrate your telegraph all in Richmond. And the telegraph was difficult; it would have been much better in a place like Atlanta. Montgomery probably would not have remained the capital. I think they would probably have moved it to Atlanta, where they had, as I said, railroads and other communication. But, uh, they had to, they had to do what they thought was politically important. And that's what this move was.

Other Speaker: Please talk to us about Mr. Davis's view of slavery.
VANDIVER: Well, you know more about that than I do. Uh, I've, what I've read about Davis's view of slavery is that, uh, he was a slave-owner and reflected the views of his time and place, but was, uh, one of those that you would call a liberal slave-owner. Now of course the main critics from slavery say there ain't no such thing. You know, if you have slaves, you're just a slave-owner and you can't be good or bad. Of course, that was not true. The South was an example of how what different kinds of slave-owners there could be. And you know, he was a, he was very well-liked by his slaves. My favorite story is what happened after the war. You probably have heard this story. One of his former slaves who was living, living somewhere in the North, I think, heard that he had been released from prison and was very poor and was looking for, you know, a job or something. And he said, well, Mr. Davis was always very kind to me and if $1,000 would be of any help to him I would be glad to advance it. Now that's a, that's a fair statement of confidence in your former master. I think as a, a general rule he was fair, but he was a slave-owner.

Other Speaker: What world do you think slavery played in secession as opposed to, let's say, tariffs?

VANDIVER: Well, I think secession was caused by a multiplicity of situations--the tariffs certainly. The tariff wars from [18]28 on, all through the nullification crisis, um, are part of the call. Slavery is certainly part of the cause. Uh, the, the general as I, as I said a moment ago, the general division of society, the different ways of both sides looking at the world, is really what caused most of the rupture. The North taking a, um, you know, the whole, what's the word I'm looking for. The whole spirit of uh, reform, that hits the North and, you know, it takes all kinds of forms--hospital reform, everything else, uh. Also, focus is finally on abolition. And, as it focused on abolition, it focused the South on slavery and slavery became a heavy nut to crack all of a sudden because the South is being told by, uh, endless paens of complaint from the North, particularly from the pulpits of the North, that they are persisting in a sin and the world's worst evil, you know the sort of comments they keep hearing. And this is, you know, they, the North tries to send in lots of propaganda pieces to that effect. And what this does, and I don't have to explain this to you, is it, it creates a, a garrison mentality. We are being attacked for the way we think and live, so to hell with you! And they concentrate themselves inside. So, slavery became
an issue by, by uh, essentially, the urge to reform. But I think, what I really think is, is that both
sides looked at life differently. The North had al, galloped into the industrial age happily,
galloped into strong central government, to, uh, uh, unbelievable business trade with the world.
The South looked at life much, as a much slower kind of thing. Southerners were not into
business on a great scale. Cotton, certain cotton brokers were, yes. But business was not a big
thing in the Old South. A, a slower kind of life was. And I think it was as much a feeling of
alienation from a different culture as anything else caused.

Another Speaker: Take a break?

Other Speaker: No, it's uh, one more question. Um, let's, let's look at, uh, Fort Sumter and
why, why was the hand of the, of the South forced into firing? Why was that shot fired first from
the South and not fired from the North?

VANDIVER: Well, that's a very good question. And it, it resulted, uh, from a series of very
serious cabinet meetings held in Montgomery. Davis was not for firing on Sumter at the start of
these discussions, because he was, he was very seriously worried about the South firing the first
shot. He also was hoping there wouldn't be any shot, at all, it could be avoided. But there were
two forts, as you know, that remained in Federal possession: Fort Pickens in Mobile harbor and
Fort Sumter in Charleston. Both of them are essentially useless. You know, they are not
strategic points of vital importance. Uh, both of them are old, um, you know, about 50-year-old
coastal fortifications that had been built and essentially abandoned. The, the, the day of the great
fort is passing. Um, but, the argument that came to a head in the cabinet meetings was that, as
long as Fort Sumter--more than Fort Pickens, which is sort of off the map, nobody knows where
Mobile is--as long as Fort Sumter is in Federal hands, can the Confederacy claim to be in charge
of its own territory? And can we be a free and independent nation if the Federals have a fort
right in the middle of our main port? And the conclusion finally was, no, they had to force the
issue there. Um, I think they probably should not have fired on Fort Sumter then. I think they
might have waited awhile. Remember that, uh, well I'm, I'm not fair to them by saying
remember what happened afterward, but I think they, you know, relations had been strained but
surviving up to then. Davis had sent his emissaries to Lincoln, who would fob them off on
Seward, and they were being duplicitously treated, and that was another reason they decided to fire on Fort Sumter. Because they thought, well, I, I don't, I shouldn't just say that. They, they had some evidence, let me put it this way. I mean, they had some evidence that the Federals intended to reinforce Fort Sumter. And remember, they, they sent a message that they were sending supplies but that was all, well, then this becomes another issue, if they send supplies how can we let this happen? If they send supplies, they may send something else. So, I, I think they might have waited awhile but on the other hand, I, I might be wrong, uh, a relieving expedition could have arrived, and that would have really put 'em in the soup. So, I know, I know they were on this knife's edge of decision, you know. And they finally decided to fire and it's, you know, and I don't know. They, they were probably right. I suspect that with my hindsight I would have waited awhile. But, there was an expedition being outfitted, you know, in Boston.

Other Speaker: Why was New Orleans lost so quickly, so easily?

VANDIVER: Because all of, most of the troops that Mansfield Lovell had, and he was commanding in New Orleans, Major General Mansfield Lovell, uh, were, had been siphoned away to Bragg's army in bits and dribbles, although Lovell screamed for this, this happening. He said he was left with nothing to defend New Orleans with. They still, you know, this was an army, fairly large--I think he started with about 30,000--and they were dribbled away to reinforce Bragg and Beauregard. So when the attack actually came, he was, he was literally up the creek, had really nothing to stop them with, and the, the Confederate navy had, couldn't help. They had one old, had one new, but nearly unmovable, uh, ironclad, the Manassas, which had the, I think, uh, apt nickname of “Mud Turtle.”

Other Speaker: So, um, what was, if any, Davis' involvement in the assassination of the president?

VANDIVER: I can't imagine there was any. I don't think there was any. It's just not in Davis's character to have done that.
Other Speaker: Include the word “assassination” and remember **** we're doing to **** only those words out, not my question. So include the word “assassination” . . . “ I can't imagine it.”

VANDIVER: Oh, I see what you mean. Uh, as far as Davis being involved in Lincoln's assassination, I simply can't believe in it. It's against any of his character, any part of his character, to have done that, and, uh, he himself was deeply saddened by Lincoln's death, as you know.

Other Speaker: Why?

VANDIVER: I think he had an admiration for Lincoln, uh. I think, oddly enough, they had an admiration for each other. Lincoln kept calling him, you know, “that other fella,” always wondering what the other fella was doing, and, uh, how could Davis not have been interested in what Lincoln was doing, had to be.

Other Speaker: Did they ever know each other or meet each other? Is there any evidence?

VANDIVER: I'm not sure. I was wondering, I'm, my, I get my dates wrong. Was Davis in Washington when Lincoln was a congressman?

Other Speaker: He was not an elected official at the time, but he –

VANDIVER: So they were, there was no official contact. Well, then, I don't know that they'd ever met. I just don't know.

Other Speaker: – what about when President Lincoln sat in Davis's office in Richmond, after Davis [left] Richmond? Can you talk about that at all?

VANDIVER: How did Davis what?
Other Speaker: Well, I understand that after the war, after –

VANDIVER: Lincoln made a visit to Richmond, yes.

Other Speaker: And didn't he sit in Davis's –

VANDIVER: Sat in Davis's –

Other Speaker: Talk to us about that. Give us a little recap, if you're able.

VANDIVER: – Well, I'm no expert on what happened. Uh, to begin with, I think the visit itself was astounding because he went around Richmond with no guards. He just walked around himself. I know he sat in the, in Davis's office and must have been remarkably pleased to be there. Uh, you know, he did something else on that visit that fascinates me. He visited General Pickett's house. Did you know this? And Mrs. Pickett came to the door and he's standing there, and he says, is General Pickett home? And she said I'm, you know, she must've had eyes like this [indicating wide eyes]--I'm sorry, Mr. President, he's with General Lee, and he [Lincoln] says, well, I'm sorry to have missed him. When he comes back, would you tell him his old friend Abe Lincoln dropped by?

Other Speaker: Give us more about the, uh, comparison between President Lincoln and President Davis. We've done that kind of throughout, but as much as you can, really flesh that out for us. You know, there has been an argument made, if I can continue that, if the roles had been reversed, if Lincoln was the Confederate president and the Confederacy was lost, include that, uh, theory in your answer.

VANDIVER: I think if Davis had been president of the United States, they would've won, without fail, because I'm one of those that believes the North had more than the South, and simply overwhelmed the Confederates, but if Lincoln had been president of the Confederacy, I think it would've lasted longer. Lincoln would've gotten along better with the Congress. He would've, uh, elicited more public support for the cause simply by his language and by his rustic
humor, which people really responded to. He would've, uh, not won unless he could've helped the pursuit after First Manassas, but I don't think First Manassas would've happened. Isn't that interesting?

Other Speaker: Why?

VANDIVER: Because I don't think Davis would've attacked until the army was a hell of a lot bigger. He was, uh, he would understand the, the Colin Powell doctrine of massive warfare, but he could never do it in the Confederacy. He couldn't get it together. Remember, he did once. He got 95,000 men in the Seven Days battle, the biggest collection he ever had. He believed in that.

Other Speaker: Give us more of a sense of the differences between President Lincoln and President Davis ****.

VANDIVER: Well, I've already told you I think one of the differences is in, uh, expression, in, uh, their, their different capacities to project, um, a cause. Lincoln knew he had a cause, but the cause at first finally kind of fizzled on him. You know, at first, the cause was the Union, and there had been a lot of people before the war, you know, in the North who had said, uh, great grief, do we have to have another one of these secession crises? Let's let the erring sisters go in peace and be rid of them. So it wasn't a completely, uh, all-inclusive argument to save the Union. Apparently, a lot of people had written the Union off, even in the North. Uh, Lincoln re, realizing that, realizing that he was having trouble with the governors, particularly with the governor of Pennsylvania, was going to have to change the nature of the cause to keep it, keep people. For instance, his real, his main general for a while, General McClellan, was a Democrat and didn't believe in abolishing slavery. He simply thought that was unconstitutional, which of course, it was. So he's got a problem here. What does he do about his cause? So then he seizes on, emancipation, which he thinks is unconstitutional, you know, but he thinks that emancipating the slaves will be the, the cause and it finally generates into the cause. Uh, Lincoln from that standpoint, it seems to me, was very pliable about shifting his political and constitutional ground. I'm, uh, you know, he's often been said to be the most, uh, original president and I think he's
certainly one of the most canny presidents, uh, able to adjust, adjust to any circumstance that was necessary as long as they preserved the Union. You remember the letter he wrote to, uh, the editor of the, was it the Herald Tribune? [to Horace Greeley, editor of the New York Tribune, Aug. 22, 1862] Uh, written in this letter the plea of 20 millions, uh, would you express what you really mean about what you're thinking about the war? [Greeley’s editorial was entitled “The Prayer of Twenty Millions.”] He said I never, I never have had any intention to keeping in doubt what I thought. I will save the Union. If I can do that without slaving, uh, freeing any slave, I will do that. If I can save it by freeing some and not others, I will do that, and if I can save it by freeing them all, I will also do that.

Other Speaker: Why ****. Um, you said it in the past, in this, I mean in this, this, uh, discussion today, uh, there's so much of Davis and his presidency was a reaction, um, and I think for us to really understand his presidency, we need to understand Lincoln, because that's primarily who he was reacting to, to that government. Why, as you just touched on, why did Lincoln pursue the war so vigorously? Why keep the Union together? Why, why not let them go? What was, what was his, why was he so passionate about absolutely winning this war and having everything back together?

VANDIVER: Well, you have to remember that Lincoln had never believed in secession at all. He thought it was unconstitutional, and he was, he thought that his predecessor Buchanan was an ass, but Buchanan had a marvelously complicated constitutional view of what was happening. I always found this marvelous. He thought that secession was unconstitutional, but he had no constitutional authority to stop it. Now how, how about that for convoluted reasoning? Um, Lincoln always believed, being a lawyer and, and other things too, a philosopher, but certainly being a lawyer, that his idea was that there's no instrument of government that builds into itself a clause for dissolution of that government. So he couldn't believe that the Constitution, uh, provided a way out. He just accepted that as not true and, uh, I think that's what motivated him to save the Union, and he'd been, remember, he'd been talking, he'd been talking this way for some time. This is not new. Look, look back on his, some of his comments in Congress, when he was supporting the Wilmot Proviso to, to get to another compromise. He wasn't sure compromise was the way to go. Look at his arguments in the Lincoln-Douglas debates, where it
becomes increasingly clear and his language becomes increasing, increasingly clear, that he is going, he thinks the Union must be saved and that all these strange little gadgets that are being tried to save it, and yet, keep the South happy, like the, Douglas’s idea of popular sovereignty, was ridiculous. He thought they were going to have to just save the Union, and he says it, he says it after he's elected. He's on the way to Washington and he's corresponding with somebody, I can't remember, one of his pro, uh, prospective cabinet members. He said, I think we'll have to, it will ultimately have to come to a crunch, and it should come now. The longer we wait, the stronger they'll be. So he knew what he was going to do from the start, and that's not a new idea with him.

Other Speaker: You know, asking this again, you had mentioned that the abolition of slavery is absolutely unconstitutional. Why do you say that?

VANDIVER: Pardon me?

Other Speaker: You had mentioned here in answer to a question a couple of questions ago, the abolition of slavery was absolutely unconstitutional. Give us a sense as to why you, uh, subscribe to that viewpoint.

VANDIVER: Was unconstitutional.

Other Speaker: Right, you had said that the, abolishing slavery before the war was unconstitutional.

VANDIVER: Oh, well, look at the Constitution. The Constitution says, uh, that slaves shall be counted at one-third or two-thirds of a person, but slavery is recognized and considered to be an institution to be protected by the Constitution. That's the, that's the rub from Davis's standpoint. This is, you know, this is a, a constitutional matter that is being broken. The Constitution is being disrupted because of this, and that goes back, in the southern mind, heavily to the Kansas-Nebraska crisis, where the argument was if you could force us to take, drop our slaves going into a free state, you could take anything from us.
Another Speaker: There are more **** for sure.

Other Speaker: Just one, one last one, um, you said it was a practic, practically a carbon copy, the Confederate Constitution and the United States Constitution. Were there any differences in those documents?

VANDIVER: Um, yes, there were. Remember, there were two Confederate Constitutions. The Provisional Constitution created a unicameral government. Uh, one of the things in it that's very interesting is that, uh, sl, the slave trade is not reopened. It is abolished. Um, in the permanent Confederate Constitution, it is still abolished. Um, the terms of office are different. The president is elected for 6 years and cannot be re-elected, save after another 6 years. I didn't say that right, but that's the general idea. Um, the Confederate Constitution made a provision, which nobody ever took advantage of that I can think of, that, that the heads of departments, say the head of the Treasury Department, could come and sit on the floor of Congress and answer questions, a sort of a semi-parliamentary idea. Um, there was some indication in the Constitution that that would be done, and apparently, the thought was that they would be brought in and actually asked questions. Uh, the term of office of the vice president was also 6 years. Um, what else is different?

Other Speaker: When you say the slave trade was abolished, do you mean the importation of slaves or are you saying that you couldn't trade slaves within the Confederacy?

VANDIVER: Oh, you could trade slaves within the Confederacy, but it's the old idea of abolishing it outside, you know. There's no international slave trade, in other words. They probably would've traded slaves with Delaware and Maryland, but I don't know.

Other Speaker: **** let's stop for lunch ****.

VANDIVER: Okay.
Other Speaker: Okay, ****. Okay.

Speaker 1: ****.

PART 3

Other Speaker: ****.

Vandiver: “Jeff Davis rides a big white horse. Abe Lincoln rides a mule. Jeff Davis is a gentleman. Abe Lincoln is a fool.” That was recited in many southern classrooms during the war.

Other Speaker: ****.

Vandiver: And all, the textbooks all changed. The arithmetic questions shifted. “You have ten Yankees fighting five Confederates, how many Yankees die?” That kind of question. ***** You must have seen a lot of stamps, Jeff Davis on stamps ****.

Other Speaker: We have, we have a book that's all on ****.

Other Speaker: Cooper had ****.

Other Speaker: Yeah.

Other Speaker: Collection. **** focus ****.

Vandiver: That red light looks like you're aiming at me. It's not right here. [pointing to forehead]
Other Speaker: No, no, no. It's safe. Yeah. Nothing, nothing, uh, ****. Okay. ****.

Vandiver: Uh huh.

Other Speaker: Uh, please discuss with us Jefferson Davis's days at **** in Mexico ****.

Vandiver: His what?

Other Speaker: His days **** Buena Vista campaign. Jeff Davis in Mexico.

Vandiver: Well, I'm tryin' to think. Excuse me. Well, excuse me. He was, I think he was lucky to be assigned to Taylor's army, Richard [Zachary] Taylor's army.

Other Speaker: Exactly.

Vandiver: Dicks Taylor's. Excuse me. Zachary Taylor's army. You know that's, what happened to poor Taylor was most, most of his men were finally taken away and given to Winfield Scott, but while Davis was with him, he did most of the campaigning, Taylor's army did. And, uh, the Mississippi Rifles got involved in the Battle of Buena Vista, where, uh, Davis, uh, created this V formation into which the enemy managed to be sucked and then he closed the flanks on him and, uh, that was regarded as a great tactic at the time. Of course, uh, it was used at the Battle of Marathon [laughs] and probably Davis learned about it at West Point. But it worked very well. And he got a fine reputation for the, the battle there, which he certainly had much to do with winning, and then later he got a ceremonial sword from the state of Mississippi, and I, I think it gave him a conviction of his own military, uh, prowess, which lasted a considerable length of time. I don't think he ever got over it. I think he still thought that he was, could have been, a good general. Who knows? He might have been.

Other Speaker: Give us a sense of what you think about Mr. Davis's tenure as secretary of war of the United States.
Vandiver: Well, I'm a great admirer of his tenure as secretary of war. It seems to me that he was peculiarly qualified for the job because of his military background and going to West Point and so forth. And also, he had a sense of what needed to be done to modernize the army and to make the army operationally effective. He wanted to upgrade the artillery and it was very hard to get money, ah, for the army in those days. 'Course, it is in any days but now. But ah, he managed to persuade the artillery, the, uh, Congress to give a couple new batteries of artillery and he, uh, also did something to re, to increase the import, not importance, but efficiency of the cavalry. He was interested in that. And, as you know, when you and I were talking earlier, about his experiments with camels. He brought camels into the American, Great American Desert, the West, and this was regarded as a joke by lots of people, but it turned out to be, they were actually successful. Working in the dry area, they were good, uh, carriers of ammunition and everything else and when the war came, of course, they just vanished. They, they just wandered away, so his experiment, he was never able to validate, validate the experiment, but it really was a success and it wasn't the joke that a lot of people said it was. They made a movie about it one time. I can't remember, unfortunately, can't remember the name [Hawmps! 1976]. It was terrible; I can say that. But I think he was an excellent secretary of war. And while he was that, you know, he was in Franklin Pierce's cabinet. He and Pierce were great friends. And while he was there, and the secretary of the navy would occasionally leave town, and he would become acting secretary of the navy. So he had a lot of knowledge of all sides of the military.

Other Speaker: **** talk about, um, Mary Lincoln and Varina Davis.

Vandiver: Oh, my. Well, I must edit my language.

Other Speaker: Uh huh.

Vandiver: Um, I think both presidents had some cross to bear. But certainly in the, uh, field of wedded bliss, Davis came out way ahead. Lincoln, Mary Lincoln, was a, uh, well, I think she was a mental, let's say she was mentally impaired, and she was, uh, so emotional, and it seems to me, I, I keep thinking how horrible it must have been to go back to the White House after you've been off at your office, or wherever you were and en, encounter this harridan who was
apparently usually angry at him and, uh, he had, it couldn't have been fun being there with her. Now, he loved his kids and she seemed to get along with them all right, but she kind of neglected them some of the time, and as I was mentioning to you earlier, she had this thing about shopping, and on one notable occasion, she went out to buy clothes and brought home $4,000.00 worth of clothes. And one of you mentioned to me it would be worth about what, $3 or $4 million today? Now that, I left out when I was telling you this, the key point, which was that she got all this free because she would go into the store and say she was Mrs. Lincoln and could she have this and that, so she came home with all these clothes, free, and it was the most gross embarrassment to the president and he simply couldn't bear it. He had to pay it back. He had to make her take some of it back, which must have been one of the great days of their married experience, you know. It was just horrible. Now, Mrs. Davis was, uh, I think, an excellent hostess at the White House, at the Confederate White House. Now, certainly Lincoln, Mrs. Lincoln was not. She was occasionally good, but mostly not, and I get this, I get the feeling that Lincoln tried to keep her somewhat out of the center of things. Davis did not do that with, uh, with Varina. She was a very good, uh, mistress of the house, ran a good party, that sort of thing, and did her best to be effective. But she was sometimes fairly emotional herself. Of course, Davis was, also. But I think she was a fairly good foil for him. She had a good sense of humor and a wit, which he needed. He had it, too, but he could never, rarely ex, expose it to people. He had a little room in the White House that you know about--the snuggery. It was one room in the White House, down on the ground floor. It can't be any bigger than this--it may not be this big--and he had a desk and about three or four chairs in it, and there he would entertain, if he wanted to talk to somebody privately, take them in the snuggery. And that's where they had some of the best conversations. People were there, would say it in their diaries. He would let his hair down and be a warm and influential speaker and, uh, there are some good notes on Secretary Mallory's diary, how much he enjoyed going to The Snuggery, where the president could really let down his hair and sometimes, apparently, could be fairly voluble in, in the cuss language, too.

Other Speaker: Was Varina a confidante for Jefferson Davis? As it relates to his work?

Vandiver: That's a very good question. I don't know whether he had a confidant or not. I would bet that if anyone was, it was his secretary. What's his name? Harrison?
Other Speaker: No, [William] Preston Johnson.

Vandiver: Preston Johnston.

Other Speaker: Burton Harrison.

Vandiver: Yeah.

Other Speaker: There was Burton Harrison as well.

Vandiver: Um, they would, they probably would have been the closest. Um, I'm sure had Albert Sidney Johnson lived he would have been a confidant of the president. I remember something that Albert Speer said about Hitler, which will amuse you. Someone asked him if Hitler had any friends, and he said, “Well, if Hitler had any friends, I would have been one of them but he didn't regard me as one.” Davis, I don't know that Davis had a confidant save Varina, perhaps.

Other Speaker: Now, um, Jefferson Davis and Varina lost a child during the Civil War.

Vandiver: So did Lincoln.

Other Speaker: Right. Talk to us about them both losing a child, how that impacted them, um, their work, how it affected their, their office, if you can ****.

Vandiver: Well, it, uh, you know it impacted Davis heavily, personally. Uh, it, uh, I think it nearly unhinged him for a, a little time. Uh, you call it the, the son fell off a balcony and died, and Davis could not believe it. It was hard for him to let go. That was also true of Lincoln. Uh, he couldn't seem to leave the, the casket for a long time.

Other Speaker: How did Lincoln’s child die?
Vandiver: I'm trying to remember, and I can't remember at the moment. I do know the one thing, do you remember when –

Other Speaker: **** fever, I think it was. Fever.

Vandiver: Was it? Fever?

Other Speaker: Yeah, I think it was.

Vandiver: I bet it was.

Other Speaker: Fever.

Vandiver: Yes. Fever.

Other Speaker: One of those ****.

Vandiver: Uh, I think it, that really unhinged Mary Lincoln and, uh, that must have been a double whammy for Lincoln because of her, you know, to disillusion, quite literally, disillusion, and his own grief, um, both of them overcame it and continued with their official duties. Um, there was a story for awhile, which is apocryphal, but I, I can see the, why it was circulated; that, uh, Davis was in a meeting with Lee and a few others. Obviously, high strategy. And he was summoned from the room and was gone some time and returned and continued the discussion. And the story is that he went out and discovered his son was dead, but he came back and continued because of his devotion to duty. That's not true, but it's like him. You know what I mean? He could have done that.

Other Speaker: ****.
Vandiver: Think about it. They were both casualties themselves. Lincoln, of course, dies and makes the casualty poignant and heartbreaking. Davis survived as a prisoner, but was at, for some time a broken man and yet, we were talking earlier about could the North have handled his prison time better, because by putting him in the casemate prison [Fort Monroe, Va.] and sometimes in chains with light constantly on and not very nice guards most of the time, they made a martyr out of him. And while, whereas he goes into prison somewhat in very bad odor with the Confederate people, many, you know, it's easy to blame the president for losing. You have to blame somebody. You can't blame the, the heroes in gray. You can't blame all the generals, but you can blame the president. So he, he inherited, in a sense, all the, the sins of the Confederacy. And bore them in the prison. And, uh, if you want to be, give your religious bent to it, it's almost as though that was his cross and he bore everything for the Confederate people. And when he came out, he was a hero. And, remember, it was a surprise to him, when he took that trip to Richmond, up the river, he couldn't understand why all these people were standing on the riverside cheering him--the last thing he anticipated. He wasn't even sure if people would speak to him, you know. Could the Yanks, uh, handled it better? I think so. I, I think if they had, if they had figured on the idea of making him a martyr, they wouldn't have done it. They, that's the last thing they needed. Um, one of the best solutions, I guess, would have been just to ship him off somewhere--Sumatra or some great distant place and have him forgotten. But this way, he had a, he had an influence on the future. We were talking a little while ago about what his legacy is and I think one of his legacies is, um, forbearance, or persistence under great adversity. Rarely has an American, uh, official borne the adversity that he did. Uh, and yet he, uh, I don't recall ever having heard that he complained. I don't know. He probably did personally to people, but certainly there were no great public utterances of complaint by him. Nor would I expect any from him. Um, he has, he also bequeaths the legacy of returning to, uh, affection for the United States. He came back, remember, late in his life, and began, one of his last speeches is to the youths of the South to get behind the Union and make it strong again, that kind of thing. So he, he retained a kind of old patriotism, which he bore through all these differences in his career. But I think it's as a symbol, excuse me, as a symbol of strength in adversity, he, he lives, leaves a considerable legacy, also of honesty, under terrific pressure and, uh, of duty, a, a sense of duty. Lee once said that duty is the, uh, sublimest word in the English language [to Custis Lee, 1852], and I think Davis would have been the first to say that was true.
Other Speaker: So, if you could expand, what does someone living today learn from the life of Jefferson Davis?

Vandiver: Don't lose.

Other Speaker: What else?

Vandiver: If you're going to lose, lose it with, lose with valor and with honor. And bear yourself as strongly and as, uh, openly as possible. And, whatever you do, do your best job.

Other Speaker: There have been movements ever since Mr. Davis's death, to expunge him from memory as it relates to public monuments, schools, bridges named after him. You know, even in the 21st century. What do you make of those movements?

Vandiver: Well, I've always wondered about that. I, uh, I can't see why, unless it's a, it's a matter of blind hatred or of resentment of his cause, which it well may be. Uh, I can't see it as a personal attack on Davis. I see it as an attack on him as a symbol of the Confederacy. Uh, and I think it's also a mistaken idea of what the Confederacy was all about. There's this whole new flap over the flag, getting rid of the battle flag, because it's a symbol of racism, which it has become, but it wasn't in the time of its flourishing. So it's been made to be something that it isn't and I think that's true of Davis. He's been made as a, into a kind of symbol of treason, which he was not. But, remember, the, uh, I think one of the things the North probably did right, and unconsciously so--I may be unfair to them there--but there's something they did right. That is, to leave the Confederacy its history. Now, to, to try to obliterate it at the time, think what that would have been. I think guerrilla war would have broken out then. The Confederates weren't ready to snap like twigs, but by letting them keep their history, they have something to hang onto. I remember talking once to a Chinese official about Taiwan. This was a mainland official, and I said, what, what, if you got Taiwan, how would you handle it? And he said, well, I hope we'd handle it like the North handled the, the South at the end of the war. Uh, what do you mean? He said, they let the South keep its history and that, uh, allowed the South to come back
with honor, and he said we'd try to do that with Taiwan. That's the first time I ever thought of that, but it's a very good point.

Other Speaker: Do you think Jefferson Davis was a man of principle?

Vandiver: Oh, yes, yes. I think principle was one of the main goals, uh, guidances of his life. Uh, he was a, a man of honor, of, of strict duty and of principle. Always. You could tell that from his public speeches in Congress. And wherever he was called upon to make a statement about public affairs, he was always sticking to matters of principle.

Other Speaker: Let's back up, if we can. ****.

Vandiver: Sure.

Other Speaker: Um, what is a sense of how Jefferson Davis interacted with governors, Confederate governors, during the Civil War?

Vandiver: Frequently. Uh, that's a very good question because that was one of his, one of his crosses to bear was his, the, some of the Confederate governors. Uh, the, the two obvious ones that everybody talks about are Zeb Vance of North Carolina and Joe Brown of Georgia, both of whom engaged in long correspondence with the president about how they hated his dictatorship and how he is intruding on the state rights of their respective states. Uh, to which he always replied with a certain acerbity and it entrenched the positions of both sides. But with many of the governors, he got along very well. Uh, the governor of Florida, John Milton, uh, he got along extremely well with the president. You have to remember one interesting thing about Florida. It had a small population, but percentage-wise, of its population, it sent more people to the Confederate army than any southern state, and so loyal was Governor Morton [Milton] that when the war was over, he went into a, the senate chamber of the state, wrapped himself in the flag of the Fifth Florida and blew out his brains. He was that loyal, and many governors were. Isham Harris, um, Mississippi [Tennessee]; um, maybe, I may have confused him with the governor of Tennessee. Uh, the governor of Tennessee at the end of the war left and took all the
state money with him, what little was left of the state gold, and everybody accused him of leaving and stealing everything. He was in England for 10 years, came back, and put every single dime back in the state treasury. Davis got along very well with the governors of Texas, despite the fact that there was a kind of sputtering fight in Texas about conscription. People in Texas did not want to accept conscription. No one ever wants to accept conscription. But there was a fight with that, but he got along pretty well with those governors. Uh, one of them became his aide in Richmond after he got out as governor [Francis R. Lubbock]. Um, he got along with the governors of Virginia fairly well. Uh, the first governor of Virginia when the war started was Governor John Letcher, who was a, became a great personal friend of the president. And later in the war, Virginia elected a former governor, I think he was, with a marvelous name; Extra Billy Smith [William Smith, 1797-1887]. Now, he was Extra Billy because everything he did, he did something a little extra [nickname stemmed from his talent at expanding mail routes in the 1820s-1830s] and he, uh, as governor, he did a lot extra. And he was, he'd been a general during the war for awhile. He reminds me of Lincoln. You know, Lincoln had no training but he was in the militia and he didn't know the proper orders to give and Extra Billy didn't either. But, uh, each one of them had a, uh, a company come up to a rail fence and they didn't know what order to give, so they just said “fall out.” They fell out and “crawl over the fence and fall back in.” But they, he had, he had a fairly, he had good relations with the governors of Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, first part of the war when he was in good touch with them. Um, South Carolina, yes--Francis Pickens--got along well with. Uh, but it was, was Joe Brown and Zeb Vance that were the, uh, his bête noir. I remember one time he asked Churchill, someone asked Churchill what was the greatest cross you had to bear in the war and he said the Cross of Lorraine. Well, Davis’s cross was Vance and Joe Brown. I, I've always wondered what would have happened if Joe Brown had been president of the Confederate States. He was so intolerant of anybody who would, in opposition, that he might have won the war by sheer, eliminating his opponents. But he was a, no friend of the, to the Confederate States. He certainly was to Georgia.

Other Speaker: Uh, do you think Mr. Davis could have done something differently in interacting with these two to his, uh, benefit, or to the Confederacy's benefit?
Vandiver: That's a tough question. Um, North Carolina probably no, because North Carolina had a large dissident population, you know, particularly in the mountain country of western North Carolina, and, uh, Zeb Vance's problems were serious. I mean, to hold the state together he had serious problems, and I don't think Vance was as, uh, as devoted an opponent as he's been made out to be. I think he was trying to walk a very narrow line, be, between losing the state or holding it together. Uh, Joe Brown didn't have that problem, but his problem was he was part of a junta that was essentially disloyal itself. By the, by the time, by the middle of the war, Howell Cobb, who had been very loyal at the beginning, uh, Robert Barnwell Rhett, uh, and, um, not Robert Barnwell Rhett. Let's see. Uh, Cobb, Brown, and, uh, Robert Toombs had formed a sort of private club of opposition and they're, they're big names in Georgia, and if they're in opposition, you have problems in the state. Now, I don't know how Davis could have diffused that, because none of them, all of them suffered from great envy of Davis. That was the trouble. And they weren't gonna get over that unless he had gone down and flattered them out of their minds, which is not his way of doing business.

Other Speaker: What about Alexander Stephens?

Vandiver: Alex Stephens is one of that mob. 'Course, as vice president he, uh, was almost never in Richmond. He always spent most of his time back in, in, uh, Georgia, and I can't imagine why he remained vice president, or why anybody let him. He should have resigned or been impeached the way he acted as, in direct opposition to Davis and his administration. He should have been impeached.

Other Speaker: Um, Mr. Davis obtained pretty, uh, remarkable support from the North after the war. He had some quite illustrious folks standing by his side, uh, Mr. Vanderbilt, uh, Mr. Greeley, etc.

Vandiver: Who would have been his attorneys if they brought him to trial, right?

Other Speaker: Yes. I mean, how was he able to do that?
Vandiver: Well, I think a lot of these people had known him before the war and, to some extent, uh, and I think they feared the, the rising power of the radicals, what they might do if they ended up running the whole country, um, also, they, uh, I think were worried that, uh, a serious trial of Davis for, for secession, might have resulted in a court decision which would have been damaging as hell. It might have held that secession had been constitutional. Then what would they have done? So a lot of the, the help he got was from worry about what might happen and some from personal regard, also. And you know, they, there's an old American trait that you know very well, for, about the underdog. Here was the classic underdog. And it, it's sort of natural to come to try to help, you know.

Other Speaker: At the end of his life, Mr. Davis's life, he, uh, re, became reacquainted with a woman named Sarah Dorsey, uh, and lived at Beauvoir, Ms. Dorsey's residence. Uh, could you talk to us about that relationship and address any rumors that there may have been an illicit affair between those two individuals?

Vandiver: I really don't have any solid information. I, I know what you have said, about the rumors of their possible relationship. I don't know, really, about that one. I just know she did give him Beauvoir, which irritated a lot of people, and I can't remember, if I ever knew, uh, how Varina took that.

Other Speaker: Do you think it would have been in Mr. Davis's character to engage relations with Sarah Dorsey?

Vandiver: No. I don't think it would have been in his character. It would have been unprincipled.

Other Speaker: Uh, describe for us the concept of the Lost Cause.

Vandiver: Hmm. The Confederacy loses, uh, utterly, and it is a hollow shell that cracked. There have been thousands of lives lost in the defense of this cause. I don't know if you read the poem by Father Ryan about “furl that banner” [first line of “The Conquered Banner,” 1865]. If
you haven't read it, read it. Um, all these people died and all these sons are buried. All this glory is gone, and there is no future. How do you, how do you as a whole nation, ex-nation, stand the loss of so much for so little purpose? Uh, the, the tragedy of losing is, is baneful enough, but the tragedy of having nothing for it is truly unbearable. What emerges is, uh, the sense that these people lost, but they lost gallantly. They lost, but they lost with honor. And that was the beginning, I think, of the idea of the lost cause. It was defeated but it was not dishonored and those who supported and fought for it deserve to be remembered, and remembered lovingly. So, the lost cause becomes a myth of, uh, a whole sort of Camelot view of what the Confederacy was and would have become had it won. And I think the myth of the lost cause was the one thing that saved the sanity, the collective sanity of the South. And the myth of the lost cause had much behind it. It wasn't all myth.

Other Speaker: If Abraham Lincoln had survived the end of the war, how do you think he would have dealt with the capture of Jefferson Davis?

Vandiver: I've always wondered whether they would have met. I wondered if he would have called him in to say hello to him. They would have had interesting reminiscences, wouldn't they, together? Uh, I don't think Lincoln would have, uh, called him in. I think he would have done his best to avoid making him a martyr. He would have done his best to avoid being in the least cruel to him and would, I think, have also done his best to see that he went somewhere else, like England. I, I don't think there would have been any, what's the word I'm looking for, uh, animosity in Lincoln.

Other Speaker: Right. The war, at the end of the war, even Lee said, um, he became, he moved from being a citizen of Virginia to now being a citizen of the United States and there's been quotes of people saying, uh, it turned the United States into a “we” instead of a collection of, of singulars.

Another Speaker: ****
Other Speaker: Okay. Today, or since then, do you see the product of the Civil War, what Lincoln hoped, which is a union; the states becoming Union or is there still significant sectional divisions between the different parts of this country. How do you respond to that?

Vandiver: I wish I could see it in those terms. I think there's a significant division in this country, but it's not sectional. It, it's ethnic division, and it's economic division. Um, we, we're more now a class society than we were, or you could say, goodness, there were terribly poor people in the war, certainly. But we are people now riven by different kinds of, of differences, um, and I'm not sure I like the kinds of differences I see. I see the Union as less Union than it was, say 30 or 40 years ago. And I'm a little worried that, uh, we may be coming to another kind of dissolution. Sorry to have that view, but it worries me.

Other Speaker: And I guess the last question as a follow-up of that is, uh, because of the way the, the war turned out, and because there was never a secession put on trial, for that the right for a state to secede, is it conceivable that at any point in time in this, the future of the United States, that a state could remove itself from the Union?

Vandiver: Well, a lot of people argue that that was decided by the war itself. And that, uh, there is, there would be no secession, secession, but you know, you go back and look at the, uh, situation in the '50s when Brown v., uh, The United States [Brown v. Board of Education, 1954] hit the courts, there was a lot of talk about interposition. Remember that phrase? The interposition of the state between their people and the United States, the federal government. So, this is a kind of return to nullification, it seems to me. Now, this was not allowed to prevail, but a lot of people talked about it--uh, interposition, and even secession. Though, I don't think the idea is dead. I don't know that anyone, any state, would try it, uh, as long as there's a very strong support for the Union, but what, I think if the strong support for the Union were to erode, then you would, you probably would see, I don't know, but you'd probably would see the reemergence of state, uh, loyalties and allegiances.

Other Speaker: One last question. **** let me ask ****. Um, towards the end of his life, Davis made, I believe that it was either a public statement or he said in one of his speeches, that
if he had to do it again, he would do it all again, the same way. He would fight the war. He would fight everything. What, what does that leave us, in light of all of the death, all the destruction, everything that ravaged the South? What does that leave us in terms of Davis post-war, what does that tell us about the man, that he would fight that same fight over again? He would do everything the way he did.

Vandiver: Well, I don't think he meant that. I think what he meant was that he would support secession again. He would be, he would completely support the idea of secession. He never felt that it was treason. He never felt he was guilty of treason, because this was a constitutional right, he thought. Uh, whether he would have done it all exactly the same, he may have said that, but I don't believe he meant it. Uh, he, he was no stupid fool. He, he could learn from his own mistakes. He knew a lot what he had done. Um, he said at one time--someone was criticizing him--probably Edward, uh, Pol, Pollard, the editor that wrote those early histories of the Confederacy that claimed he'd been the, Davis had been the engineer of defeat. He said that you were guilty of many mistakes. And Davis said, no one knows more than I the extent of my mistakes.

Other Speaker: ****. Um, are we still fighting the Civil War today?

Vandiver: Well, I, I've got a, I've got the basis of a novel I'll give you. You can pick up on it. There's a crisis in the country. Um, there's a lot of agitation in the streets, sort of like post-Vietnam, or late Vietnam crisis. And, uh, we're engaged in a foreign conflict. Most of our troops are abroad. The only armed people are the Civil War reenactors. So, suddenly, they become the leaders of the country. Now, whether they would be Union or Confederate, is up to later decision. But I, I don't see us fighting the war again. I see us reenacting it, which I think is a fascinating, uh, development. I, I can't imagine the thousands of people that really get out there and wear the original uniforms, you know, the real stuff, men and women. I mean, I went to one reenactment of Sharpsburg years ago, Antietam, and everything was going beautifully. They had the right artillery. They had everything, you know, and then somebody gets hurt, a, a cannon explodes and somebody's badly hurt. So, in the middle of this great reenactment an ambulance comes tearing across the field. And I, I thought, God, if they'd only had one at Antietam.
Other Speaker: What do you make of the commitment that southerners and, to a larger sense, reenactors, have to the South, to the Civil War?

Vandiver: Well, I, you were asking me earlier why is the war so popular? I can't answer that except that it seems to have a, a kind of deathlessness to it. I, I suppose it's the anguish and the agony and the anger of the war. You know, there are a lot of Civil Wars, but there's never really been one this big, seems to me. Maybe the Wars of the Roses. But certainly, this was the biggest of modern times, and it, it has, from that standpoint, uh, a sort of shock appeal and you can't get over the fact that, um, the tragedy of bravery. What was it that, uh, oh, Wilford Owen, you know, the World War I poet, talked about the “pity of war.” Well, I think the pity of war has never been more greatly illustrated than in the Civil War. And people--I think this is an interesting possibility--people are still drawn to sacrifice for honor and there was sacrifice for honor on both sides and people are drawn also to the, uh, to the extent and the devotion of both sides and the things they invented to, to carry on the war. So, it's a, it's a kind of, um, immersion in history rather than just writing about it. It's experiencing the Civil War.

Other Speaker: What do you think Jefferson Davis would think about the fact that the U.S. Congress chose to restore his citizenship in the late '70s?

Vandiver: I think he'd be grossly insulted.

Other Speaker: Explain that for us, please.

Vandiver: I think he would have thought it was not necessary to reinstall it. He is, he had taken his oath to the Confederate States and that's where it was. And to restore him to Union citizenship, he probably would not have accepted had he been alive and been offered it.

Other Speaker: Why do you think the Congress back then chose to do it?

Vandiver: Don't know.
Other Speaker: Any final thoughts?

Vandiver: Pardon me?


Vandiver: Uh, my, my final thought would be that, uh, if you wanted a model person of honor, devotion to duty, courage, and courtesy, you have it in Jefferson Davis.