Richard Alan Baker: My name is Richard Alan Baker. You want the whole name spelled?

Speaker 1: Oh, no, just, just the, uh –

Richard Alan Baker: B-A-K-E-R. Uh, I am a historian. I'm employed as the historian of the United States Senate.

Speaker 1: Thank you.

Richard Alan Baker: Sure.

Speaker 1: How would you describe the life of a United States senator at the time Davis entered the Senate in, in 1847?

Richard Alan Baker: Jefferson Davis entered the Senate on December 6, 1847, and if I had to pick a date, uh, throughout the whole two century plus history of the Senate to be a senator, that would be at the very top of my list. It was a terrific time, uh, to come in and sort of see the role of the Senate and to use the Senate as a sounding box, as a platform. Uh, the Senate had really come into its own by the late 1840s, uh, and you could tell that by people who were members of the Senate. Uh, there was Daniel Webster of Massachusetts, John C. Calhoun of South Carolina, Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri, uh, Sam Houston of Texas and others, but those are some of the familiar names. Uh, it was a, um, a place where you could really speak up and make a
difference, but it was also a body filled with individuals and individualists, uh, and they didn't
work well together. I mean, they talk about having the Whig party and the Democratic party at
the time, and that sort of suggests a, uh, kind of a coherent unit of, of people with common
policies, and they were all over the lot. Uh, you know, the main thing was that a senator could
stand up in that wonderfully intimate small Senate chamber, the one that's called the old Senate
chamber today, uh, and it was, it was, if anything, it was a theater. Uh, the acoustical value, the
effects were, were terrific. Uh, it was the only show in town for, for people visiting Washington.
Uh, come up and, you know, sit in that gallery you might end up in the gallery all day long 'cause
it was kind of a tiny gallery and, and whatnot, but what you'd see on that floor was, was, was
memorable. Members of the House of Representatives who were, you know, on the other side of
the Capitol in what was a very noisy, loud, clangorous room, uh, would often come to watch the
great debates in the Senate, uh, of the late 1840s and the early 1850s, and that's where it was. I
mean, in Jefferson Davis's time, uh, we have the great, the so-called great triumvirate of Daniel
Webster, John C. Calhoun, and then the year after he came or 2 years after he came, uh, Henry
Clay of Kentucky, and uh, and a lot of others who were almost equally brilliant. So it was, it was
a, a great place to be, it was a wonderful place to be a legislator, and uh, it gave him an
opportunity to, to use his talents, and of course he arrived as a famous war hero in the Battle of
Buena Vista, and uh, and certainly cemented his fame. And uh, so people paid attention when
Jefferson Davis entered, and of course he was originally appointed to fill a vacancy because his
predecessor had died in office, and so the governor appointed him. Then his big concern was
being elected, uh, to a full term, uh, or to the balance of that term by the state legislature. In
those days senators were, were chosen by the two houses of their state legislatures. And from
Mississippi that posed somewhat of a problem because the tradition, not only in Mississippi but
in other states, was to kinda divide the state up geographically. There was no provision in the
Constitution to do that, um, senators represented entire states. But there was a concern that since
the other senator was from the southern part of the state that maybe they would want somebody
from the northern part of the state, and Davis was also a southerner and from, within the
perspective of Mississippi. But he did, he did manage to gain, uh, election to the balance of that
term, and uh, and that, that began his Senate career.

Other Speaker: Pause one second?
Speaker 1: Okay. What did you, you must have –

Other Speaker: Turned Channel 2 a little.

Speaker 1: ****. You just alluded to Davis's military background. Uh, Davis was in the military, then he became a reclusive autodidact, not formally trained in the law.

Richard Alan Baker: Mm hmm.

Speaker 1: Arguably, it was his success in the Mexican War that catapulted him in the political arena. Would you compare and contrast how someone in Davis's era fared if they were from the military or the law, how they fared as a senator?

Richard Alan Baker: The, uh, the Senate of Davis's time, the late 1840s and also the late 1850s, was filled with individuals from a variety of, of backgrounds. Um, throughout the whole history of this Senate, maybe 38 to 42 percent of the members have been lawyers. In the earlier days the percentage was a bit higher, but not, not by that much. It wasn't as if it was a body of all lawyers, these were people from, from a variety of, of fields. And certainly, um, from the senators who came in the late 1840s/early 1850s all had military experience, or not all, but many of them had military experience with the Mexican War, just as after the Civil War for the rest of the, the, uh, 19th century, many of the senators, uh, were army generals.

Speaker 1: I'm gonna go back to the first question.

Richard Alan Baker: Mm hmm.

Speaker 1: How did Jefferson Davis respond to the environment, to his, his new environment as a senator?
Richard Alan Baker: Well, Jefferson Davis, um, took his role very seriously. He came, you know, at that time there was a question: when you're a United States senator, what does that mean? Are you, does that mean that you have license to sort of decide what's good for the people of your state and vote according to your own personal views, or, since you were elected by the state legislature, are you sort of the state ambassador, uh, to the U.S. Congress? And if you are the ambassador, then you need instructions. And uh, so Davis took that very, very seriously, very literally, uh, and often would, would write back to the legislature and say how do you want me to vote on this particular matter, whereas his colleague, uh, Henry Foote, uh, with whom he came to blows on more than one occasion, literally blows, not just verbal blows, uh, said hey, I'm here to vote, uh, my own conscious, conscience, and that's what I'm gonna do. And of course it's a classic, uh, decision that confronts any senator, any, any legislator, uh, how much are you bound by the specific wishes of those who put you there to begin with? Um, Davis, um, kinda looked around the Senate and took in its culture pretty quickly. For instance, he paid a lot of attention to the, uh, people who were, were reporting the debates, the, the contract reporters who worked for local newspapers who came in and used a new form of shorthand, uh, that really fascinated Davis, and uh, he had a scientific bent, uh, and uh, this, this, this appealed to him very much. He found out that it was possible to, uh, get an appointment to the Smithsonian Institution as a member of the Board of Regents, and so he entered a, a very select circle of Washingtonians with scientific interests and, and, in some cases, training, and uh, they would, they would meet on a regular basis and talk about, uh, latest discoveries and, and issues of one kind or another. Um, Davis was also, in the environment of the Senate, very much interested in, um, proper decorum, and I think any, anybody who realizes, uh, what a chaotic situation that Senate floor was in the 1840s realizes that, that you really, somebody has to say hey, let's just call a halt here, we've got to get some order, we can't hear what we're saying, you have, um, various, uh, visitors being allowed to sit in members' desks. Uh, it was not at all uncommon for, for attractive women who were up in the gallery to be summoned down by senators, to have a place at their, at their desk to watch while the senator got up and manfully made a, a, a great speech. So you know, we go into the old Senate chamber today as nicely, pristinely restored, and you don't get a sense of kind of the
noise, the smells, the heat in the summer and the cold in the winter, um, but it was, it was Davis who, who took a special interest in proper behavior. He didn't even want members of the House of Representatives or, uh, the president allowed on the floor, let alone Supreme Court justices. There was a long list of people who were entitled to have access to the floor, and his feeling was this is a place for senators to be. And uh, uh, so he, he gook a great interest in that. I need to get a drink of water.

Speaker 1: Go ahead. [a place?] to pause. You mentioned the Smithsonian.

Richard Alan Baker: Mm hmm.

Speaker 1: Uh, could you expand on that a little bit and tell us, uh, the impact of his chairman. Is, was he a chair?

Richard Alan Baker: He was a regent.

Speaker 1: He was a regent.

Richard Alan Baker: He was a member of the Board of Regents. I don't know the, the, the specifics of what he did other than it built, it brought him into a scientific community in Washington. Uh, he became good friends with the secretary of the Smithsonian, Joseph Henry, um, at a later point, and this gets into the Meigs, the Montgomery Meigs connection. Maybe I'll hold off on that a bit. I, I, basically I don't have, I don't know a whole lot about his Smithsonian connections.

Speaker 1: Okay. Did you wanna talk about Meigs?

Richard Alan Baker: I mean, yes. Um, you know, it’s, I would argue that Jefferson Davis more than any other single person is responsible for the way the Capitol building looks today, and not only the outside with its, with its great cast iron dome and the statue of freedom on top of it and the, the big bronze doors. He was responsible for the design of that statue and for the design of
those doors. But from my point of view, even more important, uh, once you go into the building, uh, you start from the center and, and you see a fairly severe building and not a lot of color, uh, in the older portions, but once you move into the, what we still call the new portions of the Capitol, the part, the parts that were open in the late 1850s, you see rich, gold leaf, you see, uh, bright colors, uh, in, uh, in frescoed works of art. That was all Jefferson Davis's doing, not when he was a member of the Senate, uh, so much but when he became secretary of war during the administration of Franklin Pierce. Uh, he, he had a strong commitment to making the building beautiful, making it attractive, and, and making it sort of a national, national gallery of art in a way, and he was instrumental in changing the supervision. Well, let me back up and say that, that one of the benefits of the Compromise of 1850 was that members of Congress said, you know, we think the union is going to survive here in 1850. Well, if it's gonna survive, that means we need a bigger Capitol building, uh, because these new states, five new states entered the union between 1845 and 1850. That meant ten new senators and a lot more House members, our old chambers are just too small, and so we need to plan for a larger building, and uh, and so they did. The work began, uh, in 1851 under the jurisdiction of the Department of the Interior, and there were all kinds of problems with cost accounting, with, uh, lost funds, um, very great frustration. And so when Jefferson Davis became secretary of war, he managed to have the supervision transferred from the Interior Department, uh, to the War Department, which he was in charge of. And then he went out and hired a, uh, a young captain, uh, in the Quartermaster Corps named Montgomery Cunningham Meigs, and Montgomery Meigs became the superintendent of the construction project from 1853 on up through, uh, the late 1850s. And it was the, it was the decisions that Meigs made with a lot of heavy lifting on the part of Jefferson Davis, uh, that we can see in the Capitol today, we can see the results of those decisions. That in itself is a great story about, uh, partisan fighting and intrigue, the House versus the Senate, the, the Whigs versus the Democrats and then the Republicans as well in that period. And Davis was sort of the guiding hand that, uh, that kept an order, a level of sanity through that process, so I, I conclude that by saying that the way the Capitol looks today, uh, is, is remarkably, uh, attributable to the foresight of Jefferson Davis.
Speaker 1: Marvelous. You have hit on so many questions. Um, yes, I know, I, that was my next one. Would you go into a little more detail. Would you describe the means by which a man of Davis's era – oh, oops, that's not it.

Richard Alan Baker: Mm hmm.

Speaker 1: That's it. What did, uh – no, I think I already asked that. What did Jefferson Davis have to do? What did it take, uh, for Davis to accomplish his goals, and were those means any different than they are today? I guess it's political insight and –

Richard Alan Baker: Mm hmm. Mm hmm.

Speaker 1: – and um, I guess what I'm getting at is, um, **** we figured out this morning. Um, today many issues are divided along party lines.

Richard Alan Baker: Mm hmm. Mm hmm.

Speaker 1: When Davis was a senator, how were the major issues divided among party, section, or another means, and how did Davis align himself by party, section, state?

Other Speaker: When you say section we mean North.

Speaker 1: North or South.

Richard Alan Baker: Right, right.

Speaker 1: Sorry about that, yeah.

Richard Alan Baker: Um, when, when Jefferson Davis was a senator, uh, the issues were principally, uh, aligned according to section, uh, the South versus the North. Uh, that, that had, had sharpened during the 1830s and into the 1840s, where the politicians really began to think of
themselves as representatives of the North, the South or the West, which of course is why, uh, Henry Clay of the, of the West, uh, Daniel Webster of the North, John C. Calhoun of the South, all became sort of pivotal figures in shaping the debates and particularly the Compromise of 1850. And it was, it was Daniel Webster who in his famous 7th of March, 1850 address, um, when Jefferson Davis was, was very much a senator, uh, said I wish to speak today, uh, not as a Massachusetts man, uh, but as a, a senator of the United States. Now, that's not the exact quote but basically Webster, um, abandoned a number of the issues, uh, that his particular region, um, felt strongly for, and since he was willing, uh, to support a, uh, a toughened fugitive slave law. Well, this is outrageous, uh, for the New England abolitionists and yet, uh, Daniel Webster rose above, uh, those issues because this is what's good for the country. This was a, a challenge that Jefferson Davis had to face, and uh, uh, the pressures were enormous and, and what he did basically is, is to become a great spokesman for the South, for his region, and, and when people looked to Davis they realized they were dealing with somebody who within the context of his region was a moderate. Uh, he was not a fire-eater and he was not, uh, as, as many of his colleagues were, and so if you want to begin the seeds of compromise you've got to talk to people who first of all agree that the Union should continue, and right up until the very end that was where Davis was headed. Uh, so it's, and even today in the Senate members will come in and they will look around for, um, people that they admire or people who they think have done their homework. You know, how do you, how do you vote every day, day after day, on complex issues? You couldn't possibly have the time or the staff to get up to, to speed on these issues. And so you, you decide who among your colleagues are the people you respect, uh, for their judgment, for their homework, their expertise, and then you, you tend to follow along with them. Or if you're trying to put together a coalition to pass a particular piece of legislation, um, you look to those people you think will go along with you, even though they might not otherwise want to do that because they know that sometime in the future you'll, you'll try to do the same. So there's a lot of horse trading, and to look at it in terms of strict sectionalism or strict party divisions, uh, misses the point about the, uh, about the independence of senators then and now and their willingness to, uh, to, to make compromises and, and to strike a, strike deals, uh, that maybe to the public seem like it's a little shady, but it's, it's the, it's the nature of the institution since the very beginning. And without that willingness to change and, and to, uh, to compromise, nothing would get done.
Other Speaker: I think we do need a little more –

Speaker 1: Which one? **** he's –

Other Speaker: – we need a little more clarity.

Speaker 1: You answered many of our questions.

Other Speaker: I think, and then I'll ask you the question you can answer when ****.

Speaker 1: Okay.

Other Speaker: Um –

Richard Alan Baker: Right. No, that's, uh huh.

Speaker 1: ****.

Richard Alan Baker: Uh huh. You know, from the very beginning, uh, of the Senate's history, members were elected by state legislatures, and that was part of a deal at the constitutional convention, to make the states believe that they had, uh, a role in the operation of the Senate, they got to choose the senators. The problem was that in most states you had a state house and a state senate and sometimes the house and the senate would not agree, and as a consequence of that indecision they would often not elect a senator. And so it took many years before that system changed, and it was not until 1913 with the passage of the 17th Amendment to the Constitution that senators for the first time became elected directly by the people. Uh, the system of state legislative election had begun to break down really in the 1820s, and I'm sure that Davis felt the, the frustration of this system because he had to appeal not, appeal not only to the Mississippi state senate, but also to the house of representatives. That meant a lot of lobbying back home, and the writers of the Constitution would say well, that's great, that would allow him
to get to learn the sentiments and the views of, of the people back home. But it, uh, it, it got to
be very, very time consuming and very frustrating. I hope that, that gets it.

Other Speaker: Yeah.

Speaker 1: It did.

Richard Alan Baker: Yeah, all right.

Speaker 1: Yeah, thank you.

Other Speaker: Hold on one second. So then to follow up –

Richard Alan Baker: Individual senators had different notions of whom they represented. It
depended a lot on what, on what state they came from, um, but generally, uh, we can say that
they, they had a sense that they represented the people of that state as mediated through the, uh,
the state legislature. But it was the people who they had to satisfy, and if the people didn't like
the views of a senator they'd make their, their views known to their state legislators, and then
come next election time, uh, it was the popular opinion that really had a great deal to do with
whether that senator was reelected or not.

Other Speaker: And in terms of Davis, what his stance? In your research how have you
found him, how did he feel on that notion, if –

Richard Alan Baker: I don't know. I don't know.

Speaker 1: He resigned in 1851 and returned for a second term in 1857.

Richard Alan Baker: Mm hmm.

Speaker 1: How had the Senate changed upon his return?
Richard Alan Baker: Just, he resigned in 1851, became secretary of war from 1853 to 1857 and then returned to the Senate, so he was still very much a part of the Washington scene, uh, but the nation, politics in Washington, had changed enormously. Uh, when he came into the Senate the first time, uh, he knew that, as he put it, we're opening Pandora's Box, uh, on the Mexican War issues, are we gonna allow slavery in the territories, what's gonna be the nature of all that? Um, the Compromise of 1850 which he was here to help engineer, uh, settled that for a time. Then when he was gone, when he was secretary of war, the Kansas-Nebraska Act was passed in 1854, and this basically threw out the Missouri Compromise of 1820, it threw out some of the agreements of the Compromise of 1850. And it said, in the future it's not, we're not gonna just draw this line across the country and if you're north of the line it's free territory and if you're south of the line it's slave territory, we're gonna let each, each state, each territory, make up its own mind. And that all of a sudden just was like a huge shadow over the institution. Um, in 1856 there was a senator from Massachusetts, Charles Sumner, a leading abolitionist, who stood up in the chamber, made a very bombastic speech by anybody's standard, uh, attacking a, a senator from South Carolina who didn't happen to be present that day. Several days later, a relative of that senator from South Carolina came in with a cane, waited 'til the Senate was out of session, and beat the living daylights out of Charles Sumner. This is on May 22, 1856. Stop and think, what does that mean about the legislative process? All of a sudden, men of good reason and good intentions, uh, are no longer in an environment where they can be assured that other people are gonna listen to what they say. People are carrying pistols, clubs, canes, the whole works. It was a very different environment. Uh, the Dred Scott decision, uh, came along in 1857, uh, whole, it cast slavery in a whole different light. Uh, and so it was here comes Jefferson Davis, he walks right into the middle of, of these, these very ominous issues, uh, and it's a tense, uptight Senate. Uh, it's, the optimism is gone, and uh, it's just a long difficult march toward, uh, disaster at a time when Jefferson Davis himself must have been feeling terribly physically, I mean, all kinds of problems with neuralgia, uh, with, um, results of malaria, uh, and uh, you know, just horrible to kinda have to get yourself up every day. Life in Washington just in, in those days, uh, was, was very uncomfortable. There's, you know, death was common, uh, disease was everywhere, uh, inconvenience was, was, abundant, and yet they kinda rise above that and say here's what I think the best interests of the nation are, here's how I'm gonna pursue
those issues. Uh, it was very, you know, we have to give these people a lotta credit for, for doing that.

Other Speaker: Let me just, uh, interject, uh, going along these lines.

Richard Alan Baker: ’Cause Jefferson Davis had been, uh, a member of the Senate Committee of 13, uh, that met in the latter months of, weeks of 1860 to try to forge a compromise. When that so-called Crittenden Compromise fell apart, Jefferson Davis knew that it was just a matter of, of weeks before Mississippi would withdraw from the Union. And so he prepared two speeches. One he delivered on January 10th, uh, 1861, to a packed Senate chamber in which he gave sort of a, an extended explanation of his views, uh, and uh, said the time is coming when I'm gonna have to leave. Then on the 21st of January, that was the day to say goodbye, um, and he as well as four other senators, two, two from Alabama and two from Florida, uh, came into the Senate chamber, the chamber was jam-packed, the gallery was mobbed, um, and Davis spoke last. Uh, and uh, you could hear a pin drop according to the, the, the, the memoirs that his wife prepared of that particular event. Um, and, and Davis explained very briefly the difference between nullification, the doctrine of his beloved John C. Calhoun, and uh, the doctrine of secession. The time for nullification talk is over, now it's time to leave, you know, and therefore, um, you know, it is my duty to bid you, my fellow senators, farewell. And at that point he turned and walked up the center aisle of the chamber and out the rear doors, and you could hear, uh, as one observer put it, the silent muffled weeping. Uh, people knew at that point that the fat was in the fire, that the nation had come to a major crossroads, and uh, people for, for decades afterwards who were there, who witnessed that, talked about that as one of the most startling and, and memorable moments of that particular Civil War era.

Speaker 1: I got chills. I've got one more question because Dr. Baker's gotta leave. What is the legend of the Jefferson Davis, on a lighter note, what is the legend—woo--of the Jefferson Davis Senate chamber desk?

Richard Alan Baker: Jefferson Davis left the chamber in January of 1861. Within 3 months, uh, Massachusetts soldiers were occupying that Senate chamber, not in a sense of holding it against,
uh, the enemy, but just they needed a place to have as a barracks. Congress was not in session in April of 1861, uh, troops were flooding into, to the capital city, and so this Massachusetts regiment happened to, uh, be able to bivouac in the Senate chamber. One of the soldiers, uh, inquired as to which desk Jefferson Davis had sat in and pulled out a bayonet, according to the stories that have come down over the years, and began to attack the desk. And the doorkeeper of the Senate intervened and said, young man, you were sent here, uh, to protect the property of the United States government, to protect the United States government, and that is our property, that is not the property of Jefferson Davis, he is gone. And so he saved the desk. Now that desk is one of the great relics of, of the Senate, um, and if you go into the Senate chamber and get, get close enough to that desk, you can see how a skilled carpenter has placed two, uh, pieces of wood along the left front side of the desk to repair that damage. Um, this has been a very important desk for senators from Mississippi. Senator John Stennis, uh, occupied that desk for quite a while, and then in 1995 the Senate passed a resolution, it's only done this on two other occasions, saying that this desk from now on will be occupied by the senior senator from Mississippi sort of as a, as a testimony to those turbulent times of the 1850s and '60s.

Other Speaker: One last question then. Um –

Speaker 1: Loaded.

Richard Alan Baker: That is a very, very tough question.

Other Speaker: Yeah.

Richard Alan Baker: Very tough question, and, and it's, it's diff – when trying to assess the legacy of Jefferson Davis, we have to consider that he was only in the Senate about 6 years, uh, a little over 6 years, and um, he was not in the institution long enough to leave a major lasting mark. He didn't change procedures, uh, he didn't have a lot of legislation that bears his name, uh, but while he was here he was a figure of enormous stature. Uh, he was a, he was a person who could, um, that senators from other regions could go and talk to and try to understand his points of view and, and he was a, he was a sounding board, a pressure point if you will, um, and he
certainly was head and shoulders above many other senators. He was the chairman of the Committee on Military Affairs, uh, an extremely important committee. Uh, if you ask people at West Point how did West Point benefit from the chairmanship of Jefferson Davis, I'm sure they'll have a very long list because he favored West Point and was determined, uh, to, uh, to pass legislation to, to help it out. But the, the brevity of his service kinda in an institution that values seniority and rewards longevity makes it difficult to, uh, to stand back and say, uh, that here is the specific legacy of Jefferson Davis. He, you know, he engaged the job fully, uh, he used all of its resources, he represented his state fairly and well, uh, and when he left people missed him.

Other Speaker: Okay. We can get 30 seconds of room time, just have to sit in silence for 30 seconds.

Richard Alan Baker: Do you want me to cut –

Speaker 1: **** outside?

Other Speaker: Um –

Richard Alan Baker: Yeah, it's part of it, yeah.

Speaker 1: **** Kind of room time.

Other Speaker: Okay, so we'll just, we'll sit silent for 30 seconds.

Richard Alan Baker: Okay.

Other Speaker: Okay, this is room time, 30 seconds starting now. Okay.