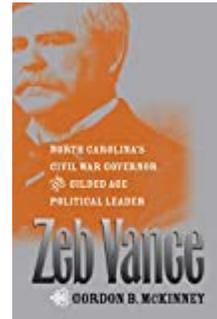


Gordon B. McKinney. *Zeb Vance: North Carolina's Civil War Governor and Gilded Age Political Leader.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. viii + 477 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2865-6.



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North Carolina's War Governor: Before and After

Zebulon Vance meant many things to many different people during his lifetime. Some white North Carolinians believed him to be the stout defender of their rights against both the Confederate government and Union forces. Other people knew Zeb Vance as a staunch Confederate nationalist who hunted deserters and draft resisters as North Carolina's Civil War governor. Such complexity has posed significant problems for historians seeking to make sense of Vance. When Frank Owsley suggested the inscription "Died of State Rights" for the Confederacy's tombstone in 1925, he saw no small amount of the Confederacy's figurative blood on the hands of Vance and Georgia's Joseph Brown. Owsley believed that the governors' opposition to Jefferson Davis's government had doomed the Southern war effort. In 1965, historian Glenn Tucker rejected Owsley's interpretation and instead proclaimed Zeb the "champion of personal freedom." More recently, historians, including Paul Escott, George Rable, and Joe Mobley, have further recast Vance as working to balance his state's interests with his new nation's needs. Only recently, however, has this complex historical figure's career received the scholarly exploration it richly deserves. In *Zeb Vance: North Car-*

olina's War Governor and Gilded Age Politician, Gordon B. McKinney follows Vance from his mountain boyhood to his seat in the United States Senate. McKinney's Vance is a Southerner, a white supremacist, a Westerner within his state, and above all a politician.

Having authored or co-authored several articles and books on western North Carolina, McKinney brings a wealth of knowledge on southern Appalachia and nineteenth-century North Carolina to this project. He places Zeb's fairly well-to-do mountain childhood within the larger context of the southern mountains' development. Zeb's father, David, operated a successful drover stand and owned enough slaves to supply his family with comfort, but his premature death sapped the family's wealth and forced them to move to Asheville while Zeb was a young man. While his father's death was tragic, the subsequent move was fortuitous. Asheville, a bustling mountain town and political hub, helped Zeb cultivate several skills vital to his future political success. Among Asheville's larger and more diverse population the gregarious young Zeb learned how to make friends quickly and defuse tensions with a good joke as well as the na-

ture of partisan politics. Vance parlayed those skills and a rich familial tradition of political involvement into a legal career that carried him from county solicitor to United States congressman in less than a decade.

Unquestionably, the Civil War defined Vance's career. McKinney devotes twelve chapters to the secession crisis and Civil War, which reveal the enormous challenges confronting the young governor. His state was horribly divided between ardent secessionists, Confederates, pacifist Quakers, white Unionists, and slaves. Guerrilla violence fractured communities across the state, and Federals seized his state's important inlet region before he took office. McKinney's thorough layering of these difficulties demonstrates that we cannot fully understand Vance's wartime administration without taking account of these various factors. Vance's protests against cavalry regiments' foraging in western North Carolina where Confederate tax policies exacerbated preexisting supply problems, his support for blockade running, and his well-known squabbles with Jefferson Davis over civil liberties, specifically the writ of habeas corpus, all stemmed from the pressures confronting Vance as governor of North Carolina.

By properly placing these events within a broader political framework, McKinney shows Vance as a skilled and shrewd politician. In supporting some white North Carolinians' desires and needs against the Richmond government, Vance acted as a good Confederate rather than an obstructionist. North Carolina's governor battled a severely divided home front and adopted policies designed to keep his white constituents in the Confederate fold. At times this meant denouncing or protesting Confederate policies in favor of his people's rights, but McKinney argues that these disputes were matters of degree rather than overall objectives. The same governor who used the state's power to resist centralization also used that same power to hunt deserters and send conscripts to the Southern armies. Vance felt that honor, both personal and state, demanded that he do all in his power to keep North Carolina fighting for Southern independence, even if he at times doubted his people's willingness to do what was necessary to achieve that end.

Besides shedding new insight into Vance's wartime actions, McKinney offers the most comprehensive examination of Vance's postwar career to date. Virtually addicted to politics, North Carolina's war governor bore his disfranchisement heavily during presidential Reconstruction. But disfranchisement could not keep Vance from politics. Even if he could not stand before the pub-

lic as a candidate, Vance never strayed far from the political arena. He worked feverishly behind the scenes to bring the Conservatives and later the Democrats back to power. It was Vance, McKinney argues, who was the prime mover in his party's increasingly racial rhetoric during the pivotal 1867 to 1868 state and national campaigns. Frustrated in his bid for the United States Senate in 1872, Vance utilized this racial strategy to gain a critical victory over Republican Thomas Settle, Jr. in the so-called Battle of Giants four years later. Vance's second gubernatorial election was less of a sea change in politics, McKinney notes, than the revitalization of the state's highest-profile politician. After 1876, Vance was comfortably home again in the political arena. More than that, his control over patronage and his prominent role in completing the long-sought Western North Carolina Railroad made him a virtual kingmaker in North Carolina politics.

Defeating Settle may have been Vance's last landmark moment, but McKinney reminds us that his career lasted another eighteen years. For much of the 1880s and early 1890s, Zeb loomed large in Democratic politics in North Carolina. In 1878, he finally reached the United States Senate, where he served until his death in 1894. No lasting legislative record marks Vance's legacy in the Senate, but he gained a lasting reputation as a fierce Southern advocate and a witty and caustic speaker. Such unswerving commitment to the South presented Vance with the greatest challenge of his postwar career. Having often declared himself the friend of the little guy in politics, Vance struggled with the mounting unrest among his state's farmers after 1886. Long known as a defender of people's rights and liberties, Vance found himself in the awkward position of defending national power against lower-class white Populists. They struggled to control each other, with the state legislature attempting to "instruct" Vance on how to behave in the Senate. Only his death in 1894 saved Vance from a potentially epic fall from grace.

The most obvious strength of McKinney's biography is its completeness. Historians have assessed Vance's contributions to the Confederate war effort and his victory in the "redemptive" gubernatorial campaign of 1876, but no previous academic biography has spanned Vance's entire life. McKinney has produced an excellent political biography that chronicles Vance's career and through it the inner workings of the Whig, Conservative, and Democratic parties. It is abundantly clear that politics dominated Vance's life from his teenage years in Asheville through his final days as senator. If there is

one avenue that feels a little incomplete, it is Vance as a nineteenth-century man. Although McKinney draws upon the most recent scholarship, one wonders more about how Vance's home life and personal relationships shaped his public persona. To what extent did Vance fit the model of Victorian patriarch? How did his duties as head of household influence his public career? How about his brother, Robert, who had his own political career after the Civil War? How did the Vance boys interact

with one another? Such quibbles take nothing away from McKinney's achievement. In fact, they reinforce Vance's complexity and subsequently McKinney's accomplishment in providing a full biography. *Zeb Vance: North Carolina's War Governor and Gilded Age Political Leader* is essential reading for all historians interested in North Carolina, the Civil War, and the nineteenth century at large.

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