

"War Governor of the South": North Carolina's Zeb Vance in the Confederacy

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Review

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Zeb Vance

A State Executive in the Civil War

Civil War governors, both North and South, played numerous and largely thankless roles in the war, including mobilizing troops, securing supplies, organizing war industry, suppressing dissent, boosting public morale, and appointing officers. Although they were essential to the war effort, the governors frequently found their powers squeezed and their wishes ignored by the central governments. At the same time, state executives were besieged with complaints from citizens concerning economic shortages, disorder, conscription, and other situations over which they had little control.

Zebulon Baird Vance, governor of North Carolina from 1862 through 1865, remains a controversial figure. He faced severe criticism both during and after the war for his supposed commitment to state's rights over Confederate needs, obstruction of Confederate policies, hoarding of supplies, and the high rate of desertion among North Carolina troops. In **War Governor of the South**, however, Joe Mobley argues that from the beginning Vance was fully committed to Confederate victory, that he threw the entire energies of his administration into supporting the war, that he believed that a strong Confederate government was essential to protecting slavery and preserving order, and that his disputes with Davis, though frequent, largely involved peripheral issues and a clash of personalities.

Vance came to the governorship with limited political experience. He was selected by Conservative Party leaders for his staunch commitment to old Whig principles and personal appeal to voters, and he did not campaign, choosing instead to remain in his position as colonel of the 26th North Carolina Infantry.

But significant discontent with the war and the Davis Administration had already surfaced in the state, and voters, ready to turn out original secessionists, gave Vance nearly three quarters of the state's vote.

Upon reaching Raleigh, Vance immediately faced a whole range of critical problems. Significant, organized dissent, fueled by unhappiness with the onerous Confederate policies of conscription and impressment and perhaps a lingering Unionism, had emerged in both the Quaker Belt and much of western North Carolina. This problem was compounded by the ever increasing number of deserters who had taken refuge in North Carolina. This situation immediately tested Vance's judgment, for the governor doubted the wisdom of conscription and recognized the frequent excesses in the implementation of these Confederate policies. But Mobley argues that, despite perceptions to the contrary, Vance fully cooperated with War Department officials in securing men and supplies, frequently urged North Carolina citizens to comply with Confederate policies, and confined his protests only to irregular conscription and illegal foraging. Vance also made his commitment clear by refusing to meet with the newly appointed military governor of occupied eastern North Carolina, Edward Stanly.

Vance also received criticism for not only the high rate of desertion among North Carolina troops but also for the actions of State Supreme Court Justice Richard M. Pearson, who issued numerous writs of habeas corpus for men held by Confederate officials and ruled that several provisions of the Confederate conscription laws were unconstitutional. Vance disputed Pearson's decisions and attempted to have them overturned, but he insisted that the Confederate and state governments respect the court's decisions. Vance also issued frequent proclamations urging deserters to return to their commands, attempted to use the state militia to curb this problem, and frequently requested help from regular Confederate troops. Whether Vance really did all he could to stem desertion is open to debate, but the truth is that no governor could overcome sources of this crippling problem, including the economic suffering of families left at home, the discontent with Confederate military setbacks, and a political culture that was not prepared to accept such drastic assertions of central government power.

Mobley praises Vance's handling of two other issues, the heightened racial tensions in the state, and the importation of critical supplies. As expected, the onset of the war, the proximity of Union troops in eastern North Carolina, and the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation all heightened white fears of slave violence. Existing state law authorized the governor to convene special

courts of oyer and terminer to carry out speedy trials of slaves suspected of crimes, but Mobley concludes that, despite his impetuous nature, the young governor showed considerable restraint in this matter. Not wishing to inflame public opinion or trigger reckless white retaliation, Vance suppressed much news that he received of slave violence and only ordered the special courts in the most pressing cases. Mobley also commends Vance for his decision not to rely on the Confederate government to supply North Carolina troops. Early in his administration Vance sent commissioners to Europe to secure shipping and supplies, and though they proved less competent than Vance hoped, the commissioners purchased one ship, a part interest in two others, and substantial supplies of blankets, uniforms, shoes, cloth, muskets, ammunition, and medicine. Unfortunately, this effort also brought Vance into conflict with the Confederate government, when in late 1863 the Confederate Congress authorized Davis to appropriate first one-quarter, and then one-half, the cargo space of any ship entering a Confederate port. Vance resented what he saw as heavy-handed interference with a successful state effort and decried the new policy, but in the end he acquiesced. Mobley cites the 1864 governor's race as compelling evidence of Vance's commitment to Confederate victory. Pressure for a separate peace continued to grow in North Carolina, and in 1863 peace candidates won many statewide elections. When Holden announced he would run for governor in 1864, the movement seemed poised to take control of the state. After consultation with his closest advisors, David Swain and William Graham, Vance determined to oppose the movement directly. He campaigned all over the state, including areas where the movement was strongest, and forcefully argued that a separate peace would leave North Carolina subject to attack from both North and South. Holden, foolishly, obliged Vance by refusing to campaign in person, and Vance's strong campaign paid off, bringing him over seventy-seven percent of the vote.

Vance continued in this vein by opposing the Confederate surrender until the absolute end. In the fall of 1864 he organized a conference of governors to consider ways to increase each state's contribution to the war. In early 1865, when two Union armies moved on the state, Vance called on every able man to volunteer, urged families to contribute food for the troops, and urged the state legislature to conscript state officials and raise the conscription age to 55. However, in mid-April Vance made one concession that he would bitterly regret, when under severe pressure from Swain and Graham he sent a letter to Sherman to see if a cessation of hostilities could be arranged. Though Sherman was

receptive, the letter had no real effect. But when Vance arrived at Durham to participate in the surrender discussions between General Joe Johnston and General William T. Sherman, General Wade Hampton bitterly attacked Vance for disloyalty, and Johnston excluded him from discussions among Confederate officers. In one of the few glimpses into Vance's character, Mobley shows Vance weeping at the prospect of Confederate surrender and at his own humiliation at Johnston's hands.

Mobley's conclusions are carefully argued and supported by a profound knowledge of North Carolina's political history. His judgments are balanced and restrained, and he freely criticizes Vance for his shortcomings, including a lack of sensitivity to the sufferings of poorer citizens and a tendency to fire off angry, unconsidered responses to perceived slights. While he pays considerable attention to social and economic issues, Mobley's work remains largely an administrative history, and readers should expect little insight into Vance's character or his personal responses to the issues he faced and the suffering in the state.

*Dr. Noel Fisher is the author of *War at Every Door: Partisan Politics and Guerrilla Violence in East Tennessee, 1860-1869* and of a forthcoming work on the Civil War in the Great Smoky Mountains region.*