

Edmund J. Davis: Civil War General, Republican Leader, Reconstruction Governor

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Review

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Moneyhon, Carl H. *Edmund J. Davis: Civil War General, Republican Leader, Reconstruction Governor.* TCU Press, \$27.95 ISBN 978-0-87565-405-8

Revitalizing a Governor's Reputation

Edmund J. Davis was one of the most maligned governors that Texas has ever known. During the Reconstruction era, Davis's political opponents never missed an opportunity to vilify him, and a majority of voters blamed him for the economic and social ills that plagued their state. Since the Reconstruction era, Texas historians, aside from a select group of revisionists writing since the 1960s, have not been favorable to Governor Davis. As such, the governor's reputation still remains blemished today. In part, Davis's tarnished character has continued to exist into the modern era because his biography has remained unpublished until now. The only full-scale examination of the governor's life prior to the publication of the work under review was Ronald n. Gray's Ph.D. dissertation entitled "Edmund J. Davis: Radical Republican and Reconstruction Governor of Texas." While Gray's dissertation was an admirable undertaking, its readership was limited primarily to the scholarly community, a fate that often befalls unpublished dissertations. Fortunately, Carl H. Moneyhon has resurrected Governor Davis in his favorable biography of this notable Texas politician.

Moneyhon's account of Davis's life and career reveals that the governor was a progressive politician who was unafraid to stand in staunch opposition of his peers in order to ensure that the results of the Civil War were not lost in Texas during Reconstruction, a period in American history between 1865 and 1877 that some scholars have labeled the Second Civil War. During this time, he bravely and stubbornly battled ex-Confederates, former secessionists, and conservative Democrats in an attempt to reconstruct the state based on the principles of free labor and equality. Unfortunately, Davis saw many of his goals for restoring the state under the federal guidelines established during Congressional Reconstruction swept away by the overwhelming and unrelenting surge of

Redemption that brought Democrats back into control of the state government in the early 1870s. Throughout this biography, the author focuses on one the central question: What made Edmund J. Davis take such a dramatic stand against his political peers? The answer to this question begins with an examination Davis's involvement in the Texas secession movement and subsequent Civil War.

Moneyhon provides a brief overview of Davis's early life in his first chapter. Here we learn that Davis was born in Florida on October 2, 1827; failed to gain entrance into West Point; moved to Texas with his family in the 1840s; set out on his own, moving to Corpus Christi and later the border town of Larado; and established himself as a reputable lawyer and a district judge. If it had not been for the dark cloud of secession, Davis might have lived out the remainder of his days as a successful jurist, perhaps he might have even found a place on the state supreme court or a federal judgeship. However, the struggle over slavery that emerged shook the nation to its knees, forever changing Davis's life. From the beginning, Davis was a staunch defender of the Union. As a lawyer and judge, he saw no legitimacy in the right of secession. His stand against Texas secessionists was just the first in a long series of battles with leading Democratic politicians in his state. Despite his efforts, the Secessionists were able to lead the state out of the Union, leaving Davis only three choices: remain in the state and support the Confederacy, remain in the state and protest his state's actions, or leave the state and join the United States military in their fight against the Confederacy. Davis chose the latter, especially when Texas took action to enact a conscription law that would have potentially forced him into Confederate service. Leaving his home in 1862, Davis headed to Mexico with a deep mistrust and resentment toward the politicians that he believed had caused the war.

After leaving the state in 1862 for Mexico, Davis travelled to New Orleans where he attempted to convince federal authorities of his plan for an invasion of Texas. Not finding immediate satisfaction in New Orleans, Davis travelled to Washington, D.C. where he met President Lincoln and asked the government to provide arms to support an invasion of Texas. Though interested, Lincoln provide no immediate assistance. In fact, Davis's plans for an invasion never materialized, at least not as he had envisioned. After leaving Washington, Davis returned to Louisiana and continued his efforts to mount an invasion of his home state. While in New Orleans, Davis's family remained at their home in Texas. His wife and children endured the hardship that most Unionists families faced on the home front—shunned by Confederate neighbors and threatened by

Confederate authorities. Davis's wife, Lizzie, and their children attempted to escape Texas by way of Mexico, but Confederate authorities prevented them from crossing the border. His family would eventually make their way out of the state, but Davis never forgot how Texas Confederates had treated them. One more incident caused Davis to develop a deep hatred for Texas Confederates. Returning to Matamoros with orders to transport Unionist refugees from Texas to New Orleans, including his family, Davis and the troops accompanying him were attacked. Confederate troops stationed on the border raided the Union encampment on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande River and captured Davis and several other federal soldiers, including Captain William W. Montgomery, an officer with the 1st Texas and a former resident of Caldwell County. The Texans took their prisoners back to Texas where they lynched Captain Montgomery. However, the Mexican government's protest of the invasion prompted Confederate authorities to release Davis rather than face an international incident. Just as with the earlier incident with his family, Davis harbored ill feelings towards the men who murdered Montgomery and those who condoned the killing. These harsh feelings toward Confederates, as well as secessionists, endured in Davis for the remainder of his life.

The remainder of Moneyhon's book focuses on Davis political and legal career following the Civil War. At every turn, Davis struggled against what he perceived as the enemies of his state—ex-Confederates, former secessionists, and conservative Democrats—waging a virtual war against them during the 1866 Constitutional Convention, against the conservative state government elected under the 1866 Constitution. Beginning in 1867, Davis worked tirelessly to implement Congressional Reconstruction policies and to entrench the Republican party in the state. His efforts to bring progressive change to the state seemed to bear fruit at the 1869-1870 Constitutional Convention. Though divided, Republicans were able to push through a state constitution that promised to bring greater civil rights to black Texans. In the 1869 gubernatorial election, Davis defeated Andrew Jackson Hamilton to become the first Republican governor elected in the state. Although his political opponents accused the governor of tyranny and bringing economic hardship to Texas through excessive taxation, Moneyhon clearly reveals that Davis attempted to enact positive changes in his state. The governor wanted to end the lawlessness that had plagued Texas since the end of the war, to defend the frontier, to initiate policies to foster economic prosperity, to create a viable public education system, and to protect African-American rights. While his plans did increase the size and

expense of government, Davis's opponents complained most that he was a tyrant who enforced his way through the use of martial law and the newly created state police force that was formed to combat the rampant lawlessness present in the state. Moneyhon convincingly explains that these charges were over-exaggerated, or entirely false. Davis reluctantly declared martial law only three times during his tenure as governor. Additionally, Davis worked tirelessly to bring peace to the frontier and achieved at least some moderate success. Public education also had its genesis in the state. Unfortunately, all of the advancements in the state were rolled back when Davis lost the 1873 gubernatorial election, leaving control of the state government in the hands of conservative Democrats. During the next few years, they systematically repealed Davis's policies. After leaving the governor's mansion, Davis became the leader of the Democratic Party. Unfortunately for Davis and the Republicans, they were not able to regain political prominence for the remainder of the nineteenth century.

Moneyhon should be commended for his effort to revitalize the reputation of Edmund J. Davis. His work does much to challenge the myths that have surrounded the governor and his administration for over 150 years. This will remain an important book in Reconstruction historiography for some time to come and should be read by all serious scholars of this turbulent era in Texas and United States history.

Kenneth W. Howell is Associate Professor of History at Prairie View A&M; University. He has several publications on the Civil War and Reconstruction eras, including The Seventh Star of the Confederacy: Texas during the Civil War (University of North Texas, 2009), Texas Confederate, Reconstruction Governor: James Webb Throckmorton (Texas A&M; University Press, 2008), The Devil's Triangle: Ben Bickerstaff, Northeast Texans, and the War of Reconstruction (Best of East Texas Publishers, 2007). He is currently editing a book on Reconstruction violence in Texas.