John Brown Gordon Biography

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Biography

American businessman and politician John Brown Gordon (1832-1904), a distinguished Confederate officer, was one of the politicians who dominated Georgia after the Reconstruction period.

John B. Gordon was born on Feb. 6, 1832, in Upson County, Ga. He attended the University of Georgia and was developing coal mines in north-western Georgia when the Civil War began. He went on to an outstanding career as a Confederate Army officer. He rose to the rank of lieutenant general and took part in the last military operations near Appomattox. In the minds of fellow Georgians he shared with Robert E. Lee the tragic glory of the surrender.

After the war Gordon became active in a number of business enterprises, including railroads and life insurance. He also opposed the Republican party, and his name has been linked with Ku Klux Klan terrorism in his state. After the Democrats regained control of Georgia, he was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1873 as a "New Departure Democrat." In the Senate his name was associated in an unfavorable way with congressmen who were attempting to obtain government subsidies for certain railroad builders. In 1880, about halfway through his second term, he suddenly resigned. Charges of "bargain" were made when Georgia governor Alfred H. Colquitt immediately appointed Joseph E. Brown in Gordon's place. These three men dominated Georgia politics until 1890 by controlling the positions of senators and governor.

Upon his return to Georgia, Gordon again engaged in business activity, especially transactions dealing with railroads and real estate. A distinguished-looking man with a fine figure and manner, he gained popularity as a Confederate war hero and speaker on the "Lost Cause" of the South. In 1886 he was elected governor.

During Gordon's administration the small farmers, increasingly unhappy because the New Departure Democrats were ignoring their needs in favor of business interests, formed the Farmers' Alliance; in the election of 1890 they won the governorship and control of the legislature. Gordon, who wanted to become senator again, now endorsed most of the proposals of the alliance. The legislature sent him to the Senate in 1891, where, contrary to the expectations of his new constituency, he continued to support business interests. At the end of his term he retired from politics and traveled around the country lecturing on the last days of the Confederacy, stressing the view that both sides had been "right." He died in Miami, Fla., on Jan. 9, 1904.