



TEXAS *Legends*

E. J. Davis



According to Texas legend, Texas needed the “Redeemer” constitution of 1876 to cleanse the state of the despotism endured under Republican governor E. J. Davis. Davis represented the more extreme branch of

the Republican Party and narrowly won the gubernatorial election in 1869 with the backing of black voters. This connection to both ex-slaves and the Republican Party no doubt helped to alienate former slave owners. In the eyes of many, Davis ballooned the debt, declared martial law in much of the state with his control of the state militia and state police, and sold out the state’s farmers to big business, including railroads, at the expense of the mainly agrarian population. And, to add insult to injury, when it became clear that Republicans would likely lose the next election, Davis postponed the legislative election and initially refused to leave office after losing the governor’s race. This version of events allowed Texans, still stinging from their loss of the recent “War of Northern Aggression,” to blame the North for the economic decline of the state and erase from memory the Confederates’ military defeat. It also gave birth to the legend of Democrats as redeemers who saved the state from a corrupt “foreign” invader.

However, if we examine some of the particulars of this story, we get a much more complicated history. Davis sought to create a compulsory education system for all children throughout the state. Any such system and its accompanying taxes would have been seen as exorbitant by Texans who preferred government to stay out of their daily lives. It was also the first time that tax dollars would pay for the education of African Americans in the state, and it was the education of African Americans that led to the claims of waste. Although Democrats saw the policy as wasteful, Texas became one of the first states to adopt a compulsory public education system.

It is true that Davis increased the debt of the state, but this is only part of the story. The state of Texas had been financially devastated by the Civil War and would have faced a lack of revenue regardless of who occupied the governor’s office. Davis advocated an expansion of social services favored by the Republican Party, which necessarily translated into higher state taxes.