

Gordon Gray

Gordon Gray (1909-1982) was among the 20th century's most notable North Carolina newspaper publishers. His only problem was he almost never had time to be a publisher. He was continually pulled away from the newspaper office for public service.

Born to a well-to-do Winston-Salem tobacco family, Gray trained as a lawyer and became a newspaper publisher by heading a corporation that bought the Winston-Salem Journal and Twin City Sentinel (afternoon) in 1937, as well as a local radio station.

In the next four years, however, Gray was often away from the office as a member of the North Carolina General Assembly from Forsyth County. Then came World War II, and Gray rose from private to captain. He got back to Winston-Salem in 1945 and resumed his editorial career.

But then a Washington friend called and asked Gray to become undersecretary of the Department of the Army. In 1949, President Harry Truman named him secretary of the Army. He became the first secretary who had ever previously served as a private.

Gray hardly settled into the secretary's office in the Pentagon when his home state called. In 1950, the board of trustees of the University of North Carolina offered Gray the presidency of the UNC system, as successor to Frank Porter Graham, who had been appointed to the U.S. Senate by Governor Kerr Scott.

For five years, Gray presided over the higher educational campuses that were exploding with post-World War II growth, while often going to Washington for special assignments from the White House.

In 1955, he stepped down from the university post to become undersecretary of the Department of State for International Security. He led other key jobs under President Dwight Eisenhower.

Finally, in 1961, he returned to North Carolina to take up the presidency of the newspaper corporation, and of a corporation of radio and television stations throughout the region.

When he was in his editorial office, Gray exercised an energetic and determined leadership in community service and civic betterment, the hallmark of so many North Carolina newspaper editors in every century. His talent for leadership sent Gordon Gray away from the office more than most others.

By Roy Parker Jr.
January 1998