

CITIZEN- GENERAL

Jacob Dolson Cox and the Civil War Era

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Contents

List of Illustrations	ix
Preface	xi
Introduction	I
1 Citizen of the Western Reserve <i>Maturing in Peace, Girding for War</i>	5
2 A Citizen-General Secures (West) Virginia	29
3 Citizen-General on the National Stage <i>The Maryland Campaign</i>	57
4 Citizen/Political General <i>Political Wars outside the Mainstream</i>	99
5 Division and Army Commander <i>The Atlanta Campaign</i>	121
6 Citizen-Warrior <i>The Franklin-Nashville Campaign and War's End</i>	142
7 From Citizen-General to State and National Political Leader	176
8 Citizen-Statesman	203
9 Civil War Historian	235
10 Renaissance Man in the Gilded Age	264
Notes	273
Selected Bibliography	321
Index	329

Introduction

“The long lines of Hood’s army surged up out of the hollow in which they had formed, and were seen coming forward in splendid array. The sight,” Union General Jacob Dolson Cox recalled, “was one to send a thrill through the heart, and those who saw it have never forgotten its martial magnificence.”¹ Seven hours later, on November 30, 1864, the Union forces commanded by Cox successfully completed repelling the final major frontal infantry attack of the Civil War at the Battle of Franklin. Cox’s warrior-like appeal to his troops at the critical moment helped cut the heart out of John Bell Hood’s Army of Tennessee, ensuring the western Confederate army’s ultimate destruction two weeks later at the Battle of Nashville.

Fifteen years earlier, almost to the day, Cox, then a divinity student at Oberlin College, had married Helen Finney, the daughter of college president Charles Finney, a leading evangelist and abolitionist. A career as a minister and professor of theology seemed preordained. No one could have predicted that the intellectual, reserved, bookish Cox possessed the “military aptitude” to lead men successfully in war. But as for many men of that era, the seemingly inevitable was overtaken by history. The wrenching events of the Civil War era led Cox from the tranquility of divinity school through the turbulence and bloodshed of war and into the political struggles of Reconstruction, finally returning him to the serenity of scholarship and the writing of history. This book considers how the shattering changes of that era affected one citizen, and how his life and work affected the era and the memory of those tumultuous events.

Raised in a Puritan home by a mother whose lineage traced to the *Mayflower*, Cox studied at Oberlin College, one of the nation’s most radical

2 institutions because of its advocacy of abolitionism and inclusion of female and black students. After a theological dispute with Finney, Cox left his ministerial studies early in the 1850s and became a lawyer in the Western Reserve town of Warren, Ohio. There he became active in the Whig Party and was one of the founders of the Ohio Republican Party. After being elected to the Ohio Senate in 1860, he gained a reputation as a fervent antislavery Radical.

Believing that war was possible and that he should be prepared to fight for his beliefs, Cox engaged in a diligent study of the history and theory of the military arts. Appointed a brigadier general of volunteers soon after the war started, Cox the citizen-general believed he was as intellectually qualified as any West Pointer to lead men in war. The test would be whether he had what he called “a constitution of body and mind for which we can find no better name than military aptitude.”²² Despite Cox’s inexperience, General George B. McClellan came to appreciate his talents and knowledge and gave him an autonomous command in the West Virginia campaign. In 1861 and 1862 Cox played a central role in taking and holding for the Union the new state of West Virginia, while earning a reputation as a quintessential subordinate commander with a firm commitment to discipline and duty.

In mid-1862 Cox transferred to the Army of the Potomac for the Maryland campaign, during which in a period of three weeks he underwent a dizzying ascent to corps command. He initiated the successful first assault at the Battle of South Mountain. As commander of the 9th Army Corps (AC), he co-led the Union’s left wing at the Battle of Antietam, for which he was promoted to major general. He then stemmed a Confederate effort to retake West Virginia. After a lengthy period in military administration, in 1864 he marched with Sherman to Atlanta as second in command of the Army of the Ohio. As commander on the defensive line at the Battle of Franklin, he played a vital role in breaking the spirit of the Confederate Army of Tennessee. Cox rejoined Sherman in North Carolina in 1865 and rose again to corps command during the battles leading to the Confederate surrender, following which he was military governor of part of that state. Throughout the war, Cox fought actively in the “political-military wars,” struggling for rank and place, while seeking recognition for the contributions of citizen-generals such as himself. His four years of warfare would prove to be in many ways his most successful professional experience.

When the war ended in 1865, Cox's political horizons seemed unlimited. But while five other Ohioans with war records (Ulysses Grant, Rutherford B. Hayes, James A. Garfield, Benjamin Harrison, and William McKinley) rose to national prominence and the presidency, Cox was in political exile by 1873. This successful citizen-general with a proven military aptitude did not have the kind of political aptitude needed for national leadership in the postwar era. While in war he was comfortable with dutifully taking orders, his independent spirit led him on occasion to take the initiative without orders and to recommend alternative approaches to his commanders. That same internal demand for intellectual autonomy would not be constrained in postwar peace and politics. His independent bent, academic orientation, straitlaced and aloof personality, rigid commitment to principle, and tendency to approach issues in the tutelary manner of a preacher/professor led him to take actions consciously that would truncate the possibility of his becoming a national political leader.

In 1865, during his successful campaign for governor of Ohio, Cox decided to deal publicly with the issue of the civil rights and citizenship of the freedman. While fervently antislavery, Cox was dubious about the feasibility of racial equality, fearing it might lead to race war in the South. Instead, he proposed an academic approach to resolving the problem by creating a *de facto* territory in the South to which, he suggested, blacks would voluntarily migrate because they would be protected by the federal government. This impractical plan divided him from the Radical Republicans as the latter's power was on the rise. Furthermore, party leaders became worried that Cox's independent streak and lack of party discipline might make him an unreliable candidate for future elections.

His second fatal political step came when he supported President Andrew Johnson's approach to Reconstruction for a lengthy period while using his influence to try to find compromise between the president and Congress on Reconstruction policy. Despite his eventual decision to disavow Johnson, Cox was seen by some as having "abandoned" the Republican Party. Caught in the middle of what he called a "family broil," Cox decided not to run for reelection for governor in 1867, even though his reelection was likely.

As Grant's secretary of the interior in 1869–70, Cox implemented one of the most far-reaching attempts to reform Indian policy and instituted the federal government's first extensive civil service reform program. Within eighteen months, however, his rigid and idealistic position against patronage

4 led to his resignation. He broke with the Republicans and became a leader of the Liberal Republican movement trying to oust Grant in 1872. The failure of that party was the final nail in Cox's national political coffin.

The biographer of one of Cox's commanders, General Ambrose Burnside, called Cox "a veritable Renaissance man"; in an era that celebrated the self-made man, Cox assumed a wide variety of careers, including military officer, school superintendent, state legislator, governor, federal cabinet member, railroad president, congressman, university president, law school dean, scientist, and historian. His most successful professional experience was as a general, and his most successful academic pursuit was as arguably the best Civil War historian of the nineteenth century. His writings remain his enduring legacy. His book on the Atlanta campaign was the definitive study for over a hundred years. His in-depth articles on the Maryland campaign for the *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War* multi-volume series (and his expansion of them in his *Reminiscences*) are bases for memory about that period. His two-volume *Military Reminiscences of the Civil War* is still cited by historians as a foundation for the memory of many aspects of the war. Cox's reviews of Civil War books for *The Nation* magazine played an important role in both shaping thinking about the war and establishing the first phase of memory about it.³

Nevertheless, knowledge of Cox the citizen-general is limited, and he remains a relative unknown except to specialists and buffs. One reason, Cox believed, was the bad luck "of being a second in command" and frequently ignored in the writing of history. Furthermore, as a citizen-general, his contributions and those of his political colleagues were often de-emphasized or denigrated in the postwar "battle of the books." Cox believed that in time his contributions to the war effort and its chronicling would be fully recognized by history. The objective of this book is to reconsider Jacob Dolson Cox as a major actor both in the Civil War era and in the creation of its memory. In sum, it is time to give Jacob Cox his due.⁴

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