

### Class Act: After Sumter, West Point's Cadets Divided

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## Review

### CLASS ACT

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**Kirshner, Ralph** *The Class of 1861: Custer, Ames, and Their Classmates After West Point*. Southern Illinois University Press, ISBN 809322665

Following the members of a particular West Point class through their military careers is rapidly becoming a sub-genre in military history. Ralph Kirshner's **The Class of 1861** is the latest addition to the field. In the same vein as such books as John C. Waugh's *The Class of 1846*, Kirshner traces the fortunes of a United States Military Academy class through the Civil War and beyond. In 1861, West Point graduated both upper classes in a rush to provide officers for the armies forming throughout the Union, releasing such men as Adelbert Ames and George Custer for active service. Future Confederate commanders such as John Pelham and Thomas Rosser departed before graduation.

Kirshner has written what he terms a "collective autobiography," using the letters, diaries, and other works of the members of the class to construct a narrative of the War. This attempt forms the first half of the book; in the second half, the author provides a series of very brief essays on the postwar lives of selected members of the class. An appendix supplies further biographical sketches of every member of the class. Also included are photos of the class of 1861 cadets, presented in order of class standing.

**The Class of 1861** does not burden the reader with the sort of analysis found in academic works, nor does it examine in depth the factors that made the military experience of these men distinctive. Throughout the first half of the book, Kirshner wisely stands fast in his decision to let the participants tell their own stories, even if he does so by means of long block quotations strung together with the barest possible narrative. Some passages are merely eccentric. In his discussion of the death of John Pelham, he notes that Jeb Stuart announced

the death in a general order that "gave Pelham a place in the *Dictionary of Military and Naval Quotations*." When Kirshner finally does comment on his subjects in the second half of the book, he says little of substance. The short chapters on selected members of the class of 1861 are very brief and fail to provide sufficient discussion and examination of their postwar careers.

Despite its focus on an interesting topic, **The Class of 1861** disappoints. This work possesses good sources, interesting subjects, and thorough illustrations, yet never really comes together as a book. Although cloaked in material about the United States Military Academy class of 1861, Kirshner has written nothing more than yet another conventional narrative of the War.

*Mitchell McNaylor is a writer living in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.*