Citizen-General: Jacob Dolson Cox and the Civil War Era

Dave Page

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Page, Dave (2014) "Citizen-General: Jacob Dolson Cox and the Civil War Era," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 3 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.16.3.16

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol16/iss3/14>

Review

Page, Dave

Summer 2014

Schmiel, Eugene D. *Citizen-General: Jacob Dolson Cox and the Civil War Era*. Ohio University Press, \$69.95 ISBN 978-0-8214-2083-6

"Political General" and Effective Fighter: Jacob Dolson Cox

In the preface and introduction to his biography of Union Major General Jacob D. Cox, Eugene Schmiel mimics many authors of similar books by claiming his goal is to bring Cox out of history's shadows, so to speak--a worthy objective, given the subject matter, even if a nearly impossible one, given the competition for readers' eyes. Schmiel also does something I cannot remember any other author doing: He discusses the cover art. I mention this only because the cover includes Cox's official portrait as post-war governor of Ohio hovering god-like over a Kurz and Allison lithograph of the battle of Burnside's Bridge at Antietam, a well-known encounter in which Cox played a prominent role.

If such a collage seems appealing, great. If, however, such an image sounds a bit cartoonish, do not judge this book by that cover. Schmiel's study of Cox is a fascinating look into the wartime and post-war politics caused by Winfield Scott's decision to split the Union army into "regulars" and "volunteers." Volunteers who worked their way up to the rank of general were often called, in a demeaning way "political generals." As the title of Schmiel's work suggests, the author—a retired foreign service officer and former assistant history professor—prefers the name "citizen-general," given that a few, including Cox, fulfilled their roles admirably.

Born in Canada in 1828, Cox moved with his family to New York City, where he heard a talk by the Rev. Charles Finney of Ohio's Oberlin College. The speech convinced him to attend Oberlin (a radical institution that admitted blacks and women) and study for the ministry. Cox married Finney's daughter but broke with his father-in-law over theological differences. Instead of pursuing the ministry, he took a job as school superintendent in Warren, Ohio, where he became involved in politics after the Compromise of 1850 stirred deep feelings

on both sides of the slavery issue.

Cox deplored slavery but felt freeing blacks without any concern for their welfare would leave them worse off than before. He struggled with a resolution to the dilemma for years. He joined the fledgling Republican Party in Ohio because it espoused an end to slavery without radical abolitionism and favored limited government and laissez-faire economics. Making the acquaintance of other prominent Ohioans, such as future president James Garfield, Cox was quickly named a brigadier general of Ohio volunteers once war began. A self-starter, he eventually came to decry the rigid outlook of professional soldiers, who eschewed the repeating rifle and Gatling gun in favor of a "Napoleonic tradition" that had already, according to Cox's outlook, proved ineffectual by the end of the Napoleonic wars.

Despite Ohioan George McClellan's mistrust of volunteer soldiers, he respected Cox and gave him an important role in the campaign to secure West Virginia for the Union. Not earning the respect he expected for the successful outcome of the campaign, Cox was introduced to the kind of political backbiting that can make or break a military career. Working his way back to active field command, he eventually lost his respect for McClellan, especially after Cox realized McClellan exaggerated Confederate troop strength and tried to fault Burnside for the army's lackluster performance at Antietam. Because Cox was de facto commander of Ambrose Burnside's corps, he felt his reputation was tarnished as well.

Squabbles over who should shoulder the blame for Antietam and who should take the credit for the smashing Union victory at Franklin, Tenn., where Cox directed the stout Union defense, led Cox to take up his pen after the war and write several books on his campaigns. Schmiel does an excellent job outlining the personalities involved in the literary bickering and analyzing Cox's contribution to the historiography of the war.

Two interesting observations: First, Cox might be said to have done his best fighting during the Wilmington campaign in early 1865 and was one of the first to enter the North Carolina city, but Schmiel give very little attention to that campaign, perhaps because Cox did not write much about it and because there was little controversy once Ben Butler was replaced. Second, Schmiel says several times that Cox did not fulfill his political promise because he was too idealistic, too pious, and not pragmatic enough in his approach to office, despite

the fact that Cox served as Ohio's governor, a U.S. congressman, and as President Grant's Secretary of Interior. (In the latter role, he fought diligently for civil service reform.) His name was also bandied about as a possible presidential candidate, even though his Canadian birth could have raised constitutional questions. That seems to me a pretty fulfilling political career.

Schmiel does confuse the number of children Cox had at certain times, implying at one point that he had six children before the end of the war and then indicating in another chapter that his sixth child was born in 1867. Other than that, the book takes the reader briskly through Cox's remarkable career, includes copious notes, and—most appreciated—provides good maps when necessary.

If any book can bring notoriety to a distinguished if relatively unknown career, then *Citizen-General* should be able to do that for Jacob Cox.

Dave Page has written articles for Civil War Times, America's Civil War and other publications and is the author of Ships Versus Shore: Civil War Engagements along Southern Shores and Rivers. He currently teaches writing at Inver Hills Community College.