



Citizen-General: Jacob Dolson Cox and the Civil War Era (War and Society in North America)

Eugene D. Schmiel

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A History Book Club Reading Selection

The wrenching events of the Civil War transformed not only the United States but also the men unexpectedly called on to lead their fellow citizens in this first modern example of total war. Jacob Dolson Cox, a former divinity student with no formal military training, was among those who rose to the challenge. In a conflict in which “political generals” often proved less than competent, Cox, the consummate citizen general, emerged as one of the best commanders in the Union army.

During his school days at Oberlin College, no one could have predicted that the intellectual, reserved, and bookish Cox possessed what he called in his writings the “military aptitude” to lead men effectively in war. His military career included helping secure West Virginia for the Union; jointly commanding the left wing of the Union army at the critical Battle of Antietam; breaking the Confederate supply line and thereby precipitating the fall of Atlanta; and holding the defensive line at the Battle of Franklin, a Union victory that effectively ended the Confederate threat in the West.

At a time when there were few professional schools other than West Point, the self-made man was the standard for success; true to that mode, Cox fashioned himself into a Renaissance man. In each of his vocations and avocations—general, governor, cabinet secretary, university president, law school dean, railroad president, historian, and scientist—he was recognized as a leader. Cox’s greatest fame, however, came to him as the foremost participant historian of the Civil War. His accounts of the conflict are to this day cited by serious scholars and serve as a foundation for the interpretation of many aspects of the war.

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