ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Jacob Dolson Cox: Civil War General and Historian

By **Eugene D. Schmiel**

"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 Major General Jacob Dolson Cox later recalled, "was one to send a thrill through the heart, and those who saw it have never forgotten its martial magnificence."[1] A few hours later, on November 30, 1864, the Union forces commanded by Cox successfully repulsed the final mass frontal infantry attack of the Civil War by Confederate Lieutenant General John Bell Hood's Army of Tennessee at the Battle of Franklin, Tennessee. Cox's emotional appeal to his men at a critical moment helped cut a critical swathe through Hood's army, laying the groundwork for the ultimate destruction of the Confederacy's western forces two weeks later at the Battle of Nashville.

Fifteen years earlier, almost to the day, the twenty-one-year-old Cox, a divinity student at Oberlin College, married Helen Finney, the daughter of Oberlin's president, Reverend Charles Grandison Finney, a leading evangelist and abolitionist. A career as a minister and Professor of Theology for the "bookish," reserved young man seemed preordained. Few would have predicted then that Cox possessed what he called a "military aptitude" to lead men successfully in war. [2]

However, as was the case for many men of that era, the inevitable was overtaken by history. The wrenching and unexpected events of the mid-nineteenth century led Cox from a tranquil life in academe and religion in rural Ohio, through the turbulence and bloodshed of the Civil War, and onto the political stage of Reconstruction, finally returning him to the relative peace of scholarship and the writing of history.

Major General Ambrose Everett Burnside's biographer called Jacob Cox "a veritable Renaissance man."[3] In an era which celebrated the self-made man, few matched Cox's ability to assume effectively such varied careers as general, school superintendent,

[1] Jacob D. Cox, *The Battle of Franklin, Tennessee, November 30, 1864: a Monograph with maps* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1897), 56-57.
[2] Jacob D. Cox, *Military Reminiscences of the Civil War*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900), 1:168.
[3] William Marvel, *Burnside* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 112.

state legislator and governor, federal cabinet member, railroad president, congressman, university president, law school dean, scientist, and historian.

Cox was born in 1828 in Montreal, Quebec, Canada, where his father was employed as the master builder of the Notre Dame Basilica. The family returned in 1829 to New York, where Cox was raised primarily by his mother, Thedia Redelia Cox, who traced her lineage to the Mayflower. His mother inculcated in young Dolson, the name he preferred, a strong commitment to moralistic Puritan principles, a hatred of slavery, self-effacement, and fealty to Anglo-Saxon traditions.

With this background, Cox was well-suited to begin his studies in 1846 at Oberlin College, one of the nation's most radical institutions because of both its strong support for abolition and its inclusion of female and black students. There he established a reputation as an intellectual and a philosopher focused on the world of ideas, with a strict moral sense of duty. He was reserved and stoical, qualities which would stand him in good stead on the battlefield.

He ceased his theological studies after a dispute with Charles Finney in 1851, and he became a school superintendent and then a lawyer in the Western Reserve town of Warren, Ohio. In the 1850's the Reserve was as antislavery as Oberlin, so it wasn't surprising that this coming man became politically active there during this age of crisis. [4] His first political allegiance was to the Whig party, the elitist and nationalist principles of which remained his intellectual base. In 1854-55 he became one of the founders of the Republican party of Ohio, and he was a protégé of leading Ohio politician Senator Salmon Portland Chase.

Elected to the Ohio Senate in 1859, he and his close friend, future President James A. Garfield, who represented the adjoining district, quickly became leaders there and gained reputations as fervent anti-slavery radicals. As tensions between North and South festered in 1860, Cox began preparing for what he feared could be a civil war. He asked Ohio Governor William Dennison Jr. for a commission as a General in the Ohio militia, and in his spare time he engaged in an impromptu yet intense education in the history and theory of the military arts. Able to read Greek, Latin, and French, he studied the classic histories of war and Antoine-Henri, Baron Jomini's treatises about Napoleon and the Napoleonic Wars.

When the Civil War began, Cox became Ohio Governor William Dennison's military chief of staff, coordinating war preparations inside and outside the Ohio Senate. When Major General George Brinton McClellan became commander of Ohio volunteers, he and Cox established a close working relationship. McClellan had firmly negative views of volunteer soldiers, but he came to see Cox as an exception. When the war began, Cox sought and received an appointment as a Brigadier General of U.S.

[4] The Western Reserve (or Reserve) is more formally known as the Connecticut Western Reserve. The Reserve was land claimed by the Connecticut Colony and later the State of Connecticut and is now refers to the north-eastern part of Ohio.

Volunteers. He and Garfield agreed that their Radicalism made it essential that they actually participate in the war, and each made a solid reputation on the battlefield during the conflict.

At the time, Cox the citizen-general believed he was as intellectually prepared for command in war as any West Pointer, especially given the limited military training cadets received in that era. The test would be whether his abstract understanding of conflict would be parlayed effectively onto the concrete reality of the battlefield. He also would face the test of how his intellectually-oriented, unemotional temperament, as well as his teetotal and non-smoking behavior, would affect his ability to lead less-educated, hard-drinking, and tobacco-using common men.

Cox's war experiences began in southern Ohio, where his teaching background was helpful when McClellan assigned him to train the new volunteers at Camp Dennison, outside Cincinnati. He then led those forces, and others, into conflict in western Virginia where, despite his inexperience, McClellan, gave him an autonomous command. In July Cox's forces moved down the Kanawha River from Point Pleasant, on the Ohio River, to Charleston (now the state capital of West Virginia which did not exist in 1861) and Gauley Bridge, at the junction of the New River, pushing a Confederate force back into the interior. His actions, paralleling those of McClellan and Brigadier General William Starke Rosecrans to the east, would help secure the region for the Union and pave the way for creation of the new state of West Virginia.

In mid-1862, following a lengthy period in winter quarters, Cox transferred to the Army of the Potomac for the Maryland campaign. Among his subordinates in the 23rd Ohio regiment were future presidents Colonel Rutherford B. Hayes and Sergeant William McKinley.

During a seven-week period from late August to late September, Cox underwent a dizzying ascent from division commander to corps commander to Union co-commander of the left flank at the Battle of Antietam. This relatively-unknown citizen soldier was chosen to lead the federal advance to take Frederick, Maryland, and he also initiated the successful combat at the Battle of South Mountain. As commander of the IX corps, he co-led the Union's left flank at the battle of Antietam on September 17, and he came within a hairsbreadth of defeating Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. For his exploits, he was promoted to Major General of Volunteers.

Cox was then sent back to West Virginia, where in October he effectively stemmed a Confederate effort to re-take control of the incipient state. In 1864, after a lengthy period engaged in military administration in Ohio, he marched with Major General William Tecumseh Sherman to Atlanta as second in command of the Army of the Ohio under Major General John McAllister Schofield. His division broke the critical Atlanta supply line on August 31, leading the Confederates to abandon the city.

In October Sherman, who looked down on volunteer officers, but recognized Cox's abilities, offered him the command of the XXIII corps for his march to the sea. But Schofield convinced Sherman that Cox would be needed for the Franklin-Nashville campaign, deterring Confederate General John B. Hood's attempt to move north through Tennessee. On November 30 Cox commanded the forces on the line at the battle of Franklin, helping ensure the ultimate destruction of Hood's army. Cox then re-joined Sherman in North Carolina and rose to corps command during the battles leading to General Joseph Eggleston Johnston's surrender to Sherman in April1865. For a short time thereafter, Cox was Military Governor of western North Carolina.

Throughout the war, like many of his comrades, Cox fought actively in the political-military wars, struggling for rank and place in the army, while gamely seeking recognition for the military contributions of political generals like himself and the volunteer army. He gained, lost, and then re-gained the rank of Major General, of Volunteers, while his on the job training helped him evolve into an effective Division and Corps commander. In some ways, his four years of warfare would prove to be the most successful professional experience of his life. He did so well as a military man that at war's end Sherman offered to appoint him as a brigadier general in the regular army, an offer Cox refused because he wanted to return to civilian life.

Cox also turned down Sherman's offer because his political horizons seemed unlimited in 1865. He stepped onto the national political stage that year by winning the Ohio governorship and beginning a period of active involvement in national Reconstruction politics. But this successful citizen-general with an unexpected, yet proven military aptitude did not have the kind of "political aptitude" needed for national political leadership in the postwar era.

Cox, along with five other Ohioans (Ulysses S. Grant, Rutherford B. Hayes, James A. Garfield, Benjamin Harrison, and William McKinley), rose to national political prominence in the postwar years. But by the end of 1872 Cox was in permanent political exile. Unlike his Ohio-born presidential colleagues, Cox took an ideological, idealistic, independent, and self-effacing approach to politics. Reflecting his ministerial and professorial background, to him the essence of practical politics was to educate the electorate about relevant issues. On occasion, this made him appear sanctimonious. He also lacked the skill of currying allies if that meant compromise; and, scrupulously honest, he disdained the use of patronage and decried the spoils system. Those traits led him on more than one occasion to take actions which he realized to be impolitic and which led to his political demise.

In 1865 during his successful campaign for governor of Ohio, he decided, against the advice of other party leaders, to deal publicly with the issue of the civil rights and citizenship of the freed African Americans. While fervently anti-slavery, Cox's intellectual roots in the Whig party, his firm belief in Anglo-Saxon superiority, and his war experiences with southern whites and blacks had made him dubious about the feasibility of immediate equality for the African-Americans. He concluded that a

Reconstruction which simply opened political rights to every male citizen was a recipe for race war once the Union army left the South. He predicted that that situation would end in either genocide or in the creation of a servile race.

Instead, he told former Ohio Governor William Dennison in July 1865, "Reconstruction is so important that I must contribute my ideas to the common stock and try to mold public sentiment."[5] Recommending a transition period for black development, Cox advocated creating a de facto new territory along the southeast coast of the nation where blacks would be protected by the military and provided with education by the federal government. None would be forced to live there, but, he reasoned, they would flock there, just as the whites residing there would likely flee. This unique but inherently impractical plan divided him from the Radical Republicans and became a cause célèbre during his gubernatorial campaign. However, it did, as he had predicted, ensure the soldier vote and a solid victory in Ohio.

His second politically fatal step came when for a time he supported President Andrew Johnson's approach to Reconstruction. He believed Johnson's policies were consistent with those Lincoln had planned, and saw them as the best political means to ensure continued Republican rule. In Washington, he used his considerable influence to try to find compromises on Reconstruction policy. Later, Sherman and Grant advocated that Johnson appoint Cox to replace Edwin McMasters Stanton as Secretary of War, which would have obviated the conflict that led to the President's ultimate impeachment. Despite his eventual decision to disavow Johnson, Cox was seen as having "abandoned" the increasingly Radical Republican Party at a critical time. Caught in the middle, Cox's decision not to run for re-election in 1867 reflected his own and the party's unhappiness with his role in Reconstruction.

Cox's penultimate appearance on the national political stage was also short-lived due to his commitment to politically unpalatable principles. In 1869 Grant unexpectedly nominated him to be Secretary of the Interior. Together, Grant and Cox implemented one of the most far-reaching and humane attempts to reform Indian policy. Cox also instituted the federal government's first extensive Civil Service reform program. However, within 18 months he had a falling-out with the President and party leaders over his civil service reforms, and he resigned. He moved to Cincinnati, Ohio, where he spent most of the rest of his life. There in 1872 he became a leader of the Liberal Republican movement trying to oust Grant. The failure of that party was the final nail in Cox's political coffin, though he did serve one term in the House of Representatives from 1877-1879 in the vain hope of influencing the policies of his former military subordinate, President Rutherford B. Hayes.

From 1872 until his death in 1900, Cox firmly established his status as a Renaissance man. He spent time practicing as a lawyer, President of the Toledo Wabash Railway, congressman, Dean of the Cincinnati Law School, and president of the

[5] Cox to Dennison, July 9, 1865, Jacob D. Cox Papers, Oberlin College Archives.

University of Cincinnati. Also, in his spare time, he did scientific research, authoring 32 articles about microscope photography, and he served as president of the American Microscopic Society.

But the war left its mark on Cox, as it did on an entire generation. As a result, his most important post-political career by far was as an influential historian and analyst of the Civil War, and his writings have become his enduring legacy. They continue today to be cited as reliable history, as well as essential primary sources. He was the most prolific author of books about the war from among the participants, and arguably the best, both because of his research skills and his talented pen.

His book on Sherman's Atlanta campaign was the definitive study of that effort for over a hundred years. His in-depth articles for the *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War* series on the 1862 Maryland campaign and his expansion on them in his Reminiscences are a basis for memory about that critical series of movements and battles. They also address McClellan's abilities as a military leader. His book on the Battle of Franklin has been the basis of subsequent analyses of that event. In all he published 4 books and five articles in the Battles and Leaders series. [6]

Cox's magnum opus of military history was his two-volume *Military Reminiscences of the Civil War,* published posthumously in 1900. It is still today cited by historians as a foundation for the memory of many aspects of the war and a legitimately-objective history. Further, Cox's one hundred and sixty-one reviews of Civil War books, from 1874-1900, for *The Nation* magazine played an important role in shaping thinking about and establishing the first phase of memory about the war.

Cox and his wife Helen had seven children, five of whom lived to adulthood. His namesake Jacob Dolson Cox III was a Cleveland industrialist, and his son Kenyon was an artist and muralist whose work included several paintings which are now in the Library of Congress. The Coxes lived their final years together back in Oberlin, Ohio, where he completed research on his memoirs. In return for the free use of the library and other facilities at the college, Cox left his collection of over 2,000 books and his papers to the college. His papers are now in the Oberlin College archives. Cox died in 1900 from a heart attack, and he and much of his family are buried in Spring Grove cemetery in Cincinnati.

[6] Jacob D. Cox, LL.D., *Atlanta* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1882); Jacob D. Cox, *The Battle of Franklin Tennessee November 30, 1864 A Monograph with Maps* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1897); Jacob D. Cox, LL.D., *The March to the Sea Franklin and Nashville* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1898); Jacob Dolson Cox, *Military Reminiscences of the Civil War,* 2vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900); "War Preparations in the North," 1:84, "McClellan in West Virginia," 1:126, "West Virginia Operations Under Frémont," 2:278, "Forcing Fox's Gap and Turner's Gap," 2: 583, "Battle of Antietam," 2:630 in Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel, eds., *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War. Being for the Most Part Contributions by Union and Confederate Officers. Based Upon "The Century War Series",* 4 vols. (New York: The Century Co. 1884-1888).

Jacob Dolson Cox II

Born	October 27, 1828, Montreal, Quebec, Canada
Died	August 4, 1900 at Gloucester Massachusetts
Buried	Spring Grove Cemetery, Cincinnati, Ohio
Father	Jacob Dolson Cox I
Mother	Thedia Redelia (Kenyon) Cox
Career Milestones	1851 B.A. Theology, Oberlin College | 1854-55 Helped found the Republican Party of Ohio | 1859 Elected to the Ohio State Senate | 1861 Appointed Brigadier General of U.S. Volunteers and served under McClellan in the Kanawha Valley Campaign | 1862 Fought at the Battle of South Mountain and at the Battle of Antietam commanding the left flank of the Union Army | 1863 served as a district commander in the Department of the Ohio | 1864 Served under Sherman in the Atlanta Campaign, fought at the Battle of Franklin commanding the Federal defensive line, Promoted to Major General, fought at the Battle of Nashville | 1865 Elected Governor of Ohio | 1869-70 U.S. Secretary of the Interior |1873-7 President, Wabash Railway | 1877-1879 US House of Representatives | 1880-1897 Dean, Cincinnati Law School | 1885-89 President, University of Cincinnati |1882-1900 Conducted scientific research and published papers on microscope photography, authored four books of Civil War history.

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