

Amiable Scoundrel: Simon Cameron, Lincoln's Scandalous Secretary of War

Paul Kahan



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From abject poverty to undisputed political boss of Pennsylvania, Lincoln's secretary of war, senator, chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and a founder of the Republican Party, Simon Cameron (1799–1889) was one of the nineteenth century's most prominent political figures. In his wake, however, he left a series of questionable political and business dealings and, at the age of eighty, even a sex scandal.

Far more than a biography of Cameron, *Amiable Scoundrel* is also a portrait of an era that allowed—indeed, encouraged—a man such as Cameron to seize political control. The political changes of the early nineteenth century enabled him not only to improve his status but also to exert real political authority. The changes caused by the Civil War, in turn, allowed Cameron to consolidate his political authority into a successful, well-oiled political machine. A key figure in designing and implementing the Union's military strategy during the Civil War's crucial first year, Cameron played an essential role in pushing Abraham Lincoln to permit the enlistment of African Americans into the U.S. Army, a stance that eventually led to his forced resignation. Yet his legacy has languished, nearly forgotten save for the fact that his name has become shorthand for corruption, even though no evidence has ever been presented to prove that Cameron was corrupt.

Amiable Scoundrel puts Cameron's actions into a larger historical context by demonstrating that many politicians of the time, including Abraham Lincoln, used similar tactics to win elections and advance their careers. This study is the fascinating story of Cameron's life and an illuminating portrait of his times.

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