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VIOLENCE IN CONGRESS

AND THE ROAD TO

CIVIL WAR

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Battle lines were being drawn.

In Congress, that was no mere metaphor. Thinking back to this period after the Civil War, veterans of the Thirty-fifth and Thirty-sixth Congresses remembered the years between 1857 and 1861 as a time of fierce sectional violence on the floor. These were the years that drove Senators Benjamin Wade (R-OH), Simon Cameron (R-PA), and Zachariah Chandler (R-MI) to create their pact to "fight to the coffin" regardless of the consequences. The "gross personal abuse" inflicted by their slave-state colleagues was insulting their manhood and depriving their constituents of their representative rights. Yet, because of Northern anti-dueling sentiment, Northern congressmen held back and were treated like cowards. "I feel it frequently," Wade admitted.¹¹⁹

The abuse that produced their pact probably took place during a Senate debate over Kansas's constitution. In 1855, free-state advocates had produced an antislavery constitution in Topeka; two years later, slave-owners drafted a competing proslavery constitution in Lecompton, the state's capital. After a messy and corrupted vote on the two constitutions, Kansans had sent both documents to Washington for congressional approval. During an all-night session on March 15, 1858, hostilities peaked. Eager to push through the Lecompton constitution, Robert Toombs (D-GA) threatened to "crush" the Republican Party, provoking an outburst of Republican outrage.¹²⁰

As a result, Republican nerves were already on edge when later that evening Cameron accused James Green (D-MO) of dictating terms to the Republicans: in the course of the argument that followed, each man threw the lie at the other, Cameron took responsibility for his words, and Green hinted at a duel challenge.¹²¹ Cameron's subsequent consultation with Wade and Chandler led to their decision to put an end to such taunts by challenging future offenders to duels. There seemed to

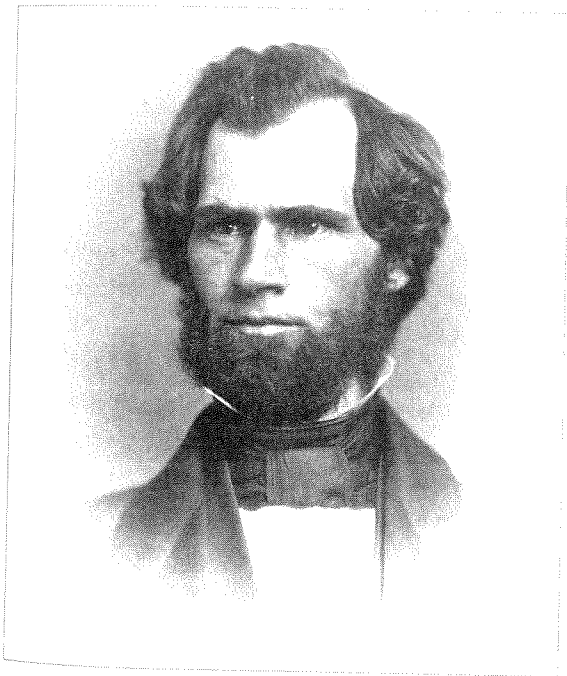
be no other way to counter the "deep humiliation" of the "people of the Free States," and to some degree, their ploy worked. Their willingness to fight checked some abuse. As they later concluded, risking their reputations, their careers, and perhaps even their lives was the price of fighting slavery in Congress.¹²²

For Thaddeus Stevens (R-PA), these years marked the start of armed sectional combat in the House. Discussing the imminent return of Southerners to Congress after the Civil War a decade later, he urged colleagues not to be hasty. The new congressmen seated around him had no memory of Congress as a "camp of armed men." They hadn't seen Robert Toombs and his "gang" render the halls of Congress "a hell of legislation" by rushing with knives and guns "as one yelling body" at Northerners who dared to denounce slavery. Bring the Southerners back, but "first re-arm yourself," Stevens counseled, and "wait until I am gone."¹²³

Stevens was speaking for effect, but he was very specific about the first instance of full-fledged sectional combat on the floor: the February 6, 1858, House melee caused by a clash between the radical Galusha Grow (R-PA) and the equally radical Lawrence Keitt (D-SC), the first time that a group of Northerners confronted a group of Southerners "force against force."¹²⁴ The "battle-royal in the House . . . was the first sectional fight ever had on the floor," wrote former congressman and future vice president of the Confederacy Alexander Stephens, noting that although no blood was shed, there were bad feelings in abundance.¹²⁵ The press agreed. "This is the most important and significant of all the fights that ever occurred in Congress," declared the *Charleston Mercury*. It was "a sectional and not a personal quarrel. It was North and South—not Grow and Keitt." Unlike previous fights, "members fought in battalions. They did not go into a corner or a lobby to fight, or entangle themselves as heretofore, between chairs and desks. They took an ample area—the open space before the Speaker's chair."¹²⁶

The reasons for this change were many. Sectional passions were already flaring because of the Supreme Court's landmark Dred Scott decision of 1857, which ruled that enslaved people and their descendants could not be American citizens, and that the federal government could not ban slavery in western territories. Endorsing the spread of slavery and suggesting that the Court was a tool of the Slave Power, it was deeply felt by Northerners.¹²⁷

Lawrence M. Keitt,
1859 (Courtesy of the Library
of Congress)



Galusha A. Grow, 1859
(Courtesy of the Library of
Congress)

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It didn't help matters that the fight took place in the middle of an overnight session, virtually a guarantee of violence. The topic of debate—Kansas's proslavery Lecompton constitution—was also sure to enflame tempers and push people to extremes. Democrats made matters worse by delaying a vote because some Southerners were missing in action and every vote counted. Liquor also played a role, as it almost inevitably did during evening sessions; many of those missing Southerners, boozing at bars, were so dead drunk when dragged into the House that they were kept out of the chamber until it was their turn to vote.¹²⁸

The two men at the heart of the fight were also lightning rods of conflict, though for different reasons; the combative Grow was a leading House Republican with a cut-and-thrust style of debate and strong antislavery views, and Keitt was an almost comically hot-tempered fire-eater who was ever and always defending Southern honor.¹²⁹ Their confrontation was the spark that set the congressional tinderbox aflame.

Not surprisingly, Keitt set things off. At about two o'clock in the morning, Grow was conferring with a Pennsylvania Democrat on the Democratic side of the House. As Grow headed back to his seat, someone asked to submit a motion out of order, and Grow objected. Keitt, who by some accounts was dozing and by many accounts was tipsy, was alert enough to yell that Grow should object on his own side of the House. Grow replied that it was a free hall and he could stand where he pleased, at which Keitt (supposedly muttering, "We'll see about that") stalked up to him and demanded to know what Grow meant, perhaps assuming that talk of a "free hall" was a backhanded slap at Southerners, or perhaps—knowing Keitt—assuming nothing at all; it didn't take much to set him off. When Grow repeated his words, Keitt grabbed Grow's throat, vowing to teach the "black republican puppy" a lesson. Knocking Keitt's arm away, Grow declared that he refused to be bullied by a slave driver cracking his whip. Keitt responded by grabbing Grow's throat again, at which Grow slugged him hard enough to knock him flat. And here the trouble began.

A group of Southerners immediately rushed over, some to aid Keitt, some to attack Grow, and some to calm things down, though the latter group ultimately got swept up in the scrimmage. Seeing a pack of Southerners descend on Grow, Republicans rallied to his aid, streaming across the chamber from their side of the hall, jumping on desks and chairs in



A comical view of the Keitt-Grow rumble (Barksdale's toupee is on the ground)
(Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society)

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their haste to save a brother Republican, bringing a rush of Southerners in their wake. The end result was a free fight in the open space in front of the Speaker's platform featuring roughly thirty sweaty, disheveled, mostly middle-aged congressmen in a no-holds-barred brawl, North against South.

Press accounts of the fight vary, but they generally agree that John "Bowie Knife" Potter (R-WI) and the fighting Washburn brothers—Cadwallader (R-WI), Israel (R-ME), and Elihu (R-IL)—stood out in the rumble, with the barrel-chested Potter jogging straight into the scrum, throwing punches as he tried to reach Grow.¹³⁰ At one point, he slugged William Barksdale (D-MS), who mistakenly reeled around and socked Elihu Washburne in return. (Elihu liked his Washburn with an *e*.) Potter responded by grabbing Barksdale by the hair to punch him in the face, but to his utter astonishment, Barksdale's hair came off; he wore a toupee. Meanwhile, John Covode (R-PA) had raised a spittoon above his head and was looking for a target, while the ashen-faced Speaker pounded his gavel for all it was worth and ordered the sergeant at arms to grab the mace and do something. Within a few minutes, people had settled back in their seats—thanks, in part, to the hilarity of Barksdale's flipped wig—and the House went back to arguing until its adjournment at 6:30 a.m. With the exception of a few black eyes and some cuts and scrapes, most of the combatants were none the worse for wear; a few men had reached for weapons, but none used them. (The *Globe* summed up the episode as a "violent personal altercation" between Keitt and Grow in which "several members seemed to participate.")¹³¹

The most notable aspect of the fight was the mass rescue by Republicans, who had rushed over to Grow with fists flying because they thought that Southerners were staging a group assault. This was Slave Power thinking; it was knee-jerk distrust of Southerners as brutal, domineering, determined to cow Northerners, and on the attack. This distrust was no back-of-the-mind matter of speculation. It was immediate; Republicans jumped into action in seconds. They also felt that at long last, they had taught Southerners a lesson. As Grow put it, Southerners had long been "under the delusion that Northern men would not fight." By running "from one side of the Chamber to the other . . . with fists clenched and arms flying," Republicans had taught Southerners that "Northern men

will fight in a just cause."¹³² In essence, Republicans were a different kind of Northerner. French's friend Daniel Clark (R-NH), boarding with French during this Congress, declared this to Robert Toombs when Toombs threatened to crush the Republican Party. He wouldn't have an easy time of it, Clark warned. "A different class of men now came from the North . . . They are sent not to bow down, but to stand up."¹³³

The Republican press echoed Grow, glorying in the show of strength and savoring the vicarious pleasure of slugging Southern blowhards. The *Boston Traveler* listed a string of "comforting reflections" about Northern "pluck." Several newspapers gleefully noted that Reuben Davis (D-MS), who had recently given a rabid speech about conquering the North, got a black eye from Potter. (Davis claimed to have tripped over a chair.)¹³⁴ Best of all was the knockdown of the swaggering Keitt. "The great State of South Carolina (in the person of her valorous (!) representative, Mr. Keitt,) lies kicking in the dust," gloated *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, particularly relishing the fact that Grow, a representative of David Wilmot's district, had floored a man who helped Brooks cane Sumner.¹³⁵ In this rematch of the caning, the North had won. Many papers thought that after years of bullying Northerners, Southerners had finally learned a lesson. They had been "beaten with their own weapons, in their own way, and on their own ground."¹³⁶ "The South is cowed," claimed a *New York Times* letter-writer. "I know what I say—COWED."¹³⁷ (Hard-pressed for a comeback, the Democratic *New York Day Book* said that Keitt made a manly apology.)¹³⁸

Judging from the Southern press, the South wasn't cowed. It was angry and defensive. Southern newspapers aimed most of their venom at the "Black Republican" press, so brutal in its accusations that it "cannot fail to be imitated in Congress."¹³⁹ The Northern press was full of lies, charged Southern papers. Grow, not Keitt, had started the fight. Grow, not Keitt, was insolent. Grow, not Keitt, had violated rules of order by not objecting from his seat. Nor was this fight anything special; such tussles happened all the time.¹⁴⁰ Equally grating, Northern papers were full of "vulgar boasting."¹⁴¹ Northerners were entirely too focused on "the mere powers of the pugilism" and Grow's "chance-blow," charged the *Virginia Sentinel*. They didn't understand that honor wasn't a matter of muscle.

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