2 Reviews

Write review

The Field of Blood: Violence in Congress and the Road to Civil War

By Joanne B. Freeman

From the moment that Brooks inflicted his savage blows, the caning of the abolitionist Senator Charles Sumner (R-MA) on May 22, 1856, has been steeped in meaning. Generations of historians have plumbed its depths in explaining the coming of the Civil War and exploring American values at a peak moment of strife.[37] But in the distance of time, its full context has been lost. As violent as it was, Sumner's caning wasn't shocking *only* because it was violent. It was the nature of the caning's violence, its timing, and its connection to swirling conspiracy theories that gave the assault its full sectional punch and national impact. That impact, in turn, profoundly affected public expectations of congressmen, and in so doing changed the workings of Congress.

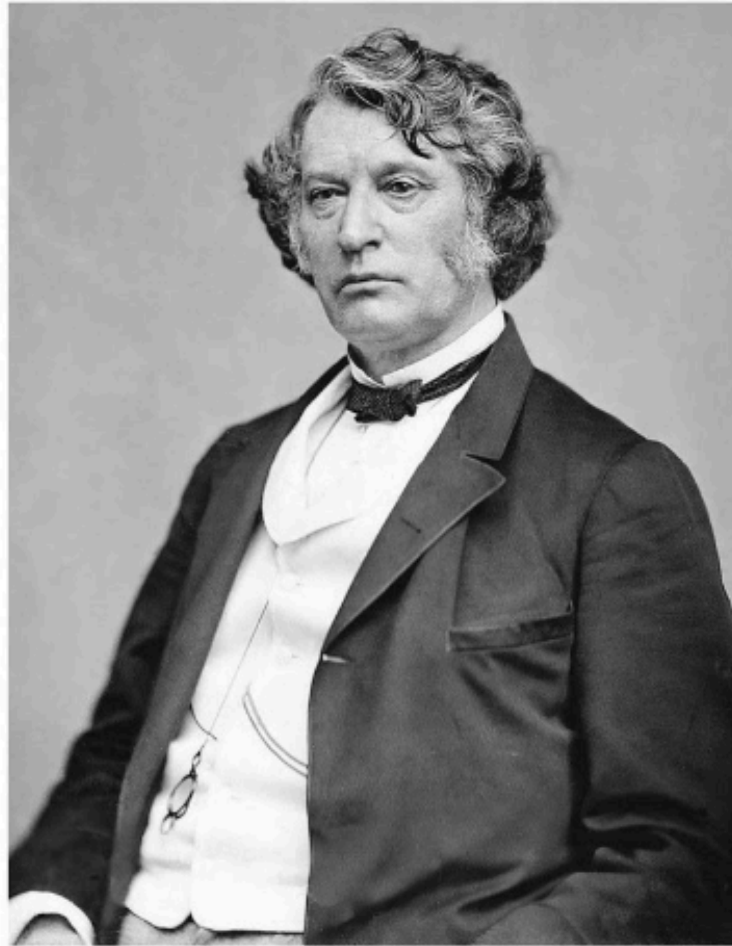
The caning was prompted by Sumner's "Crime Against Kansas" speech, a monumental effort that took five hours over May 19 and 20, filling 112 printed pages. Two months past, Sumner had been itching to confront the "Slave oligarchy."[38] His speech fulfilled that goal and more.

This wasn't Sumner's first oratorical stab at the Slave Power, nor would it be his last. Like most of his speeches, it was polished to a sheen before delivery, typeset, and ready for mass mailing as he stood to speak. As was his habit, Sumner was reaching for a broad national audience, hoping to rouse widespread public support for his cause. In many ways, given the unlikelihood that persuasion would solve the seemingly irresolvable slavery problem, Sumner wasn't really speaking to the Senate at all.

With that larger audience in mind, Sumner let loose. He first discussed the brutal "rape" of Kansas by proslavery forces, and condemned Southern "plantation manners" and his Southern colleagues' habit of "trampling" congressional rules "under foot"—an echo of John Quincy Adams's complaint of fifteen years past.[39] The next day, he outlined proposed remedies for the Kansas problem, demanding its admittance to the Union as a free state. Biting, defiant, and filled with sexual innuendo about slaveholders and their love of slavery, Sumner's speech was a tour de force. It also fulfilled the wishes of many of his constituents and supporters, who had been urging him to strike at "Southern bravado" and "crush these fellows into submission."[40]

Throughout his speech, Sumner took special aim at three senators who had attacked him during the Kansas-Nebraska debate two years past—James Mason (D-VA), Stephen Douglas (D-IL), and Andrew Butler (D-SC), a relative of Preston Brooks—insulting them personally as well as politically. Many Southerners felt the sting. "Mr. Sumner ought to be knocked down, and his face jumped into," declared Representative Thomas Rivers (A-TE).[41] Butler's friends felt that he was "compelled to flog" Sumner.[42] Even as Sumner had been drawing his speech to a close, Douglas—pacing impatiently in the back of the chamber—had muttered, "That damn fool will get himself killed by some other damn fool."[43] Given that Sumner wasn't a fighting man, he seemed to be *asking* Southerners "to kick him as we would a dog in the street."[44] Fearing that was the case, a few

of Sumner's friends asked to walk him home, but he refused.

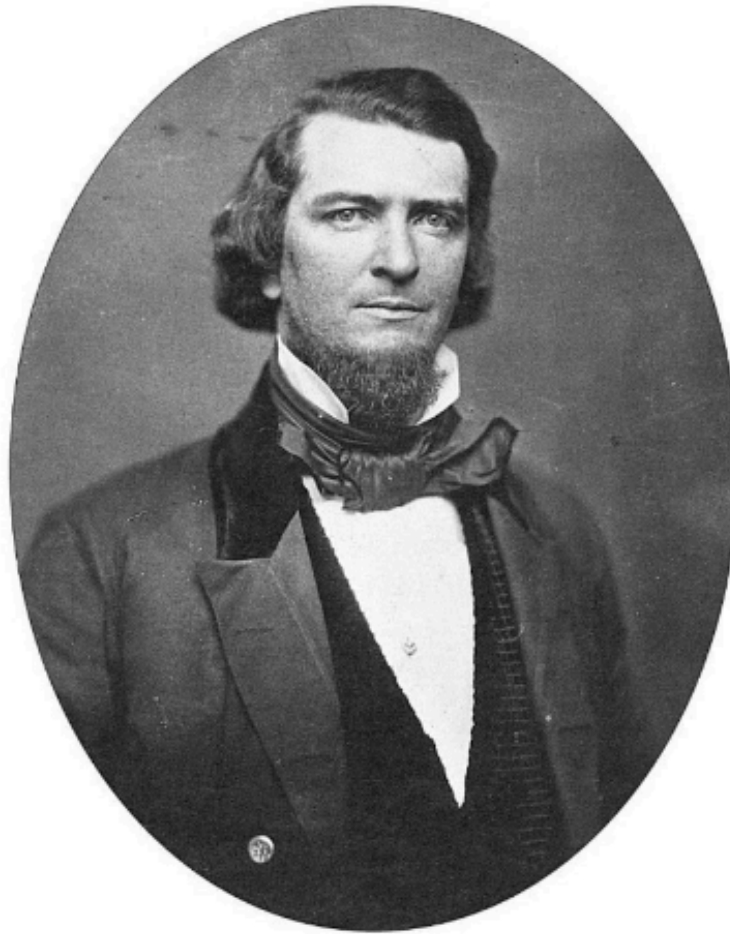


Charles Sumner, ca. 1855–65 (Courtesy of the Library of Congress)

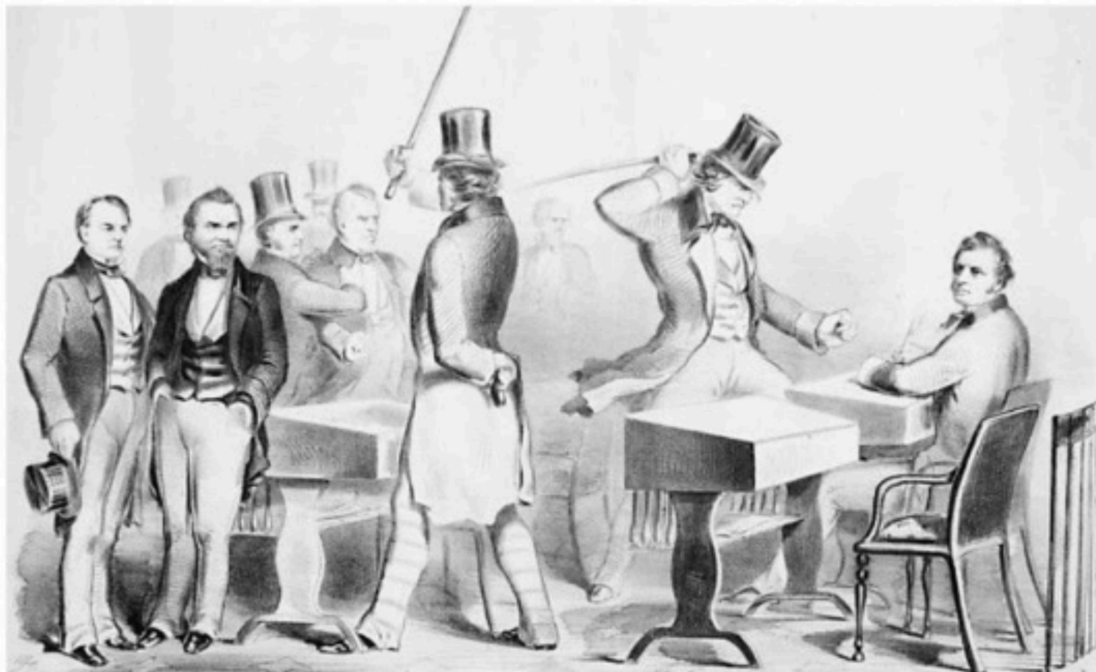
The next day, Brooks decided to take action. A newspaper account of Sumner's speech confirmed that he had insulted Butler, South Carolina, and indeed, the entire South. Considering it his duty as a South Carolina representative to resent the dishonor, Brooks decided to beat Sumner rather than challenge him to a duel because he knew that the New Englander would never accept a challenge *and* because sending a duel challenge "would subject me to legal penalties more severe than would be imposed for a simple assault and battery."[45] Here was the dark logic of the anti-dueling law. Better to beat Sumner than to run the more severe legal risk of challenging him to a duel.

So on May 22, as Sumner sat at his Senate desk franking copies of his Kansas speech for mailing, Brooks entered the Senate, cane in hand. Noticing several women in the chamber, he sat down and impatiently waited for them to leave. (Pointing to the last remaining woman, he asked a Senate secretary, "Can't you manage to get her out?" When the secretary joked that ousting her would be "ungallant" because she was "very pretty," Brooks took a second look and replied, "Yes; she is pretty, but I wish she would go.") Finally, the moment was right. Walking up to Sumner's desk, Brooks declared: "Mr. Sumner, I read your speech with care and as much impartiality as was possible and I felt it was my duty to tell you that you have libeled my state and slandered a relative who is aged and absent and I am come to punish you for it." At that, he raised his cane and began to beat Sumner over the head, inflicting more than a dozen brutal

blows before his cane shattered, with his friend Laurence Keitt fending off intervention.



Preston Brooks, ca. 1856, allegedly taken shortly after he caned Sumner (Courtesy of the Library of Congress)



This 1856 print captures Northern outrage at Sumner's caning. Representative Laurence Keitt, hiding a gun behind his back, stands to the left of Brooks and Sumner, preventing intervention. In the background, Senator John J. Crittenden is being held back. (*Arguments of the Chivalry* by Winslow Homer. Courtesy of the Library of Congress)

Stunned and bloodied, Sumner struggled to get away, but was held fast by his desk, which was bolted to the floor; he ultimately wrenched it free before collapsing. As luck would have it, the elderly Senator John J. Crittenden of Kentucky—who had watched Jonathan Cilley die in 1838—happened to be in the Senate chamber, and he ran toward Brooks yelling, "Don't kill him!" But by the time he reached Sumner, Brooks had stopped. Bloody and barely conscious, Sumner was carried from the chamber.

Although Brooks couldn't possibly have imagined the full impact of his actions before his assault, he made several choices that would amplify its power a thousandfold. Initially intending to obey the rules of congressional combat, he violated them in ways that couldn't be forgiven. His first instinct was good: before attacking, he confirmed the precise wording of Sumner's insults in the press. But from there his decisions went downhill.

Take, for example, his decision to attack Sumner in the Senate chamber. Physical violence on the floor was usually spontaneous; angry words or hostile charges escalated until someone jumped to his feet and headed toward his antagonist with no good intentions. Men who staged violent "collisions" in the House or Senate were usually chastised, as was Foote for arming himself before picking a fight with Benton. As people insisted after the resulting scuffle, deliberate assaults belonged on the street. Sam Houston's 1832 caning of William Stanbery (AJ-OH) on Pennsylvania Avenue was typical of this kind of predetermined clash; before the assault, Houston had hefted his stout hickory cane in the House in full view of Stanbery as an advance warning.[46] Brooks's first impulse was in line with this tradition; he fully intended to attack Sumner out of doors. Only after two fruitless days of watching for Sumner on the Capitol grounds did he decide to confront him in the Senate, and even then he initially planned to ask Sumner to step outside.[47]

The powerful symbolism of a senator beaten to the ground on the Senate floor shows the wisdom of staging such attacks outdoors. Nothing that happened in the Capitol seemed purely personal, and everything that happened there could be played up by the press. This was particularly true in the context of the late 1850s, when a Southern assault against a Northern congressman in the Capitol, inflicted with calm intention, seemed like Slave Power brutality and arrogance personified. Even some Southerners felt that a line had been crossed. "All agree that if Brooks had beaten him anywhere but *on the head & in the Senate*, he would but have served him right," wrote Charlotte Wise, wife of the flame-throwing Henry Wise's cousin Henry.[48] Brooks's friend Henry Edmundson (D-VA) of Campbell-fighting fame, acting as an advisor of sorts, had good reason for questioning the wisdom of staging the confrontation in the Senate, asking a colleague for advice on the matter even as the assault began.[49]

Brooks also failed to make his fight fair. Of course, his most grievous sin along these lines was caning an unarmed man pinioned by his desk. But attacking that man without warning was also foul play. Unlike Houston, Brooks didn't warn his victim of his violent intentions, nor did his confidants Edmundson and Keitt, and Sumner wasn't known to carry weapons for self-defense. The committee report on the caning recommended the House "declare its disapprobation" of both Edmundson and Keitt for this "reprehensible" lapse, as well as recommending that Brooks be expelled for the caning.[50] (A minority

report suggested taking no action, claiming that the matter was a case for criminal courts.)

When it came to boosting sectional hostilities, the caning's timing couldn't have been better. One day past, the town of Lawrence, Kansas, founded by antislavery settlers, had been ransacked by proslavery assailants, and the press was rife with bloodshed. Newspapers were also filled with talk of the murder of a waiter at Willard's Hotel by a California congressman. On May 8, the Southern-born Philemon Herbert (D-CA) had shot a waiter dead for refusing to serve him breakfast past the appointed hour (though not before provoking a dish-throwing, chair-tossing brawl). Even before the caning, the Northern press had portrayed the murder as proof of a "systematic" Slave Power reign of violence.[51] Brooks's attack seemed like more of the same but ten times worse. As the *New Hampshire Statesman* put it, the assault on Sumner had created a "hostility against the Slave Power more intense than ever." It was another "link in the chain of flagitious outrages upon the North by which we are debased forever."[52] Violence in Congress and in Kansas were now inseparably linked.

In essence, Sumner's caning was a final, brutal insult that drove home the meaning of a string of violent encounters, and the Northern press was quick to spread that message—very quick; thanks to the telegraph, *The New York Times* received its first news of the caning a mere forty-five minutes after it happened.[53] The *Boston Atlas* heard that message loud and clear, noting: "We understand perfectly well that nothing could give [Southerners] more exquisite pleasure than to kill us all."[54] Linking the beatings of Wallach, Greeley, and Sumner with the murder at Willard's Hotel and events in Kansas, the *New York Courier and Enquirer* editor James Watson Webb—now a Republican—concluded, "No reasonable man should doubt that the Slave power have unalterably determined to extend the area of their now merely *local* institution; and if possible to render it *National*. The bowie-knife, the pistol, and the bludgeon ... to be used in effecting this result."[55] Webb's column was reprinted widely, in part because, as the *Lowell Daily Citizen* explained, Webb, once a "highly conservative" defender of the slavery status quo, was now preaching resistance to the Slave Power with its own weapons. Webb's conversion was a powerful story in and of itself.[56] His harsh attack on the caning also earned him a letter from Brooks hinting at a duel.[57]

This print from the presidential election of 1856 attacks the Democratic platform as proslavery, pro-South, and pro-violence, linking "Bleeding Kansas" (in the left background) with the caning of Sumner (in the left foreground). (Courtesy of the Library of Congress)

Republican congressmen were just as quick to stress the caning's meaning, as was Sumner, who seized on the power of the moment even as he was carried off the Senate floor; moments later, still bloodied from the beating, he told William Seward that he hoped it would serve the antislavery cause.[58] It did. Sumner's speech became a national sensation. *The New York Times* printed 40,000 copies and sold out by May 28; within a month, 90,000 copies had been sold.[59] Caught up in the wellspring of outrage that surrounded the caning, Republican congressmen voiced their grievances with gusto, raising fears of violent outcomes. Hannibal Hamlin (R-ME) believed that someone would be shot down before the session closed. "Let it come," he wrote to William Pitt Fessenden. "If we do not stand manfully and fearlessly to the work before us, we ought to be slaves."[60] Fessenden was more optimistic; he thought that violence might subside for a time, but not because of cooler heads. Southerners might think twice before attacking because Northerners had "made up their minds not to be beaten to death without making such an experiment dangerous, and in my judgment such a determination is a duty of the Country, & the cause."[61] This was a severe message indeed: it was the patriotic duty of good Republican congressmen to fight. Brooks heard that message, admitting to his brother that his main risk was "assassination, but this you must not intimate to Mother."[62]

Southerners also were enraged and prepared to take action; by their account,

Sumner's speech had been an outrage, Northern aggression was flaming out of control, and Brooks's response was praiseworthy. As Governor Henry Wise of Virginia put it, "How can we stand continual aggression everywhere—in Congress, in the pulpit, in the Press?"[63] Even the mere idea of a Southern conspiracy was insulting; hearing the claim, the ever extreme Thomas Clingman (D-NC) jumped to his feet and declared the Northerner who uttered it a liar. When Lewis Campbell of Kansas fame responded by asking if Clingman meant anything personal—an opening for a duel—the matter fizzled.[64] If Brooks was punished for combatting Southern degradation, the result might be ugly, many claimed. Visiting Washington a week after the caning, Wise's cousin Henry thought the House might "ring with vollies from revolvers" when Brooks's expulsion came up for debate.[65] Laurence Keitt thought that if Northerners fought force with force, the nation's capital would "float with blood."[66]

As Wise predicted, the debate of Brooks's expulsion in July was explosive. The feeling on the floor was made apparent in a letter sent to Speaker Banks on July 10 by a Democratic congressman so fearful of being exposed as a compromiser that he didn't sign his name, identifying himself only as "A Well Wisher." Because of the intense feelings on the floor, the writer feared an "impending calamity."

> Do you know, Sir, that there exists at this time an almost murderous feeling, between certain members of the North and South, and that it is with some difficulty that a few peace-loving and happily influential associates, can prevent demonstrations upon the floor, which in the present state of excitement, would almost certainly lead to a general melee and perhaps a dozen deaths in the twinkling of an eye.

A number of Southerners were "constantly on the qui vive to prevent the throwing of missiles first from their side." Would Banks do the same among his friends? Would he discourage them from exploiting the crisis with Buncombe speeches full of abuse that would "goad their opponents beyond bearing?"[67] Clearly, as much as congressmen were performing for a national audience, the feelings on the floor were real.[68] Not everyone was ready to throw missiles, but a few missile-throwers could cause chaos.

Despite that warning, one Republican after another condemned Brooks and the "Sumner outrage," and howled defiance at the Slave Power. Brooks saw it coming and swore that "if this is done there will be an exciting time." He stayed true to his word. Although he initially planned to "degrade the most prominent" Republican "to degrade their party too," he went on something of a degradation spree, initiating duels with three Republicans who spoke out against him, insultingly dismissing a fourth Republican as not worth dueling (after allegedly threatening him in the lobby of Willard's Hotel), and trying to bludgeon two Republicans at that same hotel while roistering with friends in a drunken haze.[69] Keitt also nearly fought a duel with a Republican, and Robert Toombs (D-GA) was rumored to have considered one. Alexander Campbell (R-OH), who proposed a House investigation of the caning, was also threatened with violence.[70] All told, the caning spawned at least eight confrontations that session, as well as countless threats.