

EXTRA! EXTRA!

The Caning of Charles Sumner



Summary: In the spring of 1856, blood was also being shed in the Senate in Washington, D.C. over slavery.

Directions: Read the introduction and summarize the event. Then select any 2 news paper articles from the time period - one that is biased to the north, and one that is biased to the south. Create a T-chart that compares how the incident was reported. Then, at the bottom, note the biases.

Northern Article ↓ Southern Article

May 22, 1856

The Caning of Senator Charles Sumner

On May 22, 1856, the "world's greatest deliberative body" became a combat zone. In one of the most dramatic and deeply ominous moments in the Senate's entire history, a member of the House of Representatives entered the Senate chamber and savagely beat a senator into unconsciousness.

The inspiration for this clash came three days earlier when Senator Charles Sumner, a Massachusetts antislavery Republican, addressed the Senate on the explosive issue of whether Kansas should be admitted to the Union as a slave state or a free state. In his "Crime against Kansas" speech, Sumner identified two Democratic senators as the principal culprits in this crime - Stephen Douglas of Illinois and Andrew Butler of South Carolina. He characterized Douglas to his face as a "*noise-some, squat, and nameless animal . . . not a proper model for an American senator.*" Andrew Butler, who was not present, received more elaborate treatment. Mocking the South Carolina senator's stance as a man of chivalry, the Massachusetts senator charged him with taking "*a mistress . . . who, though ugly to others, is always lovely to him; though polluted in the sight of the world, is chaste in his sight - I mean,*" added Sumner, "*the harlot, Slavery.*"

Representative Preston Brooks was Butler's South Carolina kinsman. If he had believed Sumner to be a gentleman, he might have challenged him to a duel. Instead, he chose a light cane of the type used to discipline unruly dogs. Shortly after the Senate had adjourned for the day, Brooks entered the old chamber, where he found Sumner busily attaching his postal seal to copies of his "Crime Against Kansas" speech.

Moving quickly, Brooks slammed his metal-topped cane onto the unsuspecting Sumner's head. As Brooks struck again and again, Sumner rose and lurched blindly about the chamber, futilely attempting to protect himself. After a very long minute, it ended.

Bleeding profusely, Sumner was carried away. Brooks walked calmly out of the chamber without being detained by the stunned onlookers. Overnight, both men became heroes in their respective regions.

Surviving a House censure resolution, Brooks resigned, was immediately reelected, and soon thereafter died at age thirty-seven. Sumner recovered slowly and returned to the Senate, where he remained for another eighteen years. The nation, suffering from the breakdown of reasoned discourse that this event symbolized, tumbled onward toward the catastrophe of the Civil War.

Editorials on the Caning of Senator Charles Sumner

② **Freedom in Debate.** *Indianapolis, Indiana, Locomotive [Democratic]* (23 May 1856)

Mr. Sumner, Senator from Massachusetts, was attacked in the Senate Chamber by Mr. Brooks, Representative from South Carolina, and so beaten with a cane, that at last accounts he was in dangerous and critical condition. The assault was made while Mr. Sumner was sitting at his desk, writing, entirely unprepared, and is alleged, for an insult on the State, and on a relative, in the speech of Mr. Sumner. Committees were appointed in both houses to investigate the matter, and pass on the conduct of Brooks. Freedom of speech should be guaranteed to all public men in debate on public questions, and the spirit of ruffianism exhibited by Brooks cannot be too highly censured. This is another result of the bitter personal partisan spirit, that characterizes the press and public speakers of the day, and while it continues, will excite men to acts of lawless outrages that they would not think of in calmer moments.

③ **Attack on Mr. Sumner.** *Boston, Massachusetts, Bee [American]* (23 May 1856)

-- By referring to our telegraphic column it will be seen that Hon. Chas. Sumner, M. C., of this city, was ferociously and brutally assaulted in the National Senate Chamber yesterday, by a cowardly scoundrel named Brooks. An outrage so gross and villianous was never before committed within the walls of the Capitol. It is rendered additionally infamous and barbaric from the fact that fiendish bystanders prevented persons who were disposed from interfering. This bully Brooks who has disgraced the name of man, ought to be branded as a villain of the blackest dye, and then mercilessly kicked from one end of the continent to the other. The black mark of Cain will stand out on his brow to the last moment of his disgraced life.

(23 May 1856)

4

By the news from Washington it will be seen that Senator Sumner has been savagely and brutally assaulted, while sitting in his seat in the Senate chamber, by the Hon. Mr. Brooks of South Carolina, the reason assigned therefore being that the Senator's remarks on Mr. Butler of South Carolina, who is uncle to the man who made the attack. The particulars show that Mr. Sumner was struck unawares over the head by a loaded cane and stunned, and then the ruffianly attack was continued with many blows, the Hon. Mr. Keitt of South Carolina keeping any of those around, who might be so disposed, from attempting a rescue. No meaner exhibition of Southern cowardice -- generally miscalled Southern chivalry -- was ever witnessed. It is not in the least a cause for wonder that a member of the national House of Representatives, assisted by another as a fender-off, should attack a member of the national Senate, because, in the course of a constitutional argument, the last had uttered words which the first chose to consider distasteful. The reasons for the absence of collision between North and South -- collision of sentiment and person -- which existed a few years back, have ceased; and as the South has taken the oligarchic of violence against what they hate -- whether it be a man, a party, a law, or the Constitution of the United States. The U. S. Constitution ordains that a member of Congress shall not be called to account for words spoken in debate, and Mr. Brooks has sworn to support this very Constitution which he deliberately violated in the Capitol where the oath was taken, breaking his oath and violating the Constitution and perpetrating what looks like an act of gross cowardice, all at the same time, and yet the South Carolina Democracy resolve that for his conduct he is worthy of all praise. This only proves, that, bad as the representative may be, he is no worse than the State he represents.

We do not believe that Senator Butler approves the conduct of his nephew. Sumner's bitter attack upon Mr. Butler in that gentleman's absence was contemptible, and contempt would have been a very proper punishment to be meted out for it. The absurd and wicked resolutions which the South Carolina people are adopting will serve only to exasperate to a still greater degree the public sentiment of the North. But this is what the South Carolinians want. They rejoice in whatever seems likely to promote the dissolution of the Union. There were twice as many traitors in South Carolina in the days of the Revolution as in any other State in proportion to population, and we think that her soil as a general rule grows worse men now than it did then.

Public Approval of Mr. Brooks.

Columbia, South Carolina, South Carolinian

Democratic]

(27 May 1856)

We were not mistaken in asserting, on Saturday last, that the Hon. Preston S. Brooks had not only the approval, but the hearty congratulations of the people of South Carolina for his summary chastisement of the abolitionist Sumner.

Immediately upon the reception of the news on Saturday last, a most enthusiastic meeting was convened in the town of Newberry, at which Gen. Williams, the Intendant, presided. Complimentary resolutions were introduced by Gen. A. C. Garlington, and ardent speeches made by him, Col. S. Fair, Maj. Henry Sumner, and others. The meeting voted him a handsome gold-headed cane, which we saw yesterday, on its way to Washington, entrusted to the care of Hon. B. Simpson. At Anderson, the same evening, a meeting was called, and complimentary resolutions adopted. We heard one of Carolina's truest and most honored matrons from Mr. Brooks' district send a message to him by Maj. Simpson, saying "that the ladies of the South would send him hickory sticks, with which to chastise Abolitionists and Red Republicans whenever he wanted them."

Here in Columbia, a handsome sum, headed by the Governor of the State, has been subscribed, for the purpose of presenting Mr. Brooks with a splendid silver pitcher, goblet and stick, which will be conveyed to him in a few days by the hands of gentlemen delegated for that purpose. In Charleston similar testimonials have been ordered by the friends of Mr. Brooks.

And, to add the crowning glory to the good work, the slaves of Columbia have already a handsome subscription, and will present an appropriate token of their regard to him who has made the first practical issue for their preservation and protection in their rights and enjoyments as the happiest laborers on the face of the globe.

Meetings of approval and sanction will be held, not only in Mr. Brooks' district, but throughout the State at large, and a general and hearty response of approval will re-echo the words, "Well done," from Washington to the Rio Grande.

Richmond, Virginia, Whig [American]
(31 May 1856)



The daily and hourly reports from Washington concerning

the condition of Sumner, are all very strange and funny, and lead us to believe that the Abolition wretch, with his Abolition physicians as accomplices in the trick, is playing possum. We hear one moment that he is "comfortable and deing well" --we hear the next, that his condition is "extremely critical," and that no one is allowed to see him; and then a few hours afterwards we are favored with a different story.

Now, for our part, we never have believed that Sumner was sufficiently hurt to make it necessary for him to take to his bed at all. Least of all do we believe that the well-deserved gutta- perching he received was of so severe a character as to detain him in confinement for more than a week. But we believe it is a miserable Abolition trick from beginning to end -- resorted to to keep alive and diffuse and strengthen the sympathy awakened for him among his confederates at the North Nigger-worshipping fanatics of the male gender, and weak-minded women and silly children, are horribly affected at the thought of blood oozing out from a pin-scratch. And Sumner is wily politician enough to take advantage of this little fact.

We suggest that the Senate appoint a committee, consisting of one Southern man, to ascertain Sumner's actual condition. We think the bare sight of a hundredth part of a Southern man would impart to the possuming wretch strength enough to enable him to take up his bed and walk -- yea, walk even to Boston.