



The Caning: The Assault That Drove America to Civil War

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A Turning Point in American History, the Beating of U.S. Senator Charles Sumner and the Beginning of the War Over Slavery

Early in the afternoon of May 22, 1856, ardent pro-slavery Congressman Preston S. Brooks of South Carolina strode into the United States Senate Chamber in Washington, D.C., and began beating renowned anti-slavery Senator Charles Sumner with a gold-topped walking cane. Brooks struck again and again—more than thirty times across Sumner’s head, face, and shoulders—until his cane splintered into pieces and the helpless Massachusetts senator, having nearly wrenched his desk from its fixed base, lay unconscious and covered in blood. It was a retaliatory attack. Forty-eight hours earlier, Sumner had concluded a speech on the Senate floor that had spanned two days, during which he vilified Southern slaveowners for violence occurring in Kansas, called Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois a “noise-some, squat, and nameless animal,” and famously charged Brooks’s second cousin, South Carolina Senator Andrew Butler, as having “a mistress. . . who ugly to others, is always lovely to him. . . . I mean, the harlot, Slavery.” Brooks not only shattered his cane during the beating, but also destroyed any pretense of civility between North and South.

One of the most shocking and provocative events in American history, the caning convinced each side that the gulf between them was unbridgeable and that they could no longer discuss their vast differences of opinion regarding slavery on any reasonable level. *The Caning: The Assault That Drove America to Civil War* tells the incredible story of this transformative event. While Sumner eventually recovered after a lengthy convalescence, compromise had suffered a mortal blow. Moderate voices were drowned out completely; extremist views accelerated, became intractable, and locked both sides on a tragic collision course.

The caning had an enormous impact on the events that followed over the next four years: the meteoric rise of the Republican Party and Abraham Lincoln; the *Dred Scott* decision; the increasing militancy of abolitionists, notably John Brown’s actions; and the secession of the Southern states and the founding of the Confederacy. As a result of the caning, the country was pushed, inexorably and unstoppably, to war. Many factors conspired to cause the Civil War, but it was the caning that made conflict and disunion unavoidable five years later.

The Caning: The Assault That Drove America to Civil War Details

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From Reader Review The Caning: The Assault That Drove America to Civil War for online ebook

Michael Austin says

This was an odd book to read and a difficult one to review. On the one hand, it's journalistic approach to the topic makes it much more accessible and, in many places, more interesting, than the half-dozen or so more scholarly books on the topic. But the accessibility comes with a certain amount of sensationalism (not that the caning incident itself lacked for sensationalism), a confused chronology, and a tendency to view the entire buildup to the civil war through the lens of the incident that it is attempting to explain.

The author acknowledges in the introduction that he is dealing with events that have been much discussed and written about in American history. His one contribution, he suggests, is a fuller picture of Preston Brooks, the cane-er in the famous 1856 incident in which Brooks savagely beat, and nearly killed, Massachusetts senator Charles Sumner after Sumner delivered a fiery anti-slavery (and anti-South Carolina) speech on the Senate floor. Brooks was a South Carolina congressman and a distant relative of Senator Andrew Butler, also of South Carolina, who was one of the primary targets of Sumner's famous speech, "The Crime against Kansas."

In Puleo's narrative, Brooks is a moderate, responsible family man who acts as he feels he must under the code that defines his life, while Sumner is a brash, arrogant bomb-thrower from a dysfunctional family who could have made all of the points he wanted to make without personally antagonizing Butler and others. Puleo does not go so far as to exonerate Brooks, but he comes too close for my comfort--largely, I believe, because this sympathetic picture of Brooks is a way for him to distinguish himself from the many others who have written books on this very subject. But, even with the narrative on his side, Brooks comes off as a needlessly violent hothead whose life is governed by a deeply flawed conception of shame and honor. That he became a hero to the South after his attack shows, at a very minimum, that the cultural values of the North and the South were, at the middle of the 19th century, too far apart to coexist in the same nation--something that Puleo points out frequently and analyzes well.

My primary objection to *The Caning*, however, is that it can't seem to decide whether it is a dual biography of Sumner and Brooks or a history of America from 1856-1860. It frequently moves from one mode to the other, giving biographical details of its primary characters in some chapters and rehearsing the standard "steps to the Civil War" details (the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the Dred Scott decision, the Lecompton Constitution, etc.) in others. As a result of this scattered approach, it does neither job as well as it would have if it had chosen one approach to its topic and stuck with it.

For all this, however, the book held my interest throughout. Though I knew most of the information it presented, I found it a succinct, well-written explanation of a critical event in Antebellum American history and a decent situation of that event in the larger historical context.

Meghan says

Puleo does an interesting job making Preston Brooks more sympathetic than Charles Sumner. The historical background is well done, as is the aftermath of the caning (which occurs about midway through the book's timeline), but I can't help but wonder how skewed the characterizations of Sumner and Brooks turned out.

Jnotes99 says

Very interesting book on the caning of Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner by South Carolina Congressman Preston Brooks which was sparked by Sumner's anti slavery speech in 1856. The books takes an in-depth look at the backgrounds of both men and the impact on the ongoing debate about slavery that led to the Civil War. I learned a bit more about events leading to the civil war as well as an appreciation for one of Massachusetts most outspoken anti-slavery voices. Recommended.

Mary Jane says

Great book. For what I would consider historical information, the author was great at making it readable and interesting. Added a different perspective on the instigators to the civil war.

R.K. Byers says

the writer makes such a good case arguing that one brutal beating caused the Civil War that I'm ready to see him tie WWII to a single bad haircut.

Kusaimamekirai says

This is a fantastic read for so many reasons. As a civil war buff I had some cursory knowledge of Charles Sumner but before reading this book I hadn't realized how influential he really was. Puleo does a marvelous job of outlining the contrasts between the assailant Preston Brooks who was personally a gentleman and liked across the political aisle, and Sumner who could claim few friends for his brusque and unlikeable demeanor. Yet it's difficult to not ultimately sympathize with Summer who despite being cold in his personal relations burned brightly with his hatred of slavery. Puleo does a wonderful job of highlighting just how much the injustice of slavery ignited Sumner and why he is criminally overlooked as a pivotal figure in civil war America to this day. I thoroughly enjoyed every page of this story and everyone with interest in this chapter of American history would do well to read this book.

Carole says

Interesting event that must have been such an intense, poignant moment in history. More detail than I needed. I ran out of time to finish the book before it needed to go back to the library.

Donald Luther says

Post hoc ergo propter hoc. When I was teaching Combined Studies, colleague Michael Feuer included a lesson on the English half of the syllabus on logical fallacies. It was, I think useful to the kids and served a purpose for their subsequent years at Oak Ridge.

But the fallacy I opened this review with wasn't among those he treated. I used to do it in MEH during their senior year. I used part of Mark Twain's table talks from 'Mark Twain Tonight!' to get the point across, about how, during the Civil War, because his employment as a steamboat pilot had been ended by the war, he had enlisted in the Confederate Army, served for two weeks, deserted... and the Confederacy fell. (I could have used a similar anecdote about my service in the Vietnam War, but Twain was funnier.)

This is a good book, but it does suffer from the fallacy of linking every subsequent event to the caning of Charles Sumner, whether John Brown's Pottawatomie Massacre, the Dred Scott Decision, the Lincoln-Douglas Debates, or the firing on Fort Sumter. His treatment of the caning itself, and of the particulars--Preston Brooks, Andrew Butler and Charles Sumner--is excellent. He handles the motives and background of each, both individually and in their Congressional interactions, well and thoughtfully. He shows how the caning served to sharpen feelings on the North-South axis and how it turned up in subsequent news reports and speeches.

But he goes, I think, too far in declaring that this 90-second incident, however horrific and notable, whatever its impact on conversation and attitude at the moment, was the direct precursor and had a direct effect on each of the steps leading to Civil War that followed over the next five years.

One other small thing that gave me pause regarding Puleo's political and historical coverage. In discussing the election of 1860, he makes a very salient point about how, though Lincoln received only about 40% of the popular vote, he received more electoral votes than all of the other candidates combined. Unfortunately for Puleo, that's the requirement of the Constitution. To be elected, the President must win a majority of the electoral votes, not a mere plurality.

I don't know if he is trying to rehabilitate the principals in his work. His handling of Sumner in his epilogue, pointing out how few Bostonians today even understand his role and significance, is perhaps a little unsettling to me as a history teacher. His discussion of Brooks' reputation at his death, about six months after the attack, and the gradual loss of his fame over time, is perhaps more understandable; Brooks, after all, really had only a singular moment in the sun. But if he is seeking to reinstate them to something of their former lustre, the hyperbolic treatment of the caning may not be the best road to doing so. We get no picture of Sumner's activities during the War or during Reconstruction (though that is probably an unfair statement, since that is not the book Puleo set out to write). But without that data, we have a Senator, with all his faults, who delivered two speeches in the run-up to the Civil War. That's not much to hang his reputation on.

Andrew says

Knowing the historical significance of the caning quite well, this book was a disappointment. It was surely well written, his facts were mostly accurate, but it's the interpretation of those facts that doomed Puleo's work from the introduction. It was, as many other reviewers noted, a book built around the fallacy of "post hoc ergo propter hoc." Violence was nothing new to Congress (i.e. the Griswold-Lyon fight in 1798 or Senator Foote aiming a pistol point blank at Thomas Hart Benton in 1850). The caning of Sumner did not provoke other incidents, notably the Civil War itself (see his comments in the epilogue. Looking at the historiography of the 1850s, I don't see how he could argue that the Sumner caning sped up the country's

move down the path to war). The caning was emblematic of rising tensions, but it was not a cause of the escalation in the years following. Had the caning not happened, the Dred Scott decision still would have been written, John Brown still would have raided Harpers Ferry, and Abraham Lincoln would still have been elected in 1860. Puleo overblew the event.

Kayse says

On May 20th, 1856, Massachusetts senator Charles Sumner delivers his most famous, most scathing anti-slavery speech in reaction to "Bleeding Kansas." In his speech, he personally attacks three of his Southern colleagues, including the much-respected Andrew Butler. On May 22nd, 1856, South Carolina statesman--and kinsman to Butler--Preston Brooks corners Sumner at his desk in the senate chamber and beats him in the head with his cane until it snaps in half. Here is the true "first" battle of the American Civil War. It's incredible how this astounding event, which is often just a footnote in a history text, had such a catastrophic effect on the very fabric of our nation. This seemingly innocuous event, which many tried to paint as a mere personal quarrel between the two congressmen, represented the beginning of the end of the working relationship between the north and the south; neither side could even *feign* courtesy anymore. And like a domino, the caning directly precipitated or otherwise influenced other major antebellum events, including John Brown's massacre in Pottawatomie, Kansas (and his later unsuccessful raid on Harper's Ferry), the sudden and successful rise of the Republican Party (and ultimately, Abraham Lincoln), the outrageous Dred Scott decision, and perhaps even the Civil War itself. This book took a close look at the caning and examined and analyzed it, truly putting the event in perspective to its place in history. A great read for any Civil War buff or abolitionist-historian.

Mike says

Drama is difficult when the results are known, but in this historic recounting of the famous caning by southern Brooks to northern Senator Sumner there is a tension that you look for in good novels.

Bloody Kansas, a country tired of the horrible institution called slavery and a south comfortable in the inconsistent application of whip, chain, and inhumanity of the institution meant that conflict was inevitable.

Even religion could not expel or justify this blight on national history, but the results of one man - Representative Brooks - taking a cane to beat another man - Charles Sumner in the halls of congress seemed to be the keystone to the shift in the debate.

No longer was it the dance that Madison had caused around this albatross, but rather it was an open and flagrant conflict that could be embodied in the bloody and invalid Sumner.

The time for genteel discussion and compromise was past. The caning represented so much more and the bloodshed in Kansas was beyond comprehension as the bullies of Missouri poored across the border.

Ruffians they were but much more, this was a flagrant violation of the right of a state to choose for itself and the emotions brought John Brown and his boys to righteous indignation and eye for an eye retribution.

All in all the act of caning made Lincoln possible and war inevitable. Following the tableau is fascinating

and absorbing.

Roger says

Excellent history of the bravery and principles of Charles Sumner and its' direct connection to the Civil War. His recovery from terrible wounds from the caning in the primitive medicine of the day is equally remarkable.

John-Paul says

With relative frequency, we here in the U.S. see video of lawmakers in some foreign country coming to blows in their government chamber over a piece of legislation or a heated debate. Unfortunately, we tend to think this kind of thing happens only "over there," but in one of the most fascinating (and after reading this book I now know, pivotal) moments in the history of our country, this kind of raw violence actually took place in our own Senate chamber one May day in 1856. At first blush it could be seen on a rather superficial level: a man loses his temper and goes out of control on another man who said rather incendiary things about his family and region. However, Puleo makes a compelling argument that this brutal act's underlying themes were far deeper and more wound into the fabric of who Northerners and Southerners were at this time. It was stunning to read how the South reacted to Brooks' brutality and how the North embraced the antislavery cause of Sumner. The author also made a compelling argument for how this single event was one of the (several) triggers that eventually led to the Civil War. It was a moment in time when everyone, North and South, was united in one thought: that the time for agreement on the issue of slavery was at an end.

It's clear that neither man realized how profound an impact this act would have on the rest of their lives. Puleo does a masterful job tying in other threads around the country at this time, including John Brown's rampage in Kansas, the *Dred Scott* decision and the rise of the Republican party to national prominence over the course of four short years. Best of all, the book ends with a poignant coda which shows how even at the lowest point in our country's short history, the process of healing began to take place. A great read that shows that even the simplest moment of violence or hatred (whether it is the murder of an archduke or the beating of a U.S. senator) can change the world.

Colleen says

It took me a long time to get through this book. Not because it is long. Not because it is a hard read. It took me a month because, hard as I tried, I could not prevent myself from drawing parallels to the state of our country today. The animosity between factions. the personalities of the primary players the distrust of the media outlets, were all too real, as if "ripped" from the headlines of today. I would become distraught knowing the ultimate outcome of the actions of Preston Brooks in May, 1856, which made me put the book down until another day.

I would wholeheartedly recommend this book to anyone of my friends who teach American History. Not only does the caning lead to the Civil War, the author draws a straight line from the caning, to Dred Scott, to John Brown, to Lincoln's election. The book is well written, well researched, and in a different climate than today's political chaos, an easy read. It may be difficult to find, it is probably out of print. If anyone of my

friends wants my copy, they are welcome to it. Drop me a line. But only if I can hand it to you. I won't be mailing it to anyone.

Peter says

It's embarrassing how little I knew about Charles Sumner or this incident prior to reading "The Caning," but Stephen Puleo brilliantly dissects how Preston Brooks' attack on Sumner in the Senate chamber was in many ways the defining precursor to the Civil War. Fascinating stuff, superbly researched and presented.
