

WILLIAMJAMES HULL HOFFER. *THE CANING OF CHARLES SUMNER: HONOR, IDEALISM, AND THE ORIGINS OF THE CIVIL WAR.*
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Reviewed by Daniel Lawrence Slusser

How critical was Preston Brooks's attack on Charles Sumner in May of 1856 to the coming of the Civil War just four years later? Was the attack really about the defense of Senator Andrew Butler's honor, or were there ulterior motives at play? These are some of the questions Williamjames Hull Hoffer seeks to answer in his latest book, *The Caning of Charles Sumner*. This event has been researched by many historians over the years, but the visceral nature of the attack and its proximity to the Civil War continue to capture the imagination of modern historians. Hoffer's account is a welcome addition to the volumes written on the subject and offers rare insights to the event that only a constitutional and legal scholar can bring to the table.

Hoffer examines the political forces behind the caning of Sumner that raised sectional tensions in the late 1850s. While arguing that sectionalism and cultural divisions were a driving aspect of the matter, Hoffer does not overstate his argument or assert that an overwhelming homogeneity existed among the people within the opposing sections. An important aspect of Hoffer's study is his examination of the legal battle over slavery beginning in the late eighteenth century, and how this battle could no longer be restrained to

written and spoken words in the 1850s. The fact that Sumner and Brooks were both lawyers speaks to the breakdown of the law during this time (p. 126).

Hoffer's approach is made clear in the opening of the book: "One of the purposes of this type of book is to enable readers, particularly students, to recapture some of the drama of the past while standing far enough removed from it to examine why they respond to those events as they do." Hoffer continues, "We must remind ourselves to be historically minded, to see the world as they saw it in their time and place (p. 5)." With this pointed rejection of the postmodern perspective on history, Hoffer gives a careful review of the history of the conflict over slavery in the United States leading up to the 1850s, and how these events shaped opinions of "the peculiar institution" in the North and South.

Hoffer accomplishes his analysis by first reviewing the backgrounds of the specific persons involved in the caning as well as the political and legal conflicts over slavery made by their predecessors. He believes that the legal issues created by ambiguous compromises contained within the Constitution set the stage for the conflict that would follow. Hoffer bluntly describes the Constitution's weaknesses stating, "poor draftsmanship and the magisterial desire to compromise over vast fissures in the populace about issues such as slavery left behind a minefield for future generations to navigate, particularly with regard to the admission of new areas to the country (p. 37)." These unsettled issues led to the controversial compromise of 1850 and the Kansas-Nebraska Act that followed four years later. He explains how each of these compromises only stoked the conflict over slavery and how each failed to settle the issue.

Within this context Hoffer reviews the circumstances surrounding Sumner's "Bleeding Kansas" speech. He does an outstanding job of explaining the pressures placed on Sumner by the election that loomed just six months into the future. Sumner's need to secure reelection may have prompted him to political grandstanding in order to gain popularity with his constituents rather than to motivate members of the Senate toward specific actions (pp. 63-65). Based on this speculation, Hoffer concludes that Sumner had no intention of impugning the honor of Senator Andrew Butler. While Hoffer makes a strong point in identifying much of Sumner's motivations, I feel that attributing Sumner's rude ad hominem attacks against Butler to politics as usual is a little

off the mark. While we cannot be sure that Sumner intended to challenge Butler's honor, we can be sure that Sumner intended to insult him.

The Caning of Charles Sumner also offers some significant insights into the trial of Brooks following the attack. Hoffer's expertise in the law truly shines here and offers a perspective that few historians are qualified to give. His analysis of how the law was carried out as well as an examination of Brooks's interpretation of the law and the Constitution help the reader to better understand Brooks and his Southern comrades. Hoffer also successfully argues that the attack and Brooks's handling of the aftermath was calculated to provide greater political support for Brooks in his reelection campaign (pp. 84-95).

The final two chapters of the book answer the question, "Did the caning of Charles Sumner cause the Civil War (p. 96)?" Hoffer explains that the sectional strife that rocked the nation in the 1850s, and the Civil War that followed, "did not begin with a reaction to the caning of Charles Sumner, but it certainly followed its trajectory and was a natural outgrowth of it (p. 106)." Another significant piece of the war causation question, as it relates to the caning, is Jason Brown's testimony that the Sumner beating motivated his father John Brown's first slayings of those opposed to abolition in Kansas (p. 111). These murders, and Brown's later attempt to procure the weapons at Harpers Ferry for use in inciting a slave insurrection, ignited stronger feelings both for and against the institution of slavery and brought the nation much closer to war. Hoffer's analysis of this domino effect that traces the Civil War back to the Sumner beating is nuanced and fair. Hoffer makes no wild claims, nor does he take the radical position that there was a single cause of the Civil War. He adroitly examines the probability of the main theories and offers an appropriate amount of hedging against each one.

The Caning of Charles Sumner is not without its weaknesses, however. There is no discussion of historiography and there is a dearth of citations throughout the book. Hoffer appears to be aware of this issue and has sought to mitigate it with his inclusion of an "Essay on Sources" that lists his sources divided by subject. While this inclusion can certainly aid a scholar in research on the caning and the setting that influenced it, footnotes or endnotes would make a welcome inclusion in a second edition of the book.

Additionally, Hoffer does not deal with many of the specifics of the attack itself and the events that occurred during the two day period between the time that Sumner made his "Bleeding Kansas" speech and when Brooks

attacked Sumner. Given the title chosen for the book, a discussion of the specifics would seem to be in order. Although David Donald has covered this aspect of the attack in detail, a recounting of it in this monograph would add some interesting background to the book. A more in-depth review of antebellum Southern culture as offered by Bertram Wyatt-Brown would also help the reader to understand how Brooks's version of the requirements of the Southern Code of Honor applied, or did not apply, in this specific case. Such additions would help to round out an otherwise outstanding study.

My main criticism of Hoffer's book concerns his conclusion that Sumner was not out of line in making his speech: "Sumner did not provoke the attack. He did not shout epithets directly at Brooks or Butler or South Carolina. In legal terms he did not use 'fighting words.' The orations rhetoric was incisive but well within the tradition of classical rhetoric and meant to be (p. 129)." This seems to be a bit of a stretch as I do not believe that the tradition of classical rhetoric sanctioned the use of ad hominem attacks mocking the impairments of stroke victims.¹

Hoffer claims in the epilogue that any indictment of Sumner for his remarks, and any expression of sympathy for Brooks, is proof of the immortality of the "Lost Cause" myth. This also seems to be an overstatement of the case in defense of Sumner. Holding Sumner responsible for his inappropriate remarks is not the same as excusing Brooks. While blaming the victim of a crime is an unsavory proposition, the truth is that Sumner insulted Butler, and Sumner's Northern friends said as much to Sumner following his speech.² If Sumner had the same presence of mind as his Northern colleagues, he would not have rudely articulated such personal attacks against Butler.

Even so, this does not excuse Brooks. When Brooks improperly decided to place Sumner in a category beneath that of a gentleman, Brooks sought to indefensibly justify a vicious beating in which his victim had no chance to defend himself either verbally or physically, let alone allow a second to represent him. Here lies the proof of Brooks's guilt even when examined within the context of the cultural norms of the antebellum South. When Brooks bent

¹ Sumner ridiculed Butler's tendency to spit while speaking as a result of a partial paralysis of his lips likely caused by a stroke.

² David Donald, *Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960); 289.

the rules of the code that he claimed to follow in order to gratify his pride, he proved that he was a coward who was unworthy of the gentlemanly title he claimed for himself. In short, Sumner's speech was out of line and Sumner should have known that such personal attacks would generate retribution; however, when Brooks overreacted and attacked an unarmed Sumner without warning he dishonored himself along with the society that he claimed to defend.

As we review the events of the 1850s, taking into account Sumner's and Brooks's roles during that time, we can take comfort that the practice of slavery was brought to an end by the Civil War that began five years after the attack. While we cannot be sure that the assault set off an unstoppable chain of events leading to the Civil War, it seems clear that Sumner's blood was not shed in vain. Perhaps then Brooks and Sumner can be viewed as the catalysts the nation needed to right the wrong that was "the peculiar institution?"

William James Hoffer has produced an outstanding monograph and I recommend it to readers both inside and outside of the academy. His clear writing and thoughtful analysis combine to create an interesting telling of this tumultuous period in American history that is sure to enrich its readers.