

IN DEFENSE OF SOUTHERN HONOR: PRESTON BROOKS AND THE ATTACK ON CHARLES SUMNER

By Daniel Lawrence Slusser

On May 22, 1856, South Carolina Congressman Preston Brooks approached the desk of Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner following a meeting on the floor of the Senate chamber. As Sumner was busily writing, Brooks calmly announced in a low voice, “Mr. Sumner, I have read your speech twice over carefully. It is a libel on South Carolina, and Mr. Butler, who is a relative of mine.”¹ These were the last words Sumner heard before he was repeatedly struck by Brooks’s cane.² As the blows rained down on Sumner’s head, he attempted to rise from his chair and defend himself. However, his thighs were pinned down between his chair and his desk, which was anchored to the floor of the Senate chamber—Sumner was in no position to escape. As Sumner

¹ David Donald, *Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960), 294. Brooks had intended to say more but cut his speech short when it looked like Sumner would try to stand.

² *Ibid.*, 294. This is Sumner’s version of Brooks’s speech. Brooks’s version is longer and more detailed but Donald finds Sumner’s version more reliable. For Brooks’s version of the speech see: Harold S. Schultz, *Nationalism and Sectionalism in South Carolina 1852-1860* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1950), 117.

struggled, Preston Brooks continued using his cane to lay brutal stripes across his victim's head until Sumner, in a final act of desperation to save his own life, applied his adrenaline-fueled strength to tear his desk from its moorings.

Sumner received close to ten stripes to the head at this point. The blows tore open his scalp and blood poured into his eyes, rendering him temporarily blind. Coupled with the confusion resulting from concussions to the grey matter within his skull, this blindness left him just as defenseless as he was while trapped beneath his desk. Yet, Brooks was unyielding, and continued to strike at Sumner even after his cane had snapped in two. Sumner began to flail his arms about randomly, convulsing uncontrollably as moaning guttural noises emanated from his mouth, likely symptomatic of a seizure caused by the beating. Brooks continued to strike. Lapsing into total unconsciousness, Sumner began to fall, and knocked over another anchored desk. Before he could hit the ground, however, Brooks caught him by the lapel of his jacket and held him up as he continued with his beating.

After a total of thirty blows had been applied to Sumner's skull, what was left of Brooks's cane had disintegrated into splinters, leaving only the gold handle intact in his fist. The beating only came to an end when fellow Senators and Congressman, reacting to the ruckus, came to Sumner's aid and restrained Brooks. They described the shoulders of Sumner's jacket as being saturated with blood through to his waistcoat and shirt underneath, both of which were also covered in blood.³ Sumner subsequently laid in critical condition for months after the attack and did not return to his seat in the Senate for another three years.

What motivated Preston Brooks's vicious attack on Charles Sumner? The short answer can be found in Brooks's preface to the attack: Brooks believed himself to be defending the honor of his family and fellow citizens of South Carolina. But even this, possibly oversimplified, answer raises a number of questions. Why did Brooks believe this attack, which today seems grossly disproportionate to the offense, to be justified? Was Brooks's response to Sumner's speech appropriate in antebellum Southern culture? Does this attack point to any cultural

³ Donald, 294-297; Schultz, 117.

themes that were promoted and maintained in the antebellum South? After reviewing the circumstances leading up to the attack and examining the cultural pressures to defend honor within antebellum Southern society, I believe that the answers to these questions will show that the “Bleeding Sumner” incident represented a microcosmic example of the cultural motivations for the Civil War.

The speech that had offended Brooks had been delivered by Sumner two days prior to the attack. In the speech, Sumner condemned the ongoing violence in “Bleeding Kansas” and accused South Carolina Senator Andrew Butler of promoting such violence by virtue of his expressed desire that Kansas would emerge from the conflict as a slave state. Sumner also referred to Butler as an American equivalent of Don Quixote, claiming that he had taken a “harlot” mistress that, in Butler’s deluded mind, was a woman of virtue—the mistress Sumner referred to was slavery.⁴ Sumner also ridiculed Butler’s physical impairments that caused him to slur his speech and emit spittle as he spoke.

Butler’s cousin, Preston Brooks, was deeply offended when he heard of Sumner’s insulting remarks. Yet, Brooks did not act impulsively. He waited until the speech had been transcribed and after “carefully reading” the speech twice and conferring with friends, he made the decision to attack Sumner. In his deliberations he never considered whether or not he should take offense to Sumner’s rhetoric. He only concerned himself with how Sumner should be punished. After considering a number of traditional options, including dueling, lashing with a horsewhip, or beating with a cowhide, Brooks decided on the use of a *gutta-percha* cane as an appropriate, and supposedly durable, weapon. Brooks decided against the traditional use of a horsewhip or a cow’s hide because Sumner was three inches taller than Brooks and at least thirty pounds heavier. Sumner could have easily overpowered Brooks if given an opportunity to wrest the weapon from his grasp. Given this issue, Brooks decided on a *gutta-percha* cane with a gold handle that weighed eleven and one-half ounces and tapered from one

⁴ Charles Sumner, “On the Crime Against Kansas (1856),” in *The World’s Famous Orations*, vol. 9, ed. William Jennings Bryan and Francis Whiting Halsey, 160-173 (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1906), 168.

inch at the handle to three-quarters of an inch at the end. The light weight of the cane would allow Brooks to make repeated quick strikes to disable Sumner at the beginning of the fight and thereby prevent a defensive counter-attack.⁵

Just in case Brooks was harboring any thoughts of not redressing Sumner's insults, his friends had continually asked him following Sumner's speech: "Has the chivalry of South Carolina escaped, and is this to be tame submission?" Not responding to such criticism would certainly have left Brooks powerless in his home state, as he would have been seen as devoid of honor and courage.⁶ Although Brooks had stated in a truce with a Northern congressman two years earlier that he had abandoned sectionalism and instead supported what he termed "Constitutionalism," the offense to his state and family honor was too great to be ignored. He felt this had to be answered swiftly and severely, regardless of any intimations in the past that would have tolerated a rude difference of opinion from a Northerner, especially a Northerner as outspoken as Charles Sumner.

It is possible that Brooks's need to be seen by his peers as a man of honor was his highest priority. Without his reputation as a "man of honor," he was unlikely to gain campaign supporters or Southern endorsement of his motions in the House of Representatives.⁷ The concept of honor was the cultural cornerstone of the gentlemen's society in the antebellum South. While this concept was certainly not foreign to those in the North, it took on a different significance there. Honor in the North referred to one's personal morality, honesty, integrity, and reliability. To have honor in the South, however, a gentleman needed all of these qualities and to be vigorously supportive of the Southern way of life.

This need to support the Southern way of life was founded on the premise that Southern culture was perfect. The insistence on perfection was applied to every aspect of Southern life, ranging from the South's slave-supported agricultural economy to Southern customs, Southern

⁵ Donald, 291.

⁶ Schultz, 116; Donald, 289.

⁷ Preston S. Brooks, *The World's Famous Orations*, vol. 9, 174-176 (see note 4), 174.

preferences in literature, and even leisure activities. Each of these institutions and customs had to be defended aggressively lest they be esteemed to lose their perfect luster.

A key reason that sectionalism developed in antebellum America was because Southerners resented that Northerners had altered traditional American culture by adopting industrialism and abolitionist beliefs. Southerners perceived these changes as a slight on conservative Southern culture. For Northerners to suggest that any variance to this tradition represented a more “enlightened” approach to life, struck at the heart of Southern identity and Southern pride in its traditions.⁸ Southern gentlemen, however, had a means of dealing with others’ claims of superiority—the “Southern Code”.

The Southern Code was not a written law, but an unspoken tradition that prescribed proper behavior and specific punishment for those who deviated from the “proper” course. It covered nearly every aspect of a Southern gentleman’s life, including: how a gentleman should speak to a woman, the proper relationship between a white man and his slave, the proper mode of dueling with other gentlemen, and the appropriate means of punishment for slander.⁹ Yet, the Code’s prescribed punishments were not meant to apply solely to the uncouth brigands in the North. In the Southern gentleman’s mind they were applicable to any dispute between men in the North or the South. In an argument in 1848 between Georgia State Judge Francis Cone and future Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens, for example, the latter ended up being stabbed eighteen times by the former over a misunderstanding regarding a rumor that Cone had challenged Stephens’s honor.¹⁰ This violent defense of honor was part of a long tradition of Southern justice

⁸ Charles S. Sydnor, “The Southerner and the Laws,” *The Journal of Southern History* 6, no. 1 (Feb. 1940): 16; Edward Pessen, “The Similarities between the Antebellum North and South,” in *Major Problems in the Civil War and Reconstruction*, ed. Michael Perman, 2nd ed., 11-30 (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 29.

⁹ Both Charles S. Sydnor and Jack Kenny Williams outline the basic tenants of the “Southern Code” in detail, see: Sydnor, “The Southerner and the Laws” and Jack Kenny Williams, “The Code of Honor in Ante-Bellum South Carolina,” *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 54, no. 3 (July 1953): 113-128.

¹⁰ Lucian Lamar Knight, *Georgia’s Landmarks, Memorials, and Legends* (New York: Pelican, 2006), 38.

that had been handed down for generations. Andrew Jackson's mother famously taught him in Tennessee to "[never] sue anybody for slander or assault and battery. Always settle them cases yourself!"¹¹ Jackson was obedient to his mother's counsel and lived to fight in many duels in the defense of his personal and family honor.¹²

In the decades leading up to the Civil War, the values that the Southern Code defended were intensified. Disagreements over Northern non-enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 and the ongoing battle taking place in "Bleeding Kansas" served to fuel hatred for Northern abolitionism in the hearts of Southern men, especially slave owning aristocrats. Because the North did not have a "Gentlemen's Code" like the Southern Code, Southerners were flabbergasted that Northerners allowed speech that specifically ridiculed traditional American beliefs such as the need for—and righteousness of—slavery. In the face of this apparent lack of respect for tradition exhibited by Northerners, Southerners retreated to the familiar emotional and intellectual territory carved out by Southern traditional culture and the Southern Code. This was evident in the South's strong embrace of literature that romanticized the concept of the chivalrous gentleman knight fighting to protect the honor of fair maidens and family. The favored author of such books was Sir Walter Scott, made famous for his classic adventure tales such as *Ivanhoe* (1820), *Rob Roy* (1817), and *Waverly* (1814), among many others. Mark Twain quipped that prior to the Civil War, the South had "Sir Walter disease."¹³ Modern historian Rollin Osterweis wrote, "Instead of looking awkwardly for the days of knighthood, the South was convinced that it [was] living in them."¹⁴

The decades preceding the Civil War saw the emergence of a new type of gentleman known as the Southern cavalier. These cavaliers were a kind of puffed up Southern gentleman playboy that viewed himself as

¹¹ Sydnor, 12; Augustus C. Buell, *History of Andrew Jackson: Pioneer, Patriot, Soldier, Politician, President*, vol. 2 (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1904), 411.

¹² Robert Vincent Remini, *Andrew Jackson* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 36-37.

¹³ Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning, and Recovery* (New York: Picador, 2004), 50.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

a valiant knight of royal white descent who claimed the right to demand reverence. Sumner ridiculed this Southern identity in his “Bleeding Kansas” speech, accusing Andrew Butler of living in an imagined world of chivalrous knighthood fueled by repeated readings of fantasy adventure books.¹⁵ Given Osterweis’s observation that Southern cavaliers truly saw themselves as knights, Sumner’s insinuation that the Southern cavalier was essentially an “emperor with no clothes” could not be tolerated. It struck directly at the heart of Southern identity and the concept of honor held by the cavaliers and stripped them of it in dramatic fashion. Brooks and his peers could not allow such an insult to go unanswered without losing credibility and tacitly admitting that his kinsmen had been living a farce of an existence.¹⁶

Southerners on the whole agreed with Brooks’s actions in defense of his honor, whether it was imagined or not.¹⁷ This is evidenced by the resounding support Brooks received from Southerners following the beating. Numerous canes were sent to him with notes encouraging a repeat of the attack on Sumner and other Northern abolitionists. One such example was sent by an elderly female constituent of Brooks’s that read, “the ladies of the South would be pleased to send [Brooks] hickory sticks with which to chastise abolitionists and Republicans.”¹⁸ Many newspapers heralded the attack as a righteous example of the kinds of actions that were then required to combat the increasing Northern disrespect for Southern values.¹⁹ Brooks even bragged, “The fragments of the stick are begged for as sacred relicts.” The *Richmond Enquirer* announced, “[The abolitionist Republicans] have grown saucy, and dare to be impudent to gentlemen...The truth is, they have been suffered to

¹⁵ Charles Sumner, “On the Crime Against Kansas (1856),” in *The World’s Famous Orations*, vol. 9, 160-173 (see note 6), 168.

¹⁶ Schultz, 108; Schultz records that Brooks along with other South Carolina Congressmen wrote open letters published in local papers asking for “knights to go to battle in Kansas in support of property rights” (i.e. slavery) in May 1856.

¹⁷ Donald, 288

¹⁸ Schultz, 118.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 117-120.

run too long without collars. They must be lashed into submission.”²⁰ Another Southern paper celebrated the, “classical caning which this outrageous Abolitionist received... at the hands of chivalrous Brooks.”²¹ When a vote was taken in the House of Representatives to decide if Brooks should be expelled from the organization on account of his assault on Sumner, all but one of the Southern congressmen voted against expulsion.²² This broad support of Brooks was clearly a sign that the vast majority of Southerners believed strongly in the authority of the Southern Code. Not the least of which was Andrew Butler, who defended Brooks’s actions by saying that his cousin “[acted] under the dictates of high honor.”²³ Brooks defended himself by describing the attack as a quest for protection of honor in his speech on July 14, 1856 to the House of Representatives. He proclaimed, “Whatever insults my State insults me...I should have forfeited my own self-respect, and perhaps the good opinion of my countrymen, if I had failed to resent such an injury by calling the offender in question to a personal account.”²⁴ As if to signify that the House was not worthy of a man of Brooks’s caliber and honor, Brooks resigned his seat in the House at the end of his speech, but was promptly reelected by his constituents to another term in November.

Despite what Brooks, his constituents, and the papers were saying, support for Brooks’s actions was not unanimous in the South. While it is true that only one Southern congressman voted for expelling Brooks, Charles Sumner’s memoirs list three Southern congressmen that apologized for Brooks’s behavior.²⁵ Given the political pressure from other Southern leaders to protect Brooks, two of the three congressmen later voted against Brooks’s expulsion in spite of their personal feelings on the matter. This scenario demonstrates the difficulty of determining

²⁰ William E. Gienapp, “The Caning of Charles Sumner and the Rise of the Republican Party,” in *Major Problems in the Civil War and Reconstruction*, 41-52 (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 43.

²¹ Donald, 307.

²² *Ibid.*, 308.

²³ *Ibid.*, 307.

²⁴ Brooks, 174; Donald, 290.

²⁵ Edward Lillie Pierce and Charles Sumner, *Memoir and Letters of Charles Sumner* vol. 3, (Harvard University: Roberts Brothers, 1898), 489.

how widespread the Southern negative opinion of Brooks was during this time. Not only was there massive peer pressure to support Brooks, but there were also gag rules and censorship in place in the South at that time. Mail was opened and any support of abolition or abolitionist rhetoricians was not allowed to be delivered. Citizens who voiced support for policies that would limit slavery in any way were at best shunned and more often than not run out of town or worse. In one extreme case, a newspaper distributor was hung in Arkansas for simply carrying a copy of the *New York Tribune*, which was published by the outspoken abolitionist Horace Greeley. Those who opposed secession faced similar fates. Some were killed or intimidated by threats of violence, some were simply paid off, while many others were aggressively pressured into signing petitions in support of secession.²⁶

However, as Bertram Wyatt-Brown concludes in his article, "Honor and Secession," these tactics of intimidation and censorship were a means of preserving the honor of the South. Although there were many Southerners who disapproved of Brooks's actions, we can be reasonably sure that the number of Brooks's supporters far exceeded the number of his detractors. Even with the limitations on free speech put in place by Southern firebrands, we know that sectionalist rhetoric continued to ramp up in the next five years preceding the Civil War. Furthermore, secession and the war itself clearly prove general Southern agreement with Brooks.

By the mid 1850s, many Northerners also came to expect this type of violent response to aggressive abolitionist rhetoric from their Southern counterparts. Directly following Sumner's speech on "Bleeding Kansas" his Northern friends in the Senate told him, "several of us are going home with you" to offer some defense against a likely Southern attack.²⁷ This concern was not unwarranted. In the day following the speech, a congressman from Tennessee was overheard saying, "Mr. Sumner ought to be knocked down, and his face jumped into."²⁸ This

²⁶ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "Honor and Secession," in *Major Problems in the Civil War and Reconstruction*, 80-88 (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 86-87.

²⁷ Donald, 289

²⁸ *Ibid.*

expectation of violence by Northern senators and the threats of violence by Southern congressmen serve to further illustrate that the Southern Code's requirement of violent action in response to disgrace was understood and complied with by Southerners, and was at least roughly understood by many Northerners. Unfortunately for Sumner, despite the warnings from his friends and the rumor mill around the capital, he never saw it coming. He was so fully converted to the liberal Northern mindset and so disgusted with slavery that he had somehow forgotten that his words might be met with severe personal punishment. He remarked shortly after regaining consciousness while in the capital following the flogging that he "could not believe that a thing like this was possible."²⁹

Unionist Southern leaders knew that some violent response to challenges of Southern honor were not only possible, but likely. These few voices in the wilderness included a group of unionists in Mississippi. They believed that such behavior only represented a "fictitious chivalry" that defended an artificial sense of honor embraced by cavaliers that feared Northern abolitionism. John Potter of Alabama believed that the Southern instinct to claim honor for itself was a good one but in this case it was misplaced and misguided. Potter described this artificial form of Southern honor as "a morbid sense of honor" expressed by "[men] in disgrace" who "vainly seek to maintain their false view of true honor."³⁰ Potter also asserted that true honor does not require constant defensive reactions to challenges. This is because true honor is self-assuring and therefore transcends the need for approval from inferiors. The "morbid false honor" he believed the South embraced, was an honor derived from fear that was reinforced by making juvenile threats to others. Those found possessed by this type of honor were caught in a hypnotic trance that locked eyes with a chivalrous angel of death.

The Sumner beating and its aftermath clearly illustrate this form of Southern honor and how it was applied and maintained in antebellum life. The assault on Sumner was certainly motivated by a desire to pro-

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 297.

³⁰ Wyatt-Brown, 87.

rect this honor. It was administered in a manner that was endorsed by the “Southern Code”; a code that existed for the purpose of defining and protecting honor. The fixation of the Southern gentry on this perceived need for honor motivated a violent response to the negative judgments cast by Northerners. Ultimately, this tendency to violent defense of honor helped to precipitate the Civil War and made the idea of entering into such a war more palatable to Southerners. It may have made some of them even relish it.³¹ Later, during the course of the Civil War, Southern General Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson expressed this Southern morbid honor sentiment at Harpers Ferry: “What is life without honor? Degradation is worse than death.”³²

³¹ Ibid., 88.

³² Shelby Foote, *The Civil War, a Narrative*, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), 65.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Brooks, Preston S. "In Defense of His Attack on Sumner (1856)." In *The World's Famous Orations*, vol. 9, 174-176. New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1906.
- Buell, Augustus C. *History of Andrew Jackson: Pioneer, Patriot, Soldier, Politician, President*. Vol. 2. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1904.
- Donald, David. *Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960.
- Foote, Shelby. *The Civil War, a Narrative*. Vol. 1. New York: Vintage Books, 1986.
- Knight, Lucian Lamar. *Georgia's Landmarks, Memorials, and Legends*. New York: Pelican, 2006.
- Gienapp, William E. "The Caning of Charles Sumner and the Rise of the Republican Party." In *Major Problems in the Civil War and Reconstruction*, 41-52.
- Major Problems in the Civil War and Reconstruction*. Edited by Michael Perman. 2nd ed. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998.
- Pessen, Edward. "The Similarities between the Antebellum North and South." In *Major Problems in the Civil War and Reconstruction*, 11-30.
- Pierce, Edward Lillie, and Charles Sumner. *Memoirs and Letters of Charles Sumner*. Vol. 3. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1898.
- Remini, Robert Vincent. *Andrew Jackson*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001.
- Schivelbusch, Wolfgang. *Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning, and Recovery*. New York: Picador, 2004.

Schultz, Harold S. *Nationalism and Sectionalism in South Carolina 1852-1860*.
Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1950.

Sumner, Charles "On the Crime Against Kansas (1856)." In *The World's Famous Orations*, vol. 9, 160-173. New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1906.

Sydnor, Charles S. "The Southerner and the Laws." *The Journal of Southern History* 6, no. 1 (Feb. 1940): 3-23.

The World's Famous Orations. Vol. 9. Edited By William Jennings Bryan and Francis Whiting Halsey. New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1906

Williams, Jack Kenny. "The Code of Honor in Ante-Bellum South Carolina." *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 54, no. 3 (July 1953): 113-28.

Wyatt-Brown, Bertram. "Honor and Secession." In *Major Problems in the Civil War and Reconstruction*, 80-88.