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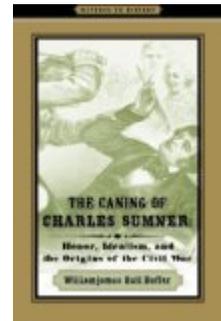
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Williamjames Hull Hoffer. *The Caning of Charles Sumner: Honor, Idealism, and the Origins of the Civil War*. Witness to History Series. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010. 160 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-9468-8; \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8018-9469-5.

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Commissioned by Christopher R. Waldrep



A Singular Affair

On May 22, 1854, Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts was assaulted on the Senate floor by Congressman Preston S. Brooks of South Carolina. According to Brooks, the attack was a consequence of a speech delivered by his victim, “The Crime against Kansas,” two days before, disparaging South Carolina and Brooks’s elderly kinsman. Williamjames Hull Hoffer’s *The Caning of Charles Sumner* attempts to place the incident as well as its primary figures within their temporal, cultural, moral, and ethical contexts.

The incident was more than merely an isolated aberration. Hull Hoffer writes that it was instead part of the continuum of verbal and physical violence that came to characterize any debate over slavery and the territories on the eve of the Civil War. And, because of such new technological innovations as the telegraph and the steam-driven newspaper presses, both words and deeds could be reported and disseminated to a national audience at hitherto unknown speed.

Divided into an introduction, five chapters, and an epilogue, the book discusses what happened before, during, and after the event as well as how it was used po-

litically in the sectional crisis. But perhaps the book’s most important insight is that both Brooks and Sumner rejected the supremacy of law and its origins in compromise. As a representative man of his section, Sumner, according to Hull Hoffer, was an adherent of the doctrine of “Higher Law.” On the one hand, along with other New England luminaries, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, Sumner believed that the surpassing evil of slavery required him to speak out and denounce its defenders and even the law if it protected such a damnable sin. On the other hand, as a product of the antebellum South, Brooks held the law and its precepts as an inferior moral guide in situations that affected honor, duty, or filial piety.

Hull Hoffer wrote *The Caning of Charles Sumner* specifically for classroom use. In his words, “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” (p. 5). In its careful analysis of the evidence and its generally balanced conclusions, the author has succeeded.

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