

13-10 The Crime Against Kansas (1856)

Charles Sumner

Born in Boston and educated at Harvard, Charles Sumner (1811–1874) entered the world of New England social reform in the 1840s and moved quickly into antislavery political activity after the organization of the Free-Soil Party in 1848. A political coalition of Free-Soilers and Democrats in Massachusetts sent Sumner to the U.S. Senate in 1851, replacing Daniel Webster, whose authorship of and support for the Compromise of 1850 and the Fugitive Slave Act outraged the growing antislavery sentiment in Massachusetts. Sumner's purpose in the Senate was first and foremost to fight the Slave Power, which he blamed for the outbreak of violence in Kansas. Sumner took the floor of the Senate over two days (May 19 and 20, 1856) to defend the free-soil settlers and denounce as barbarians the proslavery forces that were attempting to seize control of the territory. In the course of that speech, "The Crime Against Kansas," Sumner made derogatory personal references to South Carolina's elderly senator Andrew Butler, who had recently suffered a stroke. Two days later Senator Butler's nephew, Representative Preston S. Brooks of South Carolina, severely beat Sumner with a cane. Brooks became a hero in South Carolina. Sumner, revered as a martyr to the cause of freedom, won reelection to the Senate until he died.

Source: From *Charles Sumner: His Complete Works* (Lee and Shepard, 1900; reprint, New York: Negro Universities Press edition, 1969), 5:125–126.

Mr. President,—You are now called to redress a great wrong. Seldom in the history of nations is such a question presented. Tariffs, army bills, navy bills, land bills, are important, and justly occupy your care; but these all belong to the course of ordinary legislation. . . . Far otherwise is it with the eminent question now before you, involving, as it does, Liberty in a broad Territory, and also involving the peace of the whole country, with our good name in history forevermore. . . .

The wickedness which I now begin to expose is immeasurably aggravated by the motive which prompted it. Not in any common lust for power did this uncommon tragedy have its origin. It is the rape of a virgin Territory, compelling it to the hateful embrace of Slavery; and it may be clearly traced to a depraved desire for a new Slave State, hideous offspring of such a crime, in the hope of adding to the power of Slavery in the National Government. Yes, Sir, when the whole world alike . . . is rising up to condemn this wrong . . . here in our Republic, *force*—ay, Sir, *FORCE*—is openly employed in compelling Kansas to this pollution, and all for the sake of political power. . . .

Before entering upon the argument, I must say something of a general character, particularly in response to what has fallen from Senators who have raised themselves to eminence on this floor in championship of human wrong: I mean the Senator from South Carolina [Mr. Butler]. . . . The Senator from South Carolina had read many books of chivalry, and believes himself a chivalrous knight, with sentiments of honor and courage. Of course he has chosen a mistress to whom he has made his vows, and 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 the harlot Slavery. For her his tongue is always profuse with words. Let her be impeached in character, or any proposition be made to shut her out from the extension of her wantonness, and no extravagance of manner or hardihood of assertion is then too great for this Senator. . . .

I undertake, in the first place, to expose the CRIME AGAINST KANSAS, in origin and extent. . . . The debate [over the Kansas-Nebraska bill], which convulsed Congress, stirred the whole country. From all sides attention was di-

rected upon Kansas, which at once became the favorite goal of emigration. The bill loudly declares that its object is "to leave the people perfectly free to form and regulate their domestic institutions in their own way"; and its supporters everywhere challenge the determination of the question between Freedom and Slavery by a competition of emigration. . . . The populous North, stung by sense of outrage, and inspired by a noble cause, are pouring into the debatable land, and promise soon to establish a supremacy of Freedom.

Then was conceived the consummation of the Crime against Kansas. What could not be accomplished peaceably was to be accomplished forcibly. . . . The violence, for some time threatened, broke forth on the 29th of November, 1854, at the first election of a Delegate to Congress, when companies from Missouri, amounting to upwards of one thousand, crossed into Kansas, and with force and arms proceeded to vote for . . . the candidate of Slavery. . . . Five . . . times and more have these invaders entered Kansas in armed array, and thus five . . . times and more have they trampled upon the organic law of the Territory. These extraordinary expeditions are simply the extraordinary witnesses to successive, uninterrupted violence. . . . Border incursions, which in barbarous ages or barbarous lands fretted and harried an exposed people, are here renewed, with this peculiarity, that our border robbers do not simply levy blackmail and drive off a few cattle . . . they commit a succession of deeds in which . . . the whole Territory is enslaved.

Private griefs mingle their poignancy with public wrongs. I do not dwell on the anxieties of families exposed to sudden assault, and lying down to rest with the alarms of war ringing in the ears, not knowing that another day may be spared to them. . . . Our souls are wrung by individual instances. . . .

Thus was the Crime consummated. Slavery stands erect, clanking its chains on the Territory of Kansas, surrounded by a code of death, and trampling upon all cherished liberties. . . . Emerging from all the blackness of this Crime . . . I come now to the APOLOGIES which the Crime has found. . . .

With regret I come again upon the Senator from South Carolina [Butler. His speech slurred by a stroke, Butler had interjected critical comments on more than thirty occasions while Sumner spoke] who, omnipresent in this debate, overflows with rage at the simple suggestion that Kansas has applied for admission as a State, and, with incoherent phrase, discharges the loose exhortation of his speech, now upon her representative, and then upon her people. . . . [I]t is against the [free-soil majority in] . . . Kansas that sensibilities of the Senator are particularly aroused. . . .

The contest, which, beginning in Kansas, reaches us will be transferred soon from Congress to that broader stage, where every citizen is not only spectator, but actor; and to their judgment I confidently turn. To the people, about to exercise the electoral franchise, in choosing a Chief Magistrate of the Republic, I appeal, to vindicate the electoral franchise in Kansas. Let the ballot-box of the Union . . . protect the ballot-box in that Territory.

Questions

1. According to Sumner, why did the Slave Power no longer support the "popular sovereignty" solution to the question of the extension of slavery?
2. Read Sumner's comments about Senator Butler from the perspective of Representative Preston Brooks. How had Sumner challenged the honor of his uncle?
3. What was the political intent of Sumner's speech? Whom did he expect to agitate with his heated remarks? To what purpose?