

"Crime Against Kansas"

Charles Sumner (1856)

The passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in May 1854 dealt another blow to an already faltering political system. Despite the racism and disdain for abolitionists shared by most of its inhabitants, Kansas became ground zero in the battle between proslavery and antislavery forces. In 1855, massive electoral fraud gave slavery advocates control of the territorial government of Kansas and a series of violent incidents soon plunged Kansas into a small civil war.

Charles Sumner, a Republican Senator from Massachusetts and zealous opponent of slavery, delivered a blistering "Crime Against Kansas" speech, excerpted here. Sumner's attack on Senator Pierce Butler of South Carolina enraged Congressman Preston Brooks, Butler's nephew. Two days after the speech, Brooks strolled into the nearly empty Senate chamber and thrashed Sumner with a cane. It took Sumner 3 years to recover. While the "Crime Against Kansas" speech sold a million copies in the North, Brooks received dozens of canes from admiring southerners. Brooks resigned from the House shortly thereafter, but was re-elected the following election cycle. Sumner would eventually go on to be one of the key forces, along with Thaddeus Stevens, in the Republican Party during Reconstruction.

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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] and the Senator from Illinois [Mr. Douglas], who, though unlike as Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, yet, like this couple, sally forth together in the same adventure. I regret much to miss the elder Senator from his seat; but the cause against which he has run a tilt, with such ebullition of animosity, demands that the opportunity of exposing him should not be lost; and it is for the cause that I speak. The Senator from South Carolina has 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 in 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. The frenzy of Don Quixote in behalf of his wench Dulcinea del Toboso is all surpassed. The asserted rights of Slavery, which shock equality of all kinds, are cloaked by a fantastic claim of equality. If the Slave States cannot enjoy what, in mockery of the great fathers of the Republic, he misnames Equality under the Constitution, -- in other words, the full power in the National Territories to compel fellow-men to unpaid toil, to separate husband and wife, and to sell little children at the auction-block, -- then, Sir, the chivalric Senator will conduct the State of South Carolina out of the Union! Heroic knight! Exalted Senator! A second Moses come for a second exodus!

Not content with this poor menace, which we have been twice told was "measured," the Senator, in the unrestrained chivalry of his nature, has undertaken to apply opprobrious words to those who differ from him on this floor. He calls them "sectional and fanatical"; and resistance to the Usurpation of Kansas he denounces as "an uncalculating fanaticism." To be sure, these charges lack all grace of originality and all sentiment of truth; but the adventurous Senator does not hesitate. He is the uncompromising, unblushing representative on this floor of a flagrant sectionalism, now domineering over the Republic, -- and yet, with a ludicrous ignorance of his own position, unable to see himself as others see him, or with an effrontery which even his white head ought not to protect from rebuke, he applies to those here who resist his sectionalism the very epithet which designates himself. The men who strive to bring back the Government to its original policy, when Freedom and not Slavery was national, while Slavery and not Freedom was sectional, he arraigns as sectional. This will not do. It involves too great a perversion of terms. I tell that Senator that it is to himself, and to the "organization" of which he is the "committed advocate," that this epithet belongs. I now fasten it upon them. For myself, I care little for names; but, since the question is raised here, I affirm that the Republican party of the Union is in no just sense sectional, but, more than any other party, national, -- and that it now goes forth to dislodge from the high places that tyrannical sectionalism of which the Senator from South Carolina is one of the maddest zealots....

With regret I come again upon the Senator from South Carolina [Mr. Butler], 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. There was no extravagance of the ancient Parliamentary debate which he did not repeat; nor was there any possible deviation from truth which he did not make, -- with so much of passion, I gladly add, as to save him from the suspicion of intentional aberration. But the Senator touches nothing which he does not disfigure -- with error, sometimes of principle, sometimes of fact. He shows an incapacity of accuracy, whether in stating the Constitution or in stating the law, whether in details of statistics or diversions of scholarship. He cannot open his mouth, but out there flies a blunder....

But it is against the people of Kansas that the sensibilities of the Senator are particularly aroused. Coming, as he announces, "from a State," -- ay, Sir, from South Carolina, -- he turns with lordly disgust from this newly formed community, which he will not recognize even as "a member of the body politic." Pray, Sir, by what title does he indulge in this egotism? Has he read the history of the "State" which he represents? He cannot, surely, forget its shameful imbecility from Slavery, confessed throughout the Revolution, followed by its more shameful assumptions for Slavery since. He cannot forget its wretched persistence in the slave-trade, as the very apple of its eye, and the condition of its participation in the Union. He cannot forget its Constitution, which is republican only in name, confirming power in the hands of the few, and founding the qualifications of its legislators on "a settled freehold estate of five hundred acres of land and ten negroes.".... Were the whole history of South Carolina blotted out of existence, from its very beginning down to the day of the last election of the Senator to his present seat on this floor, civilization might lose -- I do not say how little, but surely less than it has already gained by the example of Kansas, in that valiant struggle against oppression....

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, with multitudinous might, protect the ballot-box in that Territory. Let the voters everywhere, while rejoicing in their own rights, help guard the equal rights of distant fellow-citizens, that the shrines of popular institutions, now desecrated, may be sanctified anew, -- that the ballot-box, now plundered, may be restored, -- and that the cry, "I am an American citizen," shall no longer be impotent against outrage. In just regard for free labor, which you would blast by deadly contact with slave labor, -- in Christian sympathy with the slave, whom you would task and sell, -- in stern condemnation of the Crime consummated on that beautiful soil, -- in rescue of fellow-citizens, now subjugated to Tyrannical Usurpation, -- in dutiful respect for the early Fathers, whose aspirations are ignobly thwarted, -- in the name of the Constitution outraged, of the Laws trampled down, of Justice banished, of Humanity degraded, of Peace destroyed, of Freedom crushed to earth, -- and in the name of the Heavenly Father, whose service is perfect freedom, I make this last appeal.

Discussion Questions

Write your answers to the following questions (at an AP level of depth).

1. Sumner makes a critical commentary about Butler, Douglas and the South by using the allusion to Don Quixote (Who? See the synopsis of the story). What is he trying to say about them?
2. What specific criticisms does Sumner level the South and slavery? Why does he target Pierce Butler?
3. What is the tone of the speech?
4. What does the "Brooks-Sumner Affair" suggest about North and South relations?