

Discussion questions for *The Caning*

Had you heard about the beating of U.S. Senator Charles Sumner prior to reading *The Caning*? If not, how surprised were you by the incident?

While reading about these brutally divided pro- and antislavery politicians, what were your thoughts about accusations of partisan bitterness in U.S. politics today? Did your views change? Are today's battles mild by comparison?

The Caning offers detailed biographic profiles of both Charles Sumner and Preston Brooks. Congressman Preston Brooks, who conducted the assault, may be the obvious antagonist. However, as you learned more about him, did you find him to be a more sympathetic character? What qualities, if any, did you find appealing?

In your view, what were Charles Sumner's strengths and weaknesses? And what was most appealing, and least appealing about him? How much did you know about him before reading *The Caning*? Were you surprised he is not a more widely recognized historical figure?

Imagine that the assault on Sumner never occurred. Would it have taken longer to push the country into war? How might the path to war have differed? In your view, how significant a factor was the caning to the start of the Civil War?

The Caning is filled with information about the pre-Civil War tension between pro- and antislavery forces. Aside from the beating of Sumner, which event — a speech, an act of violence, the Southerners' support of Brooks — did you find most shocking or surprising?

How familiar were you with the details of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which stated that the future of slavery in those territories would be decided by the popular vote of residents? Can you draw any parallels to other debates/conflicts in U.S. history?

If you hadn't been involved with this book discussion, would you have chosen to read *The Caning* on your own? Do you typically read non-fiction or history?

After reading *The Caning*, do you want to read other books about related topics (Boston or Southern history, abolitionists, the Civil War, anything written by Steve Puleo?)