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The Fight for a More Perfect Union

A new biography of Charles Sumner highlights the loneliness, and vindication, of tirelessly fighting for one's principles.

Thomas Koenig

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The Great Abolitionist: Charles Sumner and the Fight for a More Perfect Union

by Stephen Puleo (MacMillan, 464 pp., \$32)

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Charles Sumner is often remembered as the

Senator who was viciously caned—and beaten unconscious—on the floor of the U.S. Senate for his anti-slavery views in the years leading up to the Civil War. That violent attack sprang from the aversion of many towards Sumner’s unwavering advocacy for human equality: Sumner was a man ahead of his time, willing to do the difficult work to change our nation for the better.

Historian Stephen Puleo’s masterful new biography of Sumner, *The Great Abolitionist: Charles Sumner and the Fight for a More Perfect Union*, is replete with episodes of Senator Sumner being the lone advocate of a policy position and accordingly being labeled extremist, to witnessing that position become mainstream as he worked tirelessly on its behalf. Each time this familiar chain of events ran its course, Sumner was strikingly confident that his point of view would win out, because truth was on his side. “Truth in the end must prevail,” he wrote to Salmon Chase in 1850.

In writing the first full biography of Sumner in half a century, Puleo gives this complex man his due. By plumbing Sumner’s letters in particular, Puleo paints a portrait of a moody and “self-righteous” man who “craved public attention and affirmation.” Though Sumner could give a spell-binding speech, he often struggled with interpersonal interactions. He was socially awkward: As his friends married off, Sumner expressed dismay, including to the newlyweds themselves. Upon learning of his dear friend and poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s engagement, Sumner lamented to Longfellow himself: “What shall I do these long summer evenings? . . . nobody is left with whom I can have sweet sympathy.” Henry and his wife Fanny proceeded to invite Sumner on their honeymoon. Sumner accepted.

Despite his social obtuseness, as a U.S. Senator from

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Massachusetts from 1851 to 1874, Sumner was a tireless, fearless, and extraordinary advocate on behalf of the anti-slavery cause. His advocacy sprang from a commitment to the truth of equal human dignity, and his confidence in his fellow Americans' capacity to grasp it in due course.

After he graduated from Harvard Law School and spent a year kibitzing with politicians and legal luminaries like Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story in Washington, D.C., Sumner set off on a long tour of Europe. In France, he witnessed Black students, “men of fashion, who were well received by their fellow students,” attending lectures at the Sorbonne. Encounters like these convinced Sumner “that the distance between free blacks and whites among us [in the United States] is derived from education, and does not exist *in the nature of things*.”

Sumner would eventually pair this essential truth about the inherent equality of all human beings with other truths—that the Constitution took care to *not* explicitly endorse slavery in name and that slavery was directly at odds with the ideals of the Declaration of Independence—to become one of the most tireless and effective antislavery advocates in the history of American politics.

Upon returning from Europe, though he found his law practice tiresome and boring in general, Sumner took up the cause of desegregating Boston's public schools. In an 1849 case before the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, Sumner represented one Sarah Roberts, an African-American girl who had to walk by five Whites-only public schools on her way to her segregated public school. Sumner lost that legal battle, but he helped win the war: He emphasized the phrase “equality before the law” in that



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Boston courtroom, and he contended that segregated schools were inherently unequal. A century later, advocates successfully built on these very arguments and eventually triumphed in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

When encountering setbacks, Sumner wrote that he welcomed “the promise of the future,” because he believed that truth had a way of prevailing over time.

Sumner lived long enough to see many of his once-lonely crusades become victories. After his courtroom loss in the Sarah Roberts case, Sumner turned to inveighing against the new, restrictive Fugitive Slave Act at the insurgent Free Soil Party’s Massachusetts convention. The Act was passed as part of the Compromise of 1850, which had been engineered by Senators Henry Clay and Daniel Webster in order to avert the threat of dissolution of the Union. Sumner was adamant that such a compromise so at odds with justice and truth could never last: “*Nothing can be ‘settled’ which is not right.* Nothing can be ‘settled’ which is against freedom. Nothing can be ‘settled’ which is against divine law.” Sumner’s lonely opposition to the Fugitive Slave Act eventually gained traction, and then became enshrined in federal law. So too with his advocacy for the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia—and throughout the nation.

The ultimate triumph of Sumner’s antislavery ideas was a product of principle and prudence. Puleo argues that Sumner “believed compromise was a euphemism for weakness.” Sumner did not prevaricate, nor did he give an

inch to his opponents. But he was willing to bide his time. Upon his razor-thin election to the U.S. Senate by the Massachusetts legislature (an honor he characterized as “unsought and undesired”), Sumner initially kept quiet on the slavery question. He threw himself into understanding the Senate as an institution and grasping the ins and outs of policy debates, whether related to slavery or not. He would win the respect of his colleagues before trying to persuade them of his then-unpopular beliefs. Timing was essential, Sumner assured his restless antislavery confidants, but “our ultimate triumph is . . . certain.”

The triumph of which Sumner spoke was the widespread acceptance that slavery was pure evil. It was that evil that compelled Sumner to deliver his famous and unyielding “Crime Against Kansas” speech in opposition to the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act, and it was that same evil that compelled Rep. Preston Brooks to nearly cane Sumner to death on the Senate floor in response. The caning, in the words of Longfellow, had “torn the mask off the faces of traitors, and *at last* the spirit of the North is aroused.” But it didn’t arouse Sumner’s spirits: the physical and mental anguish he sustained from the blows would persist for years. Nevertheless, amid his frustrating, lonely, years-long efforts to recuperate, Sumner remained confident in “the triumph of truth.”

Sumner’s foresight was most evident during the Civil War itself. From the outset, Sumner immediately grasped that the war’s purpose and its resolution must center on the extinction of slavery. It was “inevitable.” But even as Sumner knew and believed this at his core, he remained patient with President Abraham Lincoln’s more cautious outlook. He understood, for example, Lincoln’s strategic need to keep the border states within the Union fold. Sumner’s mixture of patience and principle helped him grow extremely close with Lincoln. Puleo argues that it

was Sumner who “relentlessly and unabashedly put forth the arguments and applied the pressure that led to the evolution in Lincoln’s thinking” regarding the antislavery aims and nature of the war.

During Reconstruction, Sumner witnessed the ratification of many of his core beliefs in the supreme law of the land via constitutional amendments. And yet, Sumner remained unsatisfied: he lamented the lack of constitutional protection for universal male suffrage in particular. Additionally, he worried that unrepentant southern Whites would find creative and invidious workarounds to the new constitutional constraints. In debating the Fifteenth Amendment, for example, Sumner proposed including express prohibitions on literacy tests. Tragically, he was prescient yet again in this regard.

When encountering setbacks, Sumner wrote that he welcomed “the promise of the future,” because he believed that truth had a way of prevailing over time. That faith evinced a confidence in human reason. Such confidence is only well-founded if there exist people willing to make the arguments, to tap into the wells of reason, to persuade their fellow citizens. In other words, even as Charles Sumner expressed confidence in the ultimate victory of truth, his life’s work reveals that his confidence was in fact premised on the existence of people like himself—people who, however flawed, possess the courage to seek and speak the truth as best they see it, who do the hard work of persuading their peers also to embrace it.

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Image: 1856 cartoon depiction of Preston Brooks' attack on Charles Sumner. A lithograph based on a lithograph by John L. Magee. (Wikimedia Commons: [Boston Athenaeum](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Brooks_attacking_Sumner.jpg))