

WHEN AGGRESSION REPLACED ARGUING

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ABSTRACT: This is a review of *The Man Behind the Cane: Preston Brooks, Political Violence, and the Road to the Civil War*, by Paul Quigley. The book was published in May 2026 by Oxford University Press. The total length is 244 pages. ISBN: 9780197667262.

Keywords: U.S. Senate, caning, political violence, slavery, Civil War

This book traces the life and legacy of Preston Brooks, a U.S. senator from South Carolina who in May 1856 beat Massachusetts senator Charles Sumner to near death with a cane on the floor of the Senate. The caning is dissected from an individual perspective, but likewise from the historical context in which occurred, emphasizing diverse cultural mores, sectional differences, and political disputes percolating during the late antebellum period.

Paul Quigley is a native of England. He earned degrees from Lancaster University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Presently James I. Robertson Jr. Associate Professor of History at Virginia Tech, he serves as director of both the Center for Humanities and Virginia Center for Civil War Studies. He has written and edited previous books and articles on Civil War topics as well as leading a National Endowment for the Humanities-funded project focusing on Civil War subjects.

The structure of the text is straightforward, with an Introduction, five chapters, and an Epilogue, followed by notes and a bibliography.

In the Introduction, Quigley sets the scene of the May 22, 1856 caning of Sumner by Brooks by describing the sound of the assault. Subsequently, he enunciates the main themes of the text and identifies the areas covered in each chapter. According to Quigley, “we must work hard to understand what made history’s disagreeable characters behave as they did, in order to learn from the past” (p. 7).

In Chapter 1, the author depicts the culture of the slaveholding South, where violence was not only a means to an economic end, but a badge of honor and courage. Brooks’s family was long established in his hometown, and Preston grew up as part of the South Carolina elite, attending—though being expelled from—college and learning the tradition of dueling. Brooks participated in anti-abolition activities as an aide to Governor James Henry Hammond.

Chapter 2 encompasses Preston Brooks’s experience during the Mexican-American War, which he enthusiastically volunteered for in 1846. Hoping to prove his manhood and find glory, Brooks instead experienced little direct fighting himself before being sent home early after contracting typhoid fever; saw his brother killed in the conflict; and heard some criticism from others about his limited role afterward.

The span between 1850 and 1856 is covered in Chapters 3 and 4. In Chapter 3, Quigley portrays Preston Brooks’s reliance on religion to advance his public image. He reviews the debates surrounding the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act and 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act and how Congress sought to balance the expansion of slavery as new states joined the Union. Then the events associated with the Brooks’s caning of Senator Sumner are delineated. In Chapter 4, Quigley characterizes reactions to the caning incident. Amid a move to expel him for the caning, Brooks resigned from the Senate, only to be reelected a short time later.

Brooks’s sudden death in January 1857 is part of the material presented in Chapter 5. Quigley observes how the caning incident impacted the early development of the Republican Party. This

section additionally assesses how Brook's caning of Charles Sumner contributed to violence which manifested in the remaining years before the Civil War. There were multiple fights in Congress over slavery during this period. Too, John Brown's 1859 raid on Harper's Ferry in Virginia demonstrated the extreme tactics which abolitionists were willing to take.

Quigley's goal in the Epilogue is to uncover how Americans have viewed the Brooks caning over the long arc of United States history. According to the author, Brook's action weaved into narratives about antebellum Southern society generally, but likewise served as a notable part of many subsequent historical movements. Whereas Brooks was regarded positively in previous eras, recent national events related to race and violence have cast his legacy in decidedly negative terms. Quigley concludes that "the shadow of Preston Brooks and his cane looms large" (p. 164) in how the legacies of slavery and the Civil War still steer the direction of American politics.

Other contemporary studies on the same topic as the present book have been published. Research by Stephen Puleo (2013) and Kenneth Deitreich (2019) constitute biographies of Preston Brooks; Puleo (2024) also published a biography of Charles Sumner. Studies which concentrate on broader issues covered by Quigley such as honor culture, masculinity, and political violence include a 2023 edited book by Kevin Kruse and Julian Zelizer traversing historical inaccuracies and a 2024 book by Robert Colby examining domestic slave trade. Research by Alexandra Filindra (2023) and Jefferson Cowie (2024) investigates the history and impact of armed political culture and white resistance to Federal authority, respectively.

The present book has several positive features. The information relayed emanates from archives and other diverse sources. The citation of sources is buttressed by detailed explanatory notes. The descriptions of certain people in Preston Brook's orbit, including his father and wife, are helpful in explaining Brooks's motivations.

As for shortcomings, the author leaves us wanting more information about others who interacted with Brooks. The pictures, illustrations, and figures found in the text do not add significantly to the content or aesthetics. Finally, the author's argument that Preston felt shame or regretted the caning of Senator Sumner is not presented cohesively and ultimately falls short.

The book is not only valuable as a chronicle of the coming of the Civil War, but as a reminder that words and violence can be a combustible combination at any juncture in American history.

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