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Chaos in Congress: Masculinity and Violence in the Congressional Struggle Over Kansas

Abstract

According to Joanne Freeman's recent book on congressional violence, in the years between 1830 and 1860, members of Congress engaged in 'manly' violence against one another more than seventy times. However, no issue caused more violent personal disputes in the legislature than slavery. In particular, the debate over the legal status of slavery in the Kansas Territory caused a panoply of incidents in Congress, including near-duel between John C. Breckinridge and Francis Cutting in 1854, Preston Brooks' caning of Charles Sumner in 1856, and a brawl in the House of Representatives in 1858. This article examines how these lawmakers' views on masculinity and slavery motivated their involvement in these incidents. Firstly, the article establishes Amy S. Greenberg's dichotomy of martial and restrained masculinities as a lens of analysis; then it recounts each event and analyzes the masculine practices of each lawmaker. This analysis shows that these three violent encounters resulted from the practice of a specifically Southern iteration of martial manhood grounded in the service of slavery's interests.

Keywords

Masculinity, Congress, Politics, Violence, Slavery, Bleeding Kansas, Kansas-Nebraska Act, Sumner, Brooks, Breckinridge, Keitt, Martial Manhood, Restrained Manhood, Gender

**CHAOS IN CONGRESS: MASCULINITY AND
VIOLENCE IN THE CONGRESSIONAL STRUGGLE
OVER KANSAS**

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In 1838, Royal Navy officer Frederick Marryat visited the United States. He arrived in New York on 4 May and made his way to the country's exciting capital, Washington, D.C., where he sat in on the Congress of the young republic. Marryat had mixed thoughts on the legislature, but one event stood out to him. According to Marryat, this event "engrossed the minds of every individual" in Washington: a duel that resulted in the death of Representative Jonathan Cilley at the hands of his colleague William Graves. As a foreigner, Marryat remarked that the duel, as well as "what took place after it," was a "subject for grave reflection." Cilley's body was laid in state at his funeral. In Britain, a duelist would be "condemned and executed for murder," yet here in America was such a man receiving state honors! If Americans wanted to be a moral people, they would need to stop paying "those honours to

vice and immorality which are only due to honour and to virtue.”¹

The American people did not heed Marryat’s advice, as they would continue to accept violence within their political system – particularly in Graves’ and Cilley’s institution: Congress. In *The Field of Blood*, a recent study on antebellum congressional violence, Joanne Freeman records over *seventy* violent incidents between members of Congress in the years between 1830 and 1860. In the 1850s, one topic generated these incidents more than any other: slavery. During his time in America, Marryat speculated that slavery would “produce a separation between the Northern and Southern states.” The question of slavery constantly occupied congressional debate in the years after Marryat’s visit. In the 1850s, a dispute over whether slavery would expand to the Kansas Territory spawned several violent incidents in Congress, swelling the boil of sectional tension that erupted into the Civil War in 1861.²

¹ Frederick Marryat, *A Diary in America: With Remarks on its Institutions*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia, PA: Carey and Hart, 1839), accessed at Gale’s Sabin Americana Database (hereafter SAD), 173.

² Joanne B. Freeman, *The Field of Blood: Violence in Congress and the Road to the Civil War* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 5; Marryat, *A Diary in America*, vol. 2, SAD, 118.

This essay examines three of those incidents: the near duel between John C. Breckinridge and Francis Cutting in 1854, Preston Brooks' caning of Charles Sumner in 1856, and the 1858 congressional brawl prompted by a fight between Laurence Keitt and Galusha Grow. To understand these men in the context of gender, this essay inspects how their conceptions of masculinity and opinions on slavery motivated these violent incidents. Before this essay does so, it establishes Amy S. Greenberg's dichotomy of martial and restrained masculinities as the lens by which it will analyze the masculine practices of the involved parties. This analysis argues that the behavior of the instigating actors of Kansas-related scuffles in the 1850s reveals that these incidents resulted from the practice of a specifically Southern iteration of martial manhood grounded in the service of slavery's interests.

I: Greenberg's Gender Groundwork: Masculinity vs. Restrained Masculinity

In her 2005 book *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire*, Amy S. Greenberg identifies two prominent, opposing modes of 19th century American masculinity: restrained and martial. According to

Greenberg, restrained men “grounded their identities in their families, in the evangelical practice of their... faith, and their success in the business world.” Restrained men also prized expertise and ability, measuring their fellow men’s value through “their success as breadwinners.” Because restrained men dedicated themselves to sedulous labor and religious faith, they often observed strict moral standards. Restrained men typically held the rule of law in high esteem, despised violence and blood sports, and disapproved of the overconsumption (or sometimes the mere consumption) of alcohol. Adherents of restrained masculinity could be found in all political parties, but the reform aspects of the Whigs, Know- Nothings, and Republicans held a “special appeal” to restrained men. To restrained men, the ability to be, as Greenberg puts it, “morally upright, reliable, and brave” separated the manly from the unmanly.³

Martial men, on the other hand, rebuffed the moral standards that guided restrained men. They had no problems with imbibing alcohol, often doing so in “excess with pride.” Moreover, martial men did not highly regard expertise in the

³ Amy S. Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 11, 12, 152.

workplace like restrained men. This difference arose from the fact that martial men located manly value not in the mastery of a skill or knowledge, but in the mastery of other people. As the central tenet of martial manhood, dominance guided the typical behaviors of its adherents. Consequently, martial men often depended on public displays of physical strength, aggression, and sometimes violence to back their claims to manhood. Although martial men could be found in every political party in the antebellum United States, the Democratic Party found more martial men among its ranks than any other party because its “aggressively expansionist discourse” resonated with the goal of asserting one’s manhood through dominance.⁴

Slavery had been a controversial issue in American politics since the Constitutional Convention of 1787, but contention over the peculiar institution exponentially intensified in the 1850s. Fierce debate over the legal status of slavery in the territories acquired by the United States in its recent war with Mexico forced Congress to engineer a sectional compromise in 1850. However, this compromise contained seeds of discord. The compromise authorized

⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

popular sovereignty over slavery in the New Mexico and Utah Territories, which paved the path for Senator Stephen A. Douglas (D-IL) to propose the Kansas-Nebraska Act in the Senate. By allowing the Kansas and Nebraska Territories to vote on the legal status of slavery, the act permitted slavery north of the 36° 30' latitude line, thereby repealing the Missouri Compromise. According to Elizabeth Varon, Douglas publicly demanded for the demise of the Missouri Compromise because it unconstitutionally “abrogated the rights of citizens to self-government.” While some Northern Democrats and all Republicans and Free-Soilers viewed the death of the Missouri Compromise as anathema, most Southerners welcomed it. Among these Southerners were many slaveholding Democrats and martial men who had had no qualms about solving their problems violently, a fact which augmented the volatility of the incoming debate on Kansas.

Douglas did not realize it at the time, but introducing the Kansas-Nebraska Act to the Senate opened a Pandora's

box of violence and rage that endured for the rest of the decade.⁵

II: Political Cannibalism and the Kansas-Nebraska Act: Breckenridge vs. Cutting

On 27 March 1854, the *Congressional Globe* recorded an intense argument between Francis B. Cutting (D-NY) and John C. Breckinridge (D-KY) while debating the House's Kansas-Nebraska bill. Breckinridge, a member of an eminent political family in the slave state of Kentucky, established himself in Congress as a member of the Southern Democrats by demanding federal protections for slavery. Cutting, who lived his entire life in New York City, identified as a Northern Democrat who entertained the prospect of granting protections to slavery, but not unreservedly so. In principle, Cutting supported the Kansas-Nebraska Act.

However, when he filed a motion to send the House bill to the Committee of the Whole House on 21 March 1854, he irked several Southern Democrats, including

⁵ Elizabeth Varon, *Disunion! The Coming of the American Civil War, 1789-1859*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 252.

Breckinridge. Cutting claimed he proposed the motion in order to consider amendments that would more easily secure the bill's passage. He also stated that he wanted a "fair opportunity" for him and his Northern colleagues to articulate their views on the bill to their constituents, but Breckinridge interpreted the motion as an obstacle meant to delay the bill's passage.⁶

Two days after Cutting proposed the motion, Breckinridge delivered a scolding speech that directly condemned Cutting. Breckinridge prefaced his insult-laced remarks with a disclaimer, stating that he "had nothing to do with" Cutting's motives. He then proceeded to label Cutting's motion as a "movement to kill the bill" and a "stab aimed at [the bill] by a professed friend." Breckinridge followed up this diatribe with an angry line of inquiry:

Does not the gentleman from New York [Mr. Cutting] know, that when the bill went to the Committee of the Whole...it went to its grave? In other words, by putting it at the foot of the Calendar, it can no more be reached at

⁶ *Congressional Globe*, 33rd Congress, 1st Session, Debates, 27 March 1854, 760.

this session, in the regular course of legislation, than you can take from something under a mountain that is piled upon it?⁷

With the Kansas-Nebraska bill allegedly buried by the vast number of items on the calendar of the Committee of the Whole, Breckinridge decried Cutting's motion as an "assault" on the bill. The images invoked by Breckinridge's rhetoric depicted his Northern co-partisan as an assassin of the bill, as Breckinridge argued that the motion "was the act of a man who throws his arm in apparently friendly embrace around another" and "at the same time covertly stabs him to the heart."⁸

Cutting delivered a spirited response four days later. He sardonically acknowledged Breckinridge's disclaimer. Breckinridge, a man who supposedly admired "candor and frankness," had actually "professed to say he meant to cast no imputation against [Cutting's] motives" while simultaneously employing imagery that portrayed Cutting "with a murderous stiletto in hand" ready to stab his allies in

⁷ *Congressional Globe*, 33rd Congress, 1st Session, Appendix of Speeches, 23 March 1854, 439.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 439 & 441.

the back. Though Cutting felt insulted by Breckinridge's speech, he also felt surprised by Breckinridge's hostility to his motion, explaining that he "was amazed that a gentleman from a slaveholding State" had carped about "Northern men friendly to the principles of this bill, who merely desired a fair opportunity for discussion." Perhaps the most inflammatory section of Cutting's response implied that Breckinridge lied about the number of bills on the Committee of the Whole's calendar. The "scores and scores of bills" that Breckinridge said would bury the Kansas-Nebraska bill were really less than one score of bills and resolutions – in fact, only nineteen, according to Cutting. Breckinridge's characterization of nineteen bills and resolutions as "a mountain," Cutting scoffed, was a product of Breckinridge's "active imagination" which "created scores and scores of bills."⁹

Breckinridge offered a rejoinder immediately after Cutting concluded his remarks. Firstly, Breckinridge objected to the "flagrant manner" in which Cutting had "attempted to torture and twist [Breckinridge's] words out of their proper and legitimate meanings." Cutting's motives

⁹ *Congressional Globe*, 33rd Congress, 1st Session, Debates, 27 March 1854, 761.

were irrelevant, Breckinridge reiterated. The effects of Cutting's motion mattered more than anything else, since he pleased "every political Abolitionist" in Congress by delaying the bill. Yet Breckinridge criticized Cutting for claiming that he had made the motion in order to debate amendments to the House bill, as Breckinridge pointed out that amendments had been made not to the House bill, but to the Senate bill. He then pushed back against Cutting's claims concerning the size of the Committee of the Whole's calendar. He stated that he had "no recollection of saying there were scores of bills" on the calendar and claimed that he could find no written record showing he had ever said such a thing. In essence, Breckinridge responded to Cutting's charge of dishonesty with one of his own.¹⁰

These accusations caused further exchanges of cross words between the two men on the floor. For instance, Cutting suggested Breckinridge was ungrateful because he had attacked a New York Democrat when New York Democrats had financially contributed to his 1850 House of Representatives campaign. Cutting likely found this lack of gratitude doubly infuriating because Breckinridge's

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 762.

electoral victory was no easy feat. Breckinridge needed as much help as possible in order to win Kentucky's 8th congressional district, which had hitherto been dominated by the Whigs in the past seven elections. The animosity between Cutting and Breckinridge reached a climax when the former issued the following invective:

How dare the gentleman [Mr. Breckinridge], then, upon this floor, in the presence of those who heard me, undertake to assert that I professed friendship for the measure, with a view to kill and assassinate it, by sending it to the bottom of the calendar? And then, when I remarked that the Committee of the Whole have taken under their control the House bill which can be taken up, discussed, amended, and reported to the house, he retreats, and escapes, and skulks behind the Senate bill?¹¹

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 764.

This remark enraged Breckinridge, who immediately demanded that Cutting withdraw it. Cutting not only refused to withdraw *any* of his statements, but refused to further address Breckinridge's remarks while on the floor, as he angrily declared that what Breckinridge had said in debate "belongs in a different arena."¹²

After the House adjourned for the day, Cutting opened negotiations to duel with Breckinridge, perhaps unknowingly. In an initial note to Breckinridge, Cutting demanded that Breckinridge retract the accusation that Cutting had spoken falsely during debate or otherwise "make the explanation due from one gentleman to another." The same day, Breckinridge sent a reply, refusing to retract his statements. Cutting then sent another note the following morning reiterating his demand. Breckinridge interpreted this note as a challenge to duel, and so he embraced "the alternative offered by [Cutting's] note" by tasking a friend with arranging the terms of his "meeting" with Cutting. However, since Breckinridge and Cutting each considered themselves to be the aggrieved party in their dispute, each man set his own terms for the duel. Breckinridge's second

¹² Ibid.

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chose rifles at sixty paces at the Maryland home of Francis Preston Blair, an editor of the *Congressional Globe*. Cutting's second responded by selecting pistols at ten paces at a location to be determined later. This caused confusion between the two men's seconds, who met with each other and agreed to convince Cutting and Breckinridge to find a peaceful resolution. Thanks to the intervention of the seconds, Cutting and Breckinridge met and apologized to each other on 31 March, and Breckinridge retracted his remarks, thereby settling the dispute. Both men later cast their votes in favor of the bill, which passed 113-100 in the House and later became law.¹³

While the confrontation between Breckinridge and Cutting ended before it escalated into violence, the fact that it occurred over a bill that had important ramifications for the legal status of slavery in Kansas was no coincidence. Breckinridge's furious reaction to Cutting's motion was unquestionably out of proportion. Contrary to

¹³ "The Cutting-Breckinridge Correspondence," as quoted in *Herald* (New York, NY), 8 April 1854, accessed at the Gale Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers Database (hereafter GNUS). A second was a participant in a duel tasked with ensuring that the two principal participants conducted their honorable combat under the terms to which they mutually agreed; *Congressional Globe*, 33rd Congress, 1st Session, 22 May 1854, 1254.

Breckinridge's claims, the calendar of the Committee of the Whole did not irrevocably bury the Kansas-Nebraska bill. In fact, the Committee later unearthed the Kansas-Nebraska bill by simply tabling all other items on the calendar which preceded it. The *National Democrat*, a newspaper published by the national organization of the Democratic Party, acknowledged the unjustified nature of Breckinridge's reaction by referring to the incident as "Mr. Breckinridge's assault on Mr. Cutting." The fact that Breckinridge's most furious moment during his tenure as a Representative arose over a motion that interfered with the growth of slavery demonstrates Breckinridge's vested interest in the peculiar institution.¹⁴

Breckinridge's grounding of his manhood in martial masculinity melded with this interest. James Klotter recounts Breckinridge's private and political lives in his family biography of the Breckinridges. Breckinridge's station in life offered him opportunities to control others. During the Mexican-American War, he served as a major in Kentucky's Third Volunteer Regiment of Foot, commanding hundreds of soldiers as his subordinates and executors of the

¹⁴ *National Democrat* (Boston, MA), as quoted in *Daily Whig and Courier* (Bangor, ME), 7 April 1854, GNUS.

United States' endeavor to impose its political will on Mexico. More importantly, Breckinridge owned slaves and thus had an incentive to publicly promote domination and policies that enabled its practice within slavery. Accordingly, Breckinridge supported both the continuation of slavery in the 1850 Kentucky Constitution and the Supreme Court's majority decision in *Dred Scott v. Sandford*. Breckinridge's affinity for domination and his stake in the preservation of slavery together defined his character *qua* man and politician. This accounts for his invocation of abolitionism in his condemnation of Cutting and his desire to control the timeline of the Kansas-Nebraska bill both as a personal project and an instrument of slavery's interests. Meanwhile, Cutting's motion was inconsistent with said desire for control because it delayed the timeline set for the bill by the Southern Democrats. This prompted Breckinridge to react aggressively to Cutting's motion, thus making Breckinridge the instigator of their quarrel.¹⁵

However, Cutting's actions demonstrate that he was not one to roll over and take it when challenged. Cutting's

¹⁵ James C. Klotter, *The Breckinridges of Kentucky: 1760-1981* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1986), 103, 108, 113.

willingness to duel did not go unnoticed by Northern newspapers. *Frederick Douglass' Paper* wrote that in the face of Breckinridge's "highest pitch of indignation," Cutting "bore himself like a man." The *Boston Atlas* published a resolution passed by Tammany Hall – New York City's powerful Democratic political machine – praising Cutting for his "chivalric conduct" in his stand against Breckinridge. The *New York Mirror* touted Cutting as "the best shot we have in our pistol galleries" and cited Cutting's erstwhile willingness to duel New York physician Alexander Hosack "at any time or place, and with any weapon" as evidence of his manliness. These accounts depicted Cutting as a man amenable to public displays of physical bravado, which suggests that he was a martial man. The altercation between Breckinridge and Cutting thus pitted a martial Southerner against a martial Northerner. However, this altercation more importantly arose between two Democrats over the future of slavery in Kansas and other new territories. The nature of this dispute therefore reveals that the Democratic Party had begun to cannibalize itself over the future of slavery by the 1850s. Southern slaveholding Democrats, including Breckinridge, had grown distrustful of their Northern co-partisans' commitments and abilities to

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not only preserve but to spread slavery. Breckinridge himself continued to lead this self-cannibalization of the Democratic Party. In 1860, Southern Democrats refused to accept Stephen Douglas as their presidential candidate, instead nominating Breckinridge and effectively destroying the Democratic Party's claim to being a national institution.¹⁶

III: Bleeding Kansas and Bad Blood: Brooks vs. Sumner

A little more than two years after the quarrel between Breckinridge and Cutting, a more infamous encounter occurred in Congress: on 22 May 1856, Representative Preston Brooks (D- SC) mercilessly beat Senator Charles Sumner (R-MA) with a cane in the Old Senate Chamber. Brooks struck Sumner with his cane about thirty times. He directed several blows to Sumner's head, which left him bleeding and concussed. What could have caused such a savage, pre- meditated assault of a Senator at his place of work? The simple answer: a dispute over slavery in Kansas. Before the caning, Sumner had been the most vocal opponent of pro-slavery interests in the Senate. Sumner had

¹⁶ *Frederick Douglass' Paper* (Rochester, NY), 31 March 1854, GNUS; *Atlas* (Boston, MA), 10 April 1854, GNUS; *Mirror* (New York, NY), as quoted in *Daily Register* (Raleigh, NC), 5 April 1854, GNUS.

several heated exchanges with the slaveholder Andrew Butler (D-SC) over slavery throughout their shared time in the Senate. During debate over a petition to repeal the Fugitive Slave Act, Butler accused Sumner of refusing to obey the Constitution when Sumner evaded the question of whether Massachusetts would obey the Fugitive Slave Act. Sumner also took exception to Butler's assertion that the "independence of America" had been won by the "patriotism and good faith of slaveholding communities." Sumner responded to Butler by criticizing South Carolina itself as well as its senior Senator, asserting that "in his vaunt for slaveholding communities," Butler had "made a claim for Slavery so derogatory to Freedom and inconsistent with history" that Sumner could not leave it unaddressed. In Butler's final response, his anger flowed freely, as he rejected calls to adjourn in order to lambaste Sumner for the "elaborate and vindictive" assault on South Carolina and the Butler name. Thus began the bad blood between Sumner and Butler.¹⁷

¹⁷ "Senator Butler's Reply to Sumner," in T. Lloyd Benson, *The Caning of Senator Sumner* (Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2004), 65 & 67; "Sumner's Reply to Assailants and Oath to Support the Constitution," in Benson, *The Caning*, 74; "Senator Butler's Final Response," in Benson, *The Caning*, 77.

Two years after the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, a series of violent clashes between pro-slavery and anti-slavery settlers consumed Kansas, thrusting the young territory into a state of political disarray. Sumner believed the horrors of “Bleeding Kansas” to be the work of slaveholding interests, which he denounced in his “Crime Against Kansas” speech given on 18 and 19 May 1856. In this speech, Sumner denounced the violent infiltration of Kansas by pro-slavery settlers as a heinous crime, calling it the “rape of a virgin Territory.” Sumner condemned several of his colleagues who had legislated in the interest of slavery, including Stephen Douglas and James M. Mason (D-VA). However, Sumner had likely not forgotten his past quarrel with Butler, and accordingly commenced a lengthy tirade against Butler laced with personal insults. Sumner compared Butler to the farcical chevalier Don Quixote and labelled slavery as his Dulcinea, alleging Butler had “made his vows” with slavery, a “harlot” that appeared “polluted in the sight of the world.”¹⁸

Sumner then leveled his most bitter insult against Butler, using arguably un-senatorial language to do so:

¹⁸ “The Crime Against Kansas,” in Benson, *The Caning*, 98 & 99.

If the slave States cannot enjoy what, in mockery of the great fathers of the Republic, [Mr. Butler] 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!¹⁹

Butler was not present to hear this diatribe due to illness; however, Preston Brooks, a relative of Butler and a son of South Carolina, seethed with anger and sought retribution for the harm Sumner had caused to the honor of his relative and his state. Brooks thought the speech to be too ungentlemanly to allow Sumner the option to duel. Additionally, Congress had enacted an anti-dueling law in Washington, D.C. in 1839 in response to the Cilley-Graves

¹⁹ Ibid.

duel. Because the city observed the law stringently, Brooks knew dueling would, to use his words, “subject [him] to legal penalties more severe than would be imposed for a simple assault and battery.” He therefore planned to physically attack Sumner without formal warning.²⁰

On 22 May, Brooks entered the Senate, waited for the women that were present in the galleries to leave, then approached Sumner. According to a letter Brooks penned to his brother, he told Sumner:

Mr. Sumner, I have read your speech with care and as much impartiality as was possible and I feel it is my duty to tell you that you have libeled my State and slandered a relative who is aged and absent and I am come to punish you for it.²¹

Brooks then “gave [Sumner] about 30 first rate stripes with a gutta percha cane.” Sumner’s wherewithal to fight back was quite literally beaten out of him, as Brooks

²⁰ *Congressional Globe*, 34th Congress, 1st Session, Appendix of Speeches, 14 July 1856, 832.

²¹ “Preston Brooks Describes the Incident to His Brother,” in Benson, *The Caning*, 132.

reported that “for about the first five or six licks [Sumner] offered to make fight but I plied him so rapidly that he did not touch me.” Sumner “bellowed like a calf” towards the end of the thrashing.²²

Brooks’ firsthand account omits several important details, however. Brooks did not acknowledge that Sumner was seated at his desk entrenched in paperwork, thus putting Sumner in what he characterized as an “entirely defenceless position.” Brooks also failed to mention that he had an accomplice in the chamber: Laurence Massillon Keitt (D-SC), a personal friend of Brooks and fellow member of the House. James W. Simonton, a *New York Times* reporter, was present in the chamber before the caning. When Simonton and others rushed towards Brooks and Sumner to stop the scuffle, Keitt intercepted them and threatened any who wished to interfere, brandishing his own weapons and growling, according to Simonton, “let them alone, God damn you!” Lastly, Brooks did not mention that Sumner was unarmed during the incident – a fact which Sumner made

²² Ibid.

clear in Senate testimony when he said, “I had no arms either about my person or in my desk.”²³

The conduct of Brooks and Sumner as men and politicians provides insight into the nature of their masculinities. Charles Sumner adhered strictly to the tenets of restrained masculinity. Not only was he unarmed during the caning, but he admitted to “never wearing arms in [his] life” because he had “always lived in a civilized community where wearing arms has not been considered necessary.” Sumner’s disinterest in weapons, the tools of imposing one’s will upon others, indicates his rejection of the central tenet of martial manhood: domination. Sumner also applied anti-violence logic to nations. Speaking to a Boston crowd in 1845, Sumner harshly criticized military spending in times of peace as “irrational,” “unchristian,” and “vainly prodigal of expense.” He then argued that “the true grandeur of humanity” instead is found “in moral elevation, sustained, enlightened, and decorated by the intellect of man.” In the speech, Sumner also made appeals to Christianity, noting that he who “inspires a love for God and for man” is “the

²³ “Testimony of Charles Sumner,” in Benson, *The Caning*, 137; “Testimony of *New York Times* Reporter James W. Simonton,” in Benson, *The Caning*, 139.

man of honor in a Christian land.” Sumner’s appeal to faith, abhorrence of violence, and praise of lofty moral standards – all hallmarks of restrained masculinity – qualified Sumner as a restrained man.²⁴

Preston Brooks was the diametric opposite of Sumner: a *bona fide* martial man. This fact is made clear by Brooks’ violent past. While attending South Carolina College (today the University of South Carolina), Brooks participated in several violent encounters, one of which resulted in his expulsion from the school. In this particular incident, Brooks approached the town marshal of Columbia with two loaded pistols and threatened him because “he had heard from a Negro an exaggerated report that his brother had been carried by the town Marshall [sic] in an ignominious manner to the guard house,” according to the report of the college’s faculty that recommended Brooks’ expulsion. Even after Brooks “found his brother no longer in confinement,” he continued to menacingly brandish his weapons and threaten the town marshal. The faculty found this behavior so “against the laws of morality and the land,”

²⁴ “The True Grandeur of Nations,” in Benson, *The Caning*, 14 & 15; “Testimony of Charles Sumner,” in Benson, *The Caning*, 137.

that they unanimously voted to suspend Brooks and recommended his expulsion to the school's Board of Trustees, a recommendation which it accepted.²⁵

This belligerent episode was not unique or exceptional among elite Southern students. As Lori Glover has found, Southern colleges and universities during the antebellum period frequently served as places for young Southern men to try “drinking, gambling... dueling and other forms of orchestrated violence” without parental supervision. The typical elite Southern student behaved this way to show he possessed a form of “self-mastery” in which he “was not controlled by anybody but himself,” much to the vexation of school administrators and college town lawmen. This outward display of self-mastery played a crucial role in cultivating Southern martial manhood, as Glover notes that self-mastery “laid the foundations for [Southern elites’] dominance over wives, children, and, particularly slaves.”²⁶

²⁵ “Report of the South Carolina College Faculty on the Expulsion of Preston S. Brooks,” in Benson, *The Caning*, 26.

²⁶ Lori Glover, “‘Let Us Manufacture Men’: Educating Elite Boys in the Early National South,” in Craig Thompson Friend and Lori Glover, eds., *Southern Manhood: Perspectives on Masculinity in the Old South* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 29.

Despite never receiving his degree from South Carolina College, Preston Brooks' disorderly stint in Columbia prepared him for the oppressive practices of slaveholding, which he embraced without shame. Brooks publicly defended his right to dominate and discipline his slaves in the resignation speech he offered after attacking Sumner. During the course of the speech, Brooks questioned the authority of the House of Representatives to discipline him for "offenses committed outside of its presence." Brooks wondered if this authority extended to his home. If it did, Brooks continued:

Why, sir, if I go to my home, and I find that one of my slaves had behaved badly in my absence, and I direct him to be flogged, I may be charged with – to use the language which is familiar here – "crime the blackest and most heinous"; and when I come back [to the House of Representatives] – and come back I will – may be punished myself for inflicting a chastisement which, by the common law and the constitutional laws of

my country, I have the right to inflict upon
my slave, who is my property.²⁷

Brooks' history of violence and his unabashed proclamation of his constitutional right to abuse his slaves make clear that he defined his manhood in terms of his domineering, militant behavior and his interest in slavery, making him a squarely martial man.

The caning of Sumner added great tension to the already decaying sectional relations of the country. In particular, the bloody incident animated a truculent sentiment in the Northern Republican press. Two days after the caning, the *Pittsburgh Gazette* called for Northern politicians to enact vengeance against the South, as the paper declared that, "it can no longer be permitted that all the blows shall come from one side" and promised to elect new representatives "if our present representatives will not fight." The article threateningly finished, "these cut-throat Southrons will never learn to respect Northern men until some one of their number has a rapier thrust through his ribs, or feels a bullet in his thorax." Though it used less visceral

²⁷ "Resignation Speech of Preston Brooks, 14 July 1856," in Benson, *The Caning*, 152.

rhetoric than the *Gazette*, the *Boston Atlas* echoed similar sentiments a day after the caning. No longer could the North tolerate the closure of “the mouths of the representatives of the North... by the use of bowie-knives, bludgeons, and revolvers.” “If violence must come,” the *Atlas* continued, “we shall know how to defend ourselves.” While Sumner represented restrained masculinity, his caning galvanized the martial men of the North to meet their Southern counterparts, pushing the country closer to mass sectional violence.²⁸

IV: The Lecompton Constitution and Congressional Brawl of 1858: Team Grow vs. Team Keitt

The topic of Kansas led to yet another violent incident in Congress in 1858. In February of that year, Congress debated admitting the polarized territory into the Union. The doughfaced President James Buchanan (D-PA) and the Southern bloc of the Democratic Party aimed to admit Kansas into the Union governed by the pro-slavery Lecompton Constitution. Because this constitution was drafted by a territorial legislature whose election was tainted by electoral fraud and intimidation, a bloc of Northern

²⁸ *Gazette* (Pittsburgh, PA), 24 May 1856, GNUS; *Atlas* (Boston, MA), 23 May 1856, GNUS.

Democrats led by Stephen Douglas viewed the Lecompton Constitution as “a travesty of popular sovereignty.” Consequently, when Congress voted on the admission of Kansas as a slave state, the Northern Democrats repudiated the president, instead siding with the Republicans in opposition to the measure. These two blocs combined possessed enough votes to eventually reject Kansas’ statehood under the Lecompton Constitution.²⁹

But this did not stop the Southern Democrats from trying. Before sunrise on 6 February, the House convened to debate a bill admitting Kansas as a slave state. The Southerners wanted to delay votes on the bill during this session because several members of their bloc were missing from the chamber. Because the evening before the debate was a Friday, many Southern congressmen had spent much of the night “boozing at bars,” according to Joanne Freeman, making themselves indisposed for the early morning session. To delay votes on the bill, Southern Democrats introduced several motions to extend the debate and to adjourn the House. John Quitman (D-MS), a fire-eater and proponent of the Lecompton Constitution, offered one such motion. At

²⁹ Varon, *Disunion!* 306.

that time, Galusha Grow (R-PA), who had switched parties after the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, happened to be consulting with fellow Pennsylvanian John Hickman (D), an opponent of the Lecompton Constitution. Grow objected to Quitman's motion from the Democratic side of the chamber.³⁰

Laurence Keitt, a radical Fire-Eater and an accomplice of Brooks in the Sumner caning, reacted to Grow's objection by hostilely confronting him. The *Congressional Globe* did not record the ensuing exchange between Grow and Keitt, but observers of the event relayed its details to major newspapers. According to the *New York Times*, Keitt growled at Grow, "if you are going to object, return to your own side of the House." Grow responded by defiantly stating that he and all members of the chamber had the right to object from wherever they liked because the House was a "free hall." Keitt took exception to Grow's use of the phrase "free hall," as he interpreted 'free' as an oblique insult against slaveholding Southerners. He then asked Grow what he had meant by that response; Grow insisted that he "meant precisely" what he said. Keitt,

³⁰ *Congressional Globe*, 35th Congress, 1st Session, Debates, 5 February 1858: 601-603; Freeman, *Field of Blood*, 237.

incensed by Grow's boldness, shouted at Grow: "I'll show you, you damned Black Republican puppy!" He then grabbed Grow by the throat. Grow slapped away Keitt's hand before reaffirming that he would speak in the chamber wherever he desired, then added that he would let no slave driver "crack his whip over" him. This remark infuriated Keitt, who again shouted at Grow and tried to grab him by the throat. Grow reacted this time not with words, but with a punch to Keitt's face. The blow stunned Keitt, knocking him to the floor.³¹

The particulars of the madness that followed were not entirely clear to contemporary accounts, but these accounts did agree on certain details. After Grow struck Keitt, about a dozen Southern Democrats approached Keitt and Grow, among them Reuben Davis (D-MS) and William Barksdale (D-MS). A group of Republicans, including John "Bowie Knife" Potter (R-WI) and the brothers Elihu Washburne (R-IL) and Cadwallader Washburn (R-WI), interpreted this as a hostile movement, and reacted by rushing to the aid of Grow. The parties clashed in the well of

³¹ *Times* (New York, NY), 6 February 1858, accessed at NYT Times Machine (hereafter NTM); *Times* (New York, NY), 8 February 1858, NTM.

the House in a disorienting factional melee. During the scuffle, Barksdale seized Grow. Potter, fearing for Grow's safety, struck Barksdale. Barksdale, surrounded on all sides, mistakenly thought that Elihu Washburne had delivered the blow. He let go of Grow and socked Washburne.³²

All accounts agreed that a Republican then retaliated against Barksdale for attacking Washburne, but disagreed upon the identity of the Republican. The *Mississippian* – edited by Barksdale's brother – and the *New York Times* claimed that Cadwallader Washburn attacked Barksdale to save his brother; the *Lowell Daily Citizen* and the *Staunton Spectator* maintained that Potter assailed Barksdale. In any case, either Washburn or Potter grabbed Barksdale by the head in order to, in the words of the *New York Times*, pummel him “to greater satisfaction.” Much to the surprise the Republican attacking Barksdale, his hair came off of his head: the balding Barksdale had been wearing a toupée. Disoriented by the affray around him, Barksdale proceeded to put his hairpiece on backwards. This odd event triggered spontaneous laughter throughout the chamber, which, combined with thunderous calls for order by House Speaker

³² *Times* (New York, NY), 8 February 1858, NTM; Cadwallader Washburn preferred his last name to be spelled without a silent “e.”

James Orr (D-SC), aided in ending the scuffle before any of its participants sustained serious injuries.³³

The brawl cemented Galusha Grow's hard-nosed reputation. By the late 1850s, Grow was loathed by his Southern colleagues for his abrasive style of debate and his practice of harshly targeting pro-slavery members of the chamber. Grow's allies in the House viewed him as "a courageous, swashbuckling paladin" of anti-slavery forces, according to Robert D. Ilisevich. He "bullied and badmouthed" his pro-slavery colleagues, driving them to anger. During the Kansas- Nebraska debates, for instance, John Quitman and Grow nearly came to blows during a heated debate over the repeal of the Missouri Compromise. When Grow told Quitman that Southerners bore responsibility for augmenting sectional animosity and anti-slavery sentiment through their "injudicious and unjust legislation," Quitman angrily replied that the North had "robbed [the South] of California" in the Compromise of 1850. This sort of confrontational, public display of prowess defined Grow's *modus operandi* for the rest of his

³³ *Ibid.*, NTM; *Mississippian* (Jackson, MS), 16 February 1858, GNUS; *Daily Citizen* (Lowell, MA), 9 February 1858, GNUS; *Spectator* (Staunton, VA), 17 February 1858, accessed at the Library of Virginia's Virginia Chronicle database.

antebellum political career, according to Ilisevich. Such carefully orchestrated truculence instantiated martial masculinity, whose adherents belligerently asserted themselves to flaunt their manhood. Grow's adherence to martial masculinity accounts for his defiant, assertive response to Keitt's initial comments and his willingness to thump Keitt.³⁴

However, Keitt was the principal instigator of the conflict, a fact he acknowledged in an apology he offered to the House on 8 February. Like Breckinridge and Brooks, the instigators of their respective conflicts, Keitt fell squarely into the martial camp of masculinity. His arrival to the chamber while under the influence of alcohol before the brawl is the first indicator of this fact. Like many of his Southern colleagues the evening of the brawl, Keitt heavily imbibed. Keitt was, to use Stephen Berry's words, "half drunk and half asleep" at the time Grow made his objection. Such conduct could be expected from martial men, who often drank in excess. Keitt's views on manhood also clearly qualified him as a member of the martial camp. According

³⁴ Robert D. Ilisevich, *Galusha A. Grow: The People's Candidate* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989), 65, 100, 110; *Congressional Globe*, 34th Congress, 1st Session, Debates, 19 January 1856, 262.

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to Berry, Keitt believed most politicians to be ambling and unmanly. Keitt contended that a real man “did not dally or dicker,” but instead pursued a higher purpose “decisively.” This criterion of manhood demanded a man to prosecute his convictions without regard for the sensitivities of others: the same sort of domineering self-mastery practiced by Preston Brooks and other young Southern elites. Like Brooks, Keitt also attended South Carolina College, where he and his peers learned and accepted the merits of pro-slavery arguments. Keitt’s firm commitments to martial masculinity and to slavery worked in tandem, as they generated controversy in the wake of Keitt’s role in the Sumner caning and his militant *rencontre* with Grow, thereby pushing the two sections closer to the brink.³⁵

V: Conceptual Symbiosis: The Mutualism of Slavery and Martial Masculinity

Breckinridge, Brooks, and Keitt were kindred spirits. All three men represented the Democratic Party and the interests of slaveholders in the House of Representatives. Breckinridge later did so in the Senate and Vice-Presidency.

³⁵ Stephen Berry, *All That Makes a Man* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), 47 & 52.

Each of these three men hailed from a Southern state whose moral fabric and economic activity rested on slavery. During their time in public office, all three either employed violence, intimations thereof, or both against political opponents with whom they clashed over the issue of slavery. Each of these three men embraced martial masculine ideals. Their actions, attitudes, and the roles as aggressors in their respective clashes reflected a broader trend within Congress in the decade before the Civil War: violent disagreements between members of Congress over slavery in Kansas arose from Southern men acting on the dictates of a form of martial masculinity that rooted itself in the service of slavery's interests.

While a man's adherence to martial masculinity did not always entail his commitment to slavery, the tenets of martial masculinity synergized well with the logic of slavery. In particular, domination, the martial man's byword, found a home in slavery as an apparatus by which slaveholders could ensure the continued enslavement of their laborers. Bertram Wyatt-Brown has observed that enslaved people's unquestioning compliance with the demands of their masters was an essential component of the dominant-submissive relationship between the enslaver and the

enslaved. Slaveholders used violence to obtain this compliance and stop “the encroachments of slaves and free blacks into forbidden areas of autonomy.” Slaveholders consequently enjoyed comfortable lifestyles and economic success that Wyatt-Brown maintains “rested upon the prestige, power, and wealth that accrued from the benefits of controlling others.” Slaveholders thus had every incentive to be martial men. Because domination constituted the lifeblood of both slavery and martial masculinity, the peculiar institution and this domineering expression of manhood existed in a state of conceptual symbiosis. Domination’s centrality to both slavery and martial masculinity created a mutualistic relationship wherein the practice of each benefitted the well-being of the other. A domineering slaveholder could more easily obtain the continued submission of the enslaved. Slavery’s social and economic importance in the South, on the other hand, offered a venue for the practice of martial masculinity.³⁶

As the existence of Northern martial men like Francis Cutting and Galusha Grow shows, however, the practice of martial masculinity was not confined to Southern

³⁶ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Honor and Violence in the Old South*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1986), ix & 158.

slaveholding men. This fact, combined with the unique connection between slavery and Southern martial men, suggests that martial masculinity can be further divided into submasculinities. Breckinridge, Brooks, and Keitt thus adhered to a particular iteration of martial masculinity that grounded itself in the service of slavery's interests. The political arena of Congress offered to Southern martial men a venue where they could literally and verbally fight for slavery, thus revealing the connection between slavery and their violent definition of manliness. It then comes as no surprise that these men played the role of aggressor their respective conflicts: their identities as men were inseparably linked to slavery's survival, so they had every incentive to act quickly and aggressively. This fact accounts for the high prevalence of violent altercations between members of Congress over the Kansas question in the 1850s.

Martial, pro-slavery men found a modality for their manhood by fighting their anti-slavery opponents, which worsened the already apparent and intense hostility that existed between the free and slaveholding sections of the United States in the 1850s. The exchange between Breckinridge and Cutting, Brooks' caning of Sumner, and the 1858 melee on the House floor functioned as microcosms

for the relations between the North and South, a fact which portended a grim future for the Union's integrity. The press media did not miss this, as it predicted continued violence in the future. The *New York Herald* lamented the fact that the "quarrel" between Breckinridge and Cutting had "assumed a sectional nature." A day after the Sumner caning, the *New-York Tribune* expected "that Northern men in Washington, whether members [of Congress] or not" would continue to be "assaulted, wounded or killed" over slavery. In the wake of the 1858 brawl, the *Philadelphia North American and United States Gazette* applauded Grow and recommended that Northern men adopt Grow's violent "way of dealing with Keitt" in their interactions with irrational, unhinged Southerners whose low "grade of civilization" rendered them "insensible to the motives and feelings" of the North's "cultivated minds of Christendom."³⁷

These visions of immense bloodshed between the North and South became a reality in 1861. The Civil War's roots grew from the soil of Congress, the principal playground of sectional strife in politics. Here, the pro-

³⁷ *Herald* (New York, NY), 30 March 1854, accessed at the Library of Congress' Chronicling America Database; *Tribune* (New York, NY), 23 May 1856, GNUS; *North American and United States Gazette* (Philadelphia, PA), 8 February 1858, GNUS.

slavery aggression of Southern martial masculinity violently exploded during the debate concerning Kansas and slavery in the 1850s. This debate pushed the country towards the concerning outcome Frederick Marryat foresaw in 1838: secession. Both as men and as political actors, the slaveholding, martial congressmen of the South impelled the United States closer to the Civil War by assailing those who they perceived as an obstacle to the preservation of slavery: martial and restrained Northerners.

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