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

A new biography of abolitionist Senator Charles Sumner

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Stephen Puleo*, The Great Abolitionist: Charles Sumner and the Fight for a More Perfect Union*, St. Martin's Press, 2024.

Charles Sumner (1811-1874), like most Radical Republicans and abolitionists during the American Civil War, is little known today. A new book by historian Stephen Puleo seeks to rectify this, offering a historical examination of Sumner's political evolution—from his beginnings as a lawyer to his career in the United States Senate—before, during and after the Civil War.

Puleo's book is the first full biography of Sumner since David Donald's two-part biography *Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War* and *Charles Sumner and the Rights of Man*, released in 1960 and 1970 respectively.

Alongside other abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass and Thaddeus Stevens, Sumner personified the staunch and uncompromising struggle against slavery during the period of the Civil War. Summing up Sumner's struggles, Puleo writes that "[w]here others preached compromise and moderation, [Sumner] never wavered in denouncing slavery's evils to all who would listen and demanding that it be wiped out of existence. Where others muttered cautious, even insipid, platitudes, his voice was clear and strong." (6)

Sumner drew praise and hatred, but even under relentless political attacks, "he stood fearless, a bulwark against the slings and piercing arrows of those who targeted him." (6) His steadfast opposition to slavery made him the target of Southern slaveholders, who labeled him a fanatic.

Sumner, however, welcomed the calumny. He insisted that his politics were rooted in the American Revolution and the Declaration of Independence. Sumner spoke of that revolutionary spirit as being "the same which opposed the Tea-Tax…it is the fanaticism which finally triumphed on Bunker Hill." (134) It was his opponents who supported slavery, Sumner believed, who had betrayed the Spirit of '76.

In the Senate, Sumner made clear his intense hatred of slavery and hailed the Declaration's egalitarianism as "the very soul" of America. Right after the attack on Fort Sumter, which started the Civil War, Sumner immediately called on President Abraham Lincoln to grant immediate emancipation of all slaves under the president's war powers and to allow black regiments in the Union army. Sumner's intransigence and powerful oratory gave him immense stature. "[W]hen he spoke," writes Puelo, "everyone listened." (7)

Sumner was born in 1811 to a fairly wealthy family in Boston, Massachusetts. From an early age he learned from his father, abolitionist Charles Pinckney Sumner, that slavery was a scourge on society and that the principles of equality laid out in the Declaration should be the guiding light for the country. Boston was a city steeped in revolutionary tradition. During the American Revolution, the state of Massachusetts was perhaps the most politically radical, the home colony of figures such as Samuel Adams and John Hancock. It also saw the first military engagements at Lexington and Concord in April, 1775. The democratic and revolutionary sentiments of the first American Revolution were deeply rooted in Massachusetts.

After graduating from Harvard in the mid-1830s Sumner began a career as a lawyer. By the 1840s he had become active in Boston's abolitionist movement and had made a name for himself within the Whig Party, later joining the anti-slavery Free Soil Party and then the Republican Party, a course followed by other antislavery politicians such as Salmon Chase of Ohio and George Julian of Indiana.

Sumner first gained mass public attention when he took part in the 1850 Massachusetts Supreme Court case *Roberts v. City of Boston*. The case dealt with the question of racial segregation in schools and Sumner represented the plaintiff, Sarah Roberts, a black schoolgirl. Puleo writes that "Sumner's legal argument on behalf of Sarah centered on the Massachusetts constitution's mandate that every man, without regard to race, be treated equally before the law." (65)

The Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled against Roberts. Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw wrote in the court's majority opinion that her right to access education was not violated since, although black and white children went to separate schools, the schools were "equal" in quality. Shaw's ruling thus anticipated the notorious *Plessy v. Ferguson* US Supreme Court case of 1896, which established the legality of Jim Crow segregation in the South for much of the 20th century.

Though defeated, Sumner was hailed by abolitionists for his insistence that segregation was inherently unequal. William Lloyd Garrison called Sumner's legal arguments "luminous and profound," while a Boston newspaper that ran a front-page story calling Sumner's arguments "clear and convincing." Sumner's stature caught the attention of Free Soilers in the Massachusetts legislature, who selected him to be the state's senatorial candidate in Congress. In 1851, Sumner was elected by the Massachusetts legislature to be one of the state's two Senators.

Sumner was quiet during the first few years in the Senate, but his hatred of slavery was well-known to his colleagues. By 1854, the Republican Party was founded, formed by a coalition of "conscience" Whigs and anti-slavery Democrats, along with members of the Free Soil party. Sumner joined the Republicans the year after the Senate voted for the Kansas-Nebraska Act.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act repealed the 1820 Missouri Compromise, which had prohibited the admission of slave states above the 36° 30' latitude line. The Act admitted the territories of Kansas and Nebraska and

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it allowed residents to vote on whether to establish slavery under the doctrine of "popular sovereignty." This decision produced what came to be known as "Bleeding Kansas," a civil war before the Civil War, in which pro-slavery elements sought to terrorize the anti-slavery majority in Kansas Territory, but faced ferocious resistance from abolitionist militants, including John Brown, who would later lead the raid on Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, in 1859.

Angered over the pro-slavery attacks, in 1856 Sumner drafted a speech speaking out against Southern provocations in Kansas, titled "The Crime Against Kansas." Between May 19-20, 1856, Sumner delivered his speech before a packed audience of senators and spectators in the Senate chamber. In strong language, Sumner denounced the intrusion by pro-slavery forces as "the rape of a virgin Territory, compelling it to the hateful embrace of Slavery." He singled out pro-slavery Southern senators.

Sumner's speech enraged Southern congressmen, particularly Representative Preston Brooks, who felt his "Southern honor" had been defiled. On May 22, Brooks walked to Sumner's desk in the Senate chamber while the latter was working and proceeded to beat Sumner over the head with a cane. Brooks struck Sumner repeatedly until his cane broke, then continued the attack with its broken pieces. Another pro-slavery Congressman prevented Sumner from receiving any assistance. Sumner suffered severe lacerations and heavy blood loss.

Puleo notes that "the most important effect of Sumner's caning was to crush any hope of conciliation between North and South." (164) Underlying these objective shifts was an awareness of the incompatibility between two contradictory economic systems: one which was based on wage or "free" labor in the North and one based on slave labor in the South. The assault galvanized public sentiment in the North behind Sumner, and in opposition to slavery. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote that the attack had "torn the mask off the faces of traitors, and at last the spirit of the North is aroused." (176) Sumner would take a sabbatical to recover from his injuries. He returned to his duties in 1860, before the presidential election that saw the victory of Lincoln.

Lincoln's victory precipitated the secession crisis, as the Southern states left the union one by one and prepared for war. Sumner, from the outset, insisted that at the heart of the Civil War was the issue of slavery. Puleo quotes from a speech Sumner gave after the election: "Whenever this rebellion shows itself…it is moved by slavery—nay, *the rebellion is slavery itself.*" (243) Puleo notes that although Sumner "detested violence almost as much as he detested slavery," (219) he understood that Southern slaveholders wouldn't go down without a fight. Explaining the revolutionary struggle against slavery that lay ahead, Sumner said that "[t]he question is to be settled now." (220)

As noted above, Sumner prodded Lincoln to push for immediate emancipation and to allow black troops in the Union army. Towards the end of the war, Sumner supported the 13th Amendment, which outlawed chattel slavery, and fought to ensure the freedmen received equal rights. The end of the war and the assassination of Lincoln brought the beginnings of Reconstruction. Explaining the necessity of egalitarianism during Reconstruction, Sumner wrote that it should "[r]edeem the promises of the Declaration of Independence instead of openly setting them at defiance." (338)

Similar to his colleague in the House, Thaddeus Stevens, Sumner called for freedmen to be "secured [with] a freehold for themselves and their families, which has always seemed to me most important in Reconstruction." Sumner would later push for the ratification of the 14th Amendment, which guarantees equal protection under the law and birthright citizenship, despite feeling that it fell short of guaranteeing full voting rights for former slaves. Sumner also backed the 15th Amendment, which prohibits racial discrimination in voting rights, although he refused to vote on it as he considered its language too moderate.

As time went on, Sumner became more isolated politically, with Republicans rejecting many of his proposals for civil rights. Sumner's political career was effectively destroyed in 1870 when he led the Senate to reject the annexation of Santo Domingo (the Dominican Republic.) The Republican Party, emerging as the premier party of American capitalism, responded by stripping Sumner of his position as Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1871.

Sumner died just three years later in 1874 at the age of 63. Thousands attended his funeral and his casket was placed in the rotunda of the Capitol building. Summing up Sumner's lifelong career to fight slavery and guarantee the rights of freedmen, Puleo writes that "Sumner's courage and leadership on the antislavery issue were indisputable and unrivaled, and, in death, virtually universally acknowledged." (397)

Puleo's work is to be welcomed for its fresh and fair appraisal of Sumner's life. The author shares with the reader Sumner's thoughts by extensively quoting from his subject throughout. Puelo sheds light on the importance of Sumner's political struggles and commends his achievements. He also identifies how those like Sumner were not merely individuals with egalitarian beliefs, but far-sighted representatives of a broader trend. "Sumner represented the millions of people who, over the past four years of hideous bloodshed, had shifted their views on slavery and equal rights toward his." (313)

Despite this, Puleo's book does suffer from weaknesses. Although Puleo paints Sumner and his career in a good light, Puleo often overemphasizes the role Sumner played during the political events both prior to and after the Civil War. Perhaps the most glaring example of this is Puleo's claim that Sumner's fight for equality in the US was greater than "any other person of his era, perhaps of *any era.*" (8)

Sumner was a crucial figure in the struggle against slavery, but there were many others: Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, Thaddeus Stevens, William Lloyd Garrison, Harriet Beecher Stowe, to name a few. Even these individuals, important as they were, emerged out of vast changes and movements in the antebellum society and culture. The fight for equality had above all a *social* and not merely individual content. It required the mobilization of the masses to complete the democratic tasks initially set out by the first American Revolution. Ultimately the struggle to secure the rights which were initially proclaimed in the American Revolution some 80 years prior cost the lives of more than 400,000 Union soldiers.

Puleo also suggests that some abolitionists saw both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution as "unsalvageable [which] needed to be scrapped for the country to move on from slavery." (215) It is correct that some abolitionists, such as Garrison, rejected the Constitution as a "covenant with the devil." Others, however, probably the majority, like Douglass and Lincoln, believed that the Constitution could be leveraged to destroy slavery. But the attitude of the abolitionists toward the Declaration of Independence was unequivocal. It was, in the words of historian David Brion Davis, "the touchstone, the sacred scripture."

When Puleo turns to the decline in public support for racial equality after the war, reflected in the collapse of Reconstruction and the fading stars of figures like Sumner, he reaches for a facile answer, and one that contradicts his own thesis. "[T]he North was exhausted by war, by death, by the destruction and chaos that ravaged the country," he writes. "The abstract notions of equal rights and universal suffrage did not resonate with Northerners." (337)

This is not a serious explanation. It was not "the people" that turned away from the struggle for equality, but the ruling class and the dominant sections of the Republican Party. The war had given a huge impulse to industrial capitalist development and with it came the growth of the working class. In the South, millions of freedmen had been liberated. Without any wealth and nothing but their capacity to work, however, the formerly enslaved were now reduced to sharecropping, which supplanted

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the earlier system of chattel slavery. In both regions, as well as the West, the ascent of private, capitalist property relations triumphed, along with enormous new personal fortunes. In the face of this new reality, the ruling class began to do away with promises for equality.

It now became convenient for the ruling class to both falsify and diminish the roles of Sumner and the other Radical Republicans, as their previous calls for equality and democratic rights threatened to rouse the working class. Historical interpretation followed suit, most notoriously with the Dunning School of pro-Southern historiography, which portrayed the abolitionists and the radicals in a negative light.

In more recent times, the ideas promulgated by the *New York Times'* 1619 Project and Critical Race Theory ignore, minimize or falsify the struggle of the Radical Republicans, insisting that whites have always set out to keep blacks at the bottom and that African Americans have always "fought back alone," in the words of 1619 Project creator Nikole Hannah-Jones. As was noted in a review by the WSWS of a biography of Thaddeus Stevens, the actions of the Radical Republicans provide "an irrefutable answer to this reactionary falsification of history." In this context, Puleo's biography should be welcomed for shining a positive light on Sumner's life and career.

Just around a year before he died, Sumner explained to a friend of the goal to which he had devoted his entire life. It was to "help mankind, and advance the reign of justice on earth." (403)

Today, in the face of the increasingly intractable crisis of the entire capitalist order, the only movement that can "help mankind, and advance the reign of justice on earth" is the working class, guided by a socialist program. Sumner and the Radical Republicans' past revolutionary struggles must be studied and assimilated to prepare for the revolutionary tasks today.

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