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**A House Divided: (35) – Mr.
Brooks' Cane - II**

Lead: One hundred and fifty years ago the Republic was facing its greatest crisis. This continuing series examines the American Civil War. It is *A House Divided*.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: In spring 1856 on the floor of the U.S. Senate, Charles Sumner of Massachusetts spent two days flailing away at the what he considered the criminal behavior of pro-slavery partisans

determined to render Kansas bloody until it came into the Union as a slave state. It was tasteless, terrible speech with inflammatory rhetoric designed to whip up anti-slavery sentiment.

In the course of the speech he had named names, specifically with particular vehemence, South Carolina Senator Andrew P. Butler. The latter he asserted “discharged the loose expectoration of his speech” by demanding that Kansas free-staters should be disarmed. He then added to the insult an attack on Butler’s home state who he said had from “its shameful imbecility from Slavery,” sent to the Senate a

Don Quixote-like figure who had whored himself out to the harlot Slavery, foolishly seeing her as chaste when the whole world recognized her pollution.

Two days later, South Carolina struck back. Congressman Preston Brooks, Butler's cousin approached Sumner on the almost deserted floor of the Senate where Sumner was writing letters. He informed him that the Senator in his speech had libeled his home state and his kinsman. Sumner attempted to rise from the desk but his legs got trapped. A clearly frenzied Brooks began to wale away at the defenseless Sumner. Ten, twenty, thirty times he struck

him with a gold-headed walking cane. Finally, the Senator, bloodied around the head, tore the desk from the floor and collapsed. He spent the better part of the next four years away from the Senate in recovery.

The reaction north and south was predictable and infuriating to both sides. William Cullen Bryant, writing in the *New York Evening Post* questioned whether, ‘we must speak with bated breath in the presence of our Southern masters...chastised as they chastise their slaves?’ In the south, though some expressed qualms about his behavior, Brooks was hailed as a hero. One Richmond paper called,

‘the act good in conception, better in execution, best in consequence. The saucy abolitionists dare to be impudent to gentlemen and must be lashed into submission.’ Though the House voted to expel him, the vote was short of the two-thirds majority required. He resigned, returned to Carolina in triumph and was re-elected by unanimous vote. His only penalty was a district court fine of \$300.00. Brooks received many requests for fragments of the cane as if it were a religious relic and was gifted with numerous new canes, one at least inscribed with, “Hit Him Again.”

The incident of one buffoon

caning other would probably have passed relatively unnoticed, save for the fact that it represented in bright contrast the hardening attitudes North and South and the gradual disappearance of civility in a nation that, because of the issue of slavery, was quickly losing control of itself.

In Richmond, Virginia, this is Dan Roberts.

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