Opinion

What we can learn from the senator who nearly died for democracy

The brutal caning of Sen. Charles Sumner in 1856 shows the difference between courage and concession.

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By Zaakir Tameez

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On May 13, a man who made death threats against Sen. Jacky Rosen (D-Nevada) for her foreig using her voice to speak about political controversies. A month before that, Sen. Thom Tillis (R- nomination as defense secretary.

Most senators abhor all forms of political violence, of course. But at least one senator seemed to He was referring to the caning of Sen. Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, an act of Senate violer

Over two days — May 19 and May 20 in 1856 — Sumner delivered a stinging antislavery speech South Carolina, lashed out on May 22 to avenge the South's honor. With a gold-tipped gutta-pe his own blood in what is now the Old Senate Chamber.

Though Sumner barely survived, his assault breathed new life into the antislavery movement. V the fall of 1856, outraged Northerners elected scores of politicians who went to Washington der

“No one act,” Frederick Douglass observed, “did more to rouse the North.”

High school students learn about Sumner’s caning in U.S. history class, but few grasp the full st
overlook.

The first is that many politicians rejected America’s founding texts, sacrosanct as they are, in th
that Thomas Jefferson wrote into the Declaration of Independence: the phrase “all men are cre
“a self-evident lie.”

After nearly killing Sumner, Brooks barely faced any consequences and became a celebrity at pr
of the United States should be torn to fragments.” Openly calling for a treasonous insurrection,

The second lesson is that anti-constitutional rhetoric from politicians, as the caning shows, can
pro tempore of the Senate — led an armed gang into the territory of Kansas. With bowie knives
boxes. Their goal was to ensure that Kansas voted to become a slavery state, even if it required

Proslavery politicians in the 1850s often resorted to extreme force to impose their will. The Ma
subjected anyone who encouraged enslaved people to resist to the death penalty. There was effe
1860, most Southern states were so outraged by Lincoln’s modestly antislavery platform that th

The vast suppression of antislavery political activity was working. Wealthy enslavers dominated
surmised, as one Southern newspaper put it, that “vulgar abolitionists” could be simply “LASH
with his cane.

Yet, the opposite happened. Through grassroots programs, tens of thousands of people gathere
the idea that slavery should be abolished in federal territories — passed out as many as 3 millio
contributed to Lincoln’s epic victory in the 1860 presidential election.

In many ways, Sumner anticipated the violence directed at him — and that it could have positiv
Massachusetts expected the 1856 congressional session to “be the most violent one in our histo
the message out of concern for Sumner’s safety. And yet, Sumner persisted, believing that a bra

There is a final lesson from the caning — one that senators who operate under the fear of violen
politicians like him needed to be brave. If they had to risk their physical safety to speak their co
were serious about resisting autocracy. He thought that courage, not concession, was the key to
from the Irish novelist Jonathan Swift to articulate this piece of his political philosophy: “And k

What readers are saying

The comments reflect on the historical significance of the caning of Sen. Charl
brutality of the attack and its role in galvanizing the antislavery movement, as

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