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## READING AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does Calhoun define the causes of the sectional conflict between the northern and southern states?
2. Calhoun died four weeks after delivering this speech. What did he hope to accomplish with his final act on the public stage?

### 13-4 | Attacking the Slave Power Conspiracy

#### CHARLES SUMNER, *The Crime of Kansas* (1856)

Northern antislavery activists like Massachusetts senator Charles Sumner railed against fellow senator Stephen Douglas's "solution" to the slavery extension issue, which called for popular sovereignty, or allowing the people to decide. Though democratic, the plan opened the possibility of slavery extending into regions where it had never before gone. The rush of both abolitionists and proslavery men into the territories to claim a majority resulted in bloody conflict, a violent prelude to the 1861 Civil War. When the proslavery Kansas constitution was recognized as the legitimate government, Sumner described the outcome as a "crime against humanity."

[B]efore entering upon the argument, I must say something of a general character, particularly in response to what has fallen from senators who have raised themselves to eminence on this floor in championship of human wrongs; I mean the Senator from South Carolina [Mr. Butler], and the Senator from Illinois [Mr. Douglas], who, though unlike as Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, yet, like this couple, sally forth together in the same adventure. I regret much to miss the elder Senator from his seat; but the cause, against which he has run a tilt, with such

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*Speech of Hon. Charles Sumner, in the Senate of the United States, 19th and 20th May, 1856* (Boston: John P. Jewett & Company, 1856), 9–10, 12–14.

activity of animosity, demands that the opportunity of exposing him should not be lost; and it is for the cause that I speak. The Senator from South Carolina has read many books of chivalry, and believes himself a chivalrous knight, with sentiments of honor and courage. Of course he has chosen a mistress to whom he has made his vows, and who, though ugly to others, is always lovely to him; though polluted in the sight of the world, is chaste in his sight;—I mean the harlot, Slavery. For her his tongue is always profuse with words. Let her be impeached in character, or any proposition made to shut her out from the extension of her wantonness, and no extravagance of manner or hardihood of assertion is then too great for this Senator. The frenzy of Don Quixote in behalf of his wench Dulcinea del Toboso is all surpassed. The asserted rights of Slavery, which shock equality of all kinds, are cloaked by a fantastic claim of equality. If the slave States cannot enjoy what, in mockery of the great fathers of the Republic, he 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!

But, not content with this poor menace, which we have been twice told was “measured,” the senator, in the unrestrained chivalry of his nature, has undertaken to apply opprobrious words to those who differ from him on this floor. He calls them “sectional and fanatical”; and opposition to the usurpation in Kansas he denounces as “an uncalculating fanaticism.” To be sure these charges lack all grace of originality, and all sentiment of truth; but the adventurous Senator does not hesitate. He is the uncompromising, unblushing representative on this floor of a flagrant *sectionalism*, which now domineers over the Republic; and yet with a ludicrous ignorance of his own position,—unable to see himself as others see him,—or with an effrontery which even his white head ought not to protect from rebuke, he applies to those here who resist his sectionalism the very epithet which designates himself. The men who strive to bring back the government to its original policy, when Freedom and not Slavery was national, while Slavery and not freedom was sectional, he arraigns as *sectional*. This will not do. It involves too great a perversion of terms. I tell that Senator that it is to himself, and to the “organization” of which he is the “committed advocate,” that this epithet belongs. I now fasten it upon them. For myself, I care little for names; but, since the question has been raised here, I affirm that the Republican party of the Union is in no just sense *sectional*, but, more than any other party, *national*; and that it now goes forth to dislodge from the high places of the government the tyrannical sectionalism of which the senator from South Carolina is one of the maddest zealots.

But I have not done with the senator. There is another matter, regarded by him of such consequence, that he interpolated it into the speech of the senator from New Hampshire [Mr. Hale] and also announced that he had prepared himself with it, to take in his pocket all the way to Boston, when he expected to address the people of that community. On this account, and for the sake of truth,

I stop for one moment, and tread it to the earth. The North, according to the senator, was engaged in the slave trade, and helped to introduce slaves into the Southern States; and this undeniable fact he proposed to establish by statistics, in stating which, his errors surpassed his sentences in number. But I let these pass for the present, that I may deal with his argument. Pray, sir, is the acknowledged turpitude of a departed generation to become an example for us? And yet the suggestion of the senator, if entitled to any consideration in this discussion, must have this extent. I join my friend from New Hampshire in thanking the senator from South Carolina for adducing this instance; for it gives me an opportunity to say, that the northern merchants, with homes in Boston, Bristol, Newport, New York, and Philadelphia, who catered for Slavery during the years of the slave trade, are the lineal progenitors of the northern men, with homes in these places, who lend themselves to Slavery in our day; and especially that all, whether north or south, who take part, directly or indirectly, in the conspiracy against Kansas, do but continue the work of the slave-traders, which you condemn. It is true—too true, alas!—that our fathers were engaged in this traffic; but that is no apology for it. And, in repelling the authority of this example, I repel also the trite argument founded on the earlier example of England. It is true that our mother country, at the peace of Utrecht, extorted from Spain the Assiento Contract, securing the monopoly of the slave-trade with the Spanish Colonies, as the whole price of all the blood of great victories; that she higgled at Aix-la Chapelle for another lease of this exclusive traffic; and again, at the treaty of Madrid, clung to the wretched piracy. It is true, that in this spirit the power of the mother country was prostituted to the same base ends in her American colonies, against indignant protests from our fathers. All these things now rise up in judgment against her. Let us not follow the senator from South Carolina to do this very evil to-day, which in another generation we condemn.

As the senator from South Carolina is the Don Quixote, the senator from Illinois [Mr. Douglas] is the squire of slavery, its very Sancho Panza, ready to do all its humiliating offices. This senator, in his labored address, vindicating his labored report—piling one mass of elaborate error upon another mass—constrained himself, as you will remember, to unfamiliar, decencies of speech. Of that address I have nothing to say at this moment, though before I sit down I shall show something of its fallacies. But I go back now to an earlier occasion, when, true to his native impulses, he threw into this discussion, “for a charm of powerful trouble,” personalities most discreditable to this body. I will not stop to repel the imputations which he cast upon myself; but I mention them to remind you of the “sweltered venom sleeping got,” which, with other poisoned ingredients, he cast into the cauldron of this debate. Of other things I speak. Standing on this floor, the senator issued his rescript, requiring submission to the usurped power of Kansas; and this was accompanied by a manner—all his own—such as befits the tyrannical threat. Very well. Let the senator try. I tell him now that he cannot enforce any such submission. The senator, with the slave power at his back, is strong; but he is not strong enough for this purpose. He is bold. He shrinks from nothing. Like Danton, he may cry, “*l’audace, l’audace, toujours*

*l'audace!*"<sup>1</sup> but even his audacity cannot compass this work. The senator copies the British officer, who, with boastful swagger, said that with the hilt of his sword he would cram the "stamps" down the throats of the American people; and he will meet a similar failure. He may convulse this country with civil feud. Like the ancient madman, he may set fire to this temple of Constitutional Liberty, grander than Ephesian dome;<sup>2</sup> but he cannot enforce obedience to that tyrannical usurpation.

The senator dreams that he can subdue the North. He disclaims the open threat, but his conduct still implies it. How little that senator knows himself, or the strength of the cause which he persecutes! He is but a mortal man; against him is an immortal principle. With finite power he wrestles with the infinite, and he must fall. Against him are stronger battalions than any marshaled by mortal man—the inborn, ineradicable, invincible sentiments of the human heart; against him is nature in all her subtle forces; against him is God. Let him try to subdue these.

### READING AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Would you define the issues Sumner raised in his speech as short- or long-term causes of the Civil War? Explain your answer.
2. Compare Sumner's argument with the argument of Calhoun. How do they differ in the ways they understood the political conflict of the 1850s?
3. After delivering this speech, Sumner was savagely beaten on the floor of the U.S. Senate, sustaining injuries that incapacitated him for years. How did Sumner's speech and the response to it reflect the broader historical context of the 1850s?