

The Crime Against Kansas: The Apologies for the Crime; The True Remedy¹

Delivered to the United States Senate, 19-20 May 1856

By Hon. Senator Charles Sumner

MR. PRESIDENT, -- You are now called to redress a great wrong. Seldom in the history of nations is such a question presented. Tariffs, army bills, navy bills, land bills, are important, and justly occupy your care; but these all belong to the course of ordinary legislation. As means and instruments only, they are necessarily subordinate to the conservation of Government itself. Grant them or deny them, in greater or less degree, and you inflict no shock. The machinery of Government continues to move. The State does not cease to exist. Far otherwise is it with the eminent question now before you, involving the peace of the whole country, with our good name in history forevermore.

Take down your map, Sir, and you will find that the Territory of Kansas, more than any other region, occupies the middle spot of North America, equally distant from the Atlantic on the east and the Pacific on the west, from the frozen waters of Hudson's Bay on the north and the tepid Gulf Stream on the south, -- constituting the precise geographical centre of the whole vast Continent. To such advantages of situation, on the very highway between two oceans, are added a soil of unsurpassed richness, and a fascinating, undulating beauty of surface, with a health-giving climate, calculated to nurture a powerful and generous people, worthy to be a central pivot of American institutions. A few short months have hardly passed since this spacious Mediterranean country was open only to the savage, who ran wild in its woods and prairies; and now it has drawn to its bosom a population of freemen larger than Athens crowded within her historic gates....

Against this Territory, thus fortunate in position and population, a Crime has been committed which is without example in the records of

¹ SOURCE: The Works of Charles Sumner, vol. IV (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1870-1873), pages 125-249.

the Past. Not in plundered provinces or in the cruelties of selfish governors will you find its parallel....

The wickedness which I now begin to expose is immeasurably aggravated by the motive which prompted it. Not in any common lust for power did this uncommon tragedy have its origin. It is the rape of a virgin Territory, compelling it to the hateful embrace of Slavery; and it may be clearly traced to a depraved desire for a new Slave State, hideous offspring of such a crime, in the hope of adding to the power of Slavery in the National Government. Yes, Sir, when the whole world, alike Christian and Turk, is rising up to condemn this wrong, making it a hissing to the nations, here in our Republic, force -- ay, Sir, FORCE -- is openly employed in compelling Kansas to this pollution, and all for the sake of political power. There is the simple fact, which you will vainly attempt to deny, but which in itself presents an essential wickedness that makes other public crimes seem like public virtues.

This enormity, vast beyond comparison, swells to dimensions of crime which the imagination toils in vain to grasp, when it is understood that for this purpose are hazarded the horrors of intestine feud, not only in this distant Territory, but everywhere throughout the country. The muster has begun. The strife is no longer local, but national. Even now, while I speak, portents lower in the horizon, threatening to darken the land, which already palpitates with the mutterings of civil war....

Such is the Crime which you are to judge. The criminal also must be dragged into the day, what you may see and measure the power by which all this wrong is sustained. From no common source could it proceed. In its perpetration was needed a spirit of vaulting ambition which would hesitate at nothing; a hardihood of purpose insensible to the judgment of mankind; a madness for Slavery, in spite of Constitution, laws, and all the great examples of our history; also consciousness of power such as comes from the habit of power; a combination of energies found only in a hundred arms directed by a hundred eyes; a control of Public Opinion through venal pens and a prostituted press; an ability to subsidize crowds in every vocation of life, -- the politician with his local importance, the lawyer with his subtle tongue, and even the authority of the judge on the bench, -- with a familiar use of men in places high and low, so that none, from the

President to the lowest border postmaster, should decline to be its tool: all these things, and more, were needed, and they were found in the Slave Power of our Republic. There, Sir, stands the criminal, unmasked before you, heartless, grasping, and tyrannical, with an audacity beyond that of Verres, a subtlety beyond that of Machiavel, a meanness beyond that of Bacon, and an ability beyond that of Hastings. Justice to Kansas can be secured only by the prostration of this influence; for this is the Power behind -- greater than any President -- which succors and sustains the Crime....

Such is the Crime and such the criminal which it is my duty to expose; and, by the blessing of God, this duty shall be done completely to the end. But this will not be enough. The Apologies which, with strange hardihood, are offered for the Crime must be torn away, so that it shall stand forth without a single rag or fig-leaf to cover its vileness. And, finally, the True Remedy must be shown....

Before 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 wrong: 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 ebullition 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 in words. Let her be impeached in character, or any proposition be 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!

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 resistance to the Usurpation of 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, now domineering 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 is 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 that tyrannical sectionalism of which the Senator from South Carolina is one of the maddest zealots.

To the charge of fanaticism I also reply. Sir, fanaticism is found in an enthusiasm or exaggeration of opinion, particularly on religious subjects; but there may be fanaticism for evil as well as for good. Now I will not deny that there are persons among us loving Liberty too well for personal good in a selfish generation. Such there may be; and, for the sake of their example, would that there were more! In calling them

"fanatics," you cast contumely upon the noble army of martyrs, from the earliest day down to this hour, -- upon the great tribunes of human rights, by whom life, liberty, and happiness on earth have been secured, -- upon the long line of devoted patriots, who, throughout history have truly loved their country, -- and upon all who, in noble aspiration for the general good, and in forgetfulness of self, have stood out before their age, and gathered into their generous bosoms the shafts of tyranny and wrong, in order to make a pathway for Truth; -- you discredit Luther, when alone he nailed his articles to the door of the church at Wittenberg, and then to the imperial demand that he should retract firmly replied, "Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise, so help me God!" And in this same dreary catalogue faithful History must record all who now, in an enlightened age, and in a land of boasted Freedom, stand up, in perversion of the Constitution, and in denial of immortal truth, to fasten a new shackle upon their fellow-man. If the Senator wishes to see fanatics, let him look round among his own associates, -- let him look at himself....

Mr. President, I mean to keep absolutely within the limits of parliamentary propriety. I make no personal imputations, but only with frankness, such as belongs to the occasion and my own character, describe a great historical act, now enrolled in the Capitol. Sir, the Nebraska Bill was in every respect a swindle. It was a swindle of the North by the South. On the part of those who had already completely enjoyed their share of the Missouri Compromise, it was a swindle of those whose share was yet absolutely untouched; and the plea of unconstitutionality set up -- like the plea of usury after the borrowed money has been enjoyed -- did not make it less a swindle. Urged as a bill of peace, it was a swindle of the whole country. Urged as opening the doors to slave-masters with their slaves, it was a swindle of Popular Sovereignty in its asserted doctrine. Urged as sanctioning Popular Sovereignty, it was a swindle of slave-masters in their asserted rights. It was a swindle of a broad territory, thus cheated of protection against Slavery. It was a swindle of a great cause, early espoused by Washington, Franklin, and Jefferson, surrounded by the best fathers of the Republic. Sir, it was a swindle of God-given, inalienable rights. Turn it over, look at it on all sides, and it is everywhere a swindle; and if the word I now employ has not the authority of classical usage, it has, on this occasion, the indubitable authority of fitness. No other word will

adequately express the mingled meanness and wickedness of the cheat....

[Sumner characterizes the electoral fraud, mob violence, and tainted government of pro-slavery Kansas.]

Thus was the Crime consummated. Slavery stands erect, clanking its chains on the Territory of Kansas, surrounded by a code of death, and trampling upon all cherished liberties, whether of speech, the press, the bar, the trial by jury, or the electoral franchise. And, Sir, all this is done, not merely to introduce a wrong which in itself is a denial of all rights, and in dread of which mothers have taken the lives of their offspring, -- not merely, as is sometimes said, to protect Slavery in Missouri, since it is futile for this State to complain of Freedom on the side of Kansas, when Freedom exists without complaint on the side of Iowa, and also on the side of Illinois, -- but it is done for the sake of political power, in order to bring two new slaveholding Senators upon this floor, and thus to fortify in the National Government the desperate chances of a waning Oligarchy. As the gallant ship, voyaging on pleasant summer seas, is assailed by a pirate crew, and plundered of doubloons and dollars, so is this beautiful Territory now assailed in peace and prosperity, and robbed of its political power for the sake of Slavery. Even now the black flag of the land pirates from Missouri waves at the mast-head; in their laws you hear the pirate yell and see the flash of the pirate knife; while, incredible to relate, the President, gathering the Slave Power at his back, testifies a pirate sympathy.

Sir, all this was done in the name of Popular Sovereignty. And this is the close of the tragedy. Popular Sovereignty, which, when truly understood, is a fountain of just power, has ended in Popular Slavery, -- not in the subjection of the unhappy African race merely, but of this proud Caucasian blood which you boast. The profession with which you began, of All by the People, is lost in the wretched reality of Nothing for the People....

With regret I come again upon the Senator from South Carolina [Mr. Butler], who, omnipresent in this debate, overflows with rage at the simple suggestion that Kansas has applied for admission as a State, and, with incoherent phrase, discharges the loose expectoration of his

speech, now upon her representative, and then upon her people. There was no extravagance of the ancient Parliamentary debate which he did not repeat; nor was there any possible deviation from truth which he did not make, -- with so much of passion, I gladly add, as to save him from the suspicion of intentional aberration. But the Senator touches nothing which he does not disfigure -- with error, sometimes of principle, sometimes of fact. He shows an incapacity of accuracy, whether in stating the Constitution or in stating the law, whether in details of statistics or diversions of scholarship. He cannot open his mouth, but out there flies a blunder....

But it is against the people of Kansas that the sensibilities of the Senator are particularly aroused. Coming, as he announces, "from a State," -- ay, Sir, from South Carolina, -- he turns with lordly disgust from this newly formed community, which he will not recognize even as "a member of the body politic." Pray, Sir, by what title does he indulge in this egotism? Has he read the history of the "State" which he represents? He cannot, surely, forget its shameful imbecility from Slavery, confessed throughout the Revolution, followed by its more shameful assumptions for Slavery since. He cannot forget its wretched persistence in the slave-trade, as the very apple of its eye, and the condition of its participation in the Union. He cannot forget its Constitution, which is republican only in name, confirming power in the hands of the few, and founding the qualifications of its legislators on "a settled freehold estate of five hundred acres of land and ten negroes." And yet the Senator to whom this "State" has in part committed the guardianship of its good name, instead of moving with backward-treading steps to cover its nakedness, rushes forward, in the very ecstasy of madness, to expose it, by provoking comparison with Kansas. South Carolina is old; Kansas is young. South Carolina counts in centuries, where Kansas counts by years. But a beneficent example may be born in a day; and I venture to declare, that against the two centuries of the older "State" may be set already the two years of trial, evolving corresponding virtue, in the younger community. In the one is the long wail of Slavery; in the other, the hymn of Freedom. And if we glance at special achievement, it will be difficult to find anything in the history of South Carolina which presents so much of heroic spirit in an heroic cause as shines in that repulse of the Missouri invaders by the beleaguered town of Lawrence, where even the women gave their effective efforts to Freedom.... Were the

whole history of South Carolina blotted out of existence, from its very beginning down to the day of the last election of the Senator to his present seat on this floor, civilization might lose -- I do not say how little, but surely less than it has already gained by the example of Kansas, in that valiant struggle against oppression, and in the development of a new science of emigration. Already in Lawrence alone are newspapers and schools, including a High School, -- and throughout this infant Territory there is more of educated talent, in proportion to its inhabitants, than in his vaunted "State." Ah, Sir, I tell the Senator, that Kansas, welcome as a Free State, "a ministering angel shall be" to the Republic, when South Carolina, in the cloak of darkness which she hugs, "lies howling...."

The contest, which, beginning in Kansas, reaches us will be transferred soon from Congress to that broader stage, where every citizen is not only spectator, but actor; and to their judgment I confidently turn. To the People, about to exercise the electoral franchise, in choosing a Chief Magistrate of the Republic, I appeal, to vindicate the electoral franchise in Kansas. Let the ballot-box of the Union, with multitudinous might, protect the ballot-box in that Territory. Let the voters everywhere, while rejoicing in their own rights, help guard the equal rights of distant fellow-citizens, that the shrines of popular institutions, now desecrated, may be sanctified anew, -- that the ballot-box, now plundered, may be restored, -- and that the cry, "I am an American citizen," shall no longer be impotent against outrage. In just regard for free labor, which you would blast by deadly contact with slave labor, -- in Christian sympathy with the slave, whom you would task and sell, -- in stern condemnation of the Crime consummated on that beautiful soil, -- in rescue of fellow-citizens, now subjugated to Tyrannical Usurpation, -- in dutiful respect for the early Fathers, whose aspirations are ignobly thwarted, -- in the name of the Constitution outraged, of the Laws trampled down, of Justice banished, of Humanity degraded, of Peace destroyed, of Freedom crushed to earth, -- and in the name of the Heavenly Father, whose service is perfect freedom, I make this last appeal.