

**Williamjames Hull Hoffer.** *The Caning of Charles Sumner: Honor, Idealism, and the Origins of the Civil War.* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010. Pp. 160. Paper, \$19.95; ISBN 978-0-8018-9469-5.

Historical monographs are rarely considered “page turners” despite the work’s importance to academia. Williamjames Hull Hoffer has placed a crucial moment in history—the caning of Charles Sumner by Preston Brooks—within the broader significance of the decades preceding the Civil War. Hoffer magnifies the causality and meaning of this cultural and political menagerie. The introduction is written in a way that both lures the reader and shows the subject’s importance in big picture terms. He urges the audience to “recapture some of the drama of the past while standing far enough removed ... to examine [it].”

The first chapter sets up the caning with such vivid description that the reader forgets that it is a historical event and is instead subsumed by the players and the plot. Preston S. Brooks, a “less than elegant figure,” emerged from a tavern after a night of drinking with fellow southern congressmen and walked to the capital and into the old Senate chamber. As Brooks waited for the women in the room to leave, he spied Charles Sumner affixing stamps on copies of the speech that so offended the “honor” of his family (his uncle, Senator Andrew P. Butler) and his region. After Brooks made his move, the beating pinned Sumner underneath the desk while fellow politicians watched with little interference. Ultimately, Sumner dislodged the desk, which was bolted to the floor, and freed himself, but the trauma to his head left his “shirt and coat drenched with blood.” Hoffer writes with such narrative elegance that one can visualize the room and virtually smell the cigars and scotch. The remainder gives a brief history of melees in Congress prior to 1856, introduces the concept of honor, and describes Brooks and Sumner as products of their respective societies despite similar backgrounds.

Chapter Two explores the peculiar institution of slavery and the inadequacies of a political system that led to unavoidable conflict after 1860. Hoffer focuses on westward expansion as the major impetus of sectional tension and short-term political compromises. He also offers clear insight into the evolution of the modern two-party system, which is often difficult for students to grasp from traditional texts. Chapters Three and Four deal with the aftermath of the caning incident, and Hoffer utilizes sources not heavily considered in previous writings about the event, namely William Leader’s account published in 1875. Moreover, the text traces the radicalization of sectional tension and analyzes the fluid relationship between events such as Bleeding Kansas, Harpers Ferry, the Dred Scott decision, and the caning as pressure built to a boiling point.

The final chapter serves to summarize and reconnect the book’s pertinent themes. Hoffer weighs the significance of the caning and concludes that it can be viewed as “a critical early domino in the falling pieces that led to the Civil War” but remains most powerful as an analogy of honor and division. With unanticipated irony, Hoffer warns

in the Epilogue that politicians should be aware of the “dangers of turning words into violent actions.” In the aftermath of the Tucson tragedy in January 2011 and a renewed call for political civility, his words remain ever so timely and the story of Sumner becomes even more compelling. Taken as a whole, the short length, subject, and writing style of *The Caning of Charles Sumner* will make this text a staple in survey and upper-level American history classes alike.

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**D.K.R. Crosswell.** *Beetle: The Life of General Bedell Smith*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010. Pp. 1070. Hardcover, \$39.95; ISBN 978-08131-2649-4.

It is almost impossible to read a book about General Dwight David Eisenhower and not find references to General Walter Bedell Smith. Throughout the Second World War, Smith worked alongside Eisenhower as his Chief of Staff and most trusted assistant, directing the largest, most complex, and most important command organization in American military history. While the commander made the decisions, Smith supervised the preparation of the orders that got the military forces moving: in Sicily, Italy, and for the Invasion of Normandy in June 1944. In no small way, Eisenhower was successful because of “Beetle” Smith’s competent leadership and sound advice, a fact he acknowledged after Smith’s death in 1961. He never carried the responsibility of senior combat command, yet his role in the Allied defeat of Germany was as critical as anyone in Europe. After the war, he served President Harry S. Truman as ambassador to the Soviet Union, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, and Under Secretary of State. In spite of this distinguished career, few are aware of Smith or his role in twentieth-century American history.

D.K.R. Crosswell’s *Beetle* captures the essence of Smith’s fifty years in government service. He innovatively commences his mammoth study, almost 1000 pages including notes, discussing the general’s transition from military to civilian bureaucrat after the war. These years as Ambassador to the Soviet Union, Director of the CIA, and Under Secretary of State, were, as Crosswell describes, less than satisfying but exceedingly important. Elderly and in poor health, Smith ended his days in 1961 at Walter Reed Hospital, rejecting an elaborate funeral. He lies buried near his mentor, George C. Marshall, at Arlington National Cemetery.

The author arranges the remainder of the book in a more conventional manner beginning as a sixteen-year old private in the Indiana National Guard. Parts two and three describe Smith’s transition from soldier, to officer, to consummate staff officer as Secretary of Marshall’s General Staff at the beginning of the Second World War. Crosswell superbly describes how the Army’s pre-war professional education system, with postings at the Infantry School and Command and General Staff School, compensated for Smith not attending the U.S. Military Academy at West Point or