



# Charles Sumner and The Coming of the Civil War

*David Herbert Donald*

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**Charles Sumner and The Coming of the Civil War** David Herbert Donald

*The Pulitzer-Prize winning classic and national bestseller returns!*

In this brilliant biography—a Pulitzer Prize—winning national bestseller—David Herbert Donald, Harvard professor emeritus, traces Sumner's life as the nation careens toward civil war. In a period when senators often exercised more influence than presidents, Senator Charles Sumner was one of the most powerful forces in the American government and remains one of the most controversial figures in American history. His uncompromising moral standards made him a lightning rod in an era fraught with conflict.

Sumner's fight to end slavery made him a hero in the North and stirred outrage in the South. In what has been called the first blow of the Civil War, he was physically attacked by a colleague on the Senate floor. Unwavering and arrogant, Sumner refused to abandon the moral high ground, even if doing so meant the onslaught of the nation's most destructive war. He used his office and influence to transform the United States during the most contentious and violent period in the nation's history.

Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War presents a remarkably different view of our bloodiest war through an insightful reevaluation of the man who stood at its center.

## Charles Sumner and The Coming of the Civil War Details

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# From Reader Review Charles Sumner and The Coming of the Civil War for online ebook

## Kathleen says

I have started the book and am surprised at the life of Charles Sumner. I do not know much about him, but I never would have suspected the truth. Mr. Donald did enormous research and it shows in all the details, including quotes from Sumner and those around him, who ever the notables of the day.

I have put the book aside. While the book gets outstanding reviews, I find it difficult to pick up. Maybe I will be able to get back to it later.

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## Riley says

A very good biography of Charles Sumner of Massachusetts that ends with the firing on Fort Sumter and the beginning of the Civil War. I can remember reading history books in school in which Sumner, though credited as a vocal critic of slavery, was still presented as a less than stellar figure. This account shows both why that is and how right he was.

Here is David Donald's summation of the most famous event of Sumner's life, his beating on the Senate floor by Representative Preston Brooks of South Carolina:

"In Southern parlance, Preston Brooks had inflicted a caning, or a whipping, upon that blackguard Sumner in order to chastise him for his unprovoked insults to the hoary-headed Senator Butler and for his foul-mouthed denunciation of South Carolina. There was no conspiracy, and Brooks had no coadjutors. He acted not for political reasons, but solely to redress a personal wrong. In caning Sumner, he neither violated the privileges of the Senate nor broke the Constitutional guarantee of free speech to congressmen. His weapon was nothing but a common walking stick, such as gentlemen frequently use. After sufficiently warning Sumner, Brooks lightly struck him across the face with a blow that was but a tap, intended to put him on his guard. As Sumner promptly rose to defend himself, Brooks naturally applied the stick with more force. After the first blow, Sumner bellowed like a bull calf and quickly fell cringing to the floor, an inanimate lump of cowardice. Though Sumner suffered only flesh wounds, he absented himself from the Senate because of mortification of feeling and wounded pride. Brooks, with conspicuous gallantry, promptly reappeared in the House of Representatives, ready to face all accusers.

"In Northern language, the affair bore an entirely different aspect. Bully Brooks had made a brutal assault upon Sumner with a bludgeon. The act had no provocation; on the contrary, Sumner for years had silently endured a harsh stream of unparliamentary personalities from Butler and other defenders of the slave power. The alleged cause of the assault, Sumner's speech, was marked by the classic purity of its language and the nobility of its sentiments. The fearlessness of Sumner's ideas had, in fact, been what singled him out for assassination. Brooks was a mere tool of the slave-holding oligarchy. While fellow conspirators gathered around him to prevent interference, the South Carolinian stealthily approached Sumner and committed his brutal and barbarous outrage upon an unarmed man. Though Sumner courageously tried to defend himself, the ruffian took advantage of his defenseless position and of the surprise, beat Sumner senseless, and continued to strike him after he collapsed on the floor."

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## **Gary Hoggatt says**

Not long ago I read David Herbert Donald's 1996 biography *Lincoln* and was completely impressed by Donald's work, and his ability to bring Abraham Lincoln to life with his writing. One of the major recurring personalities in *Lincoln* is Charles Sumner, the abolitionist Senator from Massachusetts. Given all that, and that Donald won the Pulitzer Prize for biography for it, I decided I had to read Donald's 1960 biography, *Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War*. This is the first volume of a two volume biography, and covers Sumner's life up until Confederate shots are fired at Fort Sumpter.

One major difference between this volume and Donald's *Lincoln* is, frankly, that the subject is much less likeable. Sumner could be passionate and uncompromising in his beliefs, but he could also be vain, touchy, and self-righteous. To Donald's credit, he does not shy away from behavior or incidents that leave Sumner looking the worse, and he tries to explain just why Sumner developed these traits. I came away feeling that I had an accurate picture of the man, good and bad.

Much like Donald's biography of *Lincoln* is an interesting insight into the then-frontier of Illinois and the birth of the Republican Party in the West, the Sumner biography is also a window into 19th century New England (and Europe, thanks to Sumner's extensive travels) and the birth of the Republican Party in New England. It was a time of great tension and change, even in the oldest parts of the country.

Sumner was one of the most powerful politicians of his day, and at the forefront of the conflict between North and South. Anti-slavery Northerners looked to him as their most outspoken and powerful advocate, and Southerners despised him for his assault on what they viewed as their traditional way of life. After Sumner's "Crime Against Kansas" speech in 1856, South Carolina congressman Preston Brooks actually assaulted Sumner with a cane in the Senate chamber, resulting in Sumner being unable to perform his duties as a Senator for three years.

I can't recommend *Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War* as highly as I do Donald's *Lincoln*, but that's not really Donald's fault. As interesting as Sumner is, he's just no comparison to Lincoln. However, after reading these two books and finding him as the opposition in each, I find myself wishing Donald would write a biography of Illinois Democratic Senator Stephen A. Douglas, who contested with Lincoln in Illinois for the Illinois Senate seat and the 1860 presidential campaign, and who butted heads with Sumner over slavery in the Senate in the 1850's.

*Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War* is a good book that sheds a lot of light on the tensions that lead to the Civil War. I wouldn't recommend it to the general reader who isn't familiar with the era, and I'd recommend you read Donald's *Lincoln* first, but this volume is well done, and worth your time if you're a Civil War history aficionado.

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## **John Findlay says**

This book had been on my Kindle for awhile, and I finally got around to reading it. I am glad I did, as I learned much about a key figure in the lead up to the Civil War, a Senator I frankly knew nothing about. Charles Sumner is an intriguing character. He was educated at Harvard Law School, and became a protégé of

Justice Story of the Supreme Court. While traveling in Europe, he became convinced that the US tendency to see blacks as inferior was clearly wrong. He was a staunch abolitionist, at a time when that was unpopular. He was an early member of the newly formed Republican Party, after previously being a Conscience Whig and later a Free Soiler. A coalition of parties elected him to the Senate in 1851 by a single vote, where he became an outspoken critic of slavery. Known as a powerful orator, his speech entitled "The Crime Against Kansas" attacked the Kansas Nebraska Act and infuriated Southerners. During the speech he made several incisive statements about individual members of Congress who supported slavery. A few days after the speech, a Congressman from South Carolina, Preston Brooks, severely beat him with a cane on the floor of the Senate in retaliation for his remarks. Sumner was severely hurt, although it is likely that some of the damage was what we would now call Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The event further polarized the nation, with Northerners being appalled, and considering Sumner a wounded martyr to the cause of abolition, and Southerners holding Brooks up as a hero. Sumner was easily reelected to the Senate, but was primarily absent for a period of 3 years as he recovered from his disorder. The state of medical treatment was much poorer in those days, and the author details some of the theories about his illness and some treatments that today sound as quackery. Eventually, Sumner returns to the Senate, and gives another powerful speech. As some Congressmen and Senators attempt to develop a compromise that will keep some Southern and border states in the Union, Sumner is adamantly against any compromise that tolerates slavery.

Throughout the book, Sumner is portrayed as both obstinate and principled. In the Senate, he is a "bull in a china shop", and does not mince words. His position is very clear. Because of this, he does not come across as very likeable. Many of his friendships suffer as he refuses to entertain alternative opinions, particularly on the issue of slavery. The book ends with the election of Lincoln, the secession of South Carolina and several other states, and the outbreak of the Civil War. Donald has written a second volume that details the remainder of Sumner's life, which I also intend to read. This is a book that is anything but an easy read, but is extremely educational. I found it fascinating to learn about the events leading up to the Civil War, and the varied opinions of members of different parties and representatives of the North and the South. Sumner, while not likeable, was a critical component of the movement that eventually led to the war and the abolition of slavery. I'm sure he would say that the ends justified the means.

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## **Chenoa says**

Very enjoyable biography. I was not familiar with Charles Sumner until reading a brief reference to him in Brigham Young: Pioneer Prophet. It was a nice juxtaposition to go from Brigham Young to Charles Sumner.

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## **Land Murphy says**

I wrote a paper on Charles Sumner during college. (It probably wasn't a very good one.) That and my interest in the Civil War led me to this book. Sumner was an interesting fellow, but I'm not sure that I would have liked him personally. His friendships almost always ended up with Sumner taking offense and severing the friendship. John Adam's grandson was one of those erstwhile friends who found Sumner insufferable.

Sumner was an accidental Senator from Massachusetts who likely would have served only a single term were it not for the beating he received at the hands of Preston Brooks. The author suggests that in 1861, by the start of the Civil War, Sumner was one of the most powerful men in the United States. This book is Sumner's story up through the outbreak of the Civil War, and much of the book is Sumner's early life,

education, work, and travel. Those parts of the book can be tedious. Though they demonstrate Sumner's amazing connections--especially to European figures--the second half of the book, covering Sumner's entry into politics, was much more interesting. In the end, Sumner was one of those people who swore he had no interest in receiving or retaining a political office, but his actions suggest otherwise.

If for no other reason, the book is worth reading just for some of the hilarious quotes Donald includes. For example, after the Know-Nothings took control of the Massachusetts legislature following the 1854 election, Rufus Choate said: "Any thing more low, obscene, feculent, the manifold heavings of history of history have not cast up. We shall come to the worship of onions, cats and things vermiculate." I had to look up "vermiculate," which means, among other things, "with a worm-eaten appearance." Priceless.

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## **Fredrick Danysh says**

The American Civil War was not initially about slavery. Major factors included regionalism, diverse economic factors, and a strong belief in states' rights [the federal government could only exercise those powers granted to it in the Consitution, every other power belonging to the state/people]. Sumner was a leading figure in the per-war discussions.

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## **Greg says**

Donald, in this volume, has written a brilliant biography of Charles Sumner, a man who deserves much more recognition for his efforts to end slavery than he is usually given in the standard education of Americans. He does not seem to be an enjoyable person to be around. Although Donald does not use the word to describe him, my impression is that he was both dour and haughty. He was prone to exaggerated invective, and believed his position to always be unassailable and, therefore, unapproachable to compromise. That being said, was he a man that morality dictated the United States needed in this moment?

Sumner was not marked early for a career in politics. His early mentor was Justice Story, and he graduated from Harvard with a degree in law and then taught law there. "Under the tutelage of Story, who had conveniently forgotten his own earlier career as a Jeffersonian partisan and had now become John Marshall's chief support in the Supreme Court, Sumner developed, during his Washington trip, a decided aversion to politicians and to 'the unweeded garden in which they are laboring.'" (24). He later embarked on a trip to Europe to study English and French jurisprudence. He quickly developed reputations about relative merits between the systems, and also came to love European culture, and became aware of the want of culture exhibited by Americans.

Back in the United States, Sumner fell under the influence of William Ellery Channing. "Where Channing led, Sumner followed. He adopted all of the minister's arguments; he shared his concern over prison reform, education, international peace, and Negro slavery. It seemed to him positively heroic that the great Unitarian should continue to battle for social justice despite his age and obviously failing health." (84) He was a great believer in peace, but had to come to grips that only one problem could be tackled at a time. "Though Sumner continued to announce that the outlawing of war was 'the question of our age' ...he drifted away from the peace movement after 1849. The European Revolutions of 1848 caused hi to see that inflexible advocacy of peace often meant support of the reactionary status quo. In these contests between tyranny and liberty, he announced, 'all our sympathies must be with Freedom, while, in our sorrow at the unwelcome

combat, we confess that victory is only less mournful than defeat.’ Retaining a nominal affiliation with the peace movement down into the 1850s, and occasionally sponsoring international mediation or arbitration, Sumner gradually came to feel that this cause was less important than other reforms. ‘One evil at a time.’” (101)

Sumner fell under the additional mentorship of John Quincy Adams. “Always responsive to praise, Sumner became Adams’s adoring admirer. He had always extolled the ex-President’s ‘unquestioned purity of character, and remarkable attainments, the result of constant industry.’” (129) He became influential in the split of the Republican party away from the Whig party, but did not stand for election himself. He strove to elect men of character (the primary issue for Sumner was the stance on slavery) over party, which earned him many enemies in the Whig party. “Of their candidates the people should demand not party allegiance, but ‘tried character and inflexible will.’ ‘Three things at least they must require; the first is back-bone; the second is back-bone; and the third is back-bone.’” (159) In the end, however, the Republican party did achieve its election aims largely through the efforts of Sumner, and he was then nominated to serve as Senator from the state of Massachusetts.

Once in the Senate, Sumner sought to find the appropriate time to address the issue of slavery. He did not speak at first, instead trying to establish social relationships that he would then use to affect his aims. Criticized by his party for lack of effort, finally he decided to confront the issue directly. “To establish his argument, Sumner analyzed both the general question of federal protection of slavery and the specific problem of fugitive slave laws ‘in the light of history and of reason.’ In effect, he appealed from history drunk to history sober. Not merely precedents of the last sixty years, but the broader perspectives of American growth since the seventeenth century were relevant. The American nation, as Sumner saw it, had originated in the conflict between Puritan and Cavalier in England, a struggle between right and wrong, democracy and aristocracy. The contest was continued in the New World. The founders of New England, especially the builders of that ‘just and generous Commonwealth,’ Massachusetts, carried on the Puritan tradition; the fathers of Virginia had the vices of the Cavaliers, which multiplied after the introduction of Negro slaves. New England had inspired the American Revolution; her troops had won the nation’s independence despite ‘the imbecility of Southern States,’ palsied by slavery. In the ardor of revolution the best of the Southerners came to see that slavery was pernicious; Jefferson, Washington, Madison, and Patrick Henry had favored abolition.’” (193) His direct attack on the slaveholding position of the southern states earned direct condemnation. There was no compromise between Sumner’s position and the southern politicians. He continued to heap personal invective, to the point that the honor of the southern gentlemen was inflamed.

In premeditated fashion, Sumner was attacked while sitting at his desk by a representative from South Carolina. “Dazed by the first blow, Sumner of course could not remember that in order to rise from his desk, which was bolted to the floor by an iron plate and heavy screws, he had to push back his chair, which was on rollers. Perhaps half a dozen blows fell on his head and shoulders while he was still pinioned. Eyes blinded with blood, ‘almost unconsciously, acting under the instinct of self-defence,’ he then made a mighty effort to rise, and, with the pressure of his thighs, ripped the desk from the floor. Staggering forward, he now offered an even better target for Brooks, who, avoiding Sumner’s outstretched arms, beat down ‘to the full extent of his power.’ So heavy were his blows that the gutta-percha cane, which he had carefully selected because he ‘fancied it would not break,’ snapped, but with the portion remaining in his hand, he continued to pour on rapid blows. The strokes ‘made a good deal more noise after the stick was broken than before. They sounded as if the end of the stick was split.’” (247) Sumner was seriously wounded, and in fact it would be years before he could recover his position. Northern public opinion was mortified at the violence of the attack. “Simultaneously the opposite pattern of public opinion was appearing in the South. Brooks, virtually unknown before the assault, suddenly found himself a sectional hero.” (255) In the end, “the vote on

Brooks's expulsion revealed an ominous pattern: every Southern congressman but one voted against expulsion. The vote was a crystallization of what had become apparent in the debates. 'In determining this question,' one troubled representative found, 'members from the South are rallying in a body to one legal conclusion, while members from the free States are concentrating with like unanimity in the other direction, as if there was anything in climate, latitude, or longitude, which ought to control the judgment of a lawyer in determining a legal question.'" (258) Sumner's speeches, his force of personality, and the progress of history brought the force of direct confrontation between the Republican party and the slaveholding powers of the south.

As Sumner convalesced, he was absent for a substantial amount of times as events such as the Dred Scott decision, John Brown's raid, and the rise of Abraham Lincoln occurred. "His only consolation for his enforced abstinence from politics was his conviction that 'to every sincere lover of civilization his vacant chair was a perpetual speech.'" (261) Upon his return, his major speech was the summation of all his thinking on the question of slavery and the moral obligation to avoid compromise. In one particularly interesting statistic, he noted that, "Despite that state's [South Carolina's] lofty pretensions to culture, a smaller percentage of her white population than of the Massachusetts free Negroes attended school." (297) As the country drove toward civil war, Sumner's initial response was confused, driven mainly out of his sincere faith in peace. "Even after Sumner arrived in Washington in December 1860, and learned that South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas would almost certainly be out of the Union before Lincoln could be inaugurated, he found it difficult to decide what policy to pursue. A sincere advocate of peace, he could not share Ben Wade's enthusiasm for forcing the Southern states back into the Union, or join Zachariah Chandler in asserting: 'Without a little blood-letting this Union will not...be worth a rush.' The other alternative, further concessions to the South, was even less palatable. If the history of the United States taught anything, Sumner felt, it was that appeasement of slaveholders was impossible." (305)

The rest is history. Donald summarizes Sumner's career as follows. "He had stumbled into politics largely by accident. He rose to leadership in the Massachusetts Free Soil movement as much through the unavailability of his rivals as through his own talents and exertions. Candidate of a minority party, he was first chosen to the Senate through the devious workings of a political coalition. At nearly any point during his first five years in office, had he been up for re-election, he would almost certainly have been defeated. Then Preston Brooks's attack gave him his second term in the Senate and thereby assured him seniority and prestige within the Republican party. Never chosen by direct popular vote for any office, Sumner, by 1861, nevertheless had become one of the most powerful men in the United States." (322) This biography is brilliantly written. The career of this man was pivotal to the eventual precipitation of the Civil War that killed so many, and the eventual eradication of slavery, the greatest single evil actively propagated by federal and state law in the country's history. Sumner's role should be more widely known.

See my other reviews [here](#)!

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## **Lucknegrace says**

I sought out this Pulitzer Prize Winner of 1961 because I've always enjoyed studying the Civil War for knowledge as well as the stories told. This biography is fairly reader-friendly. Mr. Sumner was an antislavery Senator from Mass. He was born into a large family with a father who wanted him out and earning as quickly as possible. Charles was intelligent, learned the law and many languages, but had little interest in anything. His one talent was a loquacious (sp?)(big talker) personality, so he kind of fell into politics as an orator.



These were times of long, flowery speeches of many hours duration. He made friends and mostly enemies with his fiery abolition sermonizing. Sumner made his most famous mark on the world when an angry Southern man beat him so badly that he suffered all his life from the blows suffered on the floor of the Senate. His experience with this beating episode was also the earliest instance of PTSD being diagnosed, at least in my reading life.

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### **Joe Rodeck says**

Scholarly text. Not much character study, drama, humor. Just the facts. For history teachers and Civil War completists. Would recommend only to people who are extremely interested in Sumner, for the issue of slavery and threat of civil war far outweigh him.

My gripe is that the lay reader might not remember the definitions or significance of the Barn Burners, the Know Nothings, the Fugitive Slave Act. The author freely discusses without laying foundation or footnoting for the ignorant.

Author cites too many European cities visited and too many people with no particular tie-in to the story.

On the positive side: the Preston Brooks assault on Sumner is a fascinating story and underrated in the history books. Author effectively shows what a time warp the South was in.

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### **Rickster623 says**

Charles Sumner is a really interesting character in local and national history. I'm only about 100 pages in (as of April 9) and he's turning out to be an irascible character in Boston's history. If you are interested in understanding more about the true complexity of early 19th century politics and the dimensionality of the fledgling abolition movement, you will find this interesting and in some ways also relatively timeless. What individuals believe morally but are (or are not) willing to stake their political careers on was just as unpredictable then as now.

At the very least... if you drive through the tunnel named after Charles Sumner, you might as well have some impressive anecdotes for your passengers.

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### **Pamela says**

This 1960 biography presents a very interesting and readable history of one of the great anti-slavery orators of his day. Charles Sumner was a Harvard educated lawyer who eventually became a Senator from Massachusetts and is mainly famous to us for having been physically attacked in 1856 on the floor of the Senate by U.S. Rep. Preston Brooks of South Carolina. Senator Sumner had, two days previously, given a speech against the *Kansas-Nebraska Act* introduced by Stephen Douglas (Dem.Ill) and Andrew Butler (Dem. So.Car.) in which he had seriously insulted both Butler and the state of South Carolina. Brooks, a cousin of

Butler's, decided to avenge the insult by challenging Sumner to a duel but decided that the man deserved caning instead since he did not consider him a social equal. This was in keeping with the southern *code duello*, a code of honor for gentlemen at the time. The outcome was that Brooks beat Sumner severely with his cane, created a huge controversy and the nation was divided sectionally over who had the right of it.

It took Sumner a very long time to recover but he did return to the Senate and continued his work against slavery and during and after the Civil War advocated for freedom and equality for the blacks.

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### **Becky Loader says**

If you have been thinking about reading additional material about the background of the Civil War after seeing the movie, "Lincoln," consider picking up this excellent book on Charles Sumner. Sumner was a personal friend of Mrs. Lincoln and was loyal to her during all the many trials of her life. Donald has written an interesting biography that thoroughly describes his life as it developed in the turbulent political atmosphere of the pre-Civil War United States. Sumner, highly intelligent, entered public life reluctantly, but he was not afraid to be controversial, out-spoken, and contentious in order to make his viewpoint known. I was fascinated by the portrayal of Sumner's character, which was rather steely and private. The final sentence of the book is Sumner's pledge to the newly-elected President Lincoln that he will support him in his effort to curtail the spread of slavery. Oh, my. There needs to be another book on what happens next!

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### **Stuart says**

Interesting biography of Charles Sumner, one of the greatest of US Senators. This covers his life leading up to the Civil War. Included is the famous incident where US representative Preston S. Brooks beats Sumner over the head repeatedly with his cane, almost to death, on the floor of the US Senate for insulting the honor of South Carolina and his cousin Senator Butler. One of the great lines which got Sumner attacked was Senator Butler "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...the harlot, Slavery".

David Herbert Donald concludes his biography of Sumner's life in the follow-up "Charles Sumner and The Rights of Man".

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### **Eric\_W says**

All the discussions of Lincoln and his birthday reminded me of this two volume (2nd volume: Charles Sumner and the Rights of Man) biography of Sumner, notorious for having been beaten up by an ardent segregationist on the floor of the Senate. It was excellent and I should get off the stick and read Donald's biography of Lincoln, too: Lincoln

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