



# Young Charles Sumner and the Legacy of the American Enlightenment, 1811-1851

*Anne-Marie Taylor*

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An outspoken abolitionist, a founder of the Free Soil and Republican parties, and a leading member of the U. S. Senate for more than twenty years, Charles Sumner (1811–1874) has always figured prominently in histories of the American Civil War. For the most part, however, he has been depicted as a psychologically troubled extremist, a fanatical opponent of slavery whose self-righteousness was matched only by his arrogance.

In this book, Anne-Marie Taylor challenges that long-standing view, offering in its stead the portrait of a man animated more by principle than by impulse or ambition. According to Taylor, Sumner's reform-minded politics, including his fervent commitment to put an end to slavery, must be understood in the context of a young nation still struggling to live up to the Enlightenment ideals embraced by its founders and embodied in its Constitution.

Focusing on the first forty years of Sumner's life, before he took public office, Taylor traces the evolution of his character and thought among Boston's cultural elite. His belief in the virtues of cosmopolitanism, in the dignity of the human intellect and conscience, and in the possibility of a cultivated and just society, all find their roots in an education steeped in Enlightenment principles. At the same time, as a child of New England Puritanism and Revolutionary republicanism, Sumner was raised to believe in the moral obligation of the individual to work for the common good.

As Taylor shows in this richly drawn biography, much of the triumph and tragedy of Sumner's story?the energy of his idealism as well as the poignancy of his eventual disappointment? derives from the overpowering sense of duty and national destiny imbued by his upbringing.

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