

## PART THIRTEEN



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# The Death of Slavery

## 25 The Father of American Terrorism

**KEN CHOWDER**

*Sectional conflict over slavery existed from the beginning of the American nation. It continued through the Federalist, Jefferson, and Jacksonian eras, becoming especially acute with the rise of the abolitionist crusade in the 1830s. Then, during the era of expansion and the Mexican War, the debate over slavery shifted to the western territories. By midcentury, as historian James M. McPherson says in *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (1988), "the greatest danger to American survival . . . was sectional conflict between North and South over the future of slavery." Indeed, from the 1840s on, every major sectional conflict involved the complex slavery issue, especially the expansion of slavery into the western territories and any future lands the United States might acquire. By 1848, slavery had become the central issue in American politics.*

*The decade of the 1850s was a time of spiraling violence over slavery. In 1856, civil war between proslavery and antislavery pioneers broke out in the newly established Kansas Territory in the nation's heartland. When Americans started killing Americans in "Bleeding Kansas" over the future of slavery, it was a dress rehearsal for the national cataclysm a few years later.*

*The violent and bitter struggle over slavery reached a shattering climax in John Brown's raid at Harpers Ferry on a rain-swept October night in 1859. Brown's objective was to destroy slavery by inciting a massive, Nat Turner-style slave insurrection across the entire South. Or, failing that, he hoped that his raid would polarize the free states and slave states and lead to a blowup in which slavery itself would perish.*

*Brown's Harpers Ferry attack made him one of the most controversial figures in American history. When Virginia authorities captured and hanged Brown for his efforts, his admirers heralded him as an immortal American hero who, in the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, "made the gallows as glorious as the cross." By contrast, his detractors damned Brown as a "mean, terrible, vicious man," a*

murderer and a maniac who sought to put the slaveholding South to the torch. For more than a century, Americans have engaged in such a heated controversy over whether Brown was right or wrong, sane or crazy, hero or fanatic, that scarcely anyone has taken the time to try to understand him.

For fifty-nine-year-old John Brown, a white man who had failed in virtually everything he had ever tried, the attack against Harpers Ferry was the supreme moment of his life, the moment he had been working for since he had committed himself to violence in the Kansas civil war in 1856. He and his handful of fellow revolutionaries—most of them young, five of them black—were going to liberate some four million human beings from bondage, thereby removing a monstrous wrong from American society. For Brown, slavery was an egregious “sin against God,” a sin that violated the commandments of Jehovah, the angry God of the Old Testament. In Brown’s eyes, slavery also contradicted the Declaration of Independence, which guaranteed all men the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Slavery violated Brown’s secular views as well: his passionate commitment to the nuclear family (he had read about the brutal breakup of slave families), his belief in the right of all men to enjoy the fruits of their labor and to raise themselves above the condition of their birth.

Yet, instead of eradicating slavery, the United States had institutionalized that cruel institution, surrounding it with a network of constitutional and political safeguards quite as though the Declaration of Independence did not exist. Such hypocrisy enraged Brown. How could Americans sanction slavery and yet proclaim theirs the freest and most enlightened nation in the world? By 1859, he thought it impossible to remove slavery peacefully through regular political channels. As he pointed out, southerners and their northern allies dominated the crucial branches of the federal government and were using these agencies not only to preserve and perpetuate slavery, but also to extend it into the western territories. Moreover, in the infamous Dred Scott decision, the United States Supreme Court, controlled by proslavery southern Democrats, had denied African Americans the right of United States citizenship and had forbidden Congress or territorial legislatures to exclude slavery from the public lands. And in Brown’s opinion few northerners seemed to care. Northern Democrats, he fumed, were all “doughfaces” who enjoyed licking up “Southern spittle.” Republicans, he argued, were too “wishy-washy” about slavery to do anything about that institution, and the abolitionists were a bunch of “milk-and-water” pacifists who preferred talk to action. By the late 1850s, Brown asserted, slavery had become too entrenched in American life ever to be expunged by peaceful means. The only way to destroy this “hellish” institution was to annihilate it by revolutionary violence—and by the extermination of Brown’s entire generation of men, women, and children, if that were the will of Jehovah. And Brown believed passionately that this was Jehovah’s will, and that He had chosen Brown to be His special angel of death to root out slavery by the sword.

As it turned out, Brown’s attack at Harpers Ferry traumatized the South as had no other event in history, and it spun the nation irreversibly toward civil war. White southerners viewed Harpers Ferry as a violent outgrowth of northern antislavery agitation, an act of “outside provocation” that caused them to equate Brown’s style of revolutionary violence with Abraham Lincoln and the Republican party. Like the sinking of the battleship *Maine* and the attack on Pearl Harbor, Brown’s raid enflamed emotions to such intensity that rational dialogue was no longer possible. Sectional tensions over slavery had reached the breaking point.

In the following essay, Ken Chowder raises troubling questions about Brown and his times. Some historians condemn Brown as insane because he was a white man prepared to sacrifice his life for enslaved African Americans. However, before branding Brown as mentally unstable because of his

religious convictions, you might recall from selection 15 that Nat Turner also invoked the Bible and God's name to justify the bloodiest slave insurrection in southern history. Nor was Brown the only white figure of his day who thought himself a pawn in the hands of an all-wise, all-powerful God. Abraham Lincoln and Robert E. Lee, among many others, held such beliefs, yet few have ever called them maniacs or religious fanatics.

Consider a final question. Does the "violent, excessive, morally torn society" that produced Brown resemble the deeply troubled America of our own time? Chowder's title, "The Father of American Terrorism," suggests that Brown was the ancestor of modern American terrorists like Timothy McVeigh, who bombed the federal building in Oklahoma City in the 1990s because of his perceived grievances against the federal government. Do you think this is correct? Or is this an example of "presentism" as discussed in selection 8—of imposing today's standards and difficulties on the people of the past? These are troubling questions, and we hope that discussing them in the classroom will give you a deeper understanding, not only of John Brown's world, but also of your own.

## GLOSSARY

**BEECHER, HENRY WARD** A popular minister and an outspoken critic of slavery, Beecher contended that Brown's death made him a great martyr to the abolitionist movement. His sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe, wrote the best-selling novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which converted countless readers to the antislavery cause.

**BOOTH, JOHN WILKES** After witnessing Brown's execution, this prominent actor called Brown "a traitor," viewing him "with unlimited, undeniable contempt." A Maryland native, Booth had powerful pro-Confederate sympathies. Although he declined to fight in the rebel army, he did serve as a secret Confederate agent. In April of 1865, he murdered President Lincoln at Ford's Theater.

**BORDER RUFFIANS** These proslavery Missourians crossed the border into neighboring Kansas, terrorized free-state communities, and voted illegally in Kansas elections. In 1855, they helped elect a proslavery territorial legislature in Kansas.

**DOUGLASS, FREDERICK** See glossary in selection 8.

**GARRISON, WILLIAM LLOYD** See glossary in selection 15.

**JACKSON, THOMAS J.** A professor at the Virginia Military Institute, he was present at the hanging of John Brown. He would go on to become one of the Confederacy's greatest generals. He was nicknamed "Stonewall" after his heroics during the first battle of Manassas (also known as Bull Run).

**KANSAS-NEBRASKA ACT (1854)** The brainchild of United States Senator Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois, this controversial measure divided the northern section of the old Louisiana Purchase Territory into two new territories, Kansas and

Nebraska. The act repealed the Missouri Compromise line (1820), which had divided the Louisiana Purchase, prohibiting slavery above the line and permitting it below the line. The act established popular sovereignty as the formula for dealing with slavery in the national lands; now the citizens of a territory would settle the status of slavery there by voting it in or out. Until the residents of Kansas and Nebraska voted on the slavery issue, southern slaveowners were free to take their "chattel" into a vast northern domain once reserved for freedom. The Kansas-Nebraska Act was a monumental fiasco. It greatly intensified sectional tensions and brought about both the disintegration of the Whig party and the formation of a new, all-northern antislavery party, the Republicans, who pledged to halt the spread of slavery into the territories.

**LEE, ROBERT E.** A lieutenant colonel in the United States Army at the time of Brown's raid, this prominent Virginian commanded the force of federal Marines who captured Brown and a few of his surviving raiders in the enginehouse at Harpers Ferry. Like Brown, Lee considered slavery "a moral and political evil," yet he condemned the abolitionists as "evil" people who had caused the nation's sectional troubles. In his judgment, the fate of slavery should be left to the wisdom of God. Initially he opposed secession, agreeing with President James Buchanan that it was "nothing but revolution." However, when the Civil War began, he sided with his beloved Virginia, joined the rebellion, and became the Confederacy's greatest general.

**LOVEJOY, ELIJAH** Lovejoy was an abolitionist editor who published an antislavery newspaper in Alton, Illinois. In 1837, a mob from Missouri, a slave state, murdered Lovejoy

and threw his printing press into the Mississippi River. Lovejoy became the first martyr in the abolitionist cause.

**POTTAWATOMIE MASSACRE (1856)** After proslavery Missourians sacked the free-state settlement of Lawrence, Brown and several antislavery followers retaliated by riding back to Pottawatomie Creek in eastern Kansas and hacking five proslavery settlers to death with broadswords. The "massacre" ignited a civil war in Kansas that left two hundred people dead and destroyed \$2 million in property. "Bleeding Kansas" proved to be a dress rehearsal for the national conflagration that followed five years later.

**SUMNER, CHARLES** In May of 1856, this prominent Republican senator from Massachusetts gave a provocative speech entitled "The Crime Against Kansas." In retaliation, South Carolina Congressman Preston Brooks attacked Sumner with a cane inside the Senate chamber, almost killing him with repeated blows to the head. This assault further polarized the country. For John Brown, the beating of

Sumner provided one more reason to attack his proslavery foes at Pottawatomie Creek.

**THOREAU, HENRY DAVID** His book about solitary life on Walden Pond near Concord, Massachusetts, eventually earned him a prominent place in American literature. Although Thoreau was a nonviolent abolitionist, he deified Brown after he was hanged, calling him "an angel of light" and comparing him to Christ.

**TURNER, NAT** Selection 15 examines the Nat Turner rebellion.

**UNDERGROUND RAILROAD** Through this system runaway slaves escaped to the North. "Conductors" such as Harriet Tubman (see selection 24) escorted the blacks out of the South, often just ahead of the slave patrols. "Station houses" along the way furnished the fugitives with food and shelter. Brown was active in Underground Railroad operations in Ohio and Massachusetts.

On December 2, 1859, a tall old man in a black coat, black pants, black vest, and black slouch hat climbed into a wagon and sat down on a black walnut box. The pants and coat were stained with blood; the box was his coffin; the old man was going to his execution. He had just handed a last note to his jailer: "I John Brown am now quite *certain* that the crimes of this *guilty land* will never be purged *away* but with Blood. I had . . . *vainly* flattered myself that without *very much* bloodshed; it might be done."

As he rode on his coffin, John Brown gazed out over the cornfields of Virginia. "This is a beautiful country," he said. "I never had the pleasure of seeing it before."

The United States in 1859 was a nation that harbored a ticking time bomb: the issue of slavery. And it was a place where an astonishing number of men were willing to die for their beliefs, certain they were following a higher law. John Brown was one of those

God-fearing yet violent men. And he was already more than a man; he was a legend. In fact, there were two competing legends. To slaveholders he was utter evil—fanatic, murderer, liar, and lunatic, and horse thief to boot—while to abolitionists he had become the embodiment of all that was noble and courageous.

After a lifetime of failure John Brown had at last found a kind of success. He was now a symbol that divided the nation, and his story was no longer about one man; it was a prophecy. The United States, like John Brown, was heading toward a gallows—the gallows of war.

A scaffold had been built in a field outside Charlestown, Virginia. There were rumors of a rescue attempt, and fifteen hundred soldiers, commanded by Col. Robert E. Lee, massed in the open field. No civilians were allowed within hearing range, but an actor from Virginia borrowed a uniform so he could watch John Brown die. "I looked at the traitor and terrorizer," said John Wilkes Booth, "with unlimited, undeniable contempt." Prof. Thomas Jackson, who would in three years be known as Stonewall, was also watching: "The sheriff placed the rope around [Brown's] neck, then threw a white cap over his head. . . . When the rope was cut by a single blow, Brown

Ken Chowder, "The Father of American Terrorism," *American Heritage*, vol. 51, no. 1 (February/March, 2000), pp. 81–91. Excerpted by permission of American Heritage Publishing, and the author.

fell through. . . . There was very little motion of his person for several moments, and soon the wind blew his lifeless body to and fro."

A Virginia colonel named J. T. L. Preston chanted: "So perish all such enemies of Virginia! All such enemies of the Union! All such foes of the human race!"

But hanging was not the end of John Brown; it was the beginning. Northern churches' bells tolled for him, and cannon boomed in salute. In Massachusetts, Henry David Thoreau spoke: "Some eighteen hundred years ago, Christ was crucified; This morning, perchance, Captain Brown was hung. . . . He is not Old Brown any longer; he is an angel of light."

John Brown's soul was already marching on. But the flesh-and-blood John Brown—a tanner, shepherd, and farmer, a simple and innocent man who could kill in cold blood, a mixture of opposite parts who mirrored the paradoxical America of his time—this John Brown had already vanished, and he would rarely appear again. His life instead became the subject for 140 years of spin. John Brown has been used rather than considered by history; even today we are still spinning his story.

As far as history is concerned, John Brown was genuinely nobody until he was fifty-six years old—that is, until he began to kill people. Not that his life was without incident. He grew up in the wilderness of Ohio (he was born in 1800, when places like Detroit, Chicago, and Cleveland were still frontier stockades). He married at twenty, lost his wife eleven years later, soon married again, and fathered a total of twenty children. Nine of them died before they reached adulthood.

At seventeen Brown left his father's tannery to start a competing one. "I acknowledge no master in human form," he would say, many years later, when he was wounded and in chains at Harpers Ferry. The young man soon mastered the rural arts of farming, tanning, surveying, home building, and animal husbandry, but his most conspicuous talent seemed to be one for profuse and painful failure.

In the 1830s, with a growing network of canals making barren land worth thousands, Brown borrowed deeply to speculate in real estate—just in time



National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution/Art Resource, NY

*An African American photographer, Augustus Washington, took this early daguerreotype of John Brown around 1846. Ken Chowder concludes that the hanging of the radical abolitionist "was not the end of John Brown; it was the beginning."*

for the disastrous Panic of 1837. The historian James Brewer Stewart, author of *Holy Warriors*, says that "Brown was a typical story of someone who invested, as thousands did, and lost thousands, as thousands did as well. Brown was swept along in a current of default and collapse."

He tried breeding sheep, started another tannery, bought and sold cattle—each time a failure. When one venture lost money, Brown quietly appropriated funds from a partner in a new business and used it to pay the earlier loss. But in the end his farm tools, furniture, and sheep went on the auction block.

When his farm was sold, he seemed to snap. He refused to leave. With two sons and some old muskets,

he barricaded himself in a cabin on the property. "I was making preparation for the commencement and vigorous prosecution of a tedious, distressing, wasting, and long protracted war," Brown wrote. The sheriff got up a posse and briefly put him in the Akron jail. No shots were fired, but it was an incident people would remember, years later, when the old man barricaded himself at Harpers Ferry.

Brown's misadventures in business have drawn widely varying interpretations. His defenders say he had a large family to support; small wonder he wanted badly to make money. But others have seen his financial dreams as an obsession, a kind of fever that gave him delusions of wealth and made him act dishonestly.

Perhaps it was this long string of failures that created the revolutionary who burst upon the American scene in 1856. By that time Brown had long nurtured a vague and protean plan: He imagined a great event in which he—the small-time farmer who had failed in everything he touched—would be God's messenger, a latter-day Moses who would lead his people from the accursed house of slavery. He had already, for years, been active in the Underground Railroad, hiding runaways and guiding them north toward Canada. In 1837 he stood up in the back of a church in Ohio and made his first public statement on human bondage, a single pungent sentence: "Here before God, in the presence of these witnesses, I consecrate my life to the destruction of slavery." For years, however, this vow seemed to mean relatively little; in the early 1850s, as anger over slavery began to boil up all over the North, the frustrated and humiliated Brown was going from courtroom to courtroom embroiled in his own private miseries.

Finally it happened. The John Brown we know was born in the place called Bloody Kansas. Slavery had long been barred from the territories of Kansas and Nebraska, but in 1854 the Kansas-Nebraska Act decreed that the settlers of these territories would decide by vote whether to be free or slave. The act set up a competition between the two systems that would become indistinguishable from war.

Settlers from both sides flooded into Kansas. Five of John Brown's sons made the long journey there from Ohio. But Brown himself did not go. He was in his mid-fifties, old by the actuarial tables of his day; he seemed broken.

Then, in March of 1855, five thousand proslavery Missourians—the hard-drinking, heavily armed "Border Ruffians"—rode into Kansas. "We came to vote, and we are going to vote or kill every God-damned abolitionist in the Territory," their leader declared. The Ruffians seized the polling places, voted in their own legislature, and passed their own laws. Prison now awaited anyone who spoke against slavery.

In May, John Junior wrote to his father begging for his help. The free-soilers needed arms, "more than we need bread," he said. "Now we want you to get for us these arms." The very next day, Brown began raising money and gathering weapons and in August the old man left for Kansas, continuing to collect arms as he went.

In May 1856 a proslavery army sacked the free-soil town of Lawrence; not a single abolitionist dared fire a gun. This infuriated Brown. He called for volunteers to go on "a secret mission." The old man, in his soiled straw hat, stuck a revolver in his belt and led a company of eight men down toward Pottawatomie Creek. Proslavery people lived in the cabins there.

Late on the night of May 23, 1856, one of the group, probably Brown, banged on the door of James Doyle's cabin. He ordered the men of the family outside at gunpoint, and Brown's followers set upon three Doyles with broadswords. They split open heads and cut off arms. John Brown watched his men work. When it was over, he put a single bullet into the head of James Doyle.

His party went to two more cabins, dragged out and killed two more men. At the end bodies lay in the bushes and floated in the creek; the murderers had made off with horses, saddles, and a bowie knife.

What came to be called the Pottawatomie Massacre ignited all-out war in Kansas. John Brown, the aged outsider, became an abolitionist leader. In August some 250 Border Ruffians attacked the

free-soil town of Osawatomie. Brown led thirty men in defending the town. He fought hard, but Osawatomie burned to the ground.

A few days later, when Brown rode into Lawrence on a gray horse, a crowd gathered to cheer "as if the President had come to town," one man said. The spinning of John Brown had already begun. A Scottish reporter named James Redpath had found Brown's men in their secret campsite, and "I left this sacred spot with a far higher respect for the Great Struggle than ever I had felt before." And what of Pottawatomie? Brown had nothing to do with it, Redpath wrote. John Brown himself even prepared an admiring account of the Battle of Osawatomie for Eastern newspapers. Less than two weeks after the fight, a drama called *Ossawatomie Brown* was celebrating him on Broadway.

That autumn, peace finally came to Kansas, but not to John Brown. For the next three years he traveled the East, occasionally returning to Kansas, beseeching abolitionists for guns and money, money and guns. His plan evolved into this: One night he and a small company of men would capture the federal armory and arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia. The invaders would take the guns there and leave. Local slaves would rise up to join them, making an army; together they all would drive south, and the revolution would snowball through the kingdom of slavery.

On the rainy night of October 16, 1859, Brown led a determined little procession down the road to Harpers Ferry. Some twenty men were making a direct attack on the U.S. government; they would liberate four million souls from bondage. At first the raid went like clockwork. The armory was protected by just one man, and he quickly surrendered. The invaders cut telegraph lines and rounded up hostages on the street.

Then Brown's difficulties began. A local doctor rode out screaming, "Insurrection!" and by mid-morning men in the heights behind town were taking potshots down at Brown's followers. Meanwhile, John Brown quietly ordered breakfast from a hotel for his hostages. As Dennis Frye, the former chief historian at Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, asks, "The question is, why didn't John Brown attempt

to leave? Why did he stay in Harpers Ferry?" Russell Banks, the author of the . . . John Brown novel *Cloud-splitter*, has an answer: "He stayed and he stayed, and it seems to me a deliberate, resigned act of martyrdom."

At noon a company of Virginia militia entered town, took the bridge, and closed the only true escape route. By the end of the day, John Brown's revolution was failing. Eight invaders were dead or dying. Five others were cut off from the main group. Two had escaped across the river; two had been captured. Only five raiders were still fit to fight. Brown gathered his men in a small brick building, the engine-house, for the long, cold night.

The first light of October 18 showed Brown and his tiny band an armory yard lined with U.S. Marines, under the command of Col. Robert E. Lee. A young lieutenant, J. E. B. Stuart, approached beneath a white flag and handed over a note asking the raiders to surrender. Brown refused. At that Stuart jumped aside, waved his cap, and the Marines stormed forward with a heavy ladder. The door gave way. Lt. Israel Green tried to run Brown through, but his blade struck the old man's belt buckle; God, for the moment, had saved John Brown.

A few hours later, as he lay in a small room at the armory, bound and bleeding, Brown's real revolution began. Gov. Henry A. Wise of Virginia arrived with a retinue of reporters. Did Brown want the reporters removed? asked Robert E. Lee. Definitely not. "Brown said he was by no means annoyed," one reporter wrote. For the old man was now beginning a campaign that would win half of America. He told the reporters: "I wish to say . . . that you had better—all you people of the South—prepare yourselves for a settlement of this question. . . . You may dispose of me very easily—I am nearly disposed of now; but this question is still to be settled—this negro question I mean; the end of that is not yet."

His crusade for acceptance would not be easy. At first he was no hero. Leaders of the Republican party organized anti-Brown protests; "John Brown was no Republican," Abraham Lincoln said. Even [*The Liberator*], published by the staunch abolitionist William

Lloyd Garrison, called the raid "misguided, wild, and apparently insane."

In the South the initial reaction was derision—the *Richmond Dispatch* called the foray "miserably weak and contemptible"—but that soon changed to fear. Stuart's soldiers found a carpetbag crammed with letters from Brown's supporters; a number of prominent Northerners had financed the raid. It had been a conspiracy, a wide-ranging one. But how wide?

A reign of terror began in the South. A minister who spoke out against the treatment of slaves was publicly whipped; a man who spoke sympathetically about the raid found himself thrown in jail. Four state legislatures appropriated military funds. Georgia set aside seventy-five thousand dollars; Alabama, almost three times as much.

Brown's trial took just one week. As Virginia hurried toward a verdict, the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher preached, "Let no man pray that Brown be spared! Let Virginia make him a martyr!" John Brown read Beecher's words in his cell. He wrote "Good" beside them.

On November 2 the jury, after deliberating for forty-five minutes, reached its verdict. Guilty. Before he was sentenced, Brown rose to address the court: "I see a book kissed here, . . . the Bible. . . [That] teaches me to 'remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them.' I endeavored to act up to that instruction. . . I believe that to have interfered . . . in behalf of His despised poor was not wrong, but right. Now, if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life . . . and mingle my blood further with the blood of my children and with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded . . . I say let it be done!"

For the next month the Charlestown jail cell was John Brown's pulpit. All over the North, Brown knew, people were reading his words. He wrote, "You know that Christ once armed Peter. So also in my case I think he put a sword into my hand, and there continued it so long as he saw best, and then kindly took it from me."

The author of the Pottawatomie Massacre was now comparing himself to Jesus Christ. And he was not alone. Even the temperate Ralph Waldo Emerson called him "the new Saint whose fate yet hangs in

suspense but whose martyrdom if it shall be perfected, will make the gallows as glorious as the cross." There were rescue plans, but John Brown did not want to escape. "I am worth inconceivably more to hang than for any other purpose," he wrote.

He got that wish on December 2, and the mythologizing of the man began in earnest. Thoreau, Emerson, Victor Hugo, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman all wrote essays or poems immortalizing him. James Redpath eagerly waited for the moment when "Old B was in heaven"; just a month after the execution, he published the first biography. Forty thousand copies of the book sold in a single month.

Less than a year and a half later, the guns began firing on Fort Sumter. If the country had been a tinder box, it seemed to many that John Brown had been the spark. "Did John Brown fail?" Frederick Douglass wrote. ". . . John Brown began the war that ended American slavery and made this a free Republic."

His reputation seemed secure, impermeable. The first biographies of the man James Redpath called the "warrior saint" all glorified him. But then, in 1910, Oswald Garrison Villard, grandson of the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, wrote a massive and carefully researched book that pictured Brown as a muddled, pugnacious, bumbling, and homicidal madman. Nineteen years later Robert Penn Warren issued a similar (and derivative) study. Perhaps the most influential image of John Brown came, not surprisingly, from Hollywood: In *Santa Fe Trail* Raymond Massey portrayed him as a lunatic, pure and simple.

It wasn't until the 1970s that John Brown the hero re-emerged. Two excellent studies by Stephen B. Oates and Richard Owen Boyer captured the core of the conundrum: Brown was stubborn, monomaniacal, egotistical, self-righteous, and sometimes deceitful; yet he was, at certain times, a great man. Boyer, in particular, clearly admired him: At bottom Brown "was an American who gave his life that millions of other Americans might be free."

Among African-Americans, Brown's heroism has never been in doubt. Frederick Douglass praised him in print; W. E. B. Du Bois published a four-hundred-page





Hulton Archive/Getty Images

In this Thomas Hovenden painting, John Brown, on the way to his execution, pauses to kiss a black child. Hanged on December 2, 1859, Brown became a martyr to the antislavery cause. In his final hours, he realized the impact that his death would have on the growing sectional tensions that would soon produce a civil war. He prophesied that "I am worth inconceivably more to hang than for any other purpose."

celebration of him in 1909; Malcolm X said he wouldn't mind being with white people if they were like John Brown; and Alice Walker, in a poem, even wondered if in an earlier incarnation she herself hadn't once been John Brown.

But, as Russell Banks points out, Brown's "acts mean completely different things to Americans depending upon their skin color." And the image that most white people today have of John Brown is still of the wild-eyed, blood-thirsty madman. After all, he believed that God spoke to him; he killed people at Pottawatomie in cold blood; he launched an attack on the U.S. government at Harpers Ferry with not even two dozen men. How sane could he have been?

Let's look at those charges one by one. First: *He conversed with God*. Brown's religious principles, everyone agrees, were absolutely central to the man. As a child he learned virtually the entire Bible by heart. At sixteen he traveled to New England to study for the ministry. He gave up after a few months but remained deeply serious about his Calvinist beliefs. Brown had a great yearning for justice for all men, yet a rage for bloody revenge. These qualities may seem paradoxical to us, but they were ones that John Brown had in common with his deity. The angry God of the Old Testament punished evil: An eye cost exactly an eye.

If God spoke directly to John Brown, He also spoke to William Lloyd Garrison and to the slave revolutionary Nat Turner. To converse with God, in Brown's day, did not mean that you were eccentric. In fact, God was on everyone's side. John Brown saw the story of Moses setting the Israelites free as a mandate for emancipation, but at the same time, others used the Bible to justify slavery (Noah did, after all, set an everlasting curse on all the dark descendants of Ham). It was all in the Bible, and Americans on both sides went to war certain that they were doing God's bidding. So it is that John Brown believed that God had appointed him "a special agent of death," "an instrument raised up by Providence to break the jaws of the wicked."

Second: *He killed in cold blood*. Brown was a violent man, but he lived in increasingly violent times. Slavery itself was of course a violent practice. In 1831 Nat Turner led seventy slaves to revolt; they killed fifty-seven white men, women, and children. A few years later a clergyman named Elijah Lovejoy was gunned down for speaking out against slavery. By the 1850s another distinguished clergyman, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, would lead a mob to the federal courthouse in Boston and attack the place with axes and guns. "I can only make my life worth living," Higginson vowed, "by becoming a revolutionist." During the struggle in Kansas Henry Ward Beecher's Plymouth Church in Brooklyn was blithely shipping Sharps rifles west; "[T]here are times," the famous preacher said, "when self-defense is a religious duty." By the

late fifties, writes the historian James Stewart, even Congress was “a place where fist fights became common . . . a place where people came armed . . . a place where people flashed Bowie knives.” On February 5, 1858, a brawl broke out between North and South in the House of Representatives; congressmen rolled on the floor, scratching and gouging each other.

Brown’s Pottawatomie Massacre was directly connected to this national chaos. On the very day Brown heard about the sacking of Lawrence, another disturbing report reached him from Washington: A Southern congressman had attacked Sen. Charles Sumner, a fierce abolitionist, on the floor of Congress, caning him almost to death for insulting the South. When the news got to Brown’s campsite, according to his son Salmon, “the men went crazy—*crazy*. It seemed to be the finishing, decisive touch.” Brown ordered his men to sharpen their broadswords and set off toward Pottawatomie, the creek whose name still stains his reputation.

So it is that “Brown is simply part of a very violent world,” according to the historian Paul Finkelman. At Pottawatomie, Finkelman says, “Brown was going after particular men who were dangerous to the very survival of the free-state settlers in the area.” But Dennis Frye has a less analytical (and less sympathetic) reaction: “Pottawatomie was cold-blooded murder. [It was] killing people up close based on anger and vengeance.”

To Bruce Olds, the author of *Raising Holy Hell*, a 1995 novel about Brown, Pottawatomie was an example of conscious political terrorism: “Those killings took place in the middle of the night, in the dark—that was on purpose. In his writings, [Brown] uses the word ‘terror’ and the word ‘shock.’ He intended to produce both of those, and he did.”

Maybe Pottawatomie was insane, and maybe it was not. But what about that Harpers Ferry plan—a tiny band attacking the U.S. government, hoping to concoct a revolution that would carry across the South? Clearly *that* was crazy.

Yes and no. If it was crazy, it was not unique. Dozens of people, often bearing arms, had gone South to rescue slaves. Secret military societies flourished on

both sides, plotting to expand or destroy the system of slavery by force. Far from being the product of a singular cracked mind, the plan was similar to a number of others, including one by a Boston attorney named Lysander Spooner. James Horton, a leading African-American history scholar, offers an interesting scenario. “Was Brown crazy to assume he could encourage slave rebellion? . . . Think about the possibility of Nat Turner well-armed, well-equipped. . . . Nat Turner might have done some pretty amazing things,” Horton says. “It was perfectly rational and reasonable for John Brown to believe he could encourage slaves to rebel.”

But the question of Brown’s sanity still provokes dissension among experts. Was he crazy? “He was obsessed,” Bruce Olds says, “he was fanatical, he was monomaniacal, he was a zealot, and . . . psychologically unbalanced.” Paul Finkelman disagrees: Brown “is a bad tactician, he’s a bad strategist, he’s a bad planner, he’s not a very good general—but he’s not crazy.”

Some believe that there is a very particular reason why Brown’s reputation as a madman has clung to him. Russell Banks and James Horton make the same argument. “The reason white people think he was mad,” Banks says, “is because he was a white man and he was willing to sacrifice his life in order to liberate black Americans.” “We should be very careful,” Horton says, “about assuming that a white man who is willing to put his life on the line for black people is, of necessity, crazy.”

Perhaps it is reasonable to say this: A society where slavery exists is by nature one where human values are skewed. America before the Civil War was a violent society, twisted by slavery. Even sober and eminent people became firebrands. John Brown had many peculiarities of his own, but he was not outside his society; to a great degree, he represented it, in its many excesses.

The past, as always, continues to change, and the spinning of John Brown’s story goes on today. The same events—the raid on Harpers Ferry or the Pottawatomie Massacre—are still seen in totally different ways. What is perhaps most remarkable is that elements at both the left and right ends of American

society are at this moment vitally interested in the story of John Brown.

On the left is a group of historical writers and teachers called Allies for Freedom. This group believes that the truth about the Harpers Ferry raid has been buried by the conventions of history. Its informal leader, Jean Libby, author of *John Brown Mysteries*, says, "What we think is that John Brown was a black nationalist. His ultimate goal was the creation of an independent black nation." The Allies for Freedom believes, too, that far from being the folly of a lunatic, Brown's plan was not totally unworkable, that it came much closer to succeeding than historians have pictured. Libby thinks that many slaves and free blacks *did* join the uprising—perhaps as many as fifty. Why would history conceal the fact of active black participation in Harpers Ferry? "The South was anxious to cover up any indication that the raid might have been successful," Libby says, "so slaves would never again be tempted to revolt."

Go a good deal farther to the left, and there has long been admiration for John Brown. In 1975 the Weather Underground put out a journal called *Oswatomie*. In the late 1970s a group calling itself the John Brown Brigade engaged in pitched battles with the Ku Klux Klan; in one confrontation in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1979, five members of the John Brown Brigade were shot and killed. Writers also continue to draw parallels between John Brown and virtually any leftist who used political violence, including the Symbionese Liberation Army (the kidnapers of Patty Hearst in the 1970s), the Islamic terrorists who allegedly set off a bomb in the World Trade Center in Manhattan, and Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber.

At the same time, John Brown is frequently compared to those at the far opposite end of the political spectrum. Right-to-life extremists have bombed abortion clinics and murdered doctors; they have, in short, killed for a cause they believed in, just as John Brown did. Paul Hill was convicted of murdering a doctor who performed abortions; it was, Hill said, the Lord's bidding: "There's no question in my mind that it was what the Lord wanted me to do, to shoot John

Britton to prevent him from killing unborn children." If that sounds quite like John Brown, it was no accident. From death row Hill wrote to the historian Dan Stowell that Brown's "example has and continues to serve as a source of encouragement to me. . . . Both of us looked to the scriptures for direction, [and] the providential similarities between the oppressive circumstances we faced and our general understandings of the appropriate means to deliver the oppressed have resulted in my being encouraged to pursue a path which is in many ways similar to his." Shortly before his execution Hill wrote that "the political impact of Brown's actions continues to serve as a powerful paradigm in my understanding of the potential effects the use of defensive force may have for the unborn."

Nor was the murder Hill committed the only right-wing violence that has been compared to Brown's. The Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 was a frontal attack on a U.S. government building, just like the Harpers Ferry raid. Anti-abortion murders, government buildings, anarchist bombs in the mail—nearly every time political violence surfaces, it gets described in the press as a part of a long American tradition of terrorism, with John Brown as a precursor and hero, a founding father of principled violence.

He gets compared to anarchists, leftist revolutionaries, and right-wing extremists. The spinning of John Brown, in short, is still going strong. But what does that make *him*? This much, at least, is certain: John Brown is a vital presence for all sorts of people today. . . . Perhaps the violent, excessive, morally torn society John Brown represents so aptly was not just his own antebellum America but this land, now.

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 Chowder contends that John Brown represented "two competing legends"; one had meaning to the North and the other to the South. Why did slave-owners and abolitionists have such drastically different views of this controversial figure?

2 Describe Brown's life before he became embroiled in the antislavery movement. Why would Chowder conclude that "Brown was genuinely nobody until he was fifty-six years old"?

3 The Kansas-Nebraska Act authorized the residents of a territory not only to determine the status of slavery there, but also to decide whether that territory would become a free or a slave state. Why did this solution fail and produce violence and bloodshed in Kansas? How do you view Brown's actions after the destruction of the free-state town of Lawrence?

4 What was Brown's goal at Harpers Ferry? In your view, did his plan have a realistic chance of working? Why do you think that Brown stayed in Harpers Ferry and refused to try to escape into the mountainous terrain around him?

5 Chowder attempts to understand Brown through an examination of the values of the early nineteenth century, a time of violence when many people used the Bible and God's will to justify their actions. Do you find this a satisfactory explanation for Brown's actions? If violence against slavery had not taken place and resulted in civil war, do you think that the South would have soon voluntarily eliminated its peculiar institution? In other words, if Brown's actions were not right, what other strategy would have ended slavery without bloodshed?

6 Both liberals and conservatives have at times viewed Brown as both a role model and a villain. Why would Chowder state that Brown's world resembles our own? In your lifetime, can you provide examples of individuals who have used violence and religion to justify their cause? Does this essay have greater meaning after the events of September 11, 2001?