

## CHAPTER 14

# John Brown and Violent Invasion

John Brown's raid, and especially northern cheers for the raider, would have outraged Southerners anytime before emancipation. In the context of 1859, however, with Northern Republicans apparently about to seize national power, Yankees' applause for a murderous invader assaulted southern eardrums like amplified thunder. Did Brown indicate a horrifying answer to the big question about Northern Republicans: How does the foe secretly plot to pierce our borders and do in slavery?

– 1 –

By 1859, the infant Republican Party had become precociously mature. Only five years earlier, before Davy Atchison pressed Stephen A. Douglas toward repealing part of the Missouri Compromise, a Republican Party had existed only in several thousand free soilers' imaginations. In the early 1850s, an anti-immigrant party had seemed the more likely northern successor to the defunct National Whig Party. But the Kansas-Nebraska Act revitalized Yankee determination to contain the Slave Power. Containment's political appeal swelled when one-day Kansans mauled territorial democracy and Preston Brooks mugged Charles Sumner. In 1856, the new Republican Party almost won the White House. Two years later, after the so-called Dred Scott Decision and the Lecompton Crisis, Republicans almost captured a congressional majority.

Throughout their climb toward victory in the 1860 presidential election, Republicans mixed unlimited antislavery ideology with limited antislavery policies. As ideologues, Republicans fulminated against slavery. As policymakers, they conceded that the U.S. Constitution barred federal emancipation inside southern states' jurisdiction. They would only abolish slavery outside southern states' purview—in U.S. territories, in the U.S. capital, and in U.S. forts and naval yards. They would thus contain the Slave Power's breach of

white men's republicanism. But the Slave Power's enemy hid any intention to penetrate contained southern areas.

"We understand" their "game," Virginia's Roger Pryor told the House of Representatives in 1859. Republicans' "mailed hand is gloved for the moment," as "the beast sheathes his claws." Camouflaged abolitionists claim to wish only "the restriction and disparagement of slavery." But once in office, Republicans intend to "renew the work of encroachment," until they achieve "the eventual extinction of slavery."<sup>1</sup>

Republican soundbites occasionally hinted that the Slave Power's foe might someday seek more than containment. "A house divided against itself cannot stand," Abraham Lincoln told the state Illinois State Republican Convention on June 16, 1858. "This government cannot endure, permanently half *slave* or half *free*." Lincoln would restrict slavery to half of America. But would he settle for a divided house that could not stand? Lincoln only answered that after Republicans had imprisoned slavery in the South, "the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in the course of ultimate extinction."<sup>2</sup> Yet what if, public belief to the contrary, containment did not yield extinction? Southerners doubted that Lincoln would then "rest."

Nor did they expect a William H. Seward postcontainment nap. Seward, the New York senator and front-runner for the 1860 Republican Party presidential nomination, announced an "irrepressible conflict" six months after Lincoln deplored a house divided. "Free labor and slave labor," Seward warned, would irrepressibly collide until the United States became "either entirely a slaveholding nation or entirely a free-labor nation." New Yorkers, he promised, would not allow "slave culture" to invade their "rye and wheat fields." Instead, free labor would "soon invade . . . *Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, Missouri, and Texas*."<sup>3</sup> Would a President Seward aid the invaders?

Such questions, and the soundbites' ambiguous answers, hung in the air, turning every northern intruder inside the South into a hint about Seward's and Lincoln's disguised future intentions. The more towering the invader, the more Southerners wondered whether Republicans' postcontainment assault had at last thrown off the mask. So did John Brown reveal how masked Republicans meant to establish an American house undivided?

– 2 –

Other questions better illuminated John Brown. Brown ridiculed Republicans' mainstream tactics. He disparaged even Yankee extremists for deploying too nonviolent a strategy. He shared not a plan but a hatred with other Northerners. He set infuriated Southerners on the hunt for how other Yankees, equally brimming with anti-Slave Power loathing, would pursue better invasive strategies.

This solitary strategist had been born as the century began. John Brown's Connecticut family had antislavery as if in the genes. Brown was reared in

Ohio's Western Reserve, where his father helped found Oberlin College, center of American colorblind higher education.

From that radical atmosphere and that fiery father, John Brown formulated a certitude about divine intervention against sinners, starring himself as God's warrior against slaveholders. Brown could not say how God's antislavery design would unfold. He only knew that Jehovah somehow would use him to wipe slavery from His earth. "Acknowledge *Him & He* shall direct thy paths" became Brown's motto; and even "illogical movements" would become "a grand success" in the hands of "an *all good, all wise, and all powerful Director & Father.*"<sup>4</sup>

The restraining hand of churches, political parties, and familial concerns bounded other antislavery warriors. Brown obeyed only his conception of God's unbounded command. Although a zealous Christian, he joined no church. Although a passionate abolitionist, he entered no antislavery organization. Although a devoted father, he would tolerate only sons who would gladly perish to free the slaves. When his son Oliver lay dying at Harpers Ferry, horribly suffering and begging his father to kill him with a merciful bullet, John Brown refused to pull the trigger. "If you must die," proclaimed God's terrorist, "die like a man."<sup>5</sup> No other Yankee better personified one southern monster image: the northern wild individual, serving only infatuated abstractions.

Nor did any other Yankee better exemplify another southern satanic conception: the fanatical New England puritan, declaring holy war against every erring human impulse, including his own. To whip the sin out of the son who bore his name, Brown kept a ledger of John Jr.'s response to flogging. If the offspring disobeyed his mother, the heir received eight lashes; for lying, another eight; for feckless labor, three. When John Jr.'s sins still outnumbered his improvements, John Sr. blamed himself for the spiritual bankruptcy. After laying still more furious stripes on his son, Brown barred his own back. He handed the whip to John Jr. He commanded the sinning offspring to pound lashes into the sinning patriarch. "Harder, harder, harder," cried the fanatic, as the blood poured from his back.<sup>6</sup>

After many merciless self-flagellations, Brown believed that he had become a rarely pure vessel, prepared for Christ's immaculate commands to fill. Before Harpers Ferry, Frederick Douglass warned John Brown that a murderous raid on the federal arsenal would never secure a providential design. Why then, Brown wondered, did God, the master designer, call him to begin at Harpers Ferry? And why dwell on strategy after the beginning when God, the master tactician, would later point the way?

During initial forays, Brown never fretted about follow-up tactics. Pragmatic adjustment of strategy after a first strike, careful calculation of risks and rewards at every subsequent step—Brown always scorned this American formula for calculated success. Scorn for calculation turned Brown into a disastrous capitalist before he became a failed raider. The Connecticut

venturer at first succeeded, then failed at farming, at land speculation, at running a tannery, as a wool merchant. He triumphed, then failed in Ohio, in Massachusetts, in New York, in California. He ultimately failed to escape twenty-one lawsuits and more bankruptcies.

Then, after Brown turned fifty, Kansas beckoned. There, a devastating first blow could earn sustained reputation. There, Brown could ambush, kill, and depart, ending the story before poststrike complications spoiled the victory. Thus at midnight on May 24, 1856, Brown and seven compatriots smashed into three cabins in Pottawatomie, Kansas. They slaughtered five slumbering Southerners. They hacked the dead men's skulls, severed a hand from an arm, sliced fingers from another hand, and made off atop the victims' horses. Two years later, Brown burst into Missouri, murdered a slaveholder, seized eleven slaves, and led the new freedmen 1100 miles to Canadian sanctuary.

After the two successful strikes for freedom, Brown heard God's call for the Harpers Ferry strike. The bigger strike required a bigger budget. So Brown, failed financial hustler, resumed his career as money-grubber. He especially begged cash from wealthy northern intellectuals of the Transcendentalist persuasion, baffled about how to turn antislavery ideas into emancipation triumphs. Brown's prime contributors, his so-called secret six, included Theodore Parker, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, George Stearns, Samuel Gridley Howe, Gerrit Smith, and Franklin Sanborn. Most of these Yankee men of mind had been educated at Harvard. One of them had founded the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

All of them despaired that nonviolent ideas might never overturn the slaveholders. Brown preyed on their apprehensions. When they touted their pacific antislavery societies, Brown responded that "your methods are perfectly futile; you would not release five slaves in a century; peaceable emancipation is impossible." When they praised antislavery ballots, antislavery laws, antislavery education, he exploded at "Talk! Talk! Talk! That will never free the slaves." He counseled "action—action," violent action inside the South, to seize the slaveholders' rifles and to arm the slaves.<sup>7</sup>

That was a fiery solution to America's (and Republicans') master antislavery puzzle. Even if hatred of slavery consumed the North, how could that loathing damage slavery in the South? By convincing slaveholders to drop their lashes? Please! By convincing Northerners to vote down slavery? Not if the U.S. Constitution forbade federal intervention in southern states. Not if Northern Republicans drew a line in the sand between opposing slavery in new territories and assaulting slavery in old states. Brown would obliterate that line. He would defy the Constitution. He would turn the secret six's bloodless ideas into killing raids. Powerless eggheads need only finance his firearms.

At first glance, Brown did not look like a frightening gunman. While physically slim and hard, he fell two inches short of six feet. His head seemed too small even for his light frame. But his endlessly long mouth, perpetually frozen in a frown, and his cold gray eyes, endlessly searching for

foes, accentuated his usual grim silence, then his occasional outbursts of hate. His boot scarcely concealed the bowie knife jammed between trouser and skin. This “shepherd and herdsman,” said Ralph Waldo Emerson, “learned the manners of the animal and knew the secret signals by which animals communicate.”<sup>8</sup>

Yankee intellectuals succumbed to Brown’s animalistic force. The secret six agreed to help finance the killer, if he would keep their identity secret. With the *very* secret six’s financing, Brown prepared to ambush northwestern Virginia.

Initially, he presumed, slaves would lack the training to handle rifles. So he ordered a thousand pikes for a thousand dollars. These modernized spears featured two bowie knives attached to a six-foot-long ash shaft. The knives, each two inches wide and eight inches long, had been honed to a razor-sharp edge.

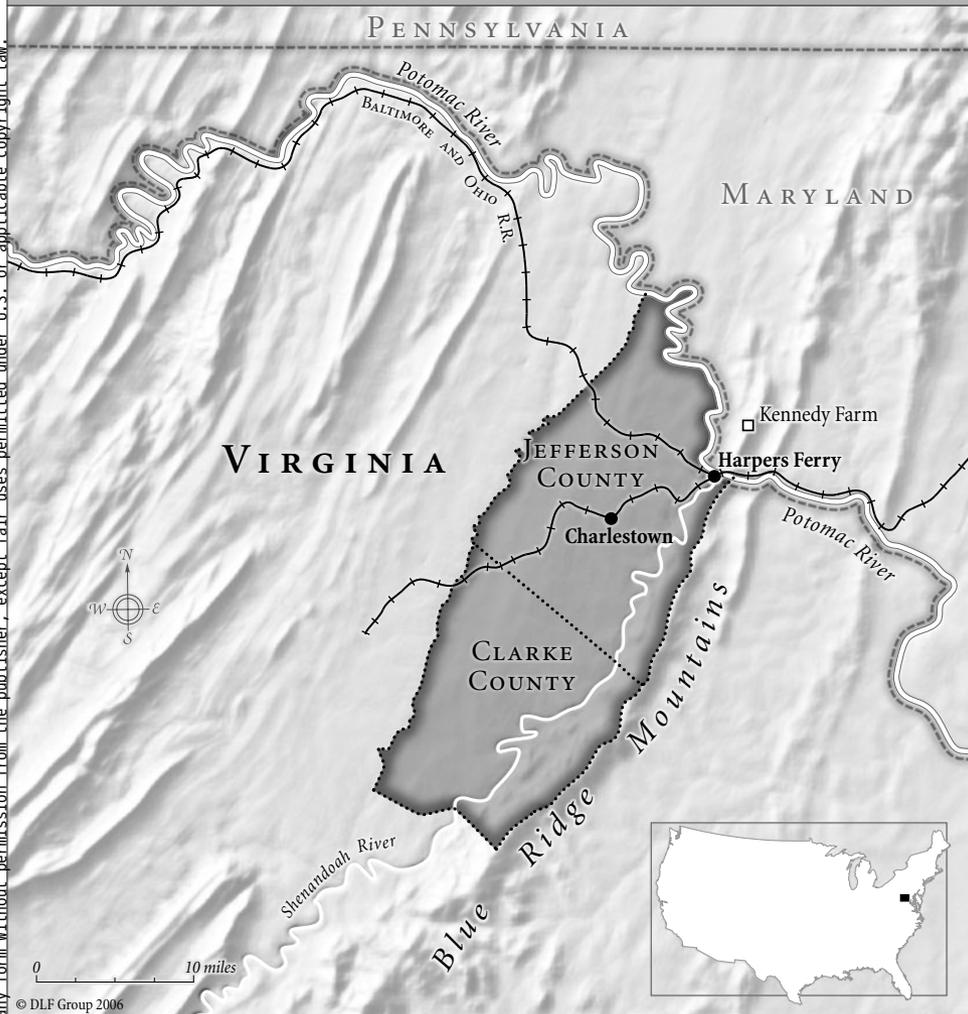
Then, in a mysterious gambit for a slave rebellion armed with pikes, Brown focused on capturing the federal rifles at Harpers Ferry. Perhaps Brown plotted that southern nonslaveholding mountaineers would come use the rifles. Or perhaps he expected that slaves who initially wielded spears would learn to wield guns. Or perhaps he planned to use violence only to protect runaway slaves as they nonviolently sprinted toward freedom. His posttraid statements wove a contradictory path between these scenarios, perhaps because, as usual, his only certain strategy involved the first strike.

Whether the first assault led to an insurrection of black slaves, a rainbow army of black and white lower classes, or a protected runaway stampede, the borderland especially attracted the raider. High up in the South, slaves most often fled their masters, and nonslaveholders most often resented the slavocracy. Inside the borderland’s mountains, antislavery guerrilla warriors could easily find hiding places. They also could use a prolonged mountainous tunnel, funneling down to the Lower South and up to the North, to speed runaways toward Canada.

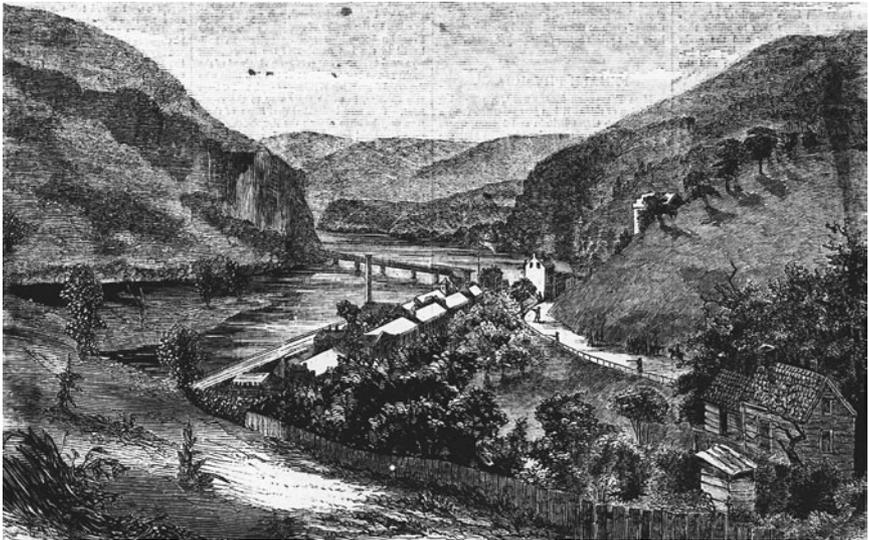
Harpers Ferry, located at the northern end of the Virginia Valley and on the western flank of the mountains, offered an inviting entrance to the tunnel. Firearms packed Harpers Ferry’s federal arsenal. The South’s largest armory loomed nearby. Slumber disarmed midnight guards. Only frail telegraph wires and railroad tracks connected the isolated town with the outside world. Brown would have to march but six miles from his preparatory Maryland farmhouse, ambush the sleeping, trash the communications, and flee with enough guns for a small army.

This border locale also offered allies to shoulder the guns. Many subsequent critics, including alas this writer, have derided Brown because few slaves lived in Harpers Ferry’s immediate neighborhood. But he was wiser than his critics, when it came to the first strike. While the land rimming Harpers Ferry rose too steeply to contain many slaves, the federal arsenal commanded Jefferson County, where almost 4000 slaves comprised over 27 percent of the population. Just south of Jefferson County loomed Clarke

## THE HARPERS FERRY ENVIRONS



The map (above) and the contemporary drawing (opposite page) together illuminate Harpers Ferry's epic setting. Here was staged a national trauma that alerted the eyes of Southerners (but has blinded the eyes of posterity) to see the succeeding better answers to the big question: How did Republicans intend to invade the South? Drawing courtesy of Special Collections, the University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville.



County. There another 3400 slaves comprised 47 percent of the population. Such unusually numerous border slaves could quickly hear that a messiah had brought a thousand savage spears, seized 10,000 murderous guns, and summoned blacks to fight for freedom.

In still other ways, Jefferson and Clarke counties were as if God-ordained for a border raid. This rather heavily enslaved hinterland area, scarcely thirty miles from the Pennsylvania border, could be easily reached through scarcely enslaved western Maryland. Partly because hostile Yankees loomed close, both counties' number and percentage of slaves had slowly ebbed. Between 1850 and 1860, Jefferson and Clarke counties lost 8 percent of their 8000 slaves. God's holy terrorist thus understandably spied providential opportunity in a poorly guarded arsenal close to the North, plus mountainous terrain for postraid concealment, plus an incrementally weakening slaveholders' regime, plus a nearby black population.

John Brown's strike started as auspiciously (or if you will, as gruesomely) as the Pottawatomie Massacre. On the evening of October 16, 1859, the liberator led fourteen other whites and four blacks from his rented Kennedy Farm in Maryland to Harpers Ferry, those six miles distant. There the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers unite to heave against a jagged semimountain, before flowing on to the sea. Thomas Jefferson, peering down from the towering bluff above, had called the spectacle "one of the most stupendous scenes in nature."

There transpired one of the most stupendous scenes in American history. In the dark night, Brown's freedom fighters easily captured Harpers Ferry's federal armory, arsenal, and engine house. They sliced the telegraph wires. They halted a train. They dispatched messengers to a nearby plantation, Lewis Washington's (a great-grandnephew of George Washington's), there to

alert slaves to spread the invasion. No other first strike has ever been better planned or carried out (which is only to say that John Brown here perfected his lifelong specialty).

No other following tactics have ever been botched so badly (which is only to say that John Brown here succumbed to his lifelong flaw). Where these raiders meant to kill whites, in order to free blacks, they first killed a free black, Shepard Hayward, as he walked harmlessly away from them. Where Brown's warriors meant to bring black fugitives northward, their first slaughtered compatriot paid the ultimate penalty for marching southward. Dangerfield Newby, a Virginia mulatto in his midthirties, enlisted in Brown's army to help his enslaved wife and seven children escape from the Harpers Ferry environs. Newby carried a note from his wife, imploring "oh dear Dangerfield" to "com [sic] this fall without fail. . . . I want to see you so much that is the one bright hope I have before me."

That hope perished when Newby suffered a mortal bullet in the neck while fleeing toward the armory. Posterity cannot tell whether a Maryland journalist's report on his death reflected an actual savage happening or a brutal southern fantasy about slavery, sex, and race. According to the Maryland observer, infuriated whites chopped off the ears and testicles of the corpse. Then they threw Newby's disfigured body into the gutter and watched a roaming hog chew the victim's still-attached member.<sup>9</sup>

After the colorblind raid left a black on each side slaughtered, Brown's ineptitude continued. Since Brown needed to cut off communications with the outside world, his men stopped that first train. They then unaccountably allowed it to puff away, to announce the ambush to unsuspecting whites. Where Lewis Washington's slaves needed to spread the tidings to rebellious slaves, Brown's raiders unaccountably hauled Washington and his bondsmen back to the arsenal. The raiders also brought back a weapon as barren of consequence as the kidnapping: Frederick the Great's sword, a gift to George Washington.

Where Brown and his men needed to transport Harpers Ferry's potentially highly consequential firearms to the nooks and crannies of the mountains in a great big hurry, the raider stayed in Harpers Ferry's death trap. While whites gathered to hurl themselves at the furious old man, their prey jailed himself inside the most innocuous corner of his captured fortress, the engine house. There, the self-imprisoned raider found no food.

The night after Brown struck, U.S. Marines arrived, led by Robert E. Lee. The next day, Lee's assaulters fed Brown's hungry raiders steel for breakfast. The ninety marines stormed the engine house. They killed half of Brown's men, including two of his sons. Lieutenant Israel Green downed the stolid father with devastating but not mortal blows. The lieutenant's ceremonial sword, like Frederick the Great's, lacked a killing edge. That dull instrument gave Brown his saving moment. When confronting Virginia's judges, he could teach Northerners to remember something more than his utter disaster.

## - 3 -

It took Southerners a few weeks to discover how totally the raid had been a debacle. In the interim, they staged one of the most savage insurrection panics in southern history. As usual at such hysterical times, paranoid Southerners saw a potential murderer in every Cuffee's every dissimulating movement. They also spied a collaborator in every contact between a white stranger and a slave. They trampled down the color line between their regimes, subjecting white suspects to trial not by courts but by mobs. They assaulted their paternalism toward blacks, replacing genial correction with savage lashings. They turned slavery into not a home but a prison, while shuddering not only at their peril but at their brutal selves.

Their descent into brutality made brief rational sense. At first, they had no idea who the raider was, who sent him, and what Northerners might be massing for his rescue. Another result of Brown's careless tactics spread panic far afield. Brown left three supporters behind in the Kennedy farmhouse when he departed for Harpers Ferry. He failed to instruct his compatriots to remove his incriminating papers if they departed. When they fled, they left behind a swiftly discovered, widely published map of future striking places, some deep in the South. Some of Brown's men at Harpers Ferry also successfully fled, perhaps to join their compatriots at the next target on their maps.

At every spot marked on the discovered map, Southerners shuddered. "The localities marked," claimed the *Norfolk (Virginia) Southern Argus*, "had been visited by Abolition emissaries and were found to contain slaves ready for insurrections." But who were the contaminating emissaries? Who were the contaminated slaves?<sup>10</sup>

Letters to Governor Henry Wise of Virginia begged for identification of the culprits. Our neighborhood is marked on the map, noted H. R. Davis of Cold Spring, Mississippi. Should we remove our long-suspected Yankee teacher named Forbers? Might another incendiary be a Yankee named Lacy, living near Kingston in Adams County, another marked spot? What can you tell us about our traitors, inquired the Allenton, Alabama, local postmaster? Our locality is "laid down" on the map among other "favorable points of attack." John Brown could know nothing about Allenton. So he must have received word from secret agents. BUT WHO?<sup>11</sup>

Who indeed? Governor Wise hadn't a clue. Neither did the alarmed citizens of Allenton or Norfolk or Cold Spring. Because anxiety about the unknowable ran wild, every watchman found employment. "You may imagine the state of things here," Andrew Hunter of Charlestown, Virginia, wrote Governor Wise, "when I tell you, that to protect my property from the torch of the incendiary—I have been compelled to place a musket in the hands of my man servant Frank."<sup>12</sup>

With black Frank not the protection most whites had in mind, extralegal committees of inquiry roamed the countryside, tarring, feathering, expelling, and occasionally killing. The inquisition's flimsy evidence led some alarmed

democrats to demand proof before punishment. With proof scarce and danger apparently omnipresent, alarmed citizens demanded punishment without evidence.

Near Sparta, Georgia, an impoverished, illiterate nonslaveholder told an overseer that he would paint his face black and join the invader, if John Brown came calling. Blacks hereabouts, explained the future face painter, outnumbered whites. Still, the nonslaveholder “wished there weren’t no niggers nohow.” Could this foul racist be John Brown’s fellow traveler? After some tense moments, the vigilant committee released the terrified fellow.<sup>13</sup>

Again, a Eufaula, Alabama, mob arrested a peddler of ploughs, since the “cut of his coat and his manners” made him seem Yankee. The peddler claimed to be Dr. Malroe of South Carolina, a proslavery zealot who owned two plantations. The committee doubted the plea. Why would a wealthy South Carolina physician sell ploughs in Alabama and dress like a Yankee? The inquisitors asked this alleged South Carolinian to name his parents. The weeping suspect momentarily could not remember. The amnesia aroused new suspicions. But before tar and feathers arrived, a trusted Alabamian rushed in to identify the suspect as indeed Dr. Malroe of South Carolina. Now the vigilant committee did the weeping, for a travesty barely averted. Committee members even bought some ploughs.<sup>14</sup>

The post-Brown fright yielded more travesties than comedies. In Savannah, Georgia, a mob seized a Yankee who allegedly peddled incendiary propaganda. The lynchers carried their victim beyond city limits. They stripped him naked. They clothed him with tar and feathers, decorated with cotton swabs. Then they booted him toward the city. When the culprit displayed his finery near the market, the night watchman “sprang . . . and ran, crying ‘the devil—the devil.’”<sup>15</sup>

In southwestern Virginia, a supposed abolitionist had more reason to think that he faced Satan. A kangaroo court sentenced him to be hanged. His illegal judges fixed one end of a rope to his neck, the other end to a tree. He swung in the sky until almost dead. They cut him down. When he caught his breath, they hitched him up again. After he almost expired, they hacked him down again. They repeated his ordeal a third time. A fourth. A fifth. Then they ordered him to run for his life. He galloped away, whooped his lynchers, “like a quarter nag.”<sup>16</sup>

Fortunately for further potential victims, neither democratic liberty for whites nor genial paternalism for blacks could be permanently transformed into an ungodly dictatorship over both races. Only evidence that even one more John Brown would invade with even one more pike or that even one slave had volunteered to wield even one spear could perpetuate this mockery of republicanism and paternalism. To paternalistic republicans’ relief, not a solitary slave had accepted Brown’s invitation. Nor did a solitary Yankee issue another invitation. After those few panicky weeks, Southerners began to believe that Abraham Lincoln, for once, had it right: White men’s “attempt . . . to get up a revolt among slaves” had only yielded slaves who “refused to participate.”<sup>17</sup>

So southern life eased back toward its edgy mix of democracy for whites, despotism for blacks. Mobs disappeared. Kangaroo courts vanished. Slaveholders resumed their role as patriarchal rulers of loving slaves, albeit a little more charily. Rulers and citizens resumed the open contest of (most!) ideas on the hustings, albeit a little more nervously. With the initially panicky southern reaction fading, only northern enthusiasm for the raider could prolong John Brown's impact.

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After his capture, John Brown looked incapable of arousing anyone's applause. The raider lay in a Virginia prison, half deaf, eyes half closed, bleeding profusely from four head wounds and a slash to the kidneys. But the savaged fanatic cared only about the question screaming in his head. Why had God ordered the big strike, then allowed His sinners to smash His servant?

God's warrior soon grasped the answer. Jehovah had wiser uses for a raider than a mere mortal had conceived. God desired an inspiring martyr. A condemned freedom fighter could awaken the slumbering North, alarm the horrendous South, and thus bring on the bloodbath that could alone free the slave. "I can recover all the lost capital," this ever failing capitalist wrote his wife, by "hanging for a few moments by the neck and I feel quite determined to make the utmost possible out of defeat."<sup>18</sup>

A sacrosanct custom empowered the apparently powerless prisoner. Before sentencing, a convict could address his sentencers. Journalists would spread Brown's words throughout the nation. With the gallows looming, no time would remain for succeeding blunders.

A previous change in personal appearance could further Brown's newest first strike. In the months before the raid, John Brown had grown a long, wide white beard, reaching his chest. The growth turned his long grim mouth into a prophet's auspicious hollow. John Brown, the righteous gunslinger who had assaulted Transcendentalists' mere words, had become Saint John, preparing one of America's most holy texts.

On November 2, 1859, in a Charlestown courtroom, the murderous saint rose from his cot to judge his judges, before they judged him. This western Virginia court "acknowledged," he supposed, "the validity of the law of God." In His Golden Rule, God teaches that "I should do" to all men whatever "men should do to me." Those "instructions" make my interference "in behalf of His despised poor . . . no wrong but right." Yet if I had instead "interfered on behalf of the rich and the powerful, . . . this Court would have deemed it an act worthy of reward, not punishment." If their perversion of the Golden Rule demands that "I forfeit my life . . . and mingle my blood further with the blood of my children, and with the blood of the [black] millions," victims of "wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments," I say "let it be done."<sup>19</sup>



Two fanciful, latter-day paintings of John Brown, one (left) showing a gentle idealist, kissing a black baby on his way to the gallows—an image infused with the northern admiration of Brown’s spirit—and the other (below) of the violent killer, a rendition saturated with the southern loathing of hateful Yankees. Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Carl Stoekel, 1897 (97.5) (*Gentle John Brown*) and the Kansas State Historical Society (*Violent John Brown*).



According to the apocryphal legend, on December 2, as John Brown left his jail on his way to the gallows, he stooped to kiss a black babe, nestled in its mother’s arms.<sup>20</sup> A few hours later, when the hangman had finished, non-apocryphal bells in northern steeples sang their tribute to the expired martyr. Then weeping thousands cheered Brown’s casket as it passed through northern habitats. And then came the evolving song, spreading over the

North, soon to be carried by a hundred thousand chanting soldiers down to the South:

Old John Brown's body is a-mouldering in the dust,  
Old John Brown's rifle's red with blood-spots turned to rust,  
Old John Brown's pike has made its last, unflinching thrust,  
His soul is marching on!<sup>21</sup>

Famous New England intellectuals kept Brown's spirit on the march. Ralph Waldo Emerson declared that Brown "will make the gallows glorious like the cross." Henry David Thoreau breathed that "some eighteen hundred years ago, Christ was crucified." Now, an "angel of light" shone from the gallows. Wendell Phillips shouted that Virginia "is a pirate ship," and "John Brown sails the sea," commissioned "to sink every pirate he meets on God's ocean." The most famous Yankee abolitionist (and, ironically, one of the most famous American pacifists) had the last word. "I am prepared to say: 'success to every slave insurrection at the South and in every slave country,'" intoned William Lloyd Garrison.<sup>22</sup>

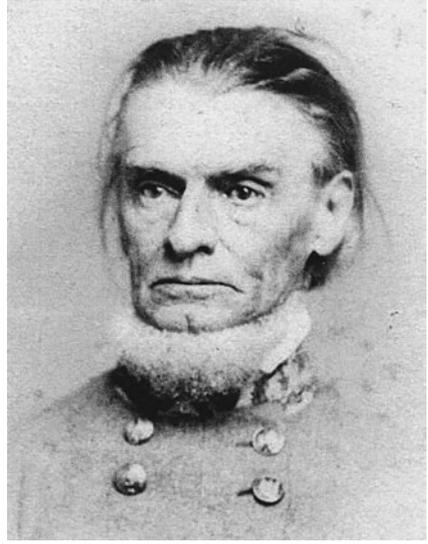
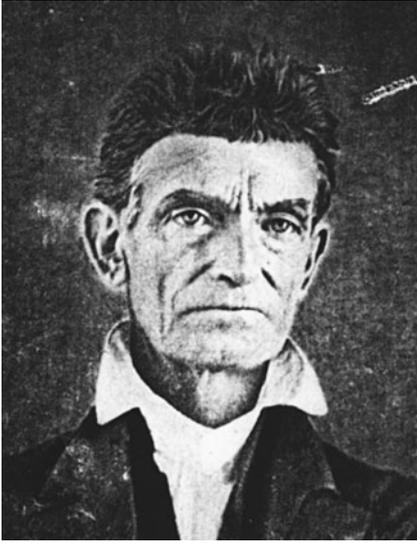
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That northern applause for a midnight assassin struck Southerners as appalling, insulting, indicative of a more horrifying northern enemy than most Southerners had suspected. Since John Brown became the ultimate wild individualist, his Yankee cheerleaders seemed proponents of unrestrained license, while the South seemed the center of social control. To publicize this alleged difference between northern and southern cultures, a charismatic southern debater rose to share center stage with John Brown.<sup>23</sup>

The two debaters, often conferring during Brown's imprisonment, created an eerie tableau of twins consulting. Both had become notorious as ordinary failures who triumphed at special moments. Just as Brown had fumbled as a capitalist, between his historic thrusts as an ambusher, so Virginia's Governor Henry Wise had floundered as a statesman, between his brilliance at Virginia's epic moments. Throughout almost all of Henry Wise's uneven career, Virginia's most aristocratic squires considered him a perverse symbol of egalitarianism gone astray, a poseur who fudged everything important to please enough plebeians to win elections.

Then the grand pre-Civil War episodes came, and the faltering Wise always rose to the occasion. He had ascended in the midcentury Virginia constitutional convention and in the 1855 Know-Nothing election. He would soar in the secession crisis. He now costarred on John Brown's stage.

Brown and Wise both displayed emaciated frames, unruly hair, and burning eyes. Each dressed in disheveled homespun. Both strutted with the vanity and imperiousness of would-be kings. Each respected the other's sincerity. Wise dismissed some Southerners' notion that Brown was insane. This Yankee's



Two warring titans, John Brown (left) and Henry Wise (right), who tore into each other, despite great mutual respect, over who was the supreme American irresponsible individualist, the fanatical abolitionist or the unchecked slaveholder. Courtesy of the Library of Congress (Brown) and the South Carolina Historical Society (Wise).

alleged lunacy, said Wise, was just the North's conventional antislavery fanaticism.<sup>24</sup> Brown dismissed some Virginians' conviction that Wise was an unprincipled demagogue. The spellbinder's seductive bombast, thought Brown, was just the conventional proslavery fanaticism. Ralph Waldo Emerson exclaimed that these "enemies become affectionate. . . . If circumstances did not keep them apart, they would fly into each other's arms."<sup>25</sup>

Wise reaffirmed his affectionate respect for his enemy in a remarkable postwar incident. In 1865, the prewar governor sought to evict a schoolmarm from his prewar farm. The intruder turned out to be one of John Brown's daughters, come south to educate blacks, including Wise's ex-slaves. When a bystander mocked Wise for falling beneath a contemptible raider's offspring, the defrocked rebel whirled on his tormentor. "John Brown," exclaimed Wise, "John Brown was a great man, sir. John Brown was a great man!"<sup>26</sup>

Wise considered Brown a great man because the Connecticut Yankee shed all northern disguises, stripped away all northern opportunism, leaving only Yankee conviction, straight up and true blue and a shock for all the world to see. Wise had studied Brown very carefully in prison. In his report to the Virginia legislature on his findings, he called the raider's unvarnished hatred of the South a challenge that must be met. "We cannot suffer such insults," warned Henry Wise, "without suffering worse than the death of citizens—without suffering dishonor, the death of a State."<sup>27</sup>

While Wise trembled at undefended honor, he saw nothing to fear in Brown's strategy to rouse the slaves. He wished Virginians would focus on the less conspicuous, more dangerous Yankee raiders, the ones who silently encouraged border slaves to run away. Brown's importance, declared Wise, lay in exuding the mentality that led the secretive conductors of the Liberty Line to steal western Virginia slaveholders' exposed property. John Brown embodied the Yankee "doctrine of absolute individual rights, independent of all relations of man to man in a conventional and social form." To Brown, to his northern cheerleaders, and to the border slave stealers, "each man has the prerogative to set up his conscience, his will, and his judgment over and above all legal enactments and social institutions."

John Brown, like most other Northerners, thought that Southerners suffered mortally from that very disease. This most unbounded of Yankees considered the slaveholder to be America's rank unbounded individualist. The tyrant who flourished beyond social control, Brown raged, could do anything loathsome to his unprotected slave. The despot could lash, smash, mash, slash his people, rape his "wenches," and sell slaves away from their families, with no legislature, no executive, no court to stay his irresponsibly uncontrolled hand. I intervened against *that* unholy individualism, said John Brown. Can the North—can the Lord—call my judges the *Christian* individualists? With that question, the Wise-Brown debate over anti-Christian individualism came to climax.

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Brown achieved his climax not with his thousand pikes but with a thousand words. The losing raider's seductive words piled irony atop irony. If Lieutenant Israel Green had grabbed a sharp sword instead of seizing a dull bludgeon as he raced out his door to draw and quarter the insurrectionist, Brown would have been slain and his intensification of the sectional controversy likely stillborn. Lacking Brown's postraid rhetoric to transform a bungler into a martyr, Yankees, always queasy about black violence, would probably have dismissed a wild anarchist as a misguided fanatic. Thus did the accident of Israel Green's nonkilling sword, a random circumstance having nothing to do with the slavery issue, for the first time show how coincidence could help the slavery issue to bring on the Civil War.

To increase the irony, John Brown had secured cash for pikes from abstruse northern wordsmiths because they feared that words would never damage the Slave Power. Yet Brown's savage spears had secured nothing more than a southern pulpit, to fire words back at the North. The most antislavery Northerners' cheers, still more ironically, gave new hope to the secessionists. The disunionists' sleepy southern brethren could now at least see that Yankees' words spat out loathing for the South.

"There has rarely occurred between separate nations," cheered Virginia's Edmund Ruffin, "a more outrageous, and . . . malignant hostility." The arch

Virginia unionist William Cabell Rives, Jr., sadly concurred that not so much “the occurrences at Harper’s Ferry” as “their consequences” had done more “to bring about the catastrophe of disunion, than all the other events of our past history put together.” Alabama’s William H. Tayloe, long a self-styled “obstinate Unionist under the impression that Republicans are not abolitionists,” now felt “smothered by the want of sympathy from the North. . . . The time has come at last for war, or the Yankeys [sic] must let us alone.”<sup>28</sup>

One well-publicized group of southern nonpoliticians would not wait to see if Yankee insulters let them alone. Over 200 southern scholars, studying at Philadelphia’s advanced medical schools, departed the alleged city of brotherly love, to them now a locale of antibrotherly hatred. These seceding Southerners enrolled with southern brethren at their home states’ less advanced institutions.<sup>29</sup> Edmund Ruffin worked for more mass departures, the next time from the Union. He sent John Brown’s pikes throughout the South for public display, labeling each spear a “Sample of the favors designed for us by our Northern Brethren.”<sup>30</sup>

Yet those pikes also epitomized how little northern hatred had yet menaced slavery inside the South. Cuffees’ unanimous unwillingness to rise up in group rebellion, even when John Brown offered an array of armaments, indicated (as Southerners had long thought and as Henry Wise had lately emphasized) that dissimulating slaves’ only lethal threat lay in individuals’ flights or assaults. After the nonexistent group slave revolt, the handful of Yankees who had financed the spears were as invisible as enslaved spear wielders had been. Of John Brown’s secret six, only Thomas Wentworth Higginson joined the trifling schemes to rescue Brown on his way to the gallows. (Henry Wise, taking no chances, emptied \$250,000 from the Virginia treasury to make the gallows more secure than ever the White House had been.) The other secret sixers scurried into hiding. Gerrit Smith hid out in the appropriate place, from Southerners’ perspective—a lunatic asylum.

Republicans convincingly denied any complicity with John Brown’s lunatic fringe methods. John Brown “agreed with us in thinking slavery wrong,” declared Abraham Lincoln. But that cannot “excuse violence, bloodshed, and treason. It could avail him nothing that he might think himself right.” Salmon P. Chase railed at “poor old” John Brown—“How rash—how mad—how criminal.” William H. Seward denounced Brown’s raid as “an act of sedition and treason.” Meeting after meeting in northern cities cheered that condemnation.<sup>31</sup>

A month after John Brown swung from the gallows, the U.S. Senate authorized Virginia’s Senator James Mason to chair an investigating committee, charged with discerning whether Republicans had the slightest connection with John Brown. Mason, a fiery Southerner, had been the first provoker of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law. He had been a relatively rare 1856 advocate of secession if Republicans won the White House. Yet the sometimes hothead conducted one of the coolest, most sensible, most impartial congressional investigations in all of American history. The inquisition

ultimately declared Republican hands squeaky clean, at least as aiders of John Brown.<sup>32</sup>

Months before the Mason Committee announced its acquittal, southern congressmen's attention swerved to other ways Republicans might move beyond containment, to invade slavery inside the South. The John Brown trauma left Southerners convinced: Northerners assuredly hate us, insufferably more than we had realized. In turn we despise their puritanism and individualism, far more than we did before Transcendentalist heroes cheered Brown's obscene terrorizing. But how will Republicans' hatred menace more than our pride, if Brown is to be our only invader?

As post-Brown Southerners sought the answer, the Harpers Ferry affair slid into its appropriate niche as but the first exciting act of a surpassing multiact drama. The second act commenced before the curtain ended the first. You wasted your resources on John Brown's anti-Christian violence, a southern visitor to northern pulpits told worshippers during the fall of 1859. But if you will donate peaceable dollars and peaceable teachers, John G. Fee promised northern Christians, I will peaceably spread your and Christ's hatred of slavery inside my southern homeland.