

A Preface

John Brown may be as salient to an understanding of the nineteenth century as he has ever been since his execution a century and a half ago. Brown has been and remains a virtual Rorschach test that reveals much about each observer's ideas about central questions of the 19th century. If you know where someone stands with regard to Brown, you can predict with a high degree of accuracy where he or she stands on the viability of slavery, the inevitability of the Civil War, or the utility and justice of violence in the campaign to end slavery. Brown is such a revealing marker because we, no less than our ancestors, insist that Brown's life and death must have held a larger meaning, that it must have touched on and revealed some of the deepest truths about Americans and their values. And because we freight Brown with so much significance, few other American historical figures occupy a comparable place in American historical memory.

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THE BEDFORD SERIES IN HISTORY AND CULTURE

**John Brown's Raid
on Harpers Ferry**
A Brief History with Documents

Jonathan Earle

University of Kansas

BEDFORD/ST. MARTIN'S

Boston ♦ New York

away. On Monday (the following) night, two small companies were made up to go to Missouri and forcibly liberate the five slaves, together with other slaves. One of these companies I assumed to direct. We proceeded to the place, surrounded the buildings, liberated the slaves, and also took certain property supposed to belong to the estate. We however learned before leaving that a portion of the articles we had taken belonged to a man living on the plantation as a tenant, and who was supposed to have no interest in the estate. We promptly returned to him all we had taken. We then went to another plantation, where we found five more slaves, took some property and two white men. We moved all slowly away into the Territory for some distance, and then sent the white men back, telling them to follow us as soon as they chose to do so. The other company freed one female slave, took some property, and, as I am informed, killed one white man (the master), who fought against the liberation.

Now for a comparison. Eleven persons are forcibly restored to their natural and inalienable rights, with but one man killed, and all "hell is stirred from beneath." It is currently reported that the Governor of Missouri has made a requisition upon the Governor of Kansas for the delivery of all such as were concerned in the last-named "dreadful outrage." The Marshal of Kansas is said to be collecting a *posse* of Missouri (not Kansas) men at West Point, in Missouri, a little town about ten miles distant, to "enforce the laws." All proslavery, conservative, Free-State, and dough-face men and Administration tools are filled with holy horror.

Consider the two cases, and the action of the Administration party.

Respectfully yours,

JOHN BROWN

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The Raid and Trial

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JOHN BROWN

Provisional Constitution and Ordinances for the People of the United States

May 8, 1858

In January 1858, Brown visited the Rochester, New York, home of Frederick Douglass. His purpose was to enlist the famous black abolitionist's support for his plan to invade the slave South and wage a guerilla war from a base in the Appalachian Mountains. Douglass's reaction was supportive but cool. During his days at the Douglass home, Brown began composing a "Provisional Constitution" for the new "state" that he hoped to found high in the Appalachian chain. To ratify the new Provisional Constitution, Brown called for a convention to meet in Chatham, Ontario, in May 1858. Chatham was home to a large free black community, many members of which were fugitives from slavery in the United States who had built a new life in Canada. Many of these residents, including the free-born Osborne P. Anderson (see Document 8), were delegates at the convention. Also present were the radical black abolitionist Martin Delany and several Brown allies, including John H. Kagi, Richard Realf, Charles Tidd, Aaron Stevens, J. S. Parsons, and Brown's son Owen. At the convention John Brown, for the first time, laid out his plan to attack slavery by invading the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia and waging war on plantations on both sides of the range.

Richard J. Hinton, *John Brown and His Men* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Co., 1894), 619-33.

After taking an oath of secrecy, the delegates heard each of the forty-eight articles in Brown's Provisional Constitution. Taken as a whole, the document provides a mocking tribute to the U.S. Constitution, which it resembled in most instances. The new constitution, for example, provided for three branches of government, including a commander in chief for the armed forces (Brown). But in the preamble Brown declared slavery, as enshrined in the U.S. Constitution, to be "in utter disregard and violation of those eternal and self-evident truths set forth in our Declaration of Independence." In other articles, the constitution declared that all slaveholders' property would be confiscated, set out punishments for various crimes, and defined plans to hold all property in common. The only item that elicited heated debate was Article XLVI, which stated that the document should not be "construed so as in any way to encourage the overthrow of any State Government of the United States: and look to no dissolution of the Union." The delegates unanimously approved and signed the constitution, agreeing to fill vacancies at a later time. Brown had achieved his goal, and he turned to preparing his invasion.

Preamble

Whereas slavery, throughout its entire existence in the United States, is none other than a most barbarous, unprovoked, and unjustifiable war of one portion of its citizens upon another portion—the only conditions of which are perpetual imprisonment and hopeless servitude or absolute extermination—in utter disregard and violation of those eternal and self-evident truths set forth in our Declaration of Independence:

Therefore we, citizens of the United States, and the oppressed people who, by a recent decision of the Supreme Court, are declared to have no rights which the white man is bound to respect, together with all other people degraded by the laws thereof, do, for the time being, ordain and establish for ourselves the following Provisional Constitution and Ordinances, the better to protect our persons, property, lives, and liberties, and to govern our actions:

Article I: Qualifications for Membership

All persons of mature age, whether proscribed, oppressed, and enslaved citizens, or of the proscribed and oppressed races of the United States, who shall agree to sustain and enforce the Provisional Constitution and Ordinances of this organization, together with all

minor children of such persons, shall be held to be fully entitled to protection under the same. . . .

Article XXVIII: Property

All captured or confiscated property, and all property the product of the labor of those belonging to this organization and of their families, shall be held as the property of the whole, equally, without distinction; and may be used for the common benefit, or disposed of for the same object; and any person, officer or otherwise, who shall improperly retain, secret, use or needlessly destroy such property, or property found, captured, or confiscated, belonging to the enemy, or shall willfully neglect to render a full and fair statement of such property by him so taken or held, shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor and, on conviction, shall be punished accordingly.

Article XXIX: Safety or Intelligence Fund

All money, plate, watches, or jewelry, captured by honorable warfare, found, taken, or confiscated, belonging to the enemy, shall be held sacred, to constitute a liberal safety or intelligence fund; and any person who shall improperly retain, dispose of, hide, use, or destroy such money or other article above named, contrary to the provisions and spirit of this article, shall be deemed guilty of theft, and, on conviction, thereof, shall be punished accordingly. The Treasurer shall furnish the Commander-in-Chief at all times with a full statement of the condition of such fund and its nature. . . .

Article XXXIII: Voluntaries

All persons who may come forward and shall voluntarily deliver up their slaves, and have their names registered on the Books of the organization, shall, so long as they continue at peace, be entitled to the fullest protection of person and property, though not connected with this organization, and shall be treated as friends, and not merely as persons neutral.

Article XXXIV: Neutrals

The persons and property of all non-slaveholders who shall remain absolute[ly] neutral, shall be respected so far as the circumstances can allow it; but they shall not be entitled to any active protection.

Article XXXV: No Needless Waste

The needless waste or destruction of any useful property or article, by fire, throwing open of fences, fields, buildings, or needless killing of animals, or injury of either, shall not be tolerated at any time or place, but shall be promptly and properly finished.

Article XXXVI: Property Confiscated

The entire and real property of all persons known to be acting either directly or indirectly with or for the enemy, or found in arms with them, or found willfully holding slaves, shall be confiscated and taken, whenever and wherever it may be found, in either free or slave States. . . .

Article XXXIX: All Must Labor

All persons connected in any way with this organization, and who may be entitled to full protection under it: shall be held as under obligation to labor in some way for the general good; and persons refusing, or neglecting so to do, shall on conviction receive a suitable and appropriate punishment.

Article XL: Irregularities

Profane swearing, filthy conversation, indecent behavior, or indecent exposure of the person, or intoxication, or quarrelling, shall not be allowed or tolerated; neither unlawful intercourse of the sexes.

Article XLI: Crimes

Persons convicted of the forcible violation of any female prisoner shall be put to death.

Article XLII: The Marriage Relation—Schools—the Sabbath

The marriage relation shall be at all times respected; and families kept together as far as possible; and broken families encouraged to reunite, and intelligence offices established for that purpose, schools and churches established, as soon as may be, for the purpose of religious and other instructions and the first day of the week regarded as a day of rest and appropriated to moral and religious instruction and

improvement; relief to the suffering, instruction of the young and ignorant, and the encouragement of personal cleanliness nor shall any persons [be] required on that day to perform ordinary manual labor, unless in extremely urgent cases.

Article XLIII: Carry Arms Openly

All persons known to be of good character, and of sound mind and suitable age, who are connected with this organization, whether male or female, shall be encouraged to carry arms openly. . . .

Article XLV: Persons to Be Seized

Persons within the limits of the territory holden by this organization, not connected with this organization, having arms at all, concealed or otherwise, shall be seized at once; or be taken in charge of some vigilant officer; and their case thoroughly investigated: and it shall be the duty of all citizens and soldiers, as well as officers, to arrest such parties as are named in this and the preceding Section or Article, without the formality of complaint or warrant: and they shall be placed in charge of some proper officer for examination, or for safe keeping.

Article XLVI: These Articles Not for the Overthrow of Gov'm't

The foregoing Articles shall not be construed so as in any way to encourage the overthrow of any State Government of the United States: and look to no dissolution of the Union, but simply to Amendment and Repeal. And our flag shall be the same that our Fathers fought under in the Revolution. . . .

Article XLVIII: Oath

Every officer, civil or military, connected with this organization, shall, before entering upon the duties of his office, make solemn oath or affirmation, to abide by and support this Provisional Constitution and these Ordinances. Also, every Citizen and Soldier, before being fully recognized as such, shall do the same.

friend) some little idea of what is *daily, and, I might also say, hourly*, passing within my *prison walls*; and could my friends but witness only a few of those scenes just as they occur, I think they would feel very reconciled to my being here *just what I am, and just as I am*. My *whole life before* had not afforded me one half the opportunity to plead *for the right*. In this, also, I find much to reconcile me to both my present condition and my immediate prospect. I may be *very insane*, (and I am so, if insane at all.) But if that be so, *insanity* is like a very pleasant dream to me. I am not in the least degree conscious of my *ravings*, of my fears, or of any terrible visions whatever; but *fancy* myself entirely composed, and that my *sleep, in particular*, is as sweet as that of a healthy, joyous little infant. I pray God that he will grant me a continuance of the same calm, but delightful, *dream*, until I come to know of those realities which "eyes have not seen, and which ears have not heard." I have scar[c]e realized that I am in prison, or in irons, at all. I certainly think I was never more cheerful in my life. I intend to take the liberty of sending, by express, to your care, some trifling articles for those of my family who may be in Ohio, which you can hand to my brother JEREMIAH, when you may see him, together with fifteen dollars I have asked him to advance to them. Please excuse me so often troubling you with my letters, or any of my matters. Please also remember me *most kindly* to MR. GRISWOLD, and to all others who love their neighbors. I write JEREMIAH to your care.

Your friend, in truth, John Brown.

Charlestown, Jefferson Co Va. 29th Nov. 1859

Mrs George L Stearns, Boston Mass

My Dear Friend

No letter I have received since my imprisonment here, has given me more satisfaction, or comfort; then yours on the 8th inst. I am quite cheerful; & was never more happy. Have only time [to] write you a word. May God forever reward you & *all yours*. My love to all who love their neighbors. I have asked to be *spared* from having any *mock; or hypocritical prayers made over me*, when I am publicly murdered: & that my only *religious attendants* be poor *little, dirty, ragged, bare headed, & barefooted Slave boys; & Girls*; led by some old *grey headed Slave Mother*.

Farewell. Farewell.

Your Friend, John Brown.

Charlestown, Prison, Jefferson Co. Va. 30th Nov. 1859

My Dearly beloved Wife, Sons: & Daughters, *every one*

As I now begin what is probably the last letter I shall ever write to any of you; I conclude to write you all at the same time. I will mention some little matters particularly applicable to little property concerns in another place. I yesterday received a letter from my wife from near Philadelphia: dated Nov 27th, by which it would seem that she has about given up the idea of seeing me again. I had written her to come on; if *she* felt equal to the undertaking; but I do not know as she will get my letter in time. It was on her *own account chiefly* that I asked her to stay *back* at first. I had a most strong desire to see her again; but there appeared to be very serious objections; & should we never meet in *this life*; I trust she will in the end be satisfied it was *for the best at least*; if not most for her comfort. I enclosed in my last letter to her a Draft of \$50, Fifty Dollars from John Jay made payable to her order. I have now another to send her from my excellent old friend Edward Harris of Woonsocket Rhode Island for \$100, One Hundred Dollars; which I shall *also make payable to her* order. I am writing the hour of my public *murder* with great composure of mind, & cheerfulness; feeling the strongest assurance that in no other possible way could I be used to so much advance the cause of God; & of humanity; & that nothing that either I or all my family have sacrificed or suffered: *will be lost*. The reflection that a *wise, & merciful, as well as just, & holy God*: rules not only the affairs of *this world*; but of all worlds; is a rock to set our feet upon; under all circumstances; *even* those more severely *trying ones*: into which our own follies; & [w]rongs have placed us. I have now no doubt but that our seeming *disaster*: will ultimately result in the most *glorious success*. So my dear *shattered; & broken* family; be of good cheer; & believe & trust in God; "with all your heart; & with all your soul; for *he doeth All things well*." Do not feel ashamed on my account; nor *for one moment* despair of the cause; or grow *weary of well doing*. I bless God; I never felt stronger confidence in the certain & near approach of a *bright Morning; & glorious day*; then I have felt; & do now feel; since my confinement here. I am endeavouring to "return" like a "poor Prodigal" *as I am*; to my Father: against whom I have *always sined: in the hope*; that he may kindly, & forgivingly "meet me: though; *a verry great way off*." Oh my dear Wife & Children would "to God" you could know how I have been "traveling in birth for you" all; that no one of you "my fail of the grace of God, through Jesus Christ": that no one of you may be blind to the truth: & glorious "light of *his word*"; in which Life; & Immortality; are brought to light." I beseech you *every one* to make the bible your *daily &*

Nightly study; with a childlike honest, candid, teachable spirit: out of love and respect for your Husband; & Father: & I beseech the God of my Fathers; to open all your eyes to a discovery of the truth. You cannot imagine how much you may soon need the consolations of the Christian religion.

Circumstances like my own; for more than a month past; convince me beyond *all doubt* of our great need: of something more to rest our hopes on; than merely our own vague theories framed up, while our *prejudices* are excited; or our *Vanity* worked up to its highest pitch. Oh do not trust your eternal all upon the boisterous Ocean, without *even a Helm; or Compass* to aid you in steering. I do *not ask any* of you; to throw *away your reason*: I only *ask* you, to make a candid, & sober *use of your reason*: My dear younger children will you listen to this last poor admonition of one who can *only* love you? Oh be determined at once to give your whole hearts to God; & let *nothing shake; or alter*; that resolution. You need have no fear of *REGRETING it*. Do not be in vain; and thoughtless: but *sober minded*. And let me entreat you all to love *the whole remnant* or our once great family: "with a pure *heart fervently*." Try to *build again*: your broken walls: & to make *the utmost* of every *stone* that is left. Nothing can so tend to make life a blessing as the consciousness that you *love; & are beloved*: & "love ye the stranger" *still*. It is a ground of the utmost comfort to *my mind*: to know that so many of you as have had *the opportunity*; have given full proof of your fidelity to the great family of man. *Be faithful until death*. From the exercise of habitual love to man: *it cannot* be very *hard*: to *learn to love* his *maker*. I must *yet* insert a reason for my firm belief in the Divine inspiration of the Bible: notwithstanding I am (perhaps naturally) skeptical. (certainly not, *credulous*.) I wish you all to consider *it most thoroughly*; when you read that blessed book; & see whether you *can not* discover such evidence yourselves. It is the purity of *heart, feeling, or motive*: as well as *word, & action* which is every where insisted on; that distinguish it from *all other teachings*; that *commends it to my conscience*: whether *my heart* be "willing, & obedient" or *not*. The inducements that it holds out; are another reason *of my conviction* or its *truth: & genuineness*; that I cannot here *omit*; in this my *last argument*, for the Bible *Eternal life*: is that my soul is "*panting after*" *this moment*. I mention this; as reason for endeavouring to leave a valuable copy of the Bible to be carefully *preserved* in remembrance of *me*: to so many of my posterity; *instead* of some *other* thing: of equal *cost*. I beseech you all to live in habitual contentment with *verry moderate* circumstances: & gains, of *worldly store*: & most earnestly to

teach this: to your *children; & Childrens, Children*; after you: by *example: as well*: as precept. Be determined to know by experience *as soon as may be*: whether bible instruction is of *Divine origin* or not; *which says*; "Owe no man anything but to love one another." John Rogers wrote to his children, "Abhor that arrant whore of Rome." John Brown writes to his children to abhor with *undiing hatred*, also: that "sum of all vilanies;" Slavery. Remember that "he that is *slow to anger* is *better* than the mighty: and he that ruleth his *spirit*; than he that taketh a city." Remember also: *that* "they that be *wise shall shine*: and they that *turn many to righteousness*: as the stars forever; & ever." And now dearly beloved *Farewell To God* & the word of his grace I comme[n]d you all.

Your Affectionate Husband & Father, John Brown

Charlestown, Va, 2d, December, 1859

I John Brown am now quite *certain* that the crimes of this *guilty land*: will never be purged *away*; but with Blood. I had as *I now think*; *vainly* flattered myself that without *verry much* bloodshed; it might be done.

Responses to John Brown's Raid

Northern and Southern Newspapers React to the Raid and Trial

1859

Newspapers across the nation reacted differently to Brown's raid and trial. For example, the Democratic New Hampshire Patriot used the episode to tar "black republicans" who lauded Brown's earlier work in Kansas. In the South, the Petersburg (Virginia) Express argued that John Brown's raid was but one instance of a far-reaching Northern conspiracy designed to destroy slavery and the southern way of life. According to the editor of the Charleston (South Carolina) Mercury, a leading secessionist journal, "none can blind their eyes to the audacity of [Brown's] attempt, or fail to regard it as a pregnant sign of the times—a prelude to what must and will recur again and again, as the progress of sectional hate and Black Republican success advances to their consummation." The third editorial, from the Republican Albany, New York, Evening Journal urges Virginia Governor Wise to spare Brown's life and refers to his last speech at the trial as "sublime."

12a. *New Hampshire Patriot*, October 26, 1859; also available online at <http://history.furman.edu/benson/docs/nhpajb59a26a.htm>; 12b. *Petersburg (Virginia) Express*, reprinted in *Charleston Mercury*, October 25, 1859; 12c. *Albany (New York) Evening Journal*, November 30, 1859; also available online at <http://history.furman.edu/benson/docs/nyajb59b30a.htm>.

NEW HAMPSHIRE PATRIOT

The Harpers Ferry Affair

October 26, 1859

The public mind throughout the country, during the past week, has been much agitated by the most deplorable events at Harpers Ferry, Va., an account of which we give in another part of this paper. The circumstances were of a nature to strongly attract public attention. A quiet community, in the night time, was startled by an insurrection in its very midst. The suddenness of the alarm, with the uncertainty of the nature and extent of the danger, at first paralyzed the people for any resistance, and the insurgents, being fully armed, gained possession of the place. But after a bloody conflict, resulting in the loss of twenty-one lives in all, the insurrection was quelled and order returned.

In this atrocious affair there were peculiar features to excite alarm, not only in the community where [it] occurred, but also throughout the country. Although the proposed object of it was the release of the slaves, yet it now clearly appears that they had no part in it. In fact, one of the first victims was a colored man, shot by the insurgents because he refused to join them. The chief actors, and by far the greater number, were white men. Neither was it a sudden outbreak, occasioned by some occurrence of the moment; but it was in pursuance of a plan deliberately considered and formed by men elsewhere, who had gone to that place for the very purpose of making preparations and carrying it into execution. These are the circumstances which render this insurrection of more than ordinary importance and deserving reflection.

Notwithstanding the melancholy result in the loss of so many lives, these events will not be without advantage to the country, if they shall serve to recall the public mind from prejudice and excitement to a clear and honest consideration of the dangerous tendencies of the pernicious doctrines which, during a few years past, have been so zealously taught and advocated by political leaders and partisan preachers here at the North. It is not a long time since not only on the stump, but even from the pulpit, "Sharpe's rifles" were recommended and applauded as the proper and best means for the relief of "bleeding Kansas." We then denounced those principles as deserving

the severest condemnation, not more, certainly, on account of the circumstances of the particular case to which they were applied, than for their dangerous and fatal tendencies, if ever admitted as proper in practice. We could not admit violence or force as, in any case, a necessary or proper recourse, in this country, for the establishment of any political principles, or for relief from political evils. But we did not then expect so soon to see so striking a proof and illustration of the correctness of our views, as is now offered by these tragical events at Harpers Ferry. They are the natural and perfect fruit of the seed sown in Kansas. The instigator and leader at Harpers Ferry was Capt. John Brown of Kansas notoriety; his confederates here were his associates there, and the arms used were the very same "Sharpe's rifles" furnished for use in Kansas. It seems appropriate that it should have been so, and we may add, almost providential that these circumstances should thus concur to connect and identify the one transaction with the other. Gerrit Smith, in his letter to Brown enclosing funds to aid him in carrying into execution his nefarious schemes at Harpers Ferry, very truly and correctly calls it "Kansas work." It was, in principle, the same.

Those black republicans who have heretofore been so loud in their applause and instigation of the work of violence and bloodshed in Kansas, now seek to relieve themselves from the unfavorable consequences in the public mind of their recent "Kansas work" on another field, by stigmatizing Brown and his associates as fools and maniacs. It is true that extreme folly and madness are apparent in this Harpers Ferry affair; but that folly and madness were not so much error on their part with regard to the principle of the "Kansas work," as in the hopeless circumstances for success under which they undertook to carry it into practice. But in what position does this new view by these defenders of black republicanism, place that party? If Brown and his confederates were fools and madmen at Harpers Ferry, may they not have been such in Kansas also? And if so, who shall say how much of the wrong in that unfortunate territory is justly to be charged against those who were the instigators of these fools and madmen, and who placed in their hands the weapons for violence and bloodshed!

In the developments made by Brown and others since their capture, are many things for consideration. We have not time or room now to refer to them particularly. We hope the people of this State will carefully read the accounts of them for themselves. We wish, however, to call attention to the statement by Brown of his motives for going to

Kansas—that it was not for the purpose of making his home there, *but to take part in its troubles*. We all know how conspicuous and violent a part he took.—This shows how true is the charge, which has been so persistently denied by our opponents, that many of the misfortunes of that Territory have been owing to the interference and instigation of those abroad who really had no interest in or care for it, except so far as it could be used for political and partisan purposes.

Let us not be misunderstood. We do not intend to charge all the members of the black republican party as being responsible for this deplorable affair at Harpers Ferry. On the contrary, we know that most of them will denounce it in as strong terms as we do, and as it deserves. But we ask them to consider whether, if not the fair and natural consequence, it is not at least the probable effect of the principles and doctrine of arms and violence advocated by the black republican leaders for the relief of Kansas, and of the doctrine of "irrepressible conflict" which they are now urged to make the sum and substance of their political faith. For if such be their view of it, we know the people of this State will not support a party from whose principles or acts results so fatal, not only to the peace but even to the continuance of the Union, are in any degree likely to follow.

PETERSBURG (VIRGINIA) EXPRESS

The Harpers Ferry Conspiracy

October 25, 1859

The Insurrection

This Harpers Ferry affair is but a small eruption on the surface of a diseased body. Brown and his desperados are but a sign of the cancerous disease with which a great part of northern society is polluted by the traitorous views of men who have been raised to honor, and surrounded by applause, and maintained in power, by whole communities, and even whole States. What Seward teaches from New York State, Wilson and Sumner from Massachusetts, Fessenden from Maine, Chase from Ohio, Collamer from Vermont, Grow from Pennsylvania¹—what

¹Abolitionist U.S. senators.

public prints, that flourish too vigorously to be the mere propagandists of fanaticism supported by a small fraction of society—the *Tribunes*, and *Eras*, and the like—teach—all lead inevitably to collision as bitter as the late affair, but wide spread as the lines which divide southern institutions from northern. The Harpers Ferry affair was but premature fruit. A whole harvest of sterner rebellion and bloodier collision is growing up and ripening from the seed these men have sown.

Disguise it as we may, large portions of the North are our enemies—more bitter, more deadly hostile than though hereditary enmity had pitched their opposing hosts on a hundred battle-fields. The spirit of the effort to wrest Kansas from slavery, made by the concert of a party which polled more than a million votes at the last Presidential election, is manifest enough from the dead and captured agents of the bloody design at Harpers Ferry. Had one of the men of the irrepressible conflict school occupied the Presidency in the last five days, who can tell the bloody news which would, at this instant, be ringing through the land?

Unless a change—a speedy and effectual change—sweep over northern society, the great conflict must come.

Can we do more than hope that the change may come? Can we do less than prepare for its alternative? Shall we go to sleep with such a warning ringing in our ears?

The South has a work before her, which she must do, unless she is content to lie down in blindness and let an enemy steal away her strength. We can force northern communities to cultivate fraternity, and to clear themselves of the pollution in their midst. We can cut off, by our own voluntary act, the trade which makes them prosperous, and build up our own energies at home. And we can arm—aye, arm!

If our young men will do their duty, we shall see, instead of three companies with meagre ranks, in this city, and a few here and there scattered in the country around, whole regiments spring up. Every militiaman should be armed and drilled. The very smallest sacrifice of time or money on the part of our people is requisite to give us men enough for any emergency, as ready for work as the gallant volunteers which sprang to the call of the Governor in the late danger. No one knows how soon this may be necessary, but all can see that preparation may be the only security.

ALBANY, NEW YORK, EVENING JOURNAL

From the Philadelphia Press

November 30, 1859

“We do not believe there is any purpose, such as the Enquirer intimates, to attempt the rescue of John Brown on the 2d of December. We do not believe that any body of men would make such an experiment, especially in view of the somewhat formidable preparations of the military of the gallant State. John Brown will meet his fate, whether as a bad man or as a madman, with comparative little sympathy. Our own belief is that he should not be executed; but if the seeds of future excitement are planted on his tomb, we do not doubt it will be found that they were placed there as well by his Southern enemies as by his Northern sympathisers.”

Whatever of sympathy the fate of John Brown awakens, will be occasioned by his bearing through an ordeal so trying, rather than any complicity of feeling in his lawless enterprise. Upon the question whether he had any right to go there with such intentions, or whether, when taken, he ought to be punished, there is no general difference of opinion or sentiment. Though we “would that all men” were Free, we should as readily go to Virginia to run off their Horses and Cattle, as their Slaves. By the Constitution and Laws, Slavery is recognized and tolerated. It was a compact made by our Fathers, and one that binds their heirs. We will oppose both its extension and its encroachments. Thus far, and no farther, goes our sense of duty to Freedom.

John Brown seems to have counted the cost of his enterprise; and, like a brave man, is prepared to meet his fate. Since the day that Paul spoke to Agrippa,¹ we have read nothing more truly sublime than John Brown’s response to the Tribunal before which he stood to receive Sentence of Death.

The “pomp and circumstance of War” with which the execution of Brown is to be surrounded, was wholly unnecessary. The rescue rumors were entirely unfounded. All this display of Troops is for effect. Gov. Wise intends to make what capital can be made out of this Execution.

¹A biblical reference to Acts 25:13–26:32, in which the apostle Paul advocates Christianity to King Agrippa II.

We agree with the "Press" in the opinion that in this case *forbearance* would be *wisdom*, though neither John Brown or his Family ask it. But Gov. Wise is entitled to and means to insist upon all that is "nominated in the bond." And John Brown, imbued with the conviction that "hanging is the best use" that can be made of him, calmly awaits his day and hour of doom.

13

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

A Plea for Captain John Brown

October 30, 1859

Henry David Thoreau—author, political activist, and one of the foremost members of the Transcendentalist philosophical movement, which emphasized individualism and critical thought—shared with John Brown a hatred of slavery and of the federal government's defense of it. In response to the U.S. war with Mexico and Southern demands for a federal fugitive slave law, Thoreau wrote an essay entitled Resistance to Civil Government, better known as "Civil Disobedience." The 1849 essay lays out Thoreau's belief that citizens' consciences must occasionally overrule unjust laws and that individuals have a duty to avoid being made agents of injustice by their leaders. Thoreau famously went to jail rather than pay taxes to a government that he argued would help fund federal slave catchers under the new Fugitive Slave Law.

In his speech "A Plea for Captain John Brown," first delivered in Thoreau's hometown of Concord, Massachusetts, just two weeks after the raid on Harpers Ferry, Thoreau offered the first full-throated defense of Brown's actions. This placed him squarely against popular opinion of the time, which held that Brown's actions were foolish and that he was likely insane; even the abolitionist Liberator called the raid a "misguided, wild, and apparently insane effort." On the contrary, Thoreau argued,

James Redpath, *Echoes of Harpers Ferry* (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860), 17–42.

Brown's commitment to justice and equality forced him to battle state-sponsored injustice. Far from being a horse thief and a murderer, Thoreau praised Brown as thoughtful, moral, and humane. "I plead not for his life, but for his character—his immortal life," he said. "He is not Brown any longer; he is an angel of light."

I trust that you will pardon me for being here. I do not wish to force my thoughts upon you, but I feel forced myself. Little as I know of Captain Brown, I would fain¹ do my part to correct the tone and the statements of the newspapers, and of my countrymen generally, respecting his character and actions. It costs us nothing to be just. We can at least express our sympathy with, and admiration of, him and his companions, and that is what I now propose to do. . . .

He was by descent and birth a New England farmer, a man of great common sense, deliberate and practical as that class is, and tenfold more so. He was like the best of those who stood at Concord Bridge once, on Lexington Common, and on Bunker Hill, only he was firmer and higher principled than any that I have chanced to hear of as there. It was no abolition lecturer that converted him. Ethan Allen and Stark,² with whom he may in some respects be compared, were rangers in lower and less important fields. They could bravely face their country's foes, but he had the courage to face his country herself, when she was in the wrong. A Western writer says, to account for his escape from so many perils, that he was conceived under a "rural exterior"; as if, in that prairie land, a hero should, by good rights, wear a citizen's dress only.

He did not go to the college called Harvard, good old Alma Mater as she is. He was not fed on the pap that is there furnished. As he phrased it, "I know no more of grammar than one of your calves." But he went to the great University of the West, where he sedulously pursued the study of Liberty, for which he had early betrayed a fondness, and having taken many degrees, he finally commenced the public practice of Humanity in Kansas, as you all know. Such were *his humanities*, and not any study of grammar. He would have left a Greek accent slanting the wrong way, and righted up a falling man.

¹Gladly.

²Ethan Allen and John Stark were both Revolutionary War heroes.

He was one of that class of whom we hear a great deal, but, for the most part, see nothing at all—the Puritans. It would be in vain to kill him. He died lately in the time of Cromwell,³ but he reappeared here. Why should he not? Some of the Puritan stock are said to have come over and settled in New England. They were a class that did something else than celebrate their forefathers' day, and eat parched corn in remembrance of that time. They were neither Democrats nor Republicans, but men of simple habits, straightforward, prayerful; not thinking much of rulers who did not fear God, not making many compromises, nor seeking after available candidates.

"In his camp," as one has recently written, and as I have myself heard him state, "he permitted no profanity; no man of loose morals was suffered to remain there, unless, indeed, as a prisoner of war. 'I would rather,' said he, 'have the small-pox, yellow fever, and cholera, all together in my camp, than a man without principle. . . . It is a mistake, sir, that our people make, when they think that bullies are the best fighters, or that they are the fit men to oppose these Southerners. Give me men of good principles—Godfearing men—men who respect themselves, and with a dozen of them I will oppose any hundred such men as these Buford ruffians.'" He said that if one offered himself to be a soldier under him, who was forward to tell what he could or would do, if he could only get sight of the enemy, he had but little confidence in him.

He was never able to find more than a score or so of recruits whom he would accept, and only about a dozen, among them his sons, in whom he had perfect faith. When he was here, some years ago, he showed to a few a little manuscript book—his "orderly book" I think he called it—containing the names of his company in Kansas, and the rules by which they bound themselves; and he stated that several of them had already sealed the contract with their blood. When some one remarked that, with the addition of a chaplain, it would have been a perfect Cromwellian troop, he observed that he would have been glad to add a chaplain to the list, if he could have found one that would fill that office worthily. It is easy enough to find one for the United States army. I believe that he had prayers in his camp morning and evening, nevertheless.

He was a man of Spartan habits, and at sixty was scrupulous about his diet at your table, excusing himself by saying that he must eat

³Oliver Cromwell, Lord Protector of Britain from 1653 to 1658.

sparingly and fare hard, as became a soldier or one who was fitting himself for difficult enterprises, a life of exposure.

A man of rare common sense and directness of speech, as of action; a transcendentalist above all, a man of ideas and principles—that was what distinguished him. Not yielding to a whim or transient impulse, but carrying out the purpose of a life. I noticed that he did not overstate anything, but spoke within bounds. I remember, particularly, how, in his speech here, he referred to what his family had suffered in Kansas, without ever giving the least vent to his pent-up fire. It was a volcano with an ordinary chimney-flue. Also referring to the deeds of certain Border Ruffians,⁴ he said, rapidly paring away his speech, like an experienced soldier, keeping a reserve of force and meaning, "They had a perfect right to be hung." He was not in the least a rhetorician, was not talking to Buncombe or his constituents anywhere, had no need to invent anything, but to tell the simple truth, and communicate his own resolution; therefore he appeared incomparably strong, and eloquence in Congress and elsewhere seemed to me at a discount. It was like the speeches of Cromwell compared with those of an ordinary king.

As for his tact and prudence, I will merely say, that at a time when scarcely a man from the Free States was able to reach Kansas by any direct route, at least without having his arms taken from him, he, carrying what imperfect guns and other weapons he could collect, openly and slowly drove an ox-cart through Missouri, apparently in the capacity of a surveyor, with his surveying compass exposed in it, and so passed unsuspected, and had ample opportunity to learn the designs of the enemy. For some time after his arrival he still followed the same profession. When, for instance, he saw a knot of ruffians on the prairie, discussing, of course, the single topic which then occupied their minds, he would, perhaps, take his compass and one of his sons, and proceed to run an imaginary line right through the very spot on which that conclave had assembled, and when he came up to them, he would naturally pause and have some talk with them, learning their news, and, at last, all their plans perfectly; and having thus completed his real survey, he would resume his imaginary one, and run on his line till he was out of sight.

When I expressed a surprise that he could live in Kansas at all, with a price set upon his head, and so large a number, including the authorities,

⁴Proslavery activists who moved to Kansas from neighboring slave states.

exasperated against him, he accounted for it by saying, "It is perfectly well understood that I will not be taken." Much of the time for some years he had to skulk in swamps, suffering from poverty and from sickness, which was the consequence of exposure, befriended only by Indians and a few whites. But though it might be known that he was lurking in a particular swamp, his foes commonly did not care to go in after him. He could even come out into a town where there were more Border Ruffians than Free State men, and transact some business, without delaying long, and yet not be molested; for said he, "No little handful of men were willing to undertake it, and a large body could not be got together in season."

As for his recent failure, we do not know the facts about it. It was evidently far from being a wild and desperate attempt. His enemy, Mr. Vallandigham, is compelled to say, that "it was among the best planned and executed conspiracies that ever failed."

Not to mention his other successes, was it a failure, or did it show a want of good management, to deliver from bondage a dozen human beings, and walk off with them by broad daylight, for weeks if not months, at a leisurely pace, through one State after another, for half the length of the North, conspicuous to all parties, with a price set upon his head, going into a courtroom on his way and telling what he had done, thus convincing Missouri that it was not profitable to try to hold slaves in his neighborhood?—and this, not because the government menials were lenient, but because they were afraid of him.

Yet he did not attribute his success, foolishly, to "his star," or to any magic. He said, truly, that the reason why such greatly superior numbers quailed before him, was, as one of his prisoners confessed, because they *lacked a cause*—a kind of armor which he and his party never lacked. When the time came, few men were found willing to lay down their lives in defense of what they knew to be wrong; they did not like that this should be their last act in this world.

But to make haste to *his* last act, and its effects.

The newspapers seem to ignore, or are perhaps really ignorant of the fact, that there are at least as many as two or three individuals to a town throughout the North who think much as the present speaker does about him and his enterprise. I do not hesitate to say that they are an important and growing party. We aspire to be something more than stupid and timid chattels, pretending to read history and our Bibles, but desecrating every house and every day we breathe in. Perhaps anxious politicians may prove that only seventeen white men and

five Negroes were concerned in the late enterprise; but their very anxiety to prove this might suggest to themselves that all is not told. Why do they still dodge the truth? They are so anxious because of a dim consciousness of the fact, which they do not distinctly face, that at least a million of the free inhabitants of the United States would have rejoiced if it had succeeded. They at most only criticise the tactics. Though we wear no crape,⁵ the thought of that man's position and probable fate is spoiling many a man's day here at the North for other thinking. If anyone who has seen him here can pursue successfully any other train of thought, I do not know what he is made of. If there is any such who gets his usual allowance of sleep, I will warrant him to fatten easily under any circumstances which do not touch his body or purse. I put a piece of paper and a pencil under my pillow, and when I could not sleep, I wrote in the dark. . . .

I read all the newspapers I could get within a week after this event, and I do not remember in them a single expression of sympathy for these men. I have since seen one noble statement, in a Boston paper, not editorial. Some voluminous sheets decided not to print the full report of Brown's words to the exclusion of other matter. It was as if the publisher should reject the manuscript of the New Testament, and print Wilson's⁶ last speech. The same journal which contained this pregnant news, was chiefly filled, in parallel columns, with the reports of the political conventions that were being held. But the descent to them was too steep. They should have been spared this contrast, been printed in an extra at least. To turn from the voices and deeds of earnest men to the cackling of political conventions! Office-seekers and speech-makers, who do not so much as lay an honest egg, but wear their breasts bare upon an egg of chalk! Their great game is the game of straws, or rather that universal aboriginal game of the platter, at which the Indians cried *hub, bub!* Exclude the reports of religious and political conventions, and publish the words of a living man.

But I object not so much to what they have omitted, as to what they have inserted. Even the *Liberator* called it "a misguided, wild, and apparently insane effort." As for the herd of newspapers and magazines, I do not chance to know an editor in the country who will deliberately print any thing which he knows will ultimately and permanently reduce the number of his subscribers. They do not believe that it

⁵A fabric traditionally worn to signify mourning.

⁶Henry Wilson, the "Natick Cobbler," was a U.S. senator from Massachusetts and, later, vice president of the United States.

would be expedient. How then can they print truth? If we do not say pleasant things, they argue, nobody will attend to us. And so they do like some traveling auctioneers, who sing an obscene song in order to draw a crowd around them. Republican editors, obliged to get their sentences ready for the morning edition, and accustomed to look at everything by the twilight of politics, express no admiration, nor true sorrow even, but call these men "deluded fanatics"—"mistaken men"—"insane," or "crazed." It suggests what a *sane* set of editors we are Blessed with, *not* "mistaken men"; who know very well on which side their bread is buttered, at least.

A man does a brave and humane deed, and at once, on all sides, we hear people and parties declaring, "I didn't do it, nor countenance *him* to do it, in any conceivable way. It can't be fairly inferred from my past career." I, for one, am not interested to hear you define your position. I don't know that I ever was, or ever shall be. I think it is mere egotism, or impertinent at this time. Ye needn't take so much pains to wash your skirts of him. No intelligent man will ever be convinced that he was any creature of yours. He went and came, as he himself informs us, "under the auspices of John Brown and nobody else." The Republican party does not perceive how many his failure will make to vote more correctly than they would have them. They have counted the votes of Pennsylvania and Co., but they have not correctly counted Captain Brown's votes. He has taken the wind out of their sails, the little wind they had, and they may as well lie to and repair.

What though he did not belong to your clique! Though you may not approve of his method or his principles, recognize his magnanimity. Would you not like to claim kindredship with him in that, though in no other thing he is like, or likely, to you? Do you think that you would lose your reputation so? What you lost at the spile, you would gain at the bung.

If they do not mean all this, then they do not speak the truth, and say what they mean. They are simply at their old tricks still.

"It was always conceded to him," says *one who calls him crazy*, "that he was a conscientious man, very modest in his demeanor, apparently inoffensive, until the subject of Slavery was introduced, when he would exhibit a feeling of indignation unparalleled."

The slave-ship is on her way, crowded with its dying victims; new cargoes are being added in mid ocean; a small crew of slaveholders, countenanced by a large body of passengers, is smothering four million under the hatches, and yet the politician asserts that the only proper way by which deliverance is to be obtained, is by "the quiet dif-

fusion of the sentiments of humanity," without any "outbreak." As if the sentiments of humanity were ever found unaccompanied by its deeds, and you could disperse them, all finished to order, the pure article, as easily as water with a watering-pot, and so lay the dust. What is that that I hear cast overboard? The bodies of the dead that have found deliverance. That is the way we are "diffusing" humanity, and its sentiments with it.

Prominent and influential editors, accustomed to deal with politicians, men of an infinitely lower grade, say, in their ignorance, that he acted "on the principle of revenge." They do not know the man. They must enlarge themselves to conceive of him. I have no doubt that the time will come when they will begin to see him as he was. They have got to conceive of a man of faith and of religious principle, and not a politician nor an Indian; of a man who did not wait until he was personally interfered with or thwarted in some harmless business before he gave his life to the cause of the oppressed.

If Walker⁷ may be considered the representative of the South, I wish I could say that Brown was the representative of the North. He was a superior man. He did not value his bodily life in comparison with ideal things. He did not recognize unjust human laws, but resisted them as he was bid. For once we are lifted out of the trivialness and dust of politics into the region of truth and manhood. No man in America has ever stood up so persistently or effectively for the dignity of human nature, knowing himself for a man, and the equal of any and all governments. In that sense he was the most American of us all. He needed no babbling lawyer, making false issues, to defend him. He was more than a match for all the judges that American voters, or officeholders of whatever grade, can create. He could not have been tried by a jury of his peers, because his peers did not exist. When a man stands up serenely against the condemnation and vengeance of mankind, rising above them literally *by a whole body*—even though he were of late the vilest murderer, who has settled that matter with himself—the spectacle is a sublime one—didn't ye know it, ye Liberator, ye Tribunes, ye Republicans?—and we become criminal in comparison. Do yourselves the honor to recognize him. He needs none of your respect.

⁷The American journalist William Walker took over the government of Nicaragua in 1855 and was recognized as president by Franklin Pierce. Walker was forced to return to the United States in 1857, but he later returned to Central America and was executed in Honduras in 1860.

As for the Democratic journals, they are not human enough to affect me at all. I do not feel indignation at anything they may say.

I am aware that I anticipate a little, that he was still, at the last accounts, alive in the hands of his foes; but that being the case, I have all along found myself thinking and speaking of him as physically dead.

I do not believe in erecting statues to those who still live in our hearts, whose bones have not yet crumbled in the earth around us, but I would rather see the statue of Captain Brown in the Massachusetts State-House yard, than that of any other man whom I know. I rejoice that I live in this age—that I am his contemporary.

What a contrast, when we turn to that political party which is so anxiously shuffling him and his plot out of its way, and looking around for some available slaveholder, perhaps, to be its candidate, at least for one who will execute the Fugitive Slave Law, and all those other unjust laws which he took up arms to annul!

Insane! A father and six sons, and one son-in-law, and several more men besides—as many at least as twelve disciples—all struck with insanity at once; while the sane tyrant holds with a firmer grip than ever his four millions of slaves, and a thousand sane editors, his abettors, are saving their country and their bacon! Just as insane were his efforts in Kansas. Ask the tyrant who is his most dangerous foe, the sane man or the insane. Do the thousands who know him best, who have rejoiced at his deeds in Kansas, and have afforded him material aid there, think him insane? Such a use of this word is a mere trope with most who persist in using it, and I have no doubt that many of the rest have already in silence retracted their words.

Read his admirable answers to Mason and others. How they are dwarfed and defeated by the contrast! On the one side, half brutish, half timid questioning; on the other, truth, clear as lightning, crashing into their obscene temples. They are made to stand with Pilate, and Gessler, and the Inquisition. How ineffectual their speech and action! and what a void their silence! They are but helpless tools in this great work. It was no human power that gathered them about this preacher.

What have Massachusetts and the North sent a few *sane* representatives to Congress for, of late years?—to declare with effect what kind of sentiments? All their speeches put together and boiled down, and probably they themselves will confess it, do not match for manly directness and force, and for simple truth, the few casual remarks of crazy John Brown, on the floor of the Harpers Ferry engine house; that man whom you are about to hang, to send to the other world,

though not to represent *you* there. No, he was not our representative in any sense. He was too fair a specimen of a man to represent the likes of us. Who, then, *were* his constituents? If you read his words understandingly you will find out. In his case there is no idle eloquence, no made, nor maiden, speech, no compliments to the oppressor. Truth is his inspirer, and earnestness the polisher of his sentences. He could afford to lose his Sharpe's rifles, while he retained his faculty of speech, a Sharpe's rifle of infinitely surer and longer range.

And the *New York Herald* reports the conversation "verbatim"! It does not know of what undying words it is made the vehicle.

I have no respect for the penetration of any man who can read the report of that conversation, and still call the principal in it insane. It has the ring of a saner sanity than an ordinary discipline and habits of life, than an ordinary organization, secure. Take any sentence of it—"Any questions that I can honorably answer, I will; not otherwise. So far as I am myself concerned, I have told everything truthfully. I value my word, sir." The few who talk about his vindictive spirit, while they really admire his heroism, have no test by which to detect a noble man, no amalgam to combine with his pure gold. They mix their own dross with it.

It is relief to turn from these slanders to the testimony of his more truthful, but frightened, jailers and hangmen. Governor Wise speaks far more justly and appreciatingly of him than any Northern editor, or politician, or public personage, that I chance to have heard from. I know that you can afford to hear him again on this subject. He says: "They are themselves mistaken who take him to be a madman. . . . He is cool, collected, and indomitable, and it is but just to him to say, that he was humane to his prisoners. . . . And he inspired me with great trust in his integrity as a man of truth. He is a fanatic, vain and garrulous" (I leave that part to Mr. Wise) "firm, truthful, and intelligent. His men, too, who survive, are like him. . . . Colonel Washington says that he was the coolest and firmest man he ever saw in defying danger and death. With one son dead by his side, and another shot through, he felt the pulse of his dying son with one hand, and held his rifle with the other, and commanded his men with the utmost composure, encouraging them to be firm, and to sell their lives as dear as they could. Of the three white prisoners, Brown, Stephens, and Coppic, it was hard to say which was most firm."

Almost the first Northern men whom the slaveholder has learned to respect!

The testimony of Mr. Vallandigham, though less valuable, is of the same purport, that "it is vain to underrate either the man or his conspiracy. . . . He is the farthest possible remove from the ordinary ruffian, fanatic, or madman."

"All is quiet at Harpers Ferry," says the journals. What is the character of that calm which follows when the law and the slaveholder prevail? I regard this event as a touchstone designed to bring out, with glaring distinctness, the character of this government. We needed to be thus assisted to see it by the light of history. It needed to see itself. When a government puts forth its strength on the side of injustice, as ours to maintain Slavery and kill the liberators of the slave, it reveals itself a merely brute force, or worse, a demoniacal force. It is the head of the Plug Uglies. It is more manifest than ever that tyranny rules. I see this government to be effectually allied with France and Austria in oppressing mankind. There sits a tyrant holding fettered four millions of slaves; here comes their heroic liberator. This most hypocritical and diabolical government looks up from its seat on the gasping four millions, and inquires with an assumption of innocence, "What do you assault me for? Am I not an honest man? Cease agitation on this subject, or I will make a slave of you, too, or else hang you." . . .

This event advertises me that there is such a fact as death—the possibility of a man's dying. It seems as if no man had ever died in America before, for in order to die you must first have lived. I don't believe in the hearses, and palls, and funerals that they have had. There was no death in the case, because there had been no life; they merely rotted or sloughed off, pretty much as they had rotted or sloughed along. No temple's vail was rent, only a hole dug somewhere. Let the dead bury their dead. The best of them fairly ran down like a clock. Franklin—Washington—they were let off without dying; they were merely missing one day. I hear a good many pretend that they are going to die; or that they have died, for aught that I know. Nonsense! I'll defy them to do it. They haven't got life enough in them. They'll deliquesce like fungi, and keep a hundred eulogists mopping the spot where they left off. Only half a dozen or so have died since the world began. Do you think that you are going to die, sir? No! there's no hope of you. You haven't got your lesson yet. You've got to stay after school. We make a needless ado about capital punishment—taking lives, when there is no life to take. *Memento mori!*¹⁸

¹⁸A Latin motto meaning "Remember that you will die."

We don't understand that sublime sentence which some worthy got sculptured on his gravestone once. We've interpreted it in a grovelling and snivelling sense; we've wholly forgotten how to die. . . .

But be sure to die, nevertheless. Do your work, and finish it. If you know how to begin, you will know when to end.

These men, in teaching us how to die, have at the same time taught us how to live. If this man's acts and words do not create a revival, it will be the severest possible satire on the acts and words that do. It is the best news that America has ever heard. It has already quickened the feeble pulse of the North, and infused more and more generous blood into her veins and heart, than any number of years of what is called commercial and political prosperity could. How many a man who was lately contemplating suicide has now something to live for! . . .

I am here to plead his cause with you. I plead not for his life, but for his character—his immortal life; and so it becomes your cause wholly, and is not his in the least. Some eighteen hundred years ago Christ was crucified; this morning, perchance, Captain Brown was hung. These are the two ends of a chain which is not without its links. He is not Old Brown any longer; he is an angel of light.

I see now that it was necessary that the bravest and humanest man in all the country should be hung. Perhaps he saw it himself. I *almost fear* that I may yet hear of his deliverance, doubting if a prolonged life, if *any* life, can do as much good as his death.

"Misguided"! "Garrulous"! "Insane"! "Vindictive"! So ye write in your easy chairs, and thus he wounded responds from the floor of the Armory, clear as a cloudless sky, true as the voice of nature is: "No man sent me here; it was my own prompting and that of my Maker. I acknowledge no master in human form."

And in what a sweet and noble strain he proceeds, addressing his captors, who stand over him: "I think, my friends, you are guilty of a great wrong against God and humanity, and it would be perfectly right for any one to interfere with you so far as to free those you wilfully and wickedly hold in bondage." . . .

I foresee the time when the painter will paint that scene, no longer going to Rome for a subject; the poet will sing it; the historian record it; and, with the Landing of the Pilgrims and the Declaration of Independence, it will be the ornament of some future national gallery, when at least the present form of Slavery shall be no more here. We shall then be at liberty to weep for Captain Brown. Then, and not till then, we will take our revenge.

GOVERNOR HENRY WISE

*Message to the Virginia Legislature**December 5, 1859*

Governor Henry A. Wise of Virginia was among the first officeholders to arrive at Harpers Ferry after John Brown's capture. A former congressman with presidential ambitions, Wise had worked hard to develop relationships with Northern Democrats, but his political future would forever be linked with John Brown. Unlike many of his fellow Southerners, Wise developed a deep respect for his foe, saying he "inspired me with great trust in his integrity as a man of truth . . . [he is] the gamest man I ever saw." After the trial Wise had to struggle with determining Brown's fate: Should he go against his firsthand observations and declare Brown insane, commute Brown's sentence to life in prison and risk enflaming the South, or go forward with the execution and make Brown a martyr?

With popular opinion what it was in the South, Wise had no real choice but to execute Brown for his crimes. In his message to the Virginia Legislature three days after Brown was hanged, Wise justified his decision, although he was well aware that doing so could unify the North and strengthen secessionists in his own state and section.

Gentlemen: Up to a late period I had fondly hoped to close my official term and part from my executive labors with naught but cause of congratulation on the condition of the commonwealth. But, the uppermost theme in this my last regular message must be that our peace has been disturbed; our citizens have been imprisoned, robbed and murdered; the sanctity of their dwellings has been violated; their persons have been outraged; their property has been seized by force of arms; a stronghold in their midst, with its arms and munitions of war, has been captured, and the inhabitants cut off from the means of defense; a national highway through our limits, and its locomotive trains and telegraphic wires have been stopped; the state and national sovereignties have been insulted and assailed; and state and federal troops have

New York Times, December 5, 1859, p. 1.

been called out and been compelled to fight, at the loss of several, killed and wounded, to subdue rebellion and treason, at Harpers Ferry in the county of Jefferson, within our jurisdiction.

This was no result of ordinary crimes, however highhanded and felonious. It was no conspiracy of bandits against society in general, with the motives which usually actuate criminals, confined to the individual perpetrators, and to be crushed by their arrest and punishment. But it was an extraordinary and actual invasion, by a sectional organization, specially upon slaveholders and upon their property in Negro slaves. The home to be invaded was the home of domestic slavery; the persons to be seized were the persons of slaveholders; the property to be confiscated was the property in slaves and the other property of slaveholders alone, such as money, plate, jewels and other of like kind, which was to be taken to compensate the robbers for the trouble and risk of robbing the masters of their slaves; the slaves were not to be taken to be carried away, but they were to be made to stand by the side of the robbers, and to be forced to fight to liberate themselves by massacring their masters; the arsenal was taken to supply arms to servile insurgents; and a provisional government was attempted, in a British province, by our own countrymen, united to us in the faith of confederacy, combining with Canadians, to invade the slaveholding states of the United States; and thus the night of the 16th of October last was surprised and the day of the 17th of October last was startled by the signal guns of rapine, murder, robbery and treason, begun at Harpers Ferry for the purpose of stirring up universal insurrection of slaves throughout the whole South.

Sudden, surprising, shocking as this invasion has been, it is not more so than the rapidity and rancor of the causes which have prompted and put it in motion. It is not confined to the parties who were the present participators in its outrages. Causes and influences lie behind it more potent [by] far than the little band of desperadoes who were sent ahead to kindle the sparks of a general conflagration; and the event, sad as it is, would deserve but little comment, if the condign punishment of the immediate perpetrators of the felonies committed would for the future secure the peace which has been disturbed, and guarantee the safety which is threatened. Indeed, if the miserable convicts were the only conspirators against our peace and safety, we might have forgiven their offenses and constrained them only by the grace of pardon. But an entire social and sectional sympathy has incited their crimes, and now rises in rebellion and insurrection to the height of sustaining and justifying their enormity.

It would be pusillanimous to shut our eyes and to affect not to see certain facts of fearful import which stare us in the face, and of which I must speak plainly to you, with the firm and manly purpose of meeting danger and with no weak and wicked design of exciting agitation. That danger exists, of serious magnitude, there can be no doubt in the minds of the most calm and reflecting, and the way to avert it in all cases is to march up to it and meet it front to front. If it has not grown too great already, it will retire from collision; and if it has grown strong enough already for the encounter, it had better be met at once for it will not diminish by delay. I believe in truth, that the very policy of the prime promoters of this apparently mad movement is purely tentative: to try whether we will face the danger which is now sealed in blood. If we "take the dare," the aggression will become more and more insolent; and, if we do not, it will either truckle or meet us in open conflict to be subdued; and, in either event, our safety and the national peace will be best secured by a direct settlement at once—the sooner the better.

For a series of years social and sectional differences have been growing up, unhappily, between the states of our Union and their people. An evil spirit of fanaticism has seized upon negro slavery as the one object of social reform, and the one idea of its abolition has seemed to madden whole masses of one entire section of the country. It enters into their religion, into their education, into their politics and prayers, into their courts of justice, into their business, into their legislatures, into all classes of their people, the most respectable and most lawful, into their pulpits and into their presses and school-houses, into their men, women and children of all ages, everywhere. It has trained three generations, from childhood up, in moral and social habits of hatred to masters of African slaves in the United States. It turns not upon slavery elsewhere, or against slaveholders in any other country, but is especially malignant and vindictive towards its own countrymen, for the very reason that it is bound to them by the faith and sanction of a confederate law. To set up that law to it is to enrage it by the sight of the law, because it is bound by it. It has been taught by the Atheism of a "higher law" than that of a regular government bound by constitutions and statutes. It has been made to believe in the doctrine of absolute individual rights, independent of all relations of man to man in a conventional and social form; and that each man for himself has the prerogative to set up his conscience, his will and his judgment over and above all legal enactments and social institutions. It has been enflamed by prostituted teachers and preachers and presses to do and

dare any crime and its consequences which may set up its individual supremacy over law and order. It has been taught from the senate chamber to trust in the fatality of an "irrepressible conflict," into which it is bound to plunge. Its anti-Christ pulpit has breathed naught but insurrectionary wrath into servants against their masters, and has denounced our national union as a covenant with death for recognizing property in slaves and guaranteeing to it the protection of law. It has raised contributions in churches to furnish arms and money to such criminals as these to make a war for empire of settlement in our new territories. It has trained them on the frontier and there taught them the skill of the Indian in savage warfare, and then turned them back upon the oldest and largest slave-holding state to surprise one of its strongest holds. It has organized in Canada and traversed and corresponded thence to New Orleans and from Boston to Iowa. It has established spies everywhere, and has secret agents in the heart of every slave state, and has secret associations and "underground railroads" in every free state. It enlists influence and money at home and abroad. It has sent comforters and counsellors and sympathy, and would have sent rescue to these assassins, robbers, murderers and traitors, whom it sent to felons' graves. It has openly and secretly threatened vengeance on the execution of our laws. And since their violation it has defiantly proclaimed aloud that "insurrection is the lesson of the hour"—not of slaves only, but all are to be free to rise up against fixed government, and no government is to be allowed except "the average common sense of the masses," and no protection is to be permitted against that power.

This is but an epitome, plain and unvarnished, without exaggeration. What is this but anarchy? What does it mean but "confusion worse confounded," and the overthrow of all rights, of all property, of all government, of all religion, of all rule among men? Nothing but mad riot can rule and misrule with such sentiments as these. There can be no compromise with them, no toleration of them in safety or with self-respect. They must be met and crushed, or they will crush us, or our union with non-slaveholding states cannot continue.

The strongest argument against this unnatural war upon negro slavery in one section by another of the same common country, is that it inevitably drives to disunion of the states, embittered with all the vengeful hate of civil war. As that union is among the most precious of our blessings, so the argument ought to weigh which weighs its value. But this consideration is despised by fanaticism. It contemns the Union, and now contemns us for clinging to it as we do. It scoffs the warning

that the Union is endangered. The Union itself is denounced as a covenant with sin, and we are scorned as too timid to make the warning of danger to it worthy to be heeded. It arrogantly assumes to break all the bonds of faith within it, and defies the attempt to escape oppression without it. *This rudely assails our honor* as well as our interest, and demands of us what we will do. We have but one thing to do; unless the numerical majority will cease to violate confederate faith, on a question of such vital importance to us, and will cease, immediately and absolutely cease to disturb our peace, to destroy our lives and property, and to deprive us of all protection and redress under the perverted forms and distorted workings of the Union, we must take up arms. The issue is too essential to be compromised any more. We cannot stand such insults and outrages as those of Harpers Ferry without suffering worse than the death of citizens: without suffering dishonor, the death of a state. . . .

Never were prisoners treated with more lenity of trial. And never in any case, in the history of trials, was justice administered with more forbearance, more calmness, more dignity and more majesty of law—never were such prisoners treated with as much benignant kindness as they have been by the people whom they outraged sufficiently to have incited summary punishment.

To prevent any such punishment on the one hand, and a rescue on the other; to guard justice, in a word, I called into service military guards, to aid the civil authority and keep the peace. Receiving information that organization of guards was necessary, I sent an aid to the scene, there to see what was wanting, to assist the adjutant general, and to pass my orders. Col. J. Lucius Davis, a competent soldier, volunteered his services, and I accepted them, to organize the corps, to distribute arms, to post guards and to provide subsistence and quarters, and to call for whatever was wanting. These services he continued most faithfully and efficiently to perform, with my full approbation, until very recent events made it necessary to call for more troops; and Major General William B. Taliaferro, of the fourth division, repaired to the place, and volunteered in person to take command. Many of the troops were from his division, and I could not decline the tender of his services. During the trial of the prisoners and since, appeals and threats of every sort, the most extraordinary, from every quarter, have been made to the executive. I lay before you the mass of these, it being impossible to enter into their details. Though the laws do not permit me to pardon in cases of treason, yet pardons

and reprieves have been demanded on the grounds of, 1st, insanity; 2nd, magnanimity; 3d, the policy of not making martyrs.

As to the first, the parties by themselves or counsel put in no plea of insanity. No insanity was feigned even; the prisoner Brown spurned it. *Since his sentence*, and since the decision on the appeal, one of his counsel, Samuel Chilton, Esq., has filed with me a number of affidavits professing to *show grounds for delaying execution, in order to give time to make an issue of fact as to the sanity of the prisoner*. How such an issue can now, after sentence, confirmed by the court of appeals, be made, I am ignorant; but it is sufficient to say that I had repeatedly seen and conversed with the prisoner, and had just returned from a visit to him, when this appeal to me was put into my hands. As well as I can know the state of mind of anyone, I know that he was sane, and remarkably sane, if quick and clear perception; if assumed rational premises, and consecutive reasoning from them; if cautious tact in avoiding disclosures, and in covering conclusions and inferences; if memory and conception and practical common sense, and if composure and self-possession are evidences of a sound state of mind. He was more sane than his prompters and promoters, and concealed well the secret which made him seem to do an act of mad impulse, by leaving him without his backers at Harpers Ferry; but he did not conceal his contempt for the cowardice which did not back him better than with a plea of insanity, which he spurned to put in on his trial at Charlestown.

As to the second ground of appeal: I know of no magnanimity which is inhumane, and no inhumanity could well exceed that to our society, *our slaves* as well as their masters, which would turn felons like these, proud and defiant in their guilt, loose again on a border already torn by a fanatical and sectional strife which threatens the liberties of the white even more than it does the bondage of the black race.

As to the third ground: Is it true that the due execution of our laws, fairly and justly administered upon these confessed robbers, murderers and traitors, will make them martyrs in the public sentiments of other states? If so, then it is time indeed that execution shall be done upon them, and that we should prepare in earnest for the "irrepressible conflict," with that sympathy which, in demanding for these criminals pardons and reprieves, and in wreaking vengeance for their refusal, would make criminals of us. Indeed, a blasphemous moral treason, an expressed fellow-feeling with felons, a professed conservatism of crime, a defiant and boastful guilty demoniac spirit

combined, arraign us, the outraged community, as the wrong-doers who must do penance and prevent our penalty by pardon and reprieve of these martyrs. This sympathy sent these men, its mere tools, to do the deeds which sentenced them. It may have sent them to be martyrs for mischief's sake; but the execution of our laws is necessary to warn future victims not again to be its tools. To heed this outside clamor at all, was to grant at once unconditional grace. To hang would be no more martyrdom than to incarcerate the fanatic. The sympathy would have asked on and on for liberation, and to nurse and sooth him whilst life lasted, in prison. His state of health would have been heralded weekly as from a palace; visitors would have come effectively reverent, to see the *shorn* felon at his "hard labor"; the work of his hands would have been sought as holy relics; and his party-colored dress would have become, perhaps, a uniform for the next band of impious marauders. There was no middle ground of mitigation. To pardon or reprieve at all, was to proclaim a licensed impunity to the thousand fanatics who are mad only in the guilt and folly of setting up their individual supremacy over law, life, property, and civil liberty itself. This sympathy with the leaders was worse than the invasion itself. The appeal was: it is policy to make *no martyrs*, but to disarm murderers, traitors, robbers, insurrectionists, by *free pardon* for wanton, malicious, unprovoked felons!

I could but ask, will execution of the legal sentence of a humane law make martyrs of such criminals? Do sectional and social masses hallow these crimes? Do whole communities sympathize with the outlaws, instead of sympathizing with the outraged society of a sister sovereignty? If so, then the sympathy is as felonious as the criminals, and is far more dangerous than was the invasion. The threat of martyrdom is a threat against our peace, and demands execution to defy such sympathy and such saints of martyrdom. The issue was forced upon us: Shall John Brown be pardoned, lest he might be canonized by execution of felony for confessed murder, robbery and treason in inciting servile insurrection in Virginia? Why a martyr? Because thousands applaud his acts and opinions, and glorify his crimes? Was I to hesitate after this? Sympathy was in insurrection, and had to be subdued more sternly than was John Brown. John Brown had surely to die according to law, and Virginia has to meet the issue. It is made. We have friends or we have not in the states whence these invaders come. They must now be not only *conservative* but *active* to prevent invaders coming. We are in arms.

Information from all quarters, with responsible names, and anonymous, dated the same time, from places far distant from each other, came, of organized conspiracies and combinations to obstruct our laws, to rescue and seize hostages, to commit rapine and burning along our borders on Maryland, Pennsylvania, Ohio and Indiana, proceeding from these states and from New York, Massachusetts and other states and Canada. These multiplied in every form for weeks; and at last, on the 19th of November, a call was very properly and timely made by Col. Davis for an additional force of 500 men.

These reports and rumors, from so many sources, of every character and form, so simultaneous, from places so far apart, at the game time, from persons so unlike in evidences of education, could be from no conspiracy to hoax; *but I relied not so much upon them as upon the earnest continued general appeal of sympathizers with the crimes. It was impossible for so much of such sympathy to exist without exciting bad men to action of rescue or revenge. On this I acted. . . .*

We must, then, acknowledge and act on the fact that present relations between the states cannot be permitted longer to exist without abolishing slavery throughout the United States, or compelling us to defend it by force of arms. . . .

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U.S. SENATE SELECT COMMITTEE
ON THE HARPERS FERRY INVASION

The Mason Report

June 15, 1860

Less than two weeks after John Brown's execution for treason against the state of Virginia, the U.S. Senate appointed a bipartisan five-man committee to investigate the Harpers Ferry raid and to determine precisely who contributed the money, weapons, and ammunition. Virginia's states' rights Senator James Mason—a lead author of the 1850 Fugitive Slave