

Seeming Disaster, Glorious Success: John Brown's Raid on Harpers Ferry

Lowry Yankwich

On November 30th, 1859, three days before he was scheduled to hang at the gallows, after being captured at Harpers Ferry, after losing all but five of his men and all hopes of sparking a slave insurrection in the South, John Brown wrote to his family, "I have now no doubt but that our seeming *disaster*: will ultimately result in the most *glorious success*."¹

What could he possibly have meant by this statement? How could Brown succeed if his days on earth were numbered? Before investigating this question, it is necessary to define success. Success can be thought of in degrees; certain goals might be accomplished and others not. There is proximate success—success that happens as a direct result of one's actions and in a timely manner. There is also ultimate success, which can come over time and be brought about because of the initial action, though not be directly correlated in time.

On the one hand, Brown and his raid failed, because proximately Brown's intentions going into the raid were not satisfied. Historian Hill Peebles Wilson argues that the fact that no slave insurrections occurred as a result of the raid is proof of Brown's failure to lead slaves to rise up against their masters.² On the other hand, Stephen Oates believes that Brown ultimately succeeded because his raid helped spark the Civil War. Though the war was tragic from beginning to end, Oates argues that it was the exact thing that Brown wanted his raid to incite.³ Thus, rather than focusing on Brown's specific goal of capturing Harpers Ferry and using that to assess his success, it is more important to realize that Brown's overarching objective was to end slavery, by whatever means.

This paper was written for Dr. Charles Hanson's Advanced Placement U.S. History class in the spring of 2010.

I agree with Oates and believe that, while Brown's raid was a proximate failure, it ultimately promoted resolution of the slavery question. First, Brown served to kindle the Civil War, which precipitated the end of slavery in law. Second, while in jail, Brown transformed himself into a martyr, and with the help of others, his goals became those of a large portion of the North before and during the Civil War.

Failure of the Raid

As to the actual raid on Harpers Ferry, John Brown found very little success. Brown wanted to establish a free, biracial state in the Appalachian mountain chain. He believed that slaves would flee to this new state, and that other southern states would be forced to emancipate their slaves.⁴ Brown thought that all of this could happen, yet when he raided Harpers Ferry, none of it did. Of the twenty-two men involved in the raid, only six, including Brown, survived. No slave uprisings resulted in response to the raid.⁵ Further, Brown sustained sword wounds, was captured, jailed, and eventually hanged. If all Brown wanted was to incite a slave rebellion in the South by taking Harpers Ferry, then he failed, because this goal wasn't met.

Also, directly after the raid, treatment of slaves got worse across the South, because southerners feared that their slaves would revolt. In South Carolina, a state known for its deeply southern values, vigilance committees and extralegal groups were formed in every district of the state. These organizations were created to enforce strict control of blacks within the community.⁶ John Brown unintentionally worsened the lives of the slaves he had wished to free. Further, since scared white communities in the South congregated to protect themselves from what they thought would be imminent slave insurrection, the possibility of slaves actually getting free became less likely.

Brown's raid also was a proximate failure because Brown lost political support from Republicans as a result. Historian Benjamin Quarles argues that Brown may have intended his raid to be a symbolic political gesture, as Harpers Ferry is located a mere 60 miles from Washington D.C.⁷ It seems plausible that he intended to appeal to the Republican

Party for action, because at the time it was known for its opposition to the expansion of slavery. Even so, very few Republicans dared associate with him. In a famous speech given at Cooper Union on February 27, 1860, Abraham Lincoln, campaigning for the Republican nomination, objected, “John Brown!! John Brown was no Republican; and you have failed to implicate a single Republican in his Harpers Ferry enterprise.”⁸ Lincoln not only won the Republican nomination, but later that year won the presidential election. He made a point of distancing himself and the Republican Party from Brown, indicating that he felt it was important to his campaign and his fight against the Democrats to denounce Brown. As a result of the raid, Brown lost political leverage, as the Republican Party was forced to back off its opposition to slavery, and thus was diverted from the cause of abolition.

If anything, Brown made the South stronger in its pro-slavery convictions, and did little to win over the North. In an article in the *Richmond Enquirer*, the author wrote of the raid, “[I]t has revived with tenfold strength the desires of a Southern Confederacy,” and yet “there is not a handful of men in the North so base as to approve of the John Brown conspiracy.”⁹ This shows that Brown’s raid sparked fear in many southerners, not just the population of slaveholders, and so unified the South behind slavery. On the other hand, northerners could only agree or disagree with Brown’s cause, which divided them. Even the *Liberator*, a northern abolitionist newspaper, distanced itself from John Brown, calling the raid “an absurd yet traitorous insurrection,” and Brown himself “murderous” and an “outlaw.”¹⁰ If even the most fervent anti-slavery advocates—abolitionists—denounced Brown, how could he unify much of the North around his cause? The *Liberator* article concludes, “Would you contrast the difference between order and tumult? Compare the peaceful pavements of Boston to-day with the blood-stained field of Harper’s Ferry.”¹¹ These statements suggest political motivations for the article. Perhaps the abolitionists were trying to distance themselves from Brown in order to maintain their credibility. If abolitionists were associated with Brown, they could not criticize the horrors of slavery without their opposition bringing up Brown’s violence. Brown threatened the reputation of the abolitionists,

and also of the Republican Party, which initially led both groups to disassociate themselves from Brown altogether.

Settlement Must Come

Popular knowledge remembers John Brown as the man who sparked the Civil War. If this is so, and in so far as the Civil War ended slavery, Brown can be seen to have succeeded in the long run. His actions led to a quicker resolution, however bloody, of the slavery question.

But did Brown really want to start a civil war? While it is unlikely that any man would want mass conflict, it appears that as early as 1856, Brown thought it might be necessary. Martin White, who later became a foe of Brown, wrote that Brown “would rather see this union dissolved and the country drenched with blood than to pay taxes to the amount of one-hundredth part of a mill.”¹² Considering that taxes were required of nearly every adult in the United States, this quote suggests that Brown wouldn’t feel loyal to a nation that didn’t observe his strong opinions on slavery. Rather than compromise, Brown would fight it out until resolution in his favor was reached.

Benjamin Sanborn, a close friend of Brown, also described Brown’s intentions for the raid as being to resolve the slavery question quickly, by whatever means. According to Sanborn, “Brown had set his heart on it as the shortest way to restore our slave-cursed nation to the principles of the Declaration of Independence; and he was ready to die in its execution—as he did.”¹³ Sanborn was one of Brown’s benefactors for the raid, a northern aristocrat, and thus his description is fairly credible. He corresponded with Brown about the raid, and would have had to be convinced of a concrete purpose in order to offer his monetary support. Thus, Sanborn suggests that Brown felt the integrity of the republic was in jeopardy, and that it was necessary to alleviate its problem—slavery—in the most efficient way.

At first, Brown thought civil war could be one means to end slavery; after the raid, he thought it was the only option. On December 2, 1859, in his final letter, Brown wrote, “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 *very much* bloodshed; it might be done.”¹⁴ This letter suggests that originally, Brown intended his raid to prompt quick resolution of the slavery question, without mass bloodshed, yet sometime after the raid he realized that widespread conflict was necessary. Thus, John Brown came to see civil war as the only way left to end slavery.

Polarization of the North and South

Brown succeeded because he helped heighten tensions between the North and the South, leading to the Civil War. In the South, nearly everyone had the same reaction: fear. This anxiety found expression in an article titled “The Harpers Ferry Conspiracy” published only a week after Brown’s raid. “Disguise it as we may, large portions of the North are our enemies...Unless a change—a speedy and effectual change—sweep over northern society, the great conflict must come.”¹⁵ This excerpt shows how southerners were increasingly inclined to think of the North and South as separate entities. Rather than acknowledging the many views held by northerners—anti-slavery, free soil, pro-slavery, ambivalent, or uninterested—southerners felt that the North was conspiring against them, planning to invade. Further, the article shows the South’s stubbornness. The author doesn’t recognize that any change need come from within the South to lessen tension between the two parts of the country; instead, he entirely blames the North for the nation’s problems. By blaming the North, the South effectively shucked any responsibility to maintain the Union, leaving the integrity of the nation dependent entirely upon the North’s ability to change.

There were other indications that the South took Brown’s raid to be a serious threat to their way of life. For example, Governor Wise of Virginia ordered 1500 soldiers to maintain order at Brown’s execution.¹⁶ This could suggest at least two things. First, Governor Wise may have believed that angry Virginians would cause havoc at Brown’s execution. Another view is that Wise was wary of northerners coming to Brown’s aid, which supports the idea that the South became paranoid of invasion by the North. Both interpretations suggest that

Brown's raid sparked fear in southerners, which caused them to act with hostility towards anything associated with Brown and to view the North as a good target.

Though at first most northerners discounted Brown's actions as crazy, ultimately Brown gained widespread support in the North. For northerners, all the attention to Brown's raid uncovered atrocities of slavery that had previously been ignored. James Redpath, a passionate Bostonian supporter of Brown, wrote in 1860, "With his sword and his voice John Brown had demonstrated the unutterable villainy of slavery."¹⁷ Redpath's statement not only represents sympathy for Brown and his cause, but also suggests that the raid made the need for action against slavery more pressing in northerners' eyes.

Brown polarized the North and South, leading them to civil war. Because the North became sympathetic to Brown in the aftermath of the raid, and realized the horrible reality of slavery, while the South became hostile to both Brown and the North, the two parts of the nation grew further apart, and each came to think of the other as distinct, if not completely foreign.

His Soul's Marching On

Between his capture and his death, John Brown did more for his cause than ever before; in less than two months, he made himself a martyr. In doing so, he lessened the importance of the raid itself and heightened the importance of his overarching goal: the abolition of slavery.

Brown made conscious efforts to become a martyr. Before the raid, he had already written a "Vindication of the Invasion." According to Brown, the raid was, "in accordance with my settled policy...intended as a discriminating blow at *Slavery*...calculated to lessen the value of Slaves...[and] was (over and above all others) *Right*."¹⁸ Brown doesn't even mention a plan to lead a massive slave insurrection, and his use of the word "vindication" implies that Brown thought, even before the raid, that his intentions would be challenged. Thus, this note shows that prior to the raid Brown was already thinking of how the public would receive it, and how he could justify it to them.

Further, the fact that Brown chose Harpers Ferry as his target might also suggest that he aimed to make a symbolic, political gesture that would reach a large audience. Though proximately, Brown's raid lost him political leverage, the fact that he attacked so near to the nation's capital was bound to garner attention and make Brown a more public figure.¹⁹

In fact, before the raid, Brown already saw that becoming a martyr might be a more effective way to promote the abolition of slavery. At one point, Brown told his twenty-two men, "If we lose our lives it will perhaps do more for the cause than our lives would be worth in any other way."²⁰ Since Brown was saying this before the raid, it shows that from the start he recognized that the raid could fail and that he could still be successful, so long as he used his death to make himself a symbol of anti-slavery passion.

Once the raid failed, Brown began to make himself a martyr. When family members tried to defend him against the charge of treason by claiming that he was insane, he quickly denounced the notion.²¹ In doing so he kept focus on his higher moral purpose and drew attention away from the actual logic behind raiding a Southern arsenal, which could easily be deemed ludicrous.

While in prison, Brown wrote scores of letters to people he knew and to strangers as well. In one of his letters Brown scrawled, "I can recover all the lost capital occasioned by that disaster by only hanging a few moments by the neck; and I feel quite determined to make the utmost possible out of a defeat."²² Once the raid failed, Brown turned to his alternate plan. The way for him to maximize the effect of his actions from prison was to feverishly write letters expressing his ultimate intentions to as many people as possible. Historian Jonathan Earle suggests that Brown's letters were written for a public audience.²³ This is further supported by an excerpt from one of Brown's letters to his family in which he wrote, "Please let all our friends read my letters when you can; & ask them to accept of it as *in part for them*."²⁴ Brown clearly showed an intention to affect a larger audience, so that when he was hanged, people would see it as a sacrifice of life to end slavery.

If the public recognized the weight of his action, they might take his cause more seriously.

Brown's efforts to guide the public's perception of him worked; the northern public reacted to Brown with sympathy and interest. To start, the *Liberator*, which had originally denounced Brown, began to warm up to him as he neared his death. On the day of Brown's execution, the newspaper published an article that read, "The execution of Brown and his comrades...will cause millions of hearts to vow eternal vengeance to slavery."²⁵ It appears that Brown's time in jail radically changed his image, at least for the *Liberator*; eventually, the newspaper was not only sympathetic with his cause, but also recognized that others were also. Furthermore, the article shows signs that Brown was being used as a symbol even before he died. It was a threat to southerners, warning them that if they weren't careful, most of the North would become deeply opposed to slavery.

The transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau also helped to mold Brown into an abolitionist symbol. In a famous speech given before Brown hanged, Thoreau said to his northern townsmen, "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...He is not Old Brown any longer; he is an angel of light."²⁶ In his speech, Thoreau pleaded not for Brown's acquittal, but rather for his adoption as a martyr. Thus, Thoreau's statement shows how northerners made conscious efforts to help Brown create a meaningful impression on the northern public. Further, because Thoreau likened Brown to an angel while he still lived, it suggests that Brown's martyrdom enabled people to use him to inspire others to the cause. In this way, Brown's martyrdom served a double purpose; directly, it made his death more significant, and indirectly, it allowed others to use his death as a way to promote abolition of slavery.

Osborne P. Anderson, a survivor of the raid, also helped solidify Brown as a symbol for anti-slavery. In his narrative, *A Voice from Harpers Ferry*, published in 1861, Anderson wrote, "[Brown] saw in the most degraded slave a man and a brother, whose appeal for his

God-ordained rights no one should disregard.”²⁷ Anderson goes on in this passage to liken Brown to Abraham and Moses, implying that Brown was driven by divine purpose. Anderson’s portrayal of Brown as a religious leader bolstered Brown’s image as a martyr by suggesting that like other religious figures, he would live on and have influence beyond his death.

Whether through his own efforts, or through those of others, Brown became a widely recognized martyr figure in the North. December 2nd, the day of his hanging, was proclaimed “Martyr Day” by many blacks, and church bells rang across the North.²⁸ Further, Brown became the subject of much artwork, including a sketch depicting Brown as a saintly father of the movement for abolition (see appendix). Both examples suggest two things: first, that at least some northerners were sympathetic to Brown’s cause. And second, that through artwork or loud ceremonies, awareness of Brown as a positive symbol became more widespread in northern society.

During the Civil War, Brown was adopted as an even stronger symbol of northern goals, signifying his success in aligning the North with his values. As Union soldiers marched to battle, they sang the “John Brown Song”:

*John Brown’s body lies a mouldering in the grave...
His soul’s marching on...
Glory, Hally, Hallelujah!...
He’s gone to be a soldier in the army of the lord...
Glory, Hally, Hallelujah!*²⁹

The lyrics of this song suggest that by the time of the Civil War, nearly everyone knew what John Brown was fighting for; so many soldiers were enrolled in the army, and this was such a common song, that thousands of people would have been familiar with the tune.

Further, though Republicans denounced him at first, ultimately they realized Brown’s goals. As David Reynolds points out, Lincoln won the election of 1864 because of the Emancipation Proclamation, black

enlistment, and Sherman's victories in the fall of 1864.³⁰ All three of these prongs have traces of John Brown in them. First, the Emancipation Proclamation officially aligned the North with the cause of freeing the slaves, one of Brown's deepest goals. Second, black enlistment, which helped boost the Union's numbers, realized Brown's desire to raise slaves out of bondage to fight their masters. Finally, Sherman's military victories confirmed that violence was necessary to eliminate slavery from the country.

Conclusion

Though at first glance Brown's raid failed, lost him support in the North, and gained him enemies in the South, ultimately his invasion was vindicated. Most of the northern public came to view him as a martyr for anti-slavery. The Union adopted his goals. The Republicans, wary at first of his radicalism, warmed to his ideas. He sparked the war that ended slavery in law in his country. He got his "glorious success." Of course, the degree to which Brown succeeded can be questioned. While the Civil War led to the abolition of slavery, it did not end discrimination against African Americans. Voting restrictions, Black Codes, Jim Crow laws, and Ku Klux Klan members ensured that blacks were not treated as equal citizens well into the twentieth century.

John Brown has been called the most interesting private figure in U. S. history, but why? Perhaps it is because he represents so many contradictions. He was a white man fighting for black men. He was terribly violent and yet wanted harmony between the races. He was a heretic to some and a saint to others.

Brown's story remains relevant to our world today. In 2001, two commercial airplanes crashed into one of the most iconic American landmarks: the World Trade Center. Since then, and after it was discovered that a fundamentalist Islamic group known as Al Qaeda was behind the attack, many Americans have both feared and even shown outright hostility toward the Muslim world. In the same way that fear made southerners separate themselves from the North, today fear makes Americans act similarly toward Muslims. Brown

gives perspective on these acts of terrorism: the American viewpoint represents only one side of the conflict. We should learn from John Brown that terrorists to some are holy warriors to others.

Appendix



Source: sketch, "John Brown—Martyr," 2 December 1859.

Notes

1. John Brown, Charles Town, VA, 30 November 1859; repr. in *John Brown's Raid on Harpers Ferry: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Jonathan Earle (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008), 101.
2. Hill Peebles Wilson, *John Brown: Soldier of Fortune* (Lawrence, Kansas: Hill P. Wilson, 1913), 355.
3. Stephen B. Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood: A Biography of John Brown* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 361.
4. Jonathan Earle, *John Brown's Raid on Harpers Ferry: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008), 21.
5. Wilson, 355.
6. Steven A. Channing, *Crisis of Fear: Secession in South Carolina* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1974), 26.
7. Benjamin Quarles, *Allies for Freedom; Blacks and John Brown* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 92.
8. Abraham Lincoln, "Address at Cooper Union," Cooper Union, New York, 27 February 1860.
9. *Richmond Enquirer*, in *Patriotic Treason*, ed. Evan Carton (New York: Free Press, 2006), 321.
10. "A Lesson for the People," *Liberator*, 28 October 1859.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Martin White; in *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights*, ed. David S. Reynolds (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 152.

13. Franklin Sanborn, *Recollections of Seventy Years* (Boston: Gorham Press, 1909), 148.
14. John Brown, 2 December 1859; repr. in Earle, 103.
15. "The Harpers Ferry Conspiracy," *Petersburg Express*, 25 October 1859, in Earle, 107.
16. Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy, Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005), 750.
17. James Redpath, *The Public Life of Capt. John Brown* (Boston: Thayer & Eldridge, 1860), 405.
18. John Brown; in Oates, 284.
19. Quarles, 92.
20. John Brown; in Oates, 289.
21. Earle, 29.
22. John Brown; in Earle, 29.
23. Earle, 88.
24. John Brown; repr. in Earle, 98.
25. "The Harper's Ferry Tragedy," *Liberator*, 2 December 1859.
26. Henry David Thoreau, "A Plea for Captain John Brown" (Concord, MA, 1859), in Earle, 110.
27. Osborne P. Anderson, *A Voice from Harper's Ferry: A Narrative of Events at Harper's Ferry; with Incidents Prior and Subsequent to Its Capture by Captain Brown and His Men* (Boston, 1861).

28. Quarles, 125.

29. C. B. Marsh, "John Brown Song"
(Charleston, MA: C. S. Hall, 1861).

30. David S. Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 472.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Anderson, Osborne P. *A Voice from Harper's Ferry: A Narrative of Events at Harper's Ferry; with Incidents Prior and Subsequent to Its Capture by Captain Brown and His Men*. Boston, 1861.

"Harper's Ferry Tragedy." *Liberator*, 2 December 1859.

"John Brown—the Martyr," 1859.

"Lesson for the People." *Liberator*, 28 October 1859.

Lincoln, Abraham. "Address at Cooper Union." Speech, Cooper Union, New York, 27 February 1860.

Marsh, C. B. "John Brown Song." Charleston, MA: C. S. Hall, 1861.

Redpath, James. *The Public Life of Capt. John Brown*. Boston: Thayer & Eldridge, 1860.

Sanborn, Franklin Benjamin. *Recollections of Seventy Years*. Boston: Gorham Press, 1909.

Thoreau, Henry David. "A Plea for Captain John Brown." Speech, 30 October 1859.

Secondary Sources

Carton, Evan. *Patriotic Treason: John Brown and the Soul of America*. New York: Free Press, 2006.

Channing, Stephen A. *Crisis of Fear: Secession in South Carolina*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1974

Earle, Jonathan. *John Brown's Raid on Harper's Ferry: a Brief History with Documents*. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008.

Oates, Stephen B. *To Purge This Land with Blood: A Biography of John Brown*. New York: Harper & Row, 1970.

Quarles, Benjamin. *Allies for Freedom: Blacks and John Brown*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1974.

Reynolds, David S. *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005.

Wilentz, Sean. *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005.

Wilson, Hill Peebles. *John Brown: Soldier of Fortune*. Boston: The Cornhill Company, 1918.