

## E. John Brown at Harpers Ferry

### 1. The Richmond Enquirer Is Outraged (1859)

*The fanatical abolitionist John Brown plotted a large slave insurrection at Harpers Ferry in western Virginia. Purchasing arms with about \$3,000 provided by sympathetic Northern abolitionists, he launched his abortive enterprise with a score of men, including two of his own sons. Wounded and captured, after the loss of several innocent lives, he was given every opportunity to pose as a martyr while being tried. He was found guilty of three capital offenses: conspiracy with slaves, murder, and treason. Most of the abolitionists who had financed his enterprise ran for cover, although many of them had evidently not known of his desperate plan to attack a federal arsenal and bring down on himself the Washington government. The Southerners were angered by the widespread expressions of sympathy for Brown in the North. A week after the raid the influential Richmond Enquirer wrote as follows. What is the most alarming aspect of this editorial?*

The Harper's Ferry invasion has advanced the cause of Disunion more than any other event . . . since the formation of the government; it has rallied to that standard men who formerly looked upon it with horror; it has revived, with tenfold strength, the desire of a Southern Confederacy. The heretofore most determined friends of the Union may now be heard saying, "If under the form of a Confederacy [Union] our peace is disturbed, our state invaded, its peaceful citizens cruelly murdered . . . by those who should be our warmest friends, . . . and the people of the North sustain the outrage, then let disunion come."

### 2. Governor J. A. Wise Refuses Clemency (1859)

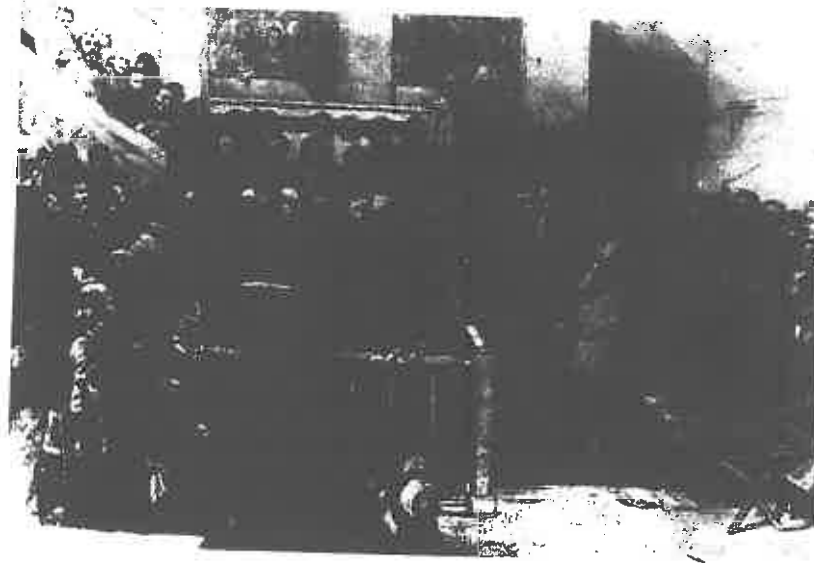
*It is perhaps surprising that Brown was not lynched, instead of being hanged after an orderly, if hurried, trial. Ten of his own men had been killed; six more were tried and hanged. Other casualties that his raid inflicted included seven dead and ten wounded. Pressures of various kinds converged on Governor Wise to extend clemency, and he explained to the legislature as follows why he could not do so. What was the basis for his reasoning?*

During the trial of . . . [the Harpers Ferry raiders] and since, appeals and threats of every sort . . . 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; 3rd, the policy of not making martyrs.

<sup>1</sup>*Richmond Enquirer*, October 25, 1859, in Edward Stone, ed., *Incident at Harper's Ferry* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1956), p. 177.

<sup>2</sup>*Richmond Enquirer*, December 6, 1859, in Edward Stone, ed., *Incident at Harper's Ferry* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1956), p. 177.



**John Brown's Trial, 1859**

*The biggest news story of its day, John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry, his trial, and his execution, riveted the attention of Americans and deeply divided them. Brown, wounded in the head and chest during his capture, appeared at his trial lying on a cot. He went to the gallows just five weeks later. (Bettmann Archive)*

As to the first, the parties themselves or counsel put in no plea of insanity. No insanity was feigned even; the prisoner Brown spurned it . . .

As to the second ground . . . : 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 . . . loose again on a border already torn by a fanatical and sectional strife. . . .

As to the third ground . . . : 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 soothe him, while life lasted, in prison. His state of health would have been heralded weekly, as from a palace . . . ; the work of his hands would have been sought as holy relics. . . .

There is 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 life, law, property, and civil liberty itself. The sympathy with the leader was worse than the invasion itself. The

appeal was: it is policy to make no martyrs, but disarm murderers, traitors, robbers, insurrectionists, by free pardon for wanton, malicious, unprovoked felons!

### 3. Horace Greeley Hails a Martyr (1859)

*Reactions in the North to Brown's incredible raid ranged from execration to adulation. The most devoted abolitionists, who believed that slavery was so black a crime as to justify violence, defended Brown. The orator Wendell Phillips cried (amid cheers), "John Brown has twice as much right to hang Governor Wise as Governor Wise has to hang him." Emerson and Thoreau publicly likened the execution to the crucifixion of Jesus. Eccentric Horace Greeley, the influential antislavery editor of the New York Tribune, was denounced by Southerners for having given editorial aid and comfort to John Brown. Greeley replied as follows in an editorial that no doubt reflected the views of countless moderate antislavery people, who deplored the method while applauding the goal. How effectively did Greeley make the point that Brown's crime was no ordinary felony, and to what extent was he anti-Brown?*

John Brown knew no limitations in his warfare on slavery—why should slavery be lenient to John Brown, defeated and a captive?

War has its necessities, and they are sometimes terrible. We have not seen how slavery could spare the life of John Brown without virtually confessing the iniquity of its own existence. We believe Brown himself has uniformly taken this view of the matter, and discountenanced all appeals in his behalf for pardon or commutation, as well as everything savoring of irritation or menace. There are eras in which death is not merely heroic but beneficent and fruitful. Who shall say that this was not John Brown's fit time to die?

We are not those who say, "If slavery is wrong, then John Brown was wholly right." There are fit and unfit modes of combating a great evil; we think Brown at Harper's Ferry pursued the latter. . . . And, while we heartily wish every slave in the world would run away from his master tomorrow and never be retaken, we should not feel justified in entering a slave state to incite them to do so, even if we were sure to succeed in the enterprise. Of course, we regard Brown's raid as utterly mistaken and, in its direct consequences, pernicious.

But his are the errors of a fanatic, not the crimes of a felon. It were absurd to apply to him opprobrious epithets or wholesale denunciations. The essence of crime is the pursuit of selfish gratification in disregard of others' good; and that is the precise opposite of Old Brown's impulse and deed. He periled and sacrificed not merely his own life—that were, perhaps, a moderate stake—but the lives of his beloved sons, the earthly happiness of his family and theirs, to benefit a despised and downtrodden race—to deliver from bitter bondage and degradation those whom he had never seen.

Unwise, the world will pronounce him. Reckless of artificial yet palpable obligations he certainly was, but his very errors were heroic—the faults of a brave, impulsive, truthful nature, impatient of wrong, and only too conscious that "resistance to

<sup>3</sup>New York Tribune, December 3, 1859.

tyrants is obedience to God." Let whoever would first cast a stone ask himself whether his own noblest act was equal in grandeur and nobility to that for which John Brown pays the penalty of a death on the gallows.

And that death will serve to purge his memory of any stain which his errors might otherwise have cast upon it. Mankind are proverbially generous to those who have suffered all that can here be inflicted—who have passed beyond the portals of the life to come. John Brown dead will live in millions of hearts—will be discussed around the homely hearth of toil and dreamed of on the couch of poverty and trial. . . .

Admit that Brown took a wrong way to rid his country of the curse, his countrymen of the chains of bondage, what is the right way? And are we pursuing that way as grandly, unselfishly, as he pursued the wrong one? If not, is it not high time we were? Before censuring severely his errors, should we not abandon our own?

### 4. Lincoln Disowns Brown (1860)

*The South quickly seized upon the John Brown raid as a club with which to belabor the just growing Republican party, which allegedly had connived with the conspirators. Rough-been Abraham Lincoln, Republican presidential aspirant, came east from Illinois for his make-or-break speech before a sophisticated eastern audience at Cooper Union in New York City. During the course of his address, which was a smashing success, he dealt with the Brown raid. How convincingly did he meet the accusation of Republican complicity, and to what extent was he both pro-Brown and anti-Brown?*

You [Southerners] charge that we [Republicans] stir up insurrections among your slaves. We deny it; and what is your proof? Harper's Ferry! John Brown!!

John Brown was no Republican; and you have failed to implicate a single Republican in his Harper's Ferry enterprise. If any member of our party is guilty in that matter, you know it, or you do not know it. If you do know it, you are inexcusable for not designating the man and proving the fact. If you do not know it, you are inexcusable for asserting it, and especially for persisting in the assertion after you have tried and failed to make the proof. You need not be told that persisting in a charge which one does not know to be true is simply malicious slander.

Some of you admit that no Republican designedly aided or encouraged the Harper's Ferry affair, but still insist that our doctrines and declarations necessarily lead to such results. We do not believe it. . . .

Slave insurrections are no more common now than they were before the Republican Party was organized. What induced the Southampton [Nat Turner's] insurrection, twenty-eight years ago, in which at least three times as many lives were lost as at Harper's Ferry? You can scarcely stretch your very elastic fancy to the conclusion that Southampton was "got up by Black Republicanism." In the present state of things in the United States, I do not think a general, or even a very extensive, slave insurrection is possible. . . .

<sup>4</sup>J. G. Nicolay and John Hay, eds., *Complete Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: The Century Co., 1894), vol. 5, pp. 314-319, passim.

John Brown's effort was peculiar. It was not a slave insurrection. It was an attempt by white men to get up a revolt among slaves, in which the slaves refused to participate. In fact, it was so absurd that the slaves, with all their ignorance, saw plainly enough it could not succeed. That affair, in its philosophy, corresponds with the many attempts, related in history, at the assassination of kings and emperors. An enthusiast broods over the oppression of a people till he fancies himself commissioned by Heaven to liberate them. He ventures the attempt, which ends in little else than his own execution.