

John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights

by [David S. Reynolds](#)

Homegrown Terrorist

A Review by Sean Wilentz

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John Brown was a violent charismatic anti-slavery terrorist and traitor, capable of cruelty to his family as well as to his foes. Every one of his murderous ventures failed to achieve its larger goals. His most famous exploit, the attack on Harpers Ferry in October 1859, actually backfired. That backfiring, and not Brown's assault or his later apotheosis by certain abolitionists and Transcendentalists, contributed something, ironically, to the hastening of southern secession and the Civil War. In a topsy-turvy way, Brown may have advanced the anti-slavery cause. Otherwise, he actually damaged the mainstream campaign against slavery, which by the late 1850s was a serious mass political movement contending for national power, and not, as Brown and some of his radical friends saw it, a fraud even more dangerous to the cause of liberty than the slaveholders.

This accounting runs against the grain of the usual historical assessments, and also against the grain of David S. Reynolds's "cultural biography" of Brown. The interpretations fall, roughly, into two camps. They agree only about the man's unique importance. Writers hostile to Brown describe him as not merely fanatical but insane, the craziest of all the crazy abolitionists whose agitation drove the country mad and caused the catastrophic, fratricidal, and unnecessary war. Brown's admirers describe his hatred of slavery as a singular sign of sanity in a nation awash in the mental pathologies of racism and bondage. Alone of the northern white abolitionist leaders, they say, Brown was willing to put his life on the line by taking up arms alongside blacks against the accursed institution; and in doing so he fired the shots that triggered the Civil War. Unlike inconsistent moderates such as Abraham Lincoln (who, Brown's champions assure us, had no interest in destroying slavery at the war's outbreak, only in saving the Union), Brown saw slavery for the enormity that it was, and fought for racial equality as well as emancipation. He was, as W.E.B. DuBois wrote in a celebratory biography, "the man who of all Americans has perhaps come nearest to touching the real souls of black folk." Most important, DuBois concluded, "John Brown was right."

The strongest portions of Reynolds's stimulating and argumentative book trace the evolution of this second, pro-Brown line of thought. Until recently, he maintains, it was largely restricted to black Americans. True, soon after Brown's capture at Harpers Ferry, and even more after his execution, a cult of the man arose, celebrated most intensely by white abolitionists. But in the despairing period that followed Reconstruction's demise and eventually led to the establishment of Jim Crow, black writers and political leaders lionized Brown's memory. Frederick Douglass, who refused to join Brown in the attack on Harpers Ferry, proposed in 1881 that Brown's act made him "our noblest American hero." Whites, with a few radical exceptions such as Eugene V. Debs and Mother Jones, vilified Brown. Even the impressively detailed biography of Brown written in 1910 by

the staunch liberal Oswald Garrison Villard (William Lloyd Garrison's grandson and a founder, with DuBois, of the NAACP) found deep fault with Brown's violence and political dreams.

Brown's legacy was mostly laid aside during the early, hopeful days of the modern civil rights movement. It was revived amid the angrier, pessimistic black nationalist vogue of the late 1960s, when Malcolm X, H. Rap Brown, and others hailed Brown as the only white American in history worthy of respect. And this time the esteem for Brown appeared among white radicals and liberals as well, sometimes wracked with ambivalence (as in Stephen Oates's fine biography, *To Purge This Land With Blood*, which appeared in 1970), and sometimes not (as in the terrorist Weather Underground's slogan, "John Brown, Live Like Him/Dare to Struggle, Dare to Win!"). It would appear, then, that Brown's reputation, although always strongest among black reformers and militants, has varied with the times as well as along the racial line, peaking when political frustration on the left boils over into rage against American politics as hopelessly corrupt, and finally against America itself as irredeemably racist. According to that incensed view of our history, Brown stands alone as a model of purity, valor, and sacrifice.

The less persuasive parts of Reynolds's book try to validate the perception of Brown as an exemplary figure. Reynolds is a scholar, not a revolutionary, and his judgments are tempered. He plainly calls Brown's early bloody exploits during the struggle over Kansas in 1856 acts of "terrorism" and "war crimes." He leaves a strong impression of Brown as an overbearing and violent man, with an immense capacity for self-dramatization. Yet Reynolds weighs these matters against the calumnies of Brown's detractors and against the qualities that he believes make Brown so admirable today. Brown, he insists, was not insane, in his politics or in his strategies. Of all the white abolitionists, Reynolds asserts, Brown was the least racist and the most comfortable entering inside what he calls, abstractly, "black culture." Far more than "the Great Emancipator" Abraham Lincoln, and even more than staunch radicals such as William Lloyd Garrison, Brown embodied the egalitarian color-blind ideals of the present. Brown's prophecies that only rivers of blood would wash slavery away proved true, Reynolds observes; his denunciations of America's political and moral corruption were eloquent as well as valid. Reynolds, too, believes that John Brown was right.

Brown was also, Reynolds insists, a crucial figure in American history. This, as much as his defense of Brown's correctness, has caught the appreciative attention of certain prominent reviewers of his book, in places ranging from *Kirkus Reviews* to *The Atlantic Monthly*. Supposedly, the reviewers tell us, Reynolds has written a "timely" account of "America's premier iconoclast." John Brown, one critic announces, was the "man who made Lincoln possible," and who created "the atmosphere of panic and paranoia ... that produced secession." Another writer announces that readers can at last appreciate John Brown as no homicidal madman but as "a serious legatee of the English and American revolutions who anticipated the Emancipation Proclamation and all that has ensued from it."

No author should be held responsible for his reviewer's enthusiasms -- except that Reynolds does want us to view Brown this way, as the catalyst, "the first mover," one reviewer writes, of the war that brought slavery's doom. The book's long subtitle summarizes its author's claims. But that subtitle begs some questions that raise serious doubts about those claims, and about the political nerve they appear to have touched among the critics. Was it really John Brown who killed slavery? No, Abraham Lincoln, the Union Army, and the framers of the Thirteenth Amendment killed slavery. Did Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry spark southern secession and the Civil War? No, Lincoln's victory in the election of 1860 did that, and would have done it regardless of Brown's assault. Was Brown the man who created the basis for the civil rights movement? No more than thousands of other Americans -- women and men, blacks and whites -- who agitated for equal rights as well as emancipation long before 1865, and before Harpers Ferry. Reynolds is able to quote various abolitionist admirers of Brown to back up his assertions, but their remarks are metaphorical and eulogistic, not historical. As history, as opposed to metaphor, eulogy, and an expression of moral certitude -- this book's claims and apologies for Brown are unconvincing.

II.

As Reynolds makes clear, John Brown was not in any way a typical abolitionist radical. During the decades after the American Revolution, abolitionism took root first among northern blacks who, in a variety of benevolent and church societies, railed against slavery, denounced the rising so-called colonization movement that aimed to help send blacks back to Africa, and protested racial prejudice in the free states. Their agitation helped to inspire northern white reformers in the 1830s to take a radical stand for slavery's immediate elimination. Led by William Lloyd Garrison and the American Anti-Slavery Society (which Garrison helped to found in 1833), these anti-slavery radicals, called immediatists, demanded the nation's full purging of any complicity with its original sin. Drawing on the Christian humanitarianism and perfectionism unleashed by the revivalist Second Great Awakening, Garrison and the immediatists also renounced violence and stressed the efficacy of moral suasion, in the belief that saving the nation's soul required transcending all forms of ungodly coercion.

John Brown was never committed to moral suasion, non-violence, or redemptive Christian humanitarianism. Born in Torrington, Connecticut in 1800, and raised chiefly in Ohio, he was trained by his devout parents in the old Congregational Calvinism, with its adherence to predestination and divine intervention. Other anti-slavery activists were moved by the evangelical promise of spiritual rebirth in Christ's merciful bosom. Brown, as comfortable in the Old Testament as in the New, worshipped an angry, vengeful God and the Jesus of Matthew 10:34, who came not to send peace but a sword. As Brown grew older -- wandering through Ohio, Pennsylvania, and upstate New York, following up one business venture with another -- his hatred of slavery and his imagined kinship with abused blacks hardened.

Reynolds successfully rebuts previous claims that Brown's business setbacks drove him into the insanity that set him on the road to Harpers Ferry -- in part, he shows, because some of his businesses proved perfectly solid. There were, to be sure, all sorts of minor

would-be Old Testament seers in pre-Civil War America, whose ups and downs in business seem to have been a prelude to religious dementia. But Brown appears to have taken his reverses as well as his successes in stride, not as any reflection of his character. In this, he was very much a Calvinist fatalist. Anyway, the insanity charge has always been a red herring, raised by historians who, wanting to explain away the causes of the "needless" Civil War, have found it necessary to dismiss Brown as a madman. Reynolds spends considerable time, perhaps too much, in establishing Brown's sanity. The really important point is that it is entirely possible to be sane and rational and also, like Brown, a fanatic.

It is to Reynolds's credit that he takes Brown's Calvinism seriously, though he sometimes glosses over how it contributed to Brown's indifference to inflicting suffering on those he considered evildoers. Believing that, as a godly patriarch, he had to multiply the legions of the Lord, Brown fathered twenty children (by two wives), eight of whom either died soon after birth or in early childhood. Brown raised the survivors to live their lives according to strict biblical principles. He did not request anything of his children, or threaten them: he commanded and expected complete obedience, much as his own father had done, and dealt swiftly and harshly with any infractions.

Reaching for his whip, Brown also kept a meticulous record of his paternal punishments, reflecting both his righteousness and his shame at his children's sinful recalcitrance. Reynolds quotes from the ledger, although he fails to note its grotesque similarity to a master's accounts of correcting his slaves:

John. Jr.
For disobeying mother: 8 lashes
For unfaithfulness at work: 3 lashes
For telling a lie: 8 lashes

But Reynolds does make clear that Brown's patriarchal devotion to the merciless God of John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards was the keystone of his entire life. And that makes it easier to understand how Brown could become such a cold-blooded killer for the Almighty.

III.

Why Brown came to direct his holy wrath against slavery is uncertain, even in Reynolds's account. Brown's father hated slavery, but he took no recorded measures to attack it. There is a story that, at age twelve, Brown witnessed a slave boy being beaten, and swore then and there to wage war on the institution; but this sounds too much like other Parson Weemish accounts of the era about the youthful epiphanies of American heroes. Nor is it clear why Brown came not simply to sympathize with the slaves but also to identify with them, to talk as if every indignity and blow they absorbed had been inflicted upon him as well. A beaten child as well as a child beater, he might well have felt a powerful identity with humans tortured for the "sin" of having black skin -- but other old-line anti-slavery Calvinists endured and witnessed what Brown did without acting as he did, so there will always be some mystery about what goaded him. What is certain is that more than a

decade before Harpers Ferry, Brown was mulling over plans to lead a great anti-slavery insurrection.

Given the political context of the time, Brown's mounting frustration and ferocity are understandable. In the 1830s, the Garrisonian abolitionists had enlisted hundreds of thousands of members and sympathizers, and sponsored many mass petition drives, only to slam into furious reaction from an obdurate Congress and scores of violent, even murderous anti-abolitionist mobs. (One in Alton, Illinois killed a local anti-slavery editor, the Reverend Elijah Lovejoy.) The strain on the abolitionist movement showed, and in 1840 the Garrisonian American Anti-Slavery Society split over strategy and tactics. The majority faction, headed by Garrison, added causes such as women's rights to its agenda while continuing its non-resistant moral crusade. The schismatics turned to agitating in national electoral politics (which the Garrisonians dismissed as a corrupt snare) and formed the Liberty Party, which received only a tiny number of votes in the presidential campaigns of 1840 and 1844. (A more moderate Free Soil Party succeeded the Liberty men in 1848, raised a great deal of noise, and failed to make a dent on the election's outcome.) In response to the abolitionist attacks, meanwhile, southern slaveholders took an increasingly hard proslavery line, proclaiming their system a benevolent system ordained by God: "instead of an evil a good -- a positive good," as John C. Calhoun told the Senate.

For many anti-slavery northerners, certain developments within mainstream politics further augured the consolidated domination of what they called "the Slave Power." The annexation of Texas, followed by the Mexican War and the absorption of vast new territories, looked like a mere cover for the expansion of the slaveholders' economic and political power. The enactment of the Fugitive Slave Bill as part of the so-called Compromise of 1850 to settle the territorial question was, for many anti-slavery northerners, radicals and non-radicals alike, the last straw; and in 1850 and 1851 they undertook a series of spectacular rescues of captured slaves awaiting their return to bondage. Some of these episodes were violent: "Civil War -- The First Blow Struck," one local newspaper reported after the bloodiest incident, outside Christiana, Pennsylvania. "The only way to make the Fugitive Slave Law a dead letter," snapped Frederick Douglass, still nominally a non-resistant Garrisonian, "is to make half-a-dozen or more dead kidnappers."

Against this dismal background, Brown began his own crusade. At a memorial meeting for the martyred Lovejoy, he rose and, with God as his witness, pledged his life to slavery's destruction. A decade later, while living in Springfield, Massachusetts, he developed a plan for a guerrilla campaign, based partly on the Nat Turner rebellion of 1831 and partly on the Spanish resistance to Napoleon during the Peninsular Wars, whereby hit-and-run attacks would terrorize the slaveholders, liberate slaves, and undermine the accursed institution. In 1851, in response to the Fugitive Slave Law, he formed a small all-black militia with himself at its head, the United States League of Gileadites, consisting chiefly of fugitive slaves and sworn to resisting the new law through Brown's guerrilla operations. But the group came to nothing, as did another plan,

hatched with the wealthy abolitionist radical Gerritt Smith, to establish a community for escaped slaves in the Adirondack Mountains.

And so, after the Christiana affair, the northern resistance to the Fugitive Slave Law also petered out, overwhelmed by a counter-campaign mounted by northern moderates and conservatives who held that the law, no matter how hateful, was fully constitutional, and that the wicked agitation against it aimed finally to destroy the Union. The desire for sectional peace remained powerful; the Great Conciliator, Henry Clay, happily observed that "the patriotic obligation of obeying the Constitution and the laws" was now "almost universally recognized and admitted." In the fall of 1852, a so-called doughface Democrat from New Hampshire sympathetic to the South, Franklin Pierce, won the presidency. Never in the previous decades had the anti-slavery movement been more stymied and beleaguered.

IV.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 changed everything -- and gave Brown the opportunity to kill his first Philistines. Pushed by pro-slavery hardliners, Illinois Senator Stephen A. Douglas's bill to organize Kansas and Nebraska territories repealed the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which by banning slavery in territories north of latitude 36' 30" had been the bulwark of sectional comity. Kansas bordered on the slave state of Missouri and harbored many slaveholders as well as Yankee free-staters. It quickly became a deadly battleground. "Come on, then, gentlemen of the slave States...." the anti-slavery New Yorker William Henry Seward bellowed on the Senate floor. "We will engage in the competition for the virgin soil of Kansas, and God give the victory to the side which is strongest in numbers as it is in right." Discerning God's will would turn out to be a gruesome business, thanks in part to the newly arrived settler John Brown.

By the time Brown joined six of his sons in Osawatomie, a small settlement in eastern Kansas near Pottawatomie Creek, in the summer of 1855, the situation had degenerated into a virtual civil war between so-called free-staters and pro-slavery men. Each side was determined to have its way over permitting or prohibiting slavery under the new territorial constitution, and Brown, now fifty-five, won an appointment as captain of the Pottawatomie Rifles company of the free-stater Liberty Guards. In May 1856, he and his men rushed to the pro-free-state capital in Lawrence to help fend off an attack by pro-slavery men, but arrived to find the place in smoldering ruins. A day later, Brown received word that a zealous pro-slavery South Carolina congressman had retaliated against an insulting speech by Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts by beating Sumner within an inch of his life on the Senate floor. According to one of Brown's sons, his father went "crazy-crazy" upon hearing the news from Washington.

"Something must be done," Brown declaimed, "to show these barbarians that we, too, have rights." On a May night, Brown, four of his sons, and three other men, carrying broadswords, ambushed the farm of James Doyle, an anti-free-stater but not a slaveholder, near Pottawatomie Creek. The raiding party dragged Doyle and his two grown sons from their house and hacked them to pieces, sparing Doyle's wife and fourteen-year-old son. Then Brown and his band moved to the Wilkinson farm and abducted and killed the law-

and-order man Allen Wilkinson, before ending their attacks at the home of James Harris, where they split the skull of another pro-slavery partisan, William Sherman.

Brown and his sons eluded capture; pro-slavery men destroyed the Brown homestead; and the massacre, combined with the Lawrence affair, escalated violence across the territory. Two hundred men (including one of Brown's sons) died in the renewed combat. Brown himself fought on uncaptured until the autumn, when he headed back East to raise money to provide fresh supplies, hard cash, and more Sharps rifles to the Kansas warriors. "You know what I have done in Kansas ..." he cryptically told a group of abolitionist sympathizers in New York. "I have no other purpose but to serve the cause of liberty."

Reynolds sees Brown's Pottawatomie attack in the context of the convulsions in Bleeding Kansas -- not simply an act of terrorism but also a war crime. The judgment is reasonable enough, though it is somewhat anachronistic. He also concedes that the attack utterly failed to achieve Brown's stated goal, to intimidate pro-slavery settlers into departing Kansas en masse. At the time, though, northern reaction to Brown and his atrocities was divided. Some anti-slavery editors idolized him as "Old Osawatomie Brown," while others looked away. Rumors circulated that Brown had not been involved, or that he had acted in self-defense. Brown was evasive and mysterious when questioned, denying nothing but admitting little. In any event, dispatches about the subsequent bloodshed in Kansas soon overshadowed Brown's massacre. And by summer's end, attention had switched to presidential politics -- and to a political universe drastically different from that of only four years earlier.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act had shaken the political system to its core. The Whig Party, already weakened by sectional divisions, collapsed when southern Whigs supported Douglas's bill; anti-slavery Democrats, fed up with their party's long history of placating the slaveholders, bolted. In the autumn, the new anti-slavery Republican Party ran its first fledgling congressional campaigns, and won a plurality of seats in the House of Representatives. Two years later, in the wake of the continuing bloodshed in Kansas, the Republicans ran John C. Frémont for the presidency on a platform that replicated the basic planks of the earlier Liberty and Free Soil platforms, denouncing slavery as one of the "relics of barbarism" and pledging to put the institution on the road to extinction by banning it in all American territories, Kansas included. Frémont wound up carrying eleven of the sixteen free states against the doughface Democratic victor James Buchanan, and the Republicans retained a substantial, though reduced, presence in the House. "[T]he process now going on in the politics of the United States," one Republican newspaperman wrote, "is a *Revolution*."

Anti-slavery northerners now had two revolutions to choose from, one peaceful and constitutional, the other violent and finally at war with the Constitution. The Republicans' revolution would remove the federal government from the grip of the Slave Power, allow slavery to exist only where (as the Constitution stipulated) it already existed, but ban it elsewhere -- a move which (northerners and southerners agreed on this point, although on nothing else) would guarantee slavery's extinction by halting its ability to expand. For

radicals such as Brown, however, this amounted to nothing more, as he put it, than "talk - - talk -- talk."

The radicals (including Garrison) believed that the Constitution was an evil document, a covenant with the Devil approved in Hell. Slavery's continued existence, anywhere, meant that the American republic deserved to die. Only a violent upheaval of slaves and free blacks joined by white revolutionaries would free the oppressed. The rise of the Republicans did nothing to dissuade Brown and his supporters. It only fixed their aims, now set in opposition not simply to the Slave Power but also to the milquetoast moderates who, in their pretended concerns for the slaves, only made the task of emancipation that much harder.

V.

By 1859, the Republican's revolution had taken great strides. The momentous Supreme Court decision in 1857 in the case of *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, intended by the Court majority to squelch the Republicans' efforts by declaring any federal ban on slavery in the territories as unconstitutional, wound up reinforcing northern anti-slavery opinion. Although Senator Douglas outlasted the Republican Abraham Lincoln and won re-election in 1858, his debates with the challenger turned Lincoln into a national figure. Continuing events in Kansas split the Democratic Party yet again, setting the moderate anti-Republican Douglas against the Buchanan administration and the pro-slavery fire-eaters who were seizing command of the party's dominant southern wing. Republicans and anti-administration Democrats now held a majority in the House.

The revolutionary abolitionists, taking little comfort in these events, became increasingly desperate. Even among Garrison's friends and loyalists, peaceful non-resistance was losing favor. Gerrit Smith, who had been an officer in the American Peace Society, declared that after Kansas he was ready to pursue the Slave Power "even unto death with violence." The Bostonian Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a leader in the fight against the Fugitive Slave Law, devised plans to raise an armed force "for resisting the U.S. Government in Kanzas [sic], and sustaining such resistance elsewhere"; and a year later Higginson and his supporters met in Cleveland and passed a series of resolutions extolling slave uprisings. Another radical Bostonian, Wendell Phillips, scrutinized the new Republican leader Lincoln and pronounced him a "huckster" and "the slave hound of Illinois." And in Maryland a mysterious bearded stranger named Isaac Smith rented a small and secluded farm near the Virginia border, where all through the summer of 1859 a trickle of black and white men took up residence.

Smith's visitors turned out to be a rag-tag army, and Smith turned out to be John Brown. He had set his insurrection in motion a year earlier, laying out his plans to Gerrit Smith and Franklin B. Sanborn, a young protégé of Ralph Waldo Emerson's, at Smith's estate in upstate New York. To their protests that the proposal was mad -- "an amazing proposition, -- desperate in its character ..." Sanborn later wrote, "of most uncertain result" -- Brown replied that he was determined to carry it out with or without their support. Awed by Brown's confidence, and by the possibility that even if the plan failed it might hasten a

civil war, Smith and Sanborn agreed to help, and enlisted four other abolitionist radicals to form a secret advisory and fund-raising committee, the so-called Secret Six.

Brown was ready to go by the fall of 1859 -- but despite his energetic recruiting efforts, his "army" wound up amounting to a pitiful twenty-one soldiers, only five of them black. With some members of the Secret Six growing jittery, Brown appealed to Frederick Douglass, an old friend in the anti-slavery struggle, to join him; but at a secret meeting of the two in August at a quarry in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, Douglass refused. Brown had determined that his guerrilla war would begin with an assault on the federal armory in Harpers Ferry -- a plan that Douglass warned was suicidal and "would array the whole country against us."

Douglass's military instincts proved sound. Harpers Ferry was situated on a tip of land formed by the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers and surrounded by imposing cliffs -- a "perfect steel-trap," Douglass called it. Once inside the town, Brown's little force would be easy prey for a counter-attack, which is exactly what transpired. On the evening of October 16, Brown's men marched out and easily captured the armory by overcoming its single watchman. Brown sent out a patrol to spread the alarm among the slaves on neighboring plantations, then sat and waited for the rebels to arrive. He had made no previous contacts with those neighboring slaves to prepare them; he had planned no escape route out of Harpers Ferry; and even less explicably, he released a midnight train bound for Baltimore that he held hostage for a few hours, in the hope that it would take the word to a hostile outside world about what was transpiring in Harpers Ferry. The haphazardness of Brown's behavior suggests that, by the time the raid began, he knew it would be futile. But it is just as likely that he simply threw the dice and hoped that the slaves would join him -- prepared, if they did not, to exchange the role of avenging commander-in-chief for that of martyr.

Less than a day and a half after it began, the raid was crushed. Armed townsmen, not content to wait for the Virginia and Maryland militia, picked off eight of Brown's men while losing three of their own. Brown, his surviving guerrillas, and some prisoners retreated inside a small but sturdy fire-engine house. After nightfall, a company of federal marines, commanded by Colonel Robert E. Lee and Lieutenant J. E. B. Stuart, joined the militiamen on the scene and prepared for the final assault, using a battering ram and their bayonets in order to avoid killing hostages. When the fighting ended, Brown, wounded in action, was taken captive. The combat had killed ten raiders (including two of Brown's sons), four townsmen (including the black baggage-handler at the railroad station, mistaken for a watchman), and one marine. Seven of Brown's men escaped, although two were later captured. One of the handful of confused and frightened slaves picked up by Brown's patrol was killed; the rest were sent back into bondage.

Now, in defeat, Brown had a second drama to perform, which would prove in many ways more important than the first. In his jail cell in Charles Town, charged with treason, Brown recovered from his wounds, wrote letters, and gave interviews with an impressive if highly calculated solemnity. In his courtroom testimony, he claimed he had not intended to raise an insurrection against the United States, but only to arm oppressed

slaves -- a hair-splitting defense that made no impact on the judge and the jury. But with his uncowering dignity and his uncompromising remarks about slavery, he became a public sensation, and he saved his best for last. In his closing speech before being sentenced to hang, Brown eloquently appealed to the laws of God, and expressed contentment that, in a just cause, he would "mingle my blood further with the blood of my children and with the blood of millions in this slave country." On the morning of his execution, December 2, he wrote out with a steady hand his final prophecy, 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."

Governor Henry A. Wise, fearing an effort to free the prisoner, ordered 1,500 soldiers to Charles Town, which only heightened the tension. (Among the troops was John Wilkes Booth, an actor who enlisted in the Richmond Grays militia with the sole intention of seeing Brown die. Others in the hanging-day throng included the fire-eater Edmund Ruffin and Thomas J. Jackson of the Virginia Military Institute, who would soon earn the nickname "Stonewall.") Taken to the gallows in a wagon, Brown stared out over the Blue Ridge Mountains and remarked, "This *is* a beautiful country." After the deed was done and while John Brown's body dangled, a Virginia colonel intoned: "So perish all such enemies of Virginia! All such enemies of the Union! All foes of the human race!"

VI.

Brown's insurrection was a total failure, but the drama was not finished. Southern reactions swerved, within a matter of weeks, from alarm to a mixture of reassurance and cocky pride. Even as Brown's men exchanged gunfire with the local citizenry, exhilarated crowds lined the railroad tracks from Baltimore to Harpers Ferry to cheer the federal forces on their way. Then a wave of hysteria hit the slaveholding states, amid rumors that Brown's raid was meant to signal massive uprisings on southern plantations. Well into the autumn, reports circulated about imagined black rebellions and whole armies of abolitionists marching southward as reinforcements. Vigilance committees sprang to life; the South Carolina legislature passed several measures further restricting slave movement and augmenting military preparations. But when the rumors faded, and it became clear that no slaves had joined in Brown's insurrection or any other, relieved southerners momentarily calmed down. The insurrectionists represented only a small number of monomaniacal Yankees. Some claimed that the events had actually vindicated slavery by proving that slaves everywhere were loyal and content. The raid itself, one Richmond paper had observed early on, was "a miserably weak and contemptible affair."

Northern opinion passed through its own series of revisions and reversals. Initially, the raid shocked even some radical abolitionists -- "misguided, wild, and apparently insane," Garrison said, though he would not renounce the terrorists. But Brown's gallantry in defeat quickly led to the rise of a virtually religious cult of the man in anti-slavery circles. At the hour of his hanging, northern church bells tolled from Boston to Chicago. Ministers preached special sermons on Brown's sacrifice; those in attendance at mass meetings bowed their heads in worshipful silence. Well before execution day, New

England abolitionists and intellectuals were beside themselves: Thoreau wrote "A Plea for Captain Brown" and called him "a transcendentalist above all, a man of ideas and principles"; and Emerson predicted that Brown would "make the gallows as glorious as the cross."

Illustrators churned out portraits of Brown and his exploits; hagiographies flew off northern presses. And in the wake of Brown's apotheosis a renewed wave of fury and fresh rumors washed over the South. How, one Baltimore newspaper asked, could southerners any longer "live under a government, a majority of whose subjects or citizens regard John Brown as a martyr and Christian hero?" A virtual reign of terror ensued, in which touchy southerners, persuaded that every Yankee was a potential John Brown, appropriated new funds for military preparations and committed random acts of violence against the northerners in their midst. There were several reported lynchings.

According to Reynolds, Brown's ultimate historical importance lies in creating this wave of fear. For decades, southerners had worried that northern abolitionists would instigate a massive slave rebellion. From the alleged Denmark Vesey conspiracy of 1822 through Nat Turner's bloody rampage nine years later, southern pro-slavery leaders blamed Yankee agitators for slave unrest; and through the 1830s and 1840s, the southern states built a legal wall along the Mason-Dixon Line to keep out incendiary abolitionist preachings. John Brown was the slaveholders' worst nightmare come true; and even though he failed, the northern celebration of him fed southern panic and paranoia that led directly to secession and Civil War. Disunionism -- which Reynolds claims was weak in the South, even in 1860 -- would have carried little weight except for the terror that followed the attack on Harpers Ferry. And although Reynolds allows that nothing could have prevented an eventual war over slavery, he insists that "Brown emerges as a positive agent for change because he forced a war that would have come anyway but could only have been worse than it was."

But in truth, Brown forced nothing. Disunionism was not weak in the South, especially the Deep South. John C. Breckinridge, the fire-eating southern candidate for president in 1860, may have only carried 18 percent of the national vote, a figure that Reynolds emphasizes; but Breckinridge handily swept the lower South, winning nearly 60 percent of the vote in Mississippi, 75 percent in Texas, and strong majorities elsewhere. (Stephen Douglas, the only northerner besides Lincoln in the race, ran dismally in the South, winning 4.8 percent in Mississippi and only .03 percent -- a grand total of 18 votes -- in Texas.) After Lincoln won the presidency, Unionism prevailed for a time in the Border South, but not in the secessionist heart of Dixie, where delegates to the state secession conventions divided mainly between those who preferred immediate disunion and those who preferred to wait until other southern states had seceded. The panic that followed Brown's raid may have played into the hands of the most determined southern disunionists, but the evidence runs strongly in favor of the idea that much of the South would have quickly seceded once Lincoln or any other Republican won the presidency.

Nor was southern disunionism the product of paranoia. However moderate they were in comparison to the abolitionists, the Republicans posed a clear and present danger to the

future of the slaveholders' peculiar democracy. Lincoln had pledged to undo *Dred Scott*, which he considered illegitimate. He and his party were committed to banning slavery in all of the nation's territories, thereby placing slavery on the road to extinction. The nation, Republicans said, would cease to be a house divided; and they were dedicated to seeing that it would be a nation of freedom, not slavery. As Lincoln proclaimed in his mostly conciliatory first inaugural address, the conflict was clear-cut, pitting "[o]ne section of our country which believes slavery is *right*, and ought to be extended," against "the other [which] believes it is *wrong*, and ought not to be extended." Once the Republicans had captured the White House as well as the House majority, it was perfectly rational for slaveholders to believe that what the Georgian Alexander Stephens called the "corner-stone" of their civilization was doomed. It was also perfectly rational for the northern Republican Charles Francis Adams to observe, after Lincoln's triumph, that "[t]here is now scarcely a shadow of a doubt that the great revolution has actually taken place, and that the country has once and for all thrown off the domination of the Slaveholders."

Brown's raid, instead of forcing the Republican revolution, actively damaged it, by linking anti-slavery with treasonous insurrection against the United States -- an idea that, no matter how popular among the radicals of Boston, was politically dangerous in key northern states from New York westward to Indiana and Illinois. Indeed, had the attack on Harpers Ferry somehow succeeded (as Reynolds projects it might well have done), the Republicans would most likely have lost the election of 1860. A prolonged military counter-offensive against Brown would have divided staunchly anti-slavery New England against the lower North, handing the northern Democrat Douglas (most likely) the electoral votes of New York, Ohio, Illinois, and Indiana. This would have been more than sufficient to throw the election into the House of Representatives where, according to the one-state, one-vote rule, a pro-southern candidate would almost certainly have prevailed. Fortunately for the Republicans, however, Brown failed in everything except captivating the hearts and minds of some over-excited New England intellectuals and causing a posthumous wave of sympathy in the North and terror in the South. Running, in effect, against Brown by denouncing his assault as an act of treason, Republicans fared well in the off-year elections in 1859.

In only one paradoxical respect did Brown unintentionally advance the anti-slavery cause and hasten the coming of the Civil War. In late 1859, the odds-on favorite to win the Republican presidential nomination was William Seward of New York -- a man considered even by many Republicans as too much of a firebrand. After Brown's raid, northern Democrats immediately singled out Seward as the true instigator of the uprising, which put him on the defensive and led him to announce that he approved of Brown's execution. Seward's rival, the more moderate-sounding Lincoln, was able to capitalize and draw a finer, vital distinction: although Brown "agreed with us in thinking slavery wrong," this alone "cannot excuse violence, bloodshed, and treason." Many factors led the Republicans finally to nominate Lincoln and not Seward, but the effects of Brown's raid was one of them. Ironically, President Lincoln proved, during the secession crisis in 1861, far more stubborn in resisting any compromise with the departing southern states than the supposed hothead Seward, whom he had named his secretary of state.

Here lay Brown's final political importance. By frightening the Republicans, he contributed to the nomination of the Kentucky-born moderate Lincoln -- the radical abolitionists' "slave-hound of Illinois." Lincoln's combination of outward courtesy to the South and firmness on the issue of slavery's immorality allowed him to win the lower northern states and thus the election, which Seward may not have been able to do. His election immediately sparked southern secession; and his unyielding resistance to secession led to the Civil War.

So Brown played a role, though it was tiny compared with his grandiose expectations (and the grandiose claims of his admirers). He indirectly helped to put a Republican moderate into the White House. A Civil War ensued -- not the slave uprising that Brown had envisaged, but a sectional conflict. And in that war, the side that bore the onus of insurrection and treason to the American republic was not the anti-slavery North, but the Confederate States of America.

VII.

The legend of John Brown remained. Northern soldiers did indeed sing "John Brown's Body" when marching to battle, although the song was originally meant as a joke directed against another John Brown altogether, a humorless Scotsman in the Massachusetts 12th Regiment. When Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, turning the war to end secession into a war to end slavery, Brown's surviving partisans quickly celebrated their hero as the true man of the moment -- if not the Great Emancipator, then the Great Anticipator. And after the war, as the revolutionary hopes of equality as well as freedom faded, embittered Americans, and especially embittered blacks, looked to the example of Brown, sometimes alongside Lincoln's, sometimes alone, as a beacon of courage and integrity in reactionary times.

Something like this pessimistic mood may account for the revived interest in Brown's legend, rooted in the chaotic radical politics of the late 1960s and early 1970s but now spread more generally among liberal-minded Americans, who are frustrated by their own impotence in electoral politics during the age of Reagan and after. "America," Reynolds writes, "has become a vast network of institutions that tend to stifle vigorous challenges from individuals.... America must be large enough to allow for meaningful protest, instead of remaining satisfied with patriotic bromides and a capitalist mass culture that fosters homogenized complacency." It is a familiar sentiment in liberal circles, including academic liberal circles, and it sometimes hardens into cynicism.

One problem with this wish for "vigorous challenges from individuals" is that, contrary to Reynolds's spirited demurrs, the American who most fully emulated John Brown in recent years was Timothy McVeigh. (If you object that McVeigh was a right-wing madman and not a carrier of the Anglo-American radical tradition, Gore Vidal will be happy to correct you.) In the era since the atrocities of September 11, 2001, one ought to be careful about finding some deeper good in terrorist politics of any kind. Reynolds forthrightly addresses this problem, and notes that the scale of the slaughter unleashed by Osama bin Laden makes his acts different in kind from John Brown's -- but this only leads one to wonder what Brown might have done if he had jet airplanes at his disposal.

And in the matter of slaying defenseless persons for a higher political and religious cause, the body count is not an instructive marker between good and evil.

Since America is a democratic republic, and since that republic survived the Civil War, we are fated to confront the legacy of John Brown whenever normal politics seems too blocked, too slow, too deafened to the cries of injustice. It is not so much a contrast between radicals and moderates: plenty of radicals refused to join Brown's operation, no matter how much they celebrated him in later years. The contrast posed by Brown is between a savage, heedless politics of purity and a politics of the possible. In flat political times, when the possible seems shrunken and democracy seems hollow, Brown materializes as a noble figure, an egalitarian paragon, a man ahead of his time. David Reynolds's book forces the matter yet again, in tones appropriate to its own time, and for that it is worth arguing with -- and for understanding all over again that John Brown was not a harbinger of idealism and justice, but a purveyor of curdled and finally destructive idealism. This is what Abraham Lincoln understood. John Brown deserves to live in American history not as a hero, but as a temptation -- and as a warning about the damage wrought by righteous American terrorists, not just to their victims but also to their causes.

Sean Wilentz's new book, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln*, has just been published by Norton.