"BUT HOW AND IN WHAT BALANCE WEIGH JOHN BROWN": NORTHERN REACTION TO JOHN BROWN'S RAID

Joshua Daniel Rothman
Staten Island, New York

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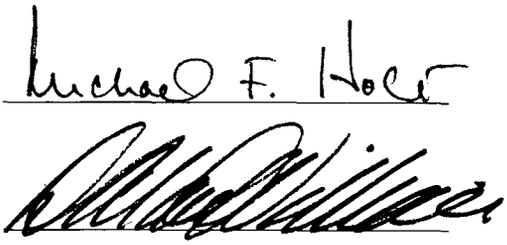

I. Introduction -- John Brown's Raid and a "Confusion of Voices"

In the middle of the night of October 16, 1859, John Brown led a group of eighteen men over a railroad bridge that crossed the Potomac River from Maryland into Virginia. On the other side of the bridge lay the small town of Harper's Ferry, significant primarily because it housed a United States arsenal, armory, and gun factory. Brown took the bridge and arsenal watchmen as his hostages, had his men cut the telegraph wires that ran through the town, seized the armory, and announced to his prisoners: "I came here from Kansas, and this is a slave State; I want to free all the negroes in this State; I have possession now of the United States armory, and if the citizens interfere with me I must only burn the town and have blood."[1] With these words, John Brown's raid had begun.

Most Americans had heard of John Brown before October 1859. He achieved national notoriety as a guerrilla warrior and leader of free soil forces in the Kansas war in 1855-1856, during which he received the honorary title of "Captain" and the nicknames "Old Brown" and "Ossawatomie Brown," the latter in recognition of the location of the homestead Brown shared with several of his sons (one of whom was killed by a proslavery settler in 1856). He was most notorious for being implicated in the massacre of five proslavery settlers at Pottawatomie Creek. After leaving Kansas, Brown vanished from the public spotlight, surfacing again only briefly in 1858 after leading a raid into Missouri during which a slaveholder was killed and some of his slaves and horses were stolen. Brown then escorted the slaves to Canada, where they were freed.

Between the Kansas escapades of 1855-1856 and the raid on Harper's Ferry in 1859, however, John Brown had been a very busy man. Fanatically religious, Brown had virulently opposed the institution of slavery for much of his life because he believed it to be an abominable violation of divine law. After the Kansas wars, he began to conceive of a plot to spark a slave uprising in the South and end slavery once and for all. He believed

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[1]Oswald Garrison Villard, *John Brown: A Biography Fifty Years Later,* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1910), p. 430.

that Southern slaves all wanted desperately to be free and that, if they knew they could gain access to weapons, they would spontaneously rise up and rebel against their masters. Brown thought that his plot could begin with the seizing of the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry. After he expropriated the weapons and freed the slaves in the surrounding area, the rebellion he initiated would spread on its own accord further and further South until all slaves were free. As Brown later explained, "If I could conquer Virginia, the balance of the Southern States would nearly conquer themselves, there being such a large number of slaves in them."[2] To the end of serving as the catalyst of this great reaction, Brown set about recruiting men to join him in his mission and raising money to purchase supplies and weapons.

Brown traveled all across the American North and into Canada in 1857-1858. He recruited men for his plan from various locations. Some he had fought with in Kansas; others were neighbors who lived near Brown's home in upstate New York; others came from places of strong antislavery activity in the Northwest and Canada; three were his own sons. Together, they were a body of twenty-one mostly young men whom one author has called "a body of reckless, adventurous young drifters with a few true idealists."[3] For financial support Brown located small sources in the Northwest, but the majority of his financing came from a small group of abolitionist elites concentrated in Boston who became known as the "Secret Six" and who agreed to create a secret committee among themselves for the purpose of supporting Brown's insurrectionary project.[4]

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[2]Stephen B. Oates, *To Purge This Land With Blood: A Biography of John Brown,* (Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, second edition, 1984), pp. 278-279.

[3]Allan Nevins, *Ordeal of the Union: The Emergence of Lincoln* (Vol. II), (New York, 1950), p. 17. For a short biographical sketch of each of John Brown's men, see Villard, pp. 678-687.

[4]The members of the "Secret Six" were Samuel Gridley Howe, Theodore Parker, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, George Stearns, Franklin Sanborn, and Gerrit Smith. After the denouement of the raid, Smith became hysterical and entered an insane asylum. Howe, Stearns and Sanborn fled to Canada, and Parker was already abroad in Europe. Only Higginson stood his ground, daring authorities to arrest him. None of the Secret Six was ever prosecuted for his complicity in the raid. The best work available on the Secret Six is Jeffery Rossbach, *Ambivalent Conspirators: John Brown, the Secret Six, and a Theory of Slave Violence,* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982).

Originally, the raid was scheduled for 1858 and Brown was prepared, even arranging a meeting in May 1858 in Chatham, Ontario, to ratify the "Provisional Constitution," a document he had written to serve as the basis of the new government he planned to institute in the South after the slave rebellion. As one scholar writes, "the Chatham convention was the climax of all Brown's feverish preparations. Now he was ready to go to war; he had never been more fiercely determined in his life."[5] Only the threat of Hugh Forbes, a Briton Brown had hired to train his men in military tactics and who Brown subsequently was delinquent in paying, to reveal the plot to politicians in Washington unless he received his salary delayed the raid for a year, during which Brown launched his raid into Missouri as a diversion and an attempt to discredit Forbes.

By the spring of 1859, the raid had been rescheduled. Brown returned to Boston one last time, said farewell to his family in New York, and left for Harper's Ferry in June. He rented a farm in Maryland about five miles from Harper's Ferry and spent the summer waiting for his recruits to arrive. By October he could wait no longer and launched his attack, taking nearly forty hostages during the first few hours of the raid, including Lewis Washington, a descendant of the first President.

John Brown's raid was short-lived. By the morning of October 17, word of what was occurring at the armory had spread through the town of Harper's Ferry and into the surrounding countryside. Farmers and local militia companies quickly converged on the raiders. During exchanges of gunfire, a number of townspeople and some of Brown's men were killed. Brown was forced to leave behind all but eleven of his hostages and to retreat into a single building, the engine-house of the armory. Meanwhile, notice of what was happening had been sent to President James Buchanan in Washington by the B&O Railroad. (A train had passed through Harper's Ferry during the night, and after stopping it briefly, Brown inexplicably had allowed it to go on its way, whereupon a railroad

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[5]Oates, *Purge*, p. 246.

employee informed the company of the raid). Buchanan quickly dispatched artillery and Marines to the site. As late as Monday night, Brown probably could have escaped by retreating into the mountains that surrounded the town on both sides. No one knows just why he hesitated, but by early Tuesday morning, the Marines under the command of Robert E. Lee and J.E.B. Stuart had completely surrounded the engine-house. Brown and what remained of his band of men were trapped. Later on Tuesday morning, after a brief attempt at negotiating a surrender, the Marines assaulted the engine-house. John Brown's raid was over.

For all his experience in Kansas, John Brown was an astoundingly poor military tactician. He had planned his raid without making any reconnaissance of the area to plan a possible escape route. He had brought no food with him on the raid and, once the bridges had been taken, placed a river between himself and his supplies five miles away in Maryland. In addition, Brown had spread out his sparse number of men, even leaving three of them behind on the farm. Finally, Brown failed to attempt to speak to any of the slaves in the area and inform them of the plot before launching it. If he had, he might have realized that Harper's Ferry was a disastrous choice as a locale from which to start a slave uprising, since there were few slaves and no plantations in the area. Ultimately, however, no matter how well Brown prepared himself, the plan was preposterous even in its very conception. To think that eighteen men could hold off fourteen hundred townsmen, the Virginia state militia, and the United States military until slaves somehow magically gathered to help fight them quite obviously was absurd.

In all, during the brief raid, three townsmen, one slaveholder and one Marine were killed. Ten of Brown's men were killed or fatally wounded (including two of Brown's sons), five of his men were captured, and seven escaped (two were later caught). Had Marine Lieutenant Israel Green been wearing his regulation sword on October 18, John Brown's raid might have ended as simply the brash act of a few lunatics. But Green was wearing his dress sword when he stormed the engine-house, and when he attacked Brown,

the blade bent. Brown was wounded. But he would live to tell the tale of his raid during his trial on charges of treason, murder, and inciting rebellion, and in the month between the day he was convicted and December 2, 1859, the day he hanged. He was able to explain why he came to Harper's Ferry, eliciting reaction and response from all over the country. As the newspapers began to relate the Harper's Ferry affair to readers across the nation, John Brown's raid was already over, but the story was just beginning.[6]

In analyzing the coming of the Civil War, historians traditionally include a discussion of John Brown's raid as one of the critical events preceding and precipitating military conflict, which broke out just eighteen months after the incident at Harper's Ferry. It was indeed a dramatic event. Historians understandably are inclined to see in the raid, which posed abolitionists determined to free slaves by paramilitary incursion against Southern slaveholders equally determined to repel such an invasion and maintain their property, a precursory encapsulation of the Civil War and a point after which war became inevitable. Allan Nevins suggests, for example, that after Harper's Ferry, "emotion North and South had now passed the point at which moderate utterances could have an emollient influence. If they pleased one side they seemed provocative to the other."[7] Oswald Garrison Villard writes that "the raid revealed to many besides John Brown that there was to be a bloody conflict on a far greater scale; and no student of this period can fail to be impressed by the prevision of coming events given to hundreds, if not thousands, on both

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[6]The literature on the various stages of the planning and execution of John Brown's raid, as well as of Brown's escapades in Kansas, is voluminous. The best biographies of Brown are Villard's and Oates's works, as well as Jules Abels, *Man On Fire: John Brown and the Cause of Liberty,* (New York, 1971). Other worthy accounts of the raid include those in Nevins and in David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861,* completed and edited by Don E. Fehrenbacher, (New York, 1976). For a historiographical essay on the John Brown literature, see Stephen B. Oates, "John Brown and His Judges: A Critique of the Historiographical Literature," *Civil War History,* vol. XVII, no. 1 (March 1971), pp. 5-24. For a more recent version of that essay, with some modifications in its contents and conclusions, see Stephen B. Oates, "John Brown and His Judges" in Oates, *Our Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln, John Brown, and the Civil War Era,* (Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1979), pp. 22-42. For a recent article on the denouement of the raid, see Robert E. McGlone, "Forgotten Surrender: John Brown's Raid and the Cult of Martial Values," *Civil War History,* Vol. XL, no. 3 (1994), pp. 185-201.

[7]Nevins, p. 107.

sides."[8] C. Vann Woodward and Stephen Oates echo one another in their assessment of the raid's impact. Woodward writes that after the raid, "paranoia continued to induce counterparanoia, each antagonist infecting the other reciprocally, until the vicious spiral ended in war,"[9] while Oates states that Brown's "raid and public execution had set in motion a spiral of accusation and counteraccusation between Northerners and Southerners that spun the nation inexorably toward civil war."[10] In short, John Brown's raid has become a significant historiographical standard. Bertram Wyatt-Brown recently acknowledged this, writing that "every generation of historians must wrestle with the meaning of this event and John Brown's relationship to the coming of the Civil War."[11]

These evaluations of the impact of John Brown's raid suggest that the event had a polarizing effect on the nation, pushing the North and South apart even further than before, increasing mutual antagonisms and edging both sections toward the point at which they were willing to engage in military conflict. Historians have been relatively clear about this effect with respect to the South. Southerners, historians have argued, believed that most Northerners supported or were sympathetic to John Brown, and the raid thus intensified the antebellum Southern siege mentality. Avery Craven, for example, writes that "a wave of indignation, hatred, and fear swept across the whole South to give it a unity it had not known before."[12] Oates concurs that the raid "had so alarmed Southern whites that henceforth any compromise between them and Northern Republicans was impossible. And nobody was more exultant about the effects of Harper's Ferry than Southern secessionists,

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[8]Villard, p. 476.
[9]C. Vann Woodward, "John Brown's Private War," in Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History,* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, revised edition, 1968), p. 68.
[10]Oates, *Purge,* p. 359.
[11]Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "'A Volcano Beneath a Mountain of Snow': John Brown and the Problem of Interpretation," in Paul Finkelman, ed., *His Soul Goes Marching On: Responses to John Brown and the Harpers Ferry Raid,* (Charlottesville, Va., University of Virginia Press, 1995), p. 10.
[12]Avery O. Craven, *The Growth of Southern Nationalism,* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1953), p. 307.

who used Brown's name to whip Southern crowds into a frenzy of anti-Republican, anti-Northern hatred."[13]

It takes more than one side to make a war, however, and historians have failed to reach a consensus assessment of the impact of John Brown's raid on the American North. Generally, they have argued that the raid was significant in some way in heightening the sectional tensions and divisions of the antebellum period, within the North as well as the South, yet collectively they seem unsure as to just how. As Paul Finkelman writes, we "know a great deal about Brown, his raid on Harper's Ferry, and those with whom he associated. We know less, however, about the meaning of that raid and the nation's response to it."[14] Some historians have argued that Brown's raid pushed Northerners together in an increasingly antislavery and anti-Southern position. Craven, for example, suggests that "the John Brown raid had cleared the air and forced many Northerners to admit that, while they abhorred violence, they found themselves approving both of Brown's motives and of his purposes."[15] Others have asserted a contrary position, that most Northerners actually rejected John Brown as a lunatic and his raid as fanatical. The real significance of the raid to these scholars was that Southerners *believed* Northern support for Brown was pervasive. By helping to create false stereotypes, the raid thus contributed to the antebellum Southern siege mentality and to overall sectional tension. One author writes that "a great deal of evidence could be adduced to show that responsible opinion in the North did not support devotees of insurrection. . . . But to the South, these reassurances were not convincing."[16]

I would suggest that this uncertainty among historians as to the impact of John Brown's raid on the North can be explained in part by the sources historians have used to

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[13]Oates, *Our Fiery Trial*, p. 13.
[14]Paul Finkelman, "Preface: John Brown and His Raid," in Finkelman, ed., *His Soul Goes Marching On*, p. 4.
[15]Craven, p. 312.
[16]Potter, p. 380.

assess it. Historians have focused on only certain manifestations of response by Northerners to the raid. Usually cited are the rhetorical reactions of preachers, politicians and other public figures, and newspaper editors (a triad the New York *Herald* referred to as "the pulpit, the platform, and the press"[17]). Also often recognized in historical accounts are the public displays of sympathy by Northerners on the day John Brown was hanged, or the "Union meetings" held in many Northern cities to attempt to counteract the supportive impression for Brown left by these displays of sympathy.[18] Finally, the status of semi-martyrdom Brown achieved among Northerners and particularly among Northern troops during the war is cited as evidence of the raid's impact on the North.[19]

Professional rhetoricians and editors, however, are bound to speak in polarizing and highly politically loaded terms that tend to leave little room for middle ground, especially with regard to an issue as potentially volatile as John Brown's raid. Likewise, speakers at sympathy and Union meetings generally were bound to be of a single frame of mind, each in direct opposition to the other. Historians are thus apt to see in those expressions either general support for John Brown and his raid or general rejection of it, depending which they choose to stress. In addition, those historians who note the significance of John Brown as a martyred symbol during the Civil War are somewhat guilty of reading backward into history and claiming for 1859 what may not have emerged until after 1861.

No historical account has yet attempted an analysis of what Northern citizens actually thought and felt about Brown's raid in 1859. If the raid is to remain in historical accounts as a significant impetus for the Civil War, then it is imperative that we attempt to

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[17]New York *Herald,* Dec. 5, 1859.

[18] In many locales, for example, bells were rung, guns were fired, and prayer meetings were convened. See descriptions in the New York *Times* and in most Northern newspapers of Dec. 3, 1859. For the use of these displays by historians, see Nevins, p. 98, or Potter, pp. 378-380 as examples, but nearly every historian studying John Brown's raid mentions these displays at some point. For descriptions of Union meetings, see the New York *Times* or most Northern papers from Dec. 8, 1859 through the end of the year.

[19]Nevins writes, for example, that "a great legend had been created in the North; a legend that was to place its mark on political thought, influence multitudes at the ballot box, and within two years send armies into battle singing 'John Brown's Body.'" (Nevins, p. 99)

take an account of just how it was perceived by Americans in their own words, rather than in the words of those paid to talk about it or those writing fawning songs and poetry about it years later. In the following, I shall attempt such an account of the reaction of Northern citizens to John Brown's raid, not through the speeches of public figures and politicians, but rather as expressed by individual citizens themselves in the hundreds of letters from all across the North sent to Governor Henry Alexander Wise of Virginia between the time of Brown's raid and his execution, as well as in letters from citizens to newspaper editors and to prominent politicians and public figures of the period.

An analysis of these opinions does not reveal a general hostility toward the South or slavery, or general support for John Brown or his raid. Neither, however, do they demonstrate that Northerners generally brushed off Brown as a lunatic. Rather, while they suggest the truth of the statement that most Northerners repudiated the raid at Harper's Ferry, they also show a wide spectrum of opinion about the intentions and motivations that lay behind the raid, about John Brown as an individual, and about the relative importance of the raid and Brown's execution to sectional tensions.

There is no way of demonstrating the representative nature of the opinions expressed in letters mailed by Northern citizens. There were no polls taken in 1859, and in most cases it is difficult to determine information about the authors of the letters beyond their names and home towns. Sometimes, in fact, they are anonymous. Nevertheless, simply by the diversity of their opinions the authors collectively suggest that Northerners were not united in any sense by John Brown's raid. On the contrary, they were divided internally along political and moral lines by the event and its aftermath and their opinions ran the gamut from praise to repulsion, with varying intermediate degrees and explanations. This diversity suggests a second reason for the uncertainty of historians. They have not reached a consensus as to Northern reaction, because in the North a consensus about John Brown and the meaning of his raid does not appear to have developed before the Civil War. Tending to stress either sympathy for Harper's Ferry or opposition to it in the North,

scholars have failed to explore sufficiently the significance of the fact that they existed simultaneously. As one scholar has suggested, the Harper's Ferry raid "plunged the North into what seemed a confusion of voices."[20] This collective ambivalence among Northern citizens suggests that perhaps we need to rethink the importance of John Brown's raid as a precipitant of military conflict in 1861.

II. The Northern Press and John Brown's Raid

Before exploring the reaction of Northern citizens to the raid on Harper's Ferry, it is important to examine the way the Northern press responded to it. Such a detour may seem odd considering the skepticism expressed above about utilizing the press as a source to demonstrate Northern response to the raid. To suggest that the press may not be the ideal source for an investigation of Northern response, however, is not to suggest that the press was an insignificant part of public debate. On the contrary, it is critical to understand the ways in which newspapers covered and framed the John Brown story, because newspapers were the primary source of news information for most literate Northerners in 1859.

While visiting the United States in the 1860s, Edward Dicey remarked that "the American might be defined as a newspaper-reading animal."[21] Dicey was simply making an observation, but the 1860 census supports his statement with evidence. The census reported that there were 4051 newspapers and periodicals published in the United States

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[20]Oates, *Our Fiery Trial*, p. 13. Most recently, Finkelman has also suggested that Northern opinion was internally divided, writing that "Northerners variously came to see Brown as an antislavery saint, a brave but foolish extremist, a lunatic, and a threat to the Union." (Finkelman, "Preface: John Brown and His Raid," p. 3). Other historians have also noted that there was internal division in the North with regard to John Brown's raid. The point is that nearly all scholars insist on making some sort of generalization or on focusing on one facet of Northern reaction, either supportive or condemnatory of Brown. I hope to discuss the various strains of Northern opinion among citizens, where Finkelman, Oates and others merely assert that variety existed without developing the implications that variety had for the relationship of John Brown's raid to the coming of the Civil War.

[21]quoted in Charles Royster, *The Destructive War: William Tecumseh Sherman, Stonewall Jackson, and the Americans,* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), p. 238.

with a total circulation of 928 million, or 34.36 for every white person in the country.[22] To cite a per capita statistic is somewhat misleading, however, as the number of publications was significantly larger in the North, and more than half the total national circulation originated in just three states -- New York, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts.[23] In sum, "by the time of John Brown's raid . . . the American press had become a pervasive presence."[24]

It could be questioned, perhaps, whether Northerners really read the massive numbers of newspapers available to them. Letters to Governor Wise suggest that they did. Not every writer, but a significant number specifically note that they were responding to the raid based on and because of what they had read in their newspaper. Others included clippings from their local papers along with their letters. If we want to understand how Northerners responded to the events at Harper's Ferry, we must attempt to describe the information to which they were responding. Obviously, it is impossible to determine all of the ways an individual might have formulated an opinion on John Brown and his raid. Certainly, people received information from, and exchanged information with, their preachers, their friends, their families, and any number of other sources. But it "was preeminently the newspapers . . . which told the people about John Brown, what he did and what happened to him."[25] As Henry Moore, a teacher from Lynn, Massachusetts wrote, seemingly expressing the sentiments of many Northerners: "I know nothing of Brown whatever, except what I read in the public journals."[26]

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[22]John Edward Byrne, "The News From Harper's Ferry: The Press as Lens and Prism for John Brown's Raid," (Ph.D dissertation, George Washington University, 1987), pp. 24-25. Byrne is the only scholar I have been able to locate who has undertaken a detailed and systematic study of the American press response to and coverage of the raid.

[23]Ibid., p. 43. An unscientific sampling by the author of 169 letters to Governor Wise reveals that the largest numbers came from New York (51), Massachusetts (30), and Pennsylvania (22). This may be partially attributable to the populations of these states relative to others, but it is not unreasonable to suggest that the massive amounts of information from the press available in these states may have influenced citizens to respond.

[24]Ibid., p. 24.

[25]Ibid., p. 8.

[26]Moore to Governor Wise, Nov. 6, 1859, Executive Papers Relating to John Brown's Raid (Harper's Ferry), Virginia State Library, Richmond. (Hereafter cited as EP-JBR).

The information available in newspapers about the raid at Harper's Ferry essentially took two forms. One was the editorial response, where editors attempted to frame the raid and its aftermath. The other was the actual coverage of the events of John Brown's raid, his trial, and his sentencing and execution (as well as the interim between the latter two). Each form of information was significant in its own ways, and for the sake of analysis it is useful to discuss them separately.

"Reacting to One Another" -- Northern Editors and the Politicization of John Brown

In 1859, most major daily newspapers still had close ties to political parties, and their editorials reflected their respective partisan lines on major public issues. John Brown's raid added a new and dramatic dimension to the issue of slavery, the most salient political topic of the late 1850s. Given the additional factor that the raid occurred just over three weeks before the November state and local elections (and just over a year before the next Presidential election), the potential it had to influence politics seemed substantial.

To most editors, in fact, it appeared unlimited, and coverage of John Brown's raid seemed almost that as well. For weeks, Northern newspapers were dominated by the John Brown story both in news and commentary -- so much so that some New York *Herald* readers began to complain. As the *Herald* wrote on November 6: "we have received a large number of communications . . . from correspondents of both sexes who have had too much of Brown. They object to Brown. They say Brown has become a bore . . . . Our correspondents say there is nothing in the papers but Brown, and Harper's Ferry, and the irrepressible conflict, and other matters connected with the same enchanting subjects. Is there nothing else in the world, we are asked, but the irrepressible conflict? Are we to be continually bored to death with niggers and politicians?"[27]

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[27]New York *Herald,* Nov. 6, 1859.

The question of reader interest, however, does not appear to have concerned the editors. Instead, they were concerned most with how John Brown's raid would fit into the contemporary political calculus and with using the raid to maximize the political advantage of their respective parties in that calculus. The result, to the detriment of informed public debate, was a highly self-contained and repetitive dialogue between partisan newspapers rather than a careful examination of John Brown's raid itself and the significance of that event. As one author has written, "Democrats and Republicans spent more time reacting to one another than to Brown or his raid."[28]

If Northern Democratic editors could have created the ideal political weapon to use against their Republican foes, it is unlikely they could have devised one better than John Brown's raid. They had been warning since the founding of the Republican party that agitation of the slavery issue would only end in disaster for the nation. John Brown's raid had presented the nation with a vision of the large scale disaster Democrats predicted -- violent slave uprisings, death and destruction of property -- without actually causing it. This provided a perfect opportunity for Democrats to step up their attacks on Republicans. It was one they would not miss.

Democratic editors began their assault on the Republicans almost instantly upon confirming the details of the raid, an assault that did not subside significantly in the weeks that followed. John Brown, in embarking on his raid, had been foolish enough to leave all of his correspondence relating to the planning of the incursion in a carpetbag in the Maryland farmhouse. Among Brown's correspondents were, obviously, members of the Secret Six and other antislavery figures. Other correspondents, however, included or mentioned prominent Republican politicians. Not all of the letters had to do with the raid, but simply the association with Brown was enough for Democratic papers, as their first

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[28]Betty L. Mitchell, "Massachusetts Reacts to John Brown's Raid," *Civil War History*, Vol. XIX, no. 1 (March 1973), p. 78.

point of attack, to implicate Republican leaders directly in Brown's actions. The New York *Herald* wrote that the letters discovered at the farm "reveal the existence of a vast conspiracy, aided by the funds of wealthy men, and encouraged by black republican politicians and other fanatics."[29] Two days later, the *Herald* reasserted this claim more forcefully, explicitly naming William Seward, Charles Sumner, John Hale, Joshua Giddings and others as co-conspirators with Brown: "They -- not the crazy fanatic John Brown -- are the real culprits; and it is they, not he, who, if justice were fairly meted out, would have to grace the gallows."[30] The *Herald* continued this line of attack for a number of weeks, calling for extradition, indictments, and trials of Republican politicians.

The *Herald,* however, was far from alone in its journalistic pursuit of those whom they believed had backed Brown. Other Democratic papers echoed this line. The Albany *Atlas and Argus,* for example, asked "Is it possible that anti-slavery agitators . . . have employed this desperate man as a fit agent to foment insurrection in the Slave States, with a view of rekindling the slavery excitement preparatory to the Presidential campaign of 1860?"[31] The Cleveland *Plain Dealer,* noting that Seward and Horace Greeley were abroad at the time of the raid, suggested that "we have only reached the penumbra of this dark spot. The evidence goes to show that the *mine* was expected to spring some months ago and point to the reason why Seward and Greeley left the country so as *not* to be in at the death."[32]

As the press sorted out the details of the planning stages of Brown's raid, it became relatively clear that the Republican politicians accused had not known about the raid in advance and had not been complicit in its execution. Democratic editors, reluctantly accepting the hollowness of their accusations, eased off of suggesting active Republican

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[29]New York *Herald,* Oct. 25, 1859.
[30]Ibid., Oct. 27, 1859.
[31]Albany *Atlas and Argus,* Oct. 19, 1859.
[32]Cleveland *Plain Dealer,* Oct. 29, 1859.

cooperation in the raid.[33] They were far from done with the Republicans, however. On the contrary, Democratic editors were left to focus on their most popular theme; namely, that John Brown's raid was simply a practical application of inflammatory Republican rhetoric, a logical extension of rhetorical antislavery agitation into action. Especially singled out for attack by most editors was Seward, Senator from New York. In 1858, during a speech in Rochester, New York, Seward had argued that the systems of slave labor and free labor existing in the United States were inherently in tension and ultimately could not coexist at all. He claimed:

> The two systems . . . are more than incongruous -- they are incompatible. They have never permanently existed together in one country, and they never can. . . . These antagonistic systems are continually coming into contact, and collision results. Shall I tell you what that collision means? They who think that it is accidental, unnecessary, the work of interested or fanatical agitators, and therefore ephemeral, mistake the case altogether. It is an irrepressible conflict between opposing and enduring forces, and it means that the United States must and will, sooner or later, become entirely a slaveholding nation, or entirely a free labor nation.[34]

The "irrepressible conflict" speech, as it quickly became known, was not radically different from Lincoln's oration in which he introduced the concept of the "house divided." But the difference for Democratic editors in focusing their attack on Seward was that, in late 1859, Seward, not Lincoln, appeared the front-runner for the 1860 Republican nomination. Democratic editors thus honed their critique of John Brown's raid in light of political circumstances, blaming Republicans in general and Seward in particular.

As usual, the *Herald* took the lead in the Democratic attack.[35] It printed a copy of the "irrepressible conflict" speech adjacent to reports of the raid on October 19. For readers who missed the obvious inference, it drove home the point on October 20, saying "that Mr.

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[33]Members of the Secret Six were still bombarded by the Democratic press, however, and the *Herald* in particular never stopped demanding that Howe, Smith, and Sanborn (their names had been especially prominent in the Brown correspondence) be placed on trial.

[34]Printed in New York *Herald,* Oct. 19, 1859.

[35]As one student of the American press has written, "The *Herald* was the most important and widely read American newspaper in the decades before the Civil War." (Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers,* [New York, Basic Books, 1978], p. 50).

Seward is the arch-agitator who is responsible for this insurrection, no one who has read his Rochester manifesto can deny."[36] The *Herald* extended this statement to Republicans generally, writing that "the only difference between the two [Republicans and Brown] is, that the one is the preaching of demagogues where their persons are safe, and the other the practical application of those preachings by fanatics under circumstances of personal danger."[37] While Brown may have been the actual perpetrator at Harper's Ferry, the *Herald* argued that "the moral responsibility [for the raid], unquestionably, involves every politician of every party actively concerned in the mischievous agitation of the slavery question during the last ten or fifteen years."[38]

Other Democratic papers followed the *Herald* in kind. The Cleveland *Plain Dealer,* critical of Republican attempts to pass off Brown as a lunatic, asserted that

> Brown is not isolated. He is betrayed and abandoned in his hour of need. He is no more *mad* than any other advocate of the 'irrepressible conflict'. . . . This is the legitimate fruit of Seward's 'irrepressible conflict' -- of Lincoln's 'house divided' -- of Gidding's [sic] 'hang them at their door porsts' [sic]. . . . Having set the ball of 'conflict' rolling between the free and the slave States, and proclaimed that it must go on until one or the other triumphs, they can not complain of those who would give the ball an accelerated and rapid impetus.[39]

The Boston *Daily Courier,* writing just after Brown's execution, argued that "Brown owes his infatuation on the subject of slavery to more selfish and more wary men -- to fanatics and demagogues, whose narrow-mindedness and personal ambition prompted them to teach by precept what he was ready to force by example."[40] The Albany *Atlas and Argus* posed the argument by asking the rhetorical "did he [Brown] do anything more than act out Mr. Seward's theory, and carry his principles into practical operation?"[41] Summing up the

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[36]New York *Herald,* Oct. 20, 1859.
[37]Ibid., Oct. 22, 1859.
[38]Ibid., Nov. 3, 1859.
[39]Cleveland *Plain Dealer,* Oct. 21, 1859.
[40]Boston *Daily Courier,* Dec. 6, 1859.
[41]Albany *Atlas and Argus,* Oct. 24, 1859.

thrust of the Democratic response to Harper's Ferry, the Wisconsin *Daily Patriot* asserted that "precisely what the Republican party preaches, Brown practices."[42]

Democratic editors, then, failed to focus on John Brown's raid and its significance. Instead, they primarily utilized the event as a tool in order to sway Americans from Republican political sympathies. Rarely were the papers as explicit as the *Herald,* which called in its election day editorial for Americans to turn out the Republicans whose rhetoric had yielded Harper's Ferry, saying "a small effort will extinguish a fire in the beginning. It is hard to quench it when it gains the ascendant."[43] But the message most Democrats wanted their readers to receive was clear: Republican rhetoric produced violence and madness -- vote Democratic.

When reports of the raid first appeared and Democratic papers reveled in the letters Brown had left at the farmhouse, Republican papers attempted to brush off Brown's raid as the act of a lunatic who had no affiliation with the Republican party. They repudiated as a cheap political trick Democratic efforts to pin the raid on the Republicans, and they insisted that the rhetoric of their party never even implied that violence was an acceptable way to end slavery. The New York *Tribune,* for example, wrote that "the attempt to connect the Republican Party with Old Brown's mad outbreak is a necessity of the Sham Democracy. This is a keen hunt for party capital, and will ultimately recoil on the hunters."[44] The Ohio *State Journal* wrote that

> The position of republicans on the subject of slavery is no dubious one that can be affected by the suspicions of hypocritical knaves, or by the reckless charges of a press that long ago abandoned all restraint of truth and all expectation of being believed. . . . Republicans are relieved from that precarious and suspicious position that makes it necessary for the treacherous friends of slavery in the North to seize on the insane invasion of a pitiable old man . . . in

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[42]Wisconsin *Daily Patriot,* Oct. 22, 1859.
[43]New York *Herald,* Nov. 8, 1859.
[44]New York *Tribune,* Oct. 20, 1859.

> order to make it an excuse for yielding everything to Southern demands."[45]

In the same vein, the Albany *Evening Journal* argued that "servile insurrections are not the fruits of political controversies in regard to Slavery Extension. . . . Law and order are the very things which the Republican Party was organized to preserve. Republicans, above all other men, condemn enterprises which menace public safety."[46] Republican papers thus tried to parry the thrusts of the Democratic press. In the first few days after the raid, however, the Republicans, unsure of the truth or falsehood of conspiracy rumors, were clearly on the defensive and could not refute the accusations effectively. As the *Evening Journal* lamely wrote, Democratic papers "charge the Republican party with encouraging the spirit of insurrection and civil war, for the purpose of securing the abolition of slavery. We have no answer to make to this reckless accusation, but we desire to place it on the record as an evidence of the unscrupulousness of our opponents."[47]

The Republican editors, however, were not above attempting to turn John Brown's raid to their own political advantage. As time passed and Democratic papers began to relent in their unfounded conspiracy charges, the Republican press increasingly took the offensive. Republicans were not responsible for the raid, they argued. On the contrary, it was actually the Democratic party that was to blame. The Republican argument here was somewhat more convoluted than the Democratic approach. Essentially, the Republicans claimed that through its orchestrated repeal of the Missouri Compromise and the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the Democrats had allowed for the settlement war that occurred in Kansas, during which John Brown had been driven insane by the violence of pro-slavery settlers and especially by the murder of his son. Brown was thus provoked by the Democrat-inspired Kansas war to wreak his revenge upon the system of slavery.[48]

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[45]Ohio *State Journal,* Oct. 22, 1859.
[46]Albany *Evening Journal,* Oct. 19, 1859.
[47]Ibid., Oct. 26, 1859.
[48]The Republican retort to Democratic accusations was premised, obviously, on the supposition that Brown was insane. This claim was probably the single most utilized by the Republicans through the time

The New York *Tribune,* taking a tack that would be familiar in Republican journals in the weeks to come, argued that "before the day of Kansas outrages and oppression, no such person as Ossawatomie Brown existed. . . . He was born of rapine, and cruelty and murder. Revenge rocked his cradle, disciplined his arm, and nerved his soul." The *Tribune* blamed the authors of the Kansas-Nebraska Act for the Harper's Ferry raid, turning the Democratic argument about the logic of political rhetoric achieving practical fruition upon its originators. The raid, the *Tribune* argued, is "a legitimate consequence of the Kansas-Nebraska bill, and but for the passage of that measure, would never have happened. President [Franklin] Pierce and Judge [Stephen] Douglas are thus the real authors of the late insurrection."[49] The Milwaukee *Sentinel* echoed the *Tribune,* repudiating Brown and attacking the Democrats in the same editorial:

> The attempt of John Brown to liberate the slaves of Virginia was a mad scheme enough; but the organized effort of . . . the Border Ruffians of Missouri, backed by a Democratic National Administration, to *force* Slavery upon the people of Kansas, and the damnable means by which the nefarious project was sought to be carried out, were infinitely more atrocious than anything that John Brown has done. The Democratic National Administration, the Democracy South and the Doughface Democracy North, were all part and pat in this 'nefarious and bloody work.'[50]

Along similar lines, the Chicago *Press and Tribune* tried to place a regional slant on its interpretation, singling out the Midwestern Democrats to blame for Harper's Ferry: "let the Democracy of the North -- particularly of the Northwest -- who, under the lead of Douglas, have stopped at nothing to degrade freedom and elevate Slavery, bear the burdens which their causeless criminality has imposed upon them. Republican skirts are clear."[51]

Democratic papers, responding to the Republican use of Kansas and Brown's insanity as mitigating factors for Harper's Ferry, noted that John Brown had participated in

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of Brown's execution to avoid any responsibility for Brown's raid (and to try and limit the responsibility of Brown himself). It is questionable whether or not the assumption was a sound one and it will be addressed later in this paper.

[49]New York *Tribune,* Oct. 28, 1859.

[50]Milwaukee *Sentinel,* Nov. 18, 1859.

[51]Chicago *Press and Tribune,* Oct. 21, 1859.

the brutal massacre and mutilation of five proslavery settlers at Pottawatomie Creek in 1856 months before his son was shot and killed by another proslavery settler. The Republicans naturally attempted to refute this reality and generally denied it was so. Acknowledging it would have raised questions of whether or not Brown was sane even before he went to Kansas and whether he actually provoked guerrilla warfare rather than being provoked himself. These would have posed a great inconvenience for Republican arguments and would have made it extremely difficult for them to shift blame for Harper's Ferry from John Brown onto Democratic politics and politicians.[52]

Naturally, Republican journals were not above taking shots directly at the system of slavery. This was traditionally one of their favorite subjects and ultimately, Republican editors, in criticizing the Democrats, were criticizing the institution without which there would have been no Kansas war and no raid at Harper's Ferry (and no Republican party) in the first place. When they were not defending themselves or attacking the Democrats, Republican editors went after slavery. As the New York *Tribune* wrote in its editorial the day after Brown's execution, "Slavery has killed John Brown. . . . Slavery and John Brown were foes to the death; Slavery for the moment is victor."[53] As Virginians, fearing that a rescue might be attempted, increased the military presence around the jailhouse in Charlestown where Brown was being held prisoner, Republican journals went out of their way to antagonize and ridicule the South for its paranoia. The Philadelphia *Daily Evening Bulletin,* for example, wrote that "there is evidently an epidemic madness in Virginia,

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[52]The details of Brown's affairs in Kansas were probably as intensely debated by the Northern press as his raid on Harper's Ferry. While the Republicans asserted that Brown had been driven crazy after the death of his son and was inspired at Harper's Ferry by revenge, Democrats responded with a report from George Washington Brown (no relation to John), Republican editor of the Lawrence, Kansas *Herald of Freedom,* in which the editor detailed John Brown's participation at Pottawatomie. (See, for example, New York *Herald,* Nov. 5, 1859). Brown undoubtedly was present at the time of the massacre and ordered and approved of the executions, although it is unknown if he actually played a part in carrying them out. Whether or not the Republican press knew of John Brown's participation in the massacre before the G.W. Brown piece appeared is unclear, but even after reading it, most of the Republican press denied it, printing spurious rebuttals such as those of John Brown's brother Jeremiah and of James Redpath, a reporter who had been in Kansas, which argued that Brown had been miles away from Pottawatomie when the killings occurred. (see, for example, the Albany *Evening Journal,* Nov. 28, 1859).

[53]New York *Tribune,* Dec. 3, 1859.

which is unaccountable among a people whose heroism used to be proverbial."[54] Likewise, the Republicans did not pass on the chance to suggest that perhaps a social system that induced such paranoia might not be worth keeping. As the Boston *Daily Advertiser* wrote, "Virginia may yet find that Brown has done her no greater mischief, than in giving her this opportunity for exposing to the world her own fears, as to the stability and safety of that system which she affects to regard as the foundation of her social welfare."[55]

Republican and Democratic papers did share one significant similarity. Both, preoccupied with attempting to outdo one another's attacks on the opponent, often failed to focus on the very issues they were ostensibly debating. Their political infighting served to detract attention from John Brown, his raid, and its significance. Instead, the emphasis was placed on who was to blame for the raid. Each paper, in looking to maximize political gain for its own party, found somewhere else to place it. Rarely, though, was the blame placed squarely on John Brown. Brown himself and his raid became at times almost epiphenomenal to the debates editors had with one another. In fact, the battle between Republican and Democratic papers had a certain inbred feel to it. Newspapers constantly made reference to editorials of their journalistic opponents, and each paper had particular opposition newspapers it singled out for attack. In this sense, the editorial response of the Northern press took on a regional as well as national significance, a logical means of attack given the local and state nature of the upcoming elections. For example, the New York *Tribune* often singled out the New York *Herald* for attack and utilized its editorial pieces for response, and vice versa. The same phenomenon occurred across the North -- between the

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[54]Philadelphia *Daily Evening Bulletin,* Nov. 25, 1859.

[55]Boston *Daily Advertiser,* Nov. 19, 1859. Democratic papers picked up on the large military presence and Southern paranoia as well, but generally poked fun at the Virginians in such a way as to convince them not to look so foolish and not to show their fear to slavery opponents. The Albany *Atlas and Argus,* for example, urged that "Virginia, at this moment, cannot afford to be ridiculous. She has been a proud State, resolute, self-reliant, governing others by her position, and the quiet influence of her self-command. She seems to be drifting off from her old position, and to be floating about at the mercy of every breeze and every wave." (Nov. 22, 1859). Whether or not Virginians took equal offense at Democratic and Republican jibes is unknown.

Albany *Evening Journal* and the Albany *Atlas and Argus,* between the Ohio State *Journal* and the Ohio *Statesman,* between the Chicago *Press and Tribune* and the Chicago *Times*, and so on.

The above discussion of Northern press reaction is not meant to suggest that editors never wrote about John Brown, the morality of his raid, the justice of his trial and sentence, and the meaning of his execution in terms of its impact on sectional tensions. They did, and many of the interpretations they presented were reflected in letters of citizens from all across the North, suggesting that editors did influence public opinion. Even when editors commented on John Brown's raid itself, however, those comments were nearly always couched in politically partisan terms, and editors never strayed far from their intent to make as much political capital as possible out of the raid through attacking the opposition in the North and laying blame for the raid therein. The result was not so much a spectrum of opinion as nearly a dichotomy of opinion and an openly aired internecine battle, rife with hostility and antagonism, between editors about each other and each other's political party as much as, if not more than, about John Brown's raid and its significance.

This appraisal cuts two ways in terms of using the press as a reflection of Northern reaction to Harper's Ferry. In one sense, it bolsters the thesis that there was no unified reaction to John Brown's raid in the North. Northern newspaper editors divided amongst themselves as to how to interpret the raid, based on their partisan political positions. As the newspapers contributed to shaping the public's response, they contributed to the internal divisions that we will see existed among Northern citizens. At the same time, however, the *ways* in which newspaper editors divided and battled place limitations on using editorials to appraise Northern reaction. Northern editors responded to John Brown's raid based on calculations with respect to Northern politics, and these limited their interpreting the raid and its aftermath as an event with ethical, moral, and political ramifications in its own right. Northern newspapers demonstrate canned partisan political responses to John Brown's raid, full of the hostility that the raid engendered in the political press. But newspapers less

successfully reflected the wide and diverse spectrum of reaction that existed among the Northern populace. As John Byrne has suggested about the editorial response to John Brown's raid, "Political considerations were prevalent. Given the strong political ties of the press of the time, the imminence of state and local elections, and concern about the crucial presidential elections in the coming year, it is not surprising that newspapers sought to make use of the John Brown story for political ends."[56]

"A Man Formed to be a Martyr" -- John Brown Creates His Own Legend

The political slants placed on John Brown's raid, however, were not all that Northerners read in their daily newspaper. Aside from the editorials, papers carried news coverage, reports of the events occurring at Harper's Ferry and, from Brown's trial to his execution, at Charlestown. Most papers received their news accounts from the New York Associated Press. Formed in 1848 by a consortium of New York newspapers that sought to take advantage of railroad and telegraph technology, A.P. reporters filed stories of news events from all across the country and sent their accounts via telegraph to New York, where they were shared by all newspapers subscribing to the service, in New York and elsewhere. The A.P. spared newspapers the costs of sending correspondents all over the United States to get first-hand coverage of an event. Simultaneously, the service allowed for news to be received more quickly and for stories to be gathered by reporters on the scene as the events unfolded.[57]

In terms of the raid at Harper's Ferry, A.P. news coverage was significant in two ways. First, it meant that the raid quickly became a national story. The telegraph and railroads carried John Brown's name and tales of his escapade to Americans in most parts of the nation just days after the raid occurred.[58] Brown's raid was one of the first national

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[56]Byrne, p. 248.
[57]Ibid., pp. 26-33.
[58]The West Coast and other locations on the Western side of the Rocky Mountains were the exception to this rule, and newspapers there did not receive information about John Brown's raid until weeks after the fact.

news events. Perhaps even more significantly, the A.P. stories filed on the raid contained almost no interpretation of events by the reporters filing them. Staff members of the A.P. were well aware that their stories were to be pooled -- used by newspapers across the political spectrum -- and that newspapers paying for stories would not tolerate a marked slant against their respective political positions. Thus, the wisest strategy for A.P. reporters was to remain as politically neutral as possible. Consequently, the stories resulting from these considerations were less stories per se than brief, factual summaries of events, and long quotations of interviews, trial testimony, and speeches.[59]

This second feature of A.P. stories, in turn, was significant to the John Brown story for two other reasons. In one respect, it meant that, unlike the editorials of the Northern press, the news coverage of the story was relatively unbiased and free of filtering through the political leanings of the writers.[60] Northerners could read accounts of the raid for themselves and form their opinions in conjunction with the interpretations provided to them by the editors. In another respect, however, it meant that John Brown had a forum all his own. Brown was well aware of the magnitude of what he had done and that the press would be hanging on (and probably printing) every word he uttered. He adjusted accordingly. John Brown was a poor military tactician, but even as he lay on the ground in the engine house at Harper's Ferry, he likely began calculating how to make the most of his failure.[61]

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[59]Byrne, p. 169.

[60]Byrne writes that the reporting on the John Brown story was "responsible and accurate," an "evenhanded presentation of factual information." (p. 412). Peter Knupfer has suggested that the nature of press coverage contributed to the politicization of editorials discussed above. Knupfer fails to emphasize the role of the A.P. in providing uniformity to news stories and instead suggests there was "widespread agreement in the North about the facts of the event and its outcome on the gallows." But he correctly asserts that the uniformity of coverage "permitted Northerners to shift the controversy toward more abstract and ultimately unresolvable issues." (Peter Knupfer, "A Crisis in Conservatism: Northern Unionism and the Harpers Ferry Raid," in Finkelman, ed., *His Soul Goes Marching On,* p. 147, n71).

[61]Brown had experience with the press corps while in Kansas and knew that the press was critical to insuring he could tell his story to the American public. As Byrne writes, "in this new situation, Brown did not shy away from the press even when facing reporters who were not disposed in his favor. The visionary could be a realist. The reporters would be writing his story. He courted them." (p. 164).

John Brown, through the American press, was able to present to the nation whatever image he chose, and he chose that of the martyr. Brown decided quickly that if he was to hang for his actions (which he undoubtedly knew he would), he was determined not to die in vain. As such, with every word he spoke before and during his trial and in every letter from prison he wrote after his conviction, Brown refused to be contrite. On the contrary, he attempted to convey to Americans the divine justice of his cause, the righteousness of his actions, his willingness to suffer so that slaves might be freed, and the prophecy that while Virginia could execute him, they could not stifle the outcry against slavery that his death would provoke. As one author has written, "John Brown had a deep conviction that his death would also allow him to become the first American among the honorable gallery of Christian martyrs. As such he perceived himself as a national martyr destined to redeem the country from its sins."[62]

John Brown's spoken and written output between the time of his raid and that of his execution was voluminous. He gave two interviews within a day of being captured (and a number of others in the following weeks), delivered numerous short speeches at his trial, and wrote over thirty letters from prison after his capture.[63] Not every newspaper printed everything Brown spoke and wrote. For the sake of discussion, though, it is useful to focus on Brown's expressions that most newspapers, regardless of party, did print off the A.P. newswire. These include his first interview after being captured, his final speech to the court before sentencing, and his letters that were most frequently published in Northern newspapers. Brown wanted to be a martyr and he tailored his image as such. As a general, John Brown was a disaster, but as a propagandist, he was a master.

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[62]Eyal J. Naveh, *Crown of Thorns: Political Martyrdom in America from Abraham Lincoln to Martin Luther King, Jr.,* (New York, New York University Press, 1990), p. 24.

[63]In 1885, Franklin Sanborn, one of the Secret Six, wrote a book in which he published thirty-three letters Brown wrote from prison, most of which were written after his conviction. I have been unable to find a source that catalogues more than this number. See Franklin B. Sanborn, *The Life and Letters of John Brown, Liberator of Kansas and Martyr of Virginia,* (New York, Negro Universities Press, 1969 reprint of 1885 edition), pp. 578-620.

Just after being captured in the engine house, Brown was taken into the offices of the armory, still bleeding from his wounds. A number of individuals, including some reporters and a few members of Congress (including Representative Clement Vallandigham of Ohio and Senator James M. Mason of Virginia), were present and anxious to question Brown and to determine just what had occurred at Harper's Ferry, what was supposed to have happened, and why. Col. Lee volunteered to remove the inquisitors from the room if Brown so desired. Brown, however, was no fool, and insisted on speaking, claiming that "he was glad to be-able to make himself and his motives clearly understood."[64]

Brown then proceeded to answer questions posed to him by reporters, congressmen and other bystanders. The questioners were most concerned with determining who had helped Brown plan and finance the raid. Brown, however, refused to acknowledge the responsibility of anyone but himself and directed the conversation back toward his own accountability for the raid and its failure. Brown insisted that he could have escaped had he wanted to, but he was concerned with the welfare of his hostages, "whose wives and daughters were in tears for their safety, and I felt for them. Besides," Brown claimed, "I wanted to allay the fears of those who believed we came here to burn and kill." To the accusation that he had killed innocent bystanders during the course of the raid, Brown insisted that if this were so, it was purely accidental and unintentional. He claimed that his prisoners could vouch for the fact that he tried to prevent his men from firing if there was a danger of killing innocent civilians. Later in the interview, Brown acknowledged that "we did kill some men in defending ourselves, but I saw no one fire except directly in self-defence."

On being asked why he came to Virginia, Brown responded "we came to free the slaves, and only that," later arguing that he did not wish to spark a general slave insurrection, but rather "expected to gather them [slaves] up from time to time, and set them

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[64]New York *Herald,* Oct. 21, 1859.

free." Brown refused to concede that the raid was foolish in its design and had no chance of success. Rather, he justified his actions by saying to Senator Mason that

> I think, my friend, 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 think I did right, and that others will do right who interfere with you at any time and all times. I hold that the golden rule, 'Do unto others as you would that others should do unto you,' applies to all who would help others to gain their liberty.

Brown claimed that his raid was divinely inspired and that he was God's chosen instrument, expecting "no reward except the satisfaction of endeavoring to do for those in distress and greatly oppressed as we would be done by." Given the opportunity by the reporter from the *Herald* to make any final statement for the papers, Brown took advantage, stating that

> I claim to be here in carrying out a measure I believe perfectly justifiable, and not to act the part of an incendiary or ruffian, but to aid those suffering great wrong. I wish to say, furthermore, that you had better -- all you people at the South -- prepare yourselves for a settlement of this question, that must come up sooner than you are prepared for it. The sooner you are prepared the better. You may dispose of me very easily, -- I am nearly disposed of now; but this question is still to be settled, -- this negro question I mean; the end of that is not yet. These wounds are inflicted upon me -- both sabre cuts on my head and bayonet stabs in different parts of my body -- some minutes after I had ceased fighting and had consented to surrender, for the benefit of others, not for my own.[65]

Thus, almost immediately upon being captured, John Brown began fashioning himself as a selfless and peaceful martyr who would be sacrificed by slavery for his desire to set others free. He was well aware that the press was present at this interview, stopping a number of times to speak to reporters specifically and insure they were going to print exactly what he was saying. At another interview the following day, in fact, a reporter perceptively noted that Brown "repeatedly urged the reporters to state facts, being very much afraid of things being misrepresented. . . . He wanted only facts to go to the world.

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[65]All quotes of the interview are from the New York *Herald*, Oct. 21, 1859.

. . . Brown evidently wishes to be considered throughout the country as a hero and a martyr."[66]

At his trial, which began on October 25, 1859, John Brown pursued the themes he had raised during his interview and used the public forum of the courtroom to fashion himself a victim of slavery's tyranny. Throughout the trial, Brown lay on a cot, presumably because he was too weak from his wounds to sit. He also complained repeatedly during the trial of injuries that prevented him from participating in his own defense, and he demanded a delay in the proceedings so that he might recover and acquire his own counsel. It is true that Brown was wounded, but most of his wounds consisted of cuts in the area of his head. He was not nearly as injured as he wanted to appear. At the end of each day's proceedings, Brown got up off of his cot and walked erect back to his prison cell. By the third day of the trial Brown's act was clear to reporters who wrote that "he is evidently not much injured, but is determined to resist the pushing of his trial by all the means of his power."[67] Being wounded added another feature to the image of persecution Brown wanted America to see.[68]

While Brown was willing to capitalize on his injuries to curry sympathy and attempt to procure a delay, he was unwilling to allow his court-appointed attorneys to enter a plea of insanity on his behalf as a mitigating factor for his actions -- a plea that, perhaps (however unlikely), might have saved Brown from the gallows. Brown probably refused to concede to an insanity plea for two reasons. The obvious reason was that he insisted that he was not insane, saying that "I am perfectly unconscious of insanity, and I reject, so far as I am capable, any attempts to interfere in my behalf on that score."[69] Another reason

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[66]New York *Herald*, Oct. 22, 1859.

[67]Ibid., Oct. 28, 1859.

[68]Brown's request for a delay was repeatedly denied by the court, although he did manage to obtain his own counsel a few days into the trial, having sent a letter to Judge Thomas Russell of Boston asking him to send a lawyer. For an account of Brown's trial, see Thomas J. Fleming, "The Trial of John Brown," *American Heritage*, Vol. 28, no. 5 (August, 1967), pp. 29-33 and 92-100. Also see the biographical accounts noted above.

[69]New York *Herald*, Oct. 28, 1859.

for Brown's refusal to submit an insanity plea, however, was that to accept such a strategy would undermine the sincerity and justice of his undertaking. If he allowed the American public to believe him insane, his raid could be brushed off as simply that -- the action of an insane man -- rather than what he wished it to be thought of, which was a righteous strike for freedom. If he was to die, as Brown as early as his first interview appears to have realized he would, then he wanted to die as a man known for his principles rather than for his lunacy.

The Virginia court took just six days to indict, arraign, and try John Brown, and the jury took just forty-five minutes to convict him of all charges on October 31, 1859. On November 2, Brown was sentenced to die by hanging on December 2. Before announcing sentence, Judge Richard Parker asked Brown if he had anything to say to the court. This gave Brown one final opportunity to justify himself before the country, and he did so with rhetorical grandeur. The speech he delivered is worth repeating in full, as it gave many individuals a real sense of what John Brown believed he had done and what he had intended in his raid on the federal arsenal. Hence, it was significant in shaping Northern response to the raid:

> I have, may it please the Court, a few words to say.
>
> In the first place, I deny everything but what I have all along admitted, -- the design on my part to free the slaves. I intended certainly to have made a clean thing of that matter, as I did last winter, when I went to Missouri and there took slaves without the snapping of a gun on either side, moved them through the country, and finally left them in Canada. I designed to have done the same thing again, on a larger scale. That was all I intended. I never did intend murder, or treason, or the destruction of property, or to excite or incite slaves to rebellion, or to make insurrection.
>
> I have another objection: and that is, it is unjust that I should suffer such a penalty. Had I interfered in the manner which I admit, and which I admit has been fairly proved (for I admire the truthfulness and candor of the greater portion of the witnesses who have testified in this case), -- had I so interfered in behalf of the rich, the powerful, the intelligent, the so-called great, or in behalf of any of their friends, -- either father, mother, brother, sister, wife, or children, or any of that class, -- and suffered and sacrificed what I have in this interference, it would have been all right; and every man in this court would have deemed it an act worthy of reward rather than punishment.
>
> This court acknowledges, as I suppose, the validity of the law of God. I see a book kissed here which I suppose to be the Bible, or

> at least the New Testament. That teaches me that all things whatsoever I would that men should do to me, I should do even so to them. It teaches me, further, to 'remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them.' I endeavored to act up to that instruction. I say, I am yet too young to understand that God is any respecter of persons. I believe that to have interfered as I have done -- as I have always freely admitted I have done -- in behalf of His despised poor, was not wrong, but right. Now, if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and mingle my blood further with the blood of my children and with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments -- I submit; so let it be done!
>
> Let me say one word further.
>
> I feel entirely satisfied with the treatment I have received on my trial. Considering all the circumstances, it has been more generous than I expected. But I feel no consciousness of guilt. I have stated from the first what was my intention, and what was not. I never had any design against the life of any person, nor any disposition to commit treason, or excite slaves to rebel, or make any general insurrection. I never encouraged any man to do so, but always discouraged any idea of that kind.
>
> Let me say, also, a word in regard to the statements made by some of those connected with me. I hear it has been stated by some of them that I have induced them to join me. But the contrary is true. I do not say this to injure them, but as regretting their weaknesses. There is not one of them but joined me of his own accord, and the greater part of them at their own expense. A number of them I never saw, and never had a word of conversation with, till the day they came to me; and that was for the purpose I have stated.
>
> Now I have done.[70]

It is clear that in his speech to the court, Brown intended to reinforce many of the claims he had made in his armory interview -- that his cause was just and in line with the wishes of God, that he never meant to harm anyone, that he was willing to die so that others might be free, that Virginia was wrong and that he was right. This was a speech that moved many people, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, who in later years compared it to the Gettysburg Address.[71]

The vast majority of the speech's content, however, was demonstrably false. It was not true that Brown only intended to remove slaves to Canada, nor could it possibly have been the case that Brown did not realize people would be killed, that property would be destroyed, and that he was committing treason. The maps and assorted other plans he

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[70]Printed in Sanborn, pp. 584-585.
[71]Oates, *Purge,* p. 327.

left behind at the farmhouse clearly indicated that he intended to spark a slave insurrection in Virginia that would spread throughout the South. The wagonload full of hundreds of guns and pikes he had brought with him to the South (not to mention the guns available in the armory) were to be given to slaves and anyone else who would join him. To think they would not be used stretches the meaning of the word naiveté in profound ways. Brown's "Provisional Constitution" called for the establishment of a new government to replace the slave governments of the Southern states with his own military rule, and allowed for the expropriation of property of slaveholders.[72] It was not true that his expedition to Missouri had been carried out without bloodshed. One of Brown's men had killed the owner of the slaves and horses Brown had stolen.[73] Nor was it true that Brown had only accepted volunteers as part of his makeshift army. Most of Brown's men were individuals he had recruited actively over the course of a number of years.[74]

In short, Brown's speech demonstrated a willingness to sacrifice and a deep sense of empathy for the poor and downtrodden, both of which John Brown clearly felt. It also conveyed an image, however, of a man dedicated to peace and non-violence, who had come to launch a small-scale slave raid that had gone awry. This was absolutely untrue, but few Americans would know that. The A.P. reporters, telling unbiased stories, were not going to intrude and risk offending subscribers by undertaking a critical analysis of Brown's statement. On the contrary, the full text of Brown's speech composed part of an A.P. release. Northern editors, preoccupied with politicizing the raid, devoted scant attention to debunking Brown's statements. As Thomas Fleming has written, "subtract the paragraphs on religion, and this speech . . . was one long lie. . . . But few, north or south, were capable of analyzing or investigating John Brown's story. Even before he

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[72]See Potter, pp. 367-368; Nevins, p. 89; Abels, p. 332. For a copy of Brown's "Provisional Constitution," see New York *Herald,* Oct. 20, 1859. A copy also exists in EP-JBR.
[73]Oates, *Purge,* pp. 261-262.
[74]Nevins, p. 89.

made his historic oration, newspapers were reporting the trial from a more and more partisan point of view."[75]

In conveying his message to the American people, John Brown was a success, and debate over his fate among Northerners would rarely revolve around his honesty. Quite the opposite, even Northerners who opposed Brown and supported his hanging appear to have accepted that he was an honest soul, if not an innocent one, in part because the press generally failed to inform them otherwise. As the *American Mercury* noted years after Brown's death, "his soul is marching on, but it was not the soul of any John Brown who really ever lived."[76]

In the month between Brown's sentencing and his execution, the Virginia authorities allowed him to receive and send letters. Where Brown had suspected as soon as he was captured that he would eventually hang, during this month he knew it as an absolute certainty. In the letters he mailed from prison, many of which were printed in the newspapers,[77] Brown consequently fashioned himself the Christian martyr even more than he had earlier. To a Quaker woman from Rhode Island he wrote that "you know that Christ once armed Peter. So also in my case I think he put a sword into my hand, and there continued it so long as he saw best, and then kindly took it from me."[78] Attempting to console his wife and children, he wrote that "I can trust God with both the time and the manner of my death, believing, as I now do, that for me at this time to seal my testimony for God and humanity with my blood will do vastly more toward advancing the cause I have earnestly endeavored to promote, than all I have done in my life before. . . . Remember, dear wife and children all, that Jesus of Nazareth suffered a most excruciating death on the cross as a felon."[79] To an old teacher, he wrote that "I cannot believe that

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[75]Fleming, p. 98.
[76]quoted in Naveh, p. 44.
[77]Republican papers, more than Democratic, tended to print John Brown's letters, but some of them appeared in the Democratic press as well.
[78]John Brown to "E.B. of R.I.," Nov. 1, 1859. (Sanborn, p. 582).
[79]John Brown to his wife and children, Nov. 8, 1859. (Sanborn, p. 586).

anything I have done, suffered, or may yet suffer will be lost to the cause of God or humanity. And before I began my work at Harper's Ferry, I felt assured that in the worst event it would certainly pay."[80] Where in his interview and his speech, he had placed emphasis on the righteousness of his cause, using his willingness to sacrifice as but a secondary (if not unimportant) point, he now focused on his impending demise, insistent to demonstrate he was facing it eagerly, without fear and with confidence that his death would inspire others in the cause of freedom. As Allan Nevins writes, "If he could not be the Spartacus of a new freedmen's state, he could be the martyred Stephen of a new gospel."[81]

The cumulative effect of John Brown's orations and written justifications was the creation of an image that barely resembled reality. The realities were that Brown was a man violently opposed to the institution of slavery and willing to end it at all costs, believing that he was an instrument God had designated to wipe this human sin from the face of the earth. To this end Brown boldly, if not skillfully, plotted to spark a slave insurrection through paramilitary invasion and the capturing of a federal arsenal that would ideally overtake the South and free its slaves. When this attempt ended in dismal failure, he turned to the only weapon he had left in his personal arsenal -- that of fashioning himself as a martyr to the cause. Believing as strongly as he did in the teachings of the Bible, it was not difficult for him to conjure up such an image, and he played the part perfectly, transforming himself into a peaceful and righteous victim rather than an invader.[82] As Amos A. Lawrence, New England textile magnate, wrote to Governor Wise, "in this case we have a regular Puritan to deal with, a man formed to be a martyr."[83]

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[80]John Brown to Rev. H.L. Vaill, Nov. 15, 1859. (Sanborn, p. 590).

[81]Nevins, p. 90.

[82]Oates suggests that Brown was actually convinced that he spoke the truth, despite his obvious mendacity. Oates writes that "in his exalted state of mind he probably believed every word of this. And in any case it was easy for him to rationalize his erroneous and contradictory statements, for whatever he said to further the cause of liberty was not only right, it was the will of God." (Oates, *Purge,* p. 345).

[83]Lawrence to Wise, Oct. 25, 1859, EP-JBR. Lawrence was the principle stockholder in the New England Emigrant Aid Society and consequently was an early supporter of Brown in his Kansas activities. After Brown's escapade in Missouri in 1858, however, Lawrence lost interest in Brown and believed him to be a fanatic. After Harper's Ferry, Lawrence wrote to Wise to disassociate himself from Brown and condemn his activities in Virginia, but also to plead for Brown's life. (See Oates, *Purge,* pp. 158, 186, 271, and 313).

But how would the Northern public respond to John Brown and his raid? The man himself told them one story. Northern editors rarely confronted that story head on, yet also provided their own variations on what that story meant. Northerners thus received a barrage of information from their newspapers about John Brown's raid, but that information did not present a clear or distinct message. It would be up to each citizen to incorporate and process the information he or she received and provide his or her own analysis of what should happen to Brown and what his raid meant. Fortunately, hundreds of citizens did so in writing -- in letters to the Governor of Virginia, to other public officials and to Northern newspapers between the time of Brown's raid and his execution. To the confusion of information, Northerners responded with a confusion of voices.

III. Northern Citizens Respond to John Brown's Raid

If nothing else, one pattern seems clear from the response of Northerners to John Brown's raid. Very few people were willing to admit explicitly that they believed raiding a federal arsenal was a moral and ethical good that should be rewarded rather than punished. There were a few transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau who argued that Brown was obeying his own "higher law" that justified his lawless actions.[84] But the vast majority of Northerners would not concede the absolute justice of John Brown's course. Even for abolitionists most opposed to slavery, there was an ambivalence toward ending slavery by violent means rather than through moral suasion.[85]

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[84]See Gilman M. Ostrander, "Emerson, Thoreau, and John Brown," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, Vol. 39, no. 4 (March 1953), pp. 713-726.

[85]Abolitionists tended to have mixed feelings about John Brown's raid, as the frustrations of the 1850s (the Fugitive Slave and Kansas-Nebraska Acts, for example) increased their willingness to accept violence as a justifiable means to end slavery. Brown's raid, in fact, forced them to confront directly the issue of violence and the relationship of their movement to it. See Jane H. Pease and William H. Pease, "Confrontation and Abolition in the 1850s," *Journal of American History*, Vol. LVII, no. 4 (March 1972), pp. 923-937, and Lawrence J. Friedman, "Antebellum American Abolitionism and the Problem of Violent Means," *The Psychohistory Review*, Vol. 9, no. 1 (Fall 1980), pp. 23-58. On the particular relationship of abolitionist women to Brown's raid with a special focus on the activities of Lydia Maria Child, see Wendy Hamand

The question for most Northerners, then, was not whether John Brown was right or wrong in his actions.[86] Rather, for most the issues were: given that what Brown did was wrong, what should be done with him? How, if at all, should he be punished? What was the wisest and most just policy to adopt toward Brown? On these questions, Northerners were divided. Their responses demonstrate that there were many ways to interpret the information available about John Brown's raid and that Northerners took advantage of them all.

The Sympathetic Northerners -- Christianity, Slavery, and an "Honest Monomaniac"

Many Northerners argued that while John Brown may have erred in undertaking his raid, he should not be hanged as punishment. The thought of Brown being hanged sent some individuals into a frenzy. A number of letters received by Governor Wise amounted to little more than ranting threats against him or his family should Brown and his men hang. James McPherson of Indiana, who wrote a number of letters to Wise, for example, threatened to bring ten thousand armed men from the North to Virginia to kill the Governor "and every Southern dog within their reach." After calling Wise an "old *son-of-a-bitch* and

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Venet, "'Cry Aloud and Spare Not': Northern Antislavery Women and John Brown's Raid," in Finkelman, ed., *His Soul Goes Marching On,* pp. 98-115.

[86]It should not be concluded that *no* Northerners believed in the justice of what John Brown had done. A small number did and were willing to say so, although they were not always prepared to give their names. In an anonymous letter to Governor Wise, for example, one author wrote that "we the people of the north who adopt the common and plain teachings of our declaration and federal compact . . . boldly declare and substantiate our declaration at every cricis [sic] with irefutable [sic] reasoning that Capt. Brown *was* justifiable in his so caled [sic] late insurrection at Harpers Ferry which was nothing more than an effort to free groaning millions of their clanking chains that move in black and appalling clouds over our southern fields." (EP-JBR, Nov. 16, 1859).

Black Northerners in particular supported Brown's incursion. Charles Langston, a black man from Ohio, for example, had been recruited by Brown to join him at Harper's Ferry but declined. Langston wrote to the Cleveland *Plain Dealer* to criticize Americans for not standing up to defend Brown and to say that "Capt. Brown was engaged in no vile, base, sordid, malicious or selfish enterprise. His aims and ends were lofty, noble, generous, benevolent, humane and Godlike. His actions were in perfect harmony with, and resulted from the teaching of the Bible, of our Revolutionary fathers and of every true and faithful anti-slavery man in this country and the world." (Cleveland *Plain Dealer,* Nov. 18, 1859. For another copy of Langston's letter and for more about the black response to John Brown's raid at the time and since, see *Blacks on John Brown,* Benjamin Quarles, ed., [Urbana-Champaign, University of Illinois Press, 1972]. For a study of the relationship of blacks to white abolitionists and to John Brown, and of Brown's attitudes and feelings toward blacks, see Daniel C. Littlefield, "Blacks, John Brown, and a Theory of Manhood," in Finkelman, ed., *His Soul Goes Marching On,* pp. 67-97).

whoremaster," McPherson suggested that "it would be well for you to delay, or sentence these men to labor for life. If you do hang them woe be unto you -- your head shall suffer. . . . I hope the slaves of Virginia and the whole South will rise *en masse and rob and murder* every family that are slave-holders. Cursed be the institution!!!"[87]

Most Northerners were more rational and reasoned in their opinions. But others did oppose Brown's execution for his crimes, and they urged that Brown's sentence be commuted to life imprisonment or that he be pardoned altogether.[88] Some individuals reasoned by way of their intense personal opposition to slavery. These people realized that Brown might very well be executed regardless of their entreaties, but they insisted to Wise that even if Brown hanged, slavery was an evil that could never be justified through punishing its opponents. Peter M. Gideon of Excelsior, Minnesota suggested that Wise set "John Brown and his comerades [sic] free, and obey that little volume that you kiss when you swear (known by you as the heigher [sic] law), to do as you would wish to be done by, and to remember those in bonds as bound with them. . . . But if you kill them, then burn the oft kissed volume of heigher [sic] law. Don't ask another jury to give it the perjured kiss of faith in adherence to its precepts -- the world has become to [sic] wise not to see the fraud."[89] This accusation that Southerners were hypocrites for hanging Brown while maintaining a system of bondage ran throughout the sympathetic Northern strain of opinion. A.W. Nourse from Onandaga County, New York asked "if it is consistent or patriotic or Christian duty to honor men for fighting for liberty in 1776 and choke men to death like dogs who do the same thing in 1859,"[90] while an anonymous writer from

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[87]McPherson to Wise, Dec. 1859, Executive Papers-Governor Henry A. Wise, Virginia State Library, Richmond.

[88]Most historians have argued that Governor Wise, in actuality, did not have the power on his own to either commute or pardon John Brown, since one of the counts of which Brown had been convicted was that of treason. Rather, they have suggested that Wise could delay the execution and ask the State Assembly, once it reconvened, to commute the sentence or pardon Brown. Robert McGlone, however, has recently argued that the constitutional issue was such that Wise could have saved Brown. (See Robert E. McGlone, "John Brown, Henry Wise, and the Politics of Insanity," in Finkelman, ed., *His Soul Goes Marching On*, p. 225).

[89]Gideon to Wise, Nov. 25, 1859, EP-JBR.

[90]Nourse to Wise, Nov. 13, 1859, EP-JBR.

Worcester, Massachusetts wrote that "you may have the power to take the life of that poor brave old man and send him to his God, but you have not the power to make slavery right."[91]

Along these lines, some warned that if Brown hanged, it would mark the beginning of the end for the slave system. Brown would become a symbol, a martyr for freedom, inspiring others in the cause of liberty. Brown's wishes as expressed in his speeches and letters, these authors warned, would be fulfilled. These citizens wished Brown's life spared, and they mixed pleas for sparing him amidst their prophecies. But if Brown were to be executed, these individuals reasoned, they would make the most of it. H. Willis of Battle Creek, Michigan warned that "you may rest assured that the Execution of J. Brown and his companions will be the death knell of slavery in this country. . . . You cannot nor need not suppose that you can long maintain your blood stained institution. . . . You may well say ere long as Jefferson once said that you must tremble for your country when you reflect that god is just."[92] Others waxed metaphorical about the consequences they believed would follow from Brown's execution. Gamaliel E. Smith of Newfield, Maine foresaw that "you may hang John Brown and his associates . . . and you can never convince an honest, thinking, Christian people that God ever decreed that slavery should exist anywhere -- and the system of slavery is a volcano that will sooner or later burst forth and produce a revolution."[93] A.F. Martin of Georgetown, Ohio perhaps invested the execution of Brown with the greatest potential influence on Northern opinion and national affairs, writing that "you may rest assured, that Brown and followers are not *all* that will *die*, but the whole north will be incensed with your conduct, Civil War will then be a consequence and then -- *you* may be hung, and *your Darling* institution will bite the *dust.* I

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[91]anonymous to Wise, Nov. 5, 1859, EP-JBR.
[92]Willis to Wise, Nov. 28, 1859, EP-JBR.
[93]Smith to Wise, Nov. 19, 1859.

beseech you, therefore in the name of an Almighty God to deal mercifully and ask you on behalf of our country not to hang a man for doing what he knows to be right."[94]

The religious overtones and absolute opposition to slavery apparent in the above letters indicate that most of these individuals likely had abolitionist leanings, if they did not categorize themselves as abolitionists per se. Thus, there were individuals in the North who shared John Brown's concerns with the nation's violations of God's law through the institution of slavery. They empathized with Brown's devotion, if not entirely with his means, and they saw in his execution a potential impetus to a wider regional dedication by Northerners to bringing the nation's labor systems in line with Christian justice. To these individuals, John Brown's raid meant that slavery was in retreat and his execution would be a clarion call for Northerners to continue the offensive. As "New Hampshire" wrote just a week before Brown's execution, "you may be permitted to Hang Brown . . . but when you do this you will add ten thousand flames to the fire already kindled which must spread until this cursed institution of slavery shall be consumed."[95]

Not all Northerners, however, justified their opposition to Brown's execution on the ostensible basis of opposition to slavery. Others did, however, share with these slavery opponents a sympathy for Brown and a dedication to Christianity. Some Northerners thus implored Governor Wise to spare Brown simply as an exercise of Christian mercy. Ruth Weaver of Smyrna, New York, for example, wrote that she awoke in the middle of the night to address to the Governor "a warning not to suffer anything done to these late prisoners in a hasty or harsh manner althouh [sic] they have committed an high offence against thier [sic] country and also in the sight of the great Creator. . . . But Oh! let justice and judgment go forth. . . . First seek to know His will and remember the example of Him our Lord and Saviour when nailed to the Cross how He prayed for his

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[94]Martin to Wise, Nov. 22, 1859, EP-JBR.
[95]"New Hampshire" to Wise, Nov. 27, 1859, EP-JBR.

murderers."[96] Similarly, Mary King of Chambersburg, Pennsylvania attempted to sway the Governor by quoting from the Bible, writing to urge him to "spare the life of this unfortunate man and his deluded followers -- and in doing so you will realize the full truth of the saviours promise 'Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy.'"[97] It was not unusual for writers asking for Brown's life to quote Scripture. One anonymous letter, in fact, contained just two sentences, tersely combining the antislavery appeal and the call for Christian mercy: "That mercy I to others show, That mercy show to me," and "He who is without sin, let him cast the first stone."[98]

Other individuals urged Christian mercy to get at the issue of capital punishment in general, arguing that state executions were inconsistent with a Christian republic. Charles H. Gregory, writing from New York, claimed that "I am fully persuaded that the words of the Saviour as recorded in the new testament are expressly opposed to one man taking the life of another fellow man, under any circumstances. I think God alone has this prerogative."[99] Stating the case in more emotive terms, a man from Gloucester, Massachusetts conceded that "yes, John Brown has done wickedly! He has taken life and caused the widow and the orphan to mourn! . . . Now, my dear brother, how does wisdom decide that you should dispose of him? . . . I ask you to let him go to be punished by *Him* who doeth all things well; then the blood of poor Old Brown will not be found upon your skirts. . . . Show yourself a hero by fearing Him only who hath said 'Thou shalt not kill!'"[100]

Individuals in the 1850s such as these, who opposed the death penalty as a matter of principle, believed that man was a "moral, educable, and savable" being. Crime, they argued, was better addressed as a social issue through a policy of reformation rather than

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[96]Weaver to Wise, Oct. 20, 1859, EP-JBR.
[97]King to Wise, Nov. 1, 1859, EP-JBR.
[98]anonymous to Wise, Dec. 1, 1859, EP-JBR.
[99]Gregory to Wise, Nov. 22, 1859, EP-JBR.
[100]"Brother Gardner" to Wise, Nov. 22, 1859, EP-JBR.

punishment. Often, as historian Louis Masur has suggested, opposition to slavery went hand in hand with opposition to the death penalty, since "both slavery and capital punishment . . . represented systems of brutality that coerced individuals, and both institutions merited attack."[101] Although opposition to capital punishment was a popular social cause in the 1840s and 1850s, individuals who adhered to it were still in a distinct minority. Most people tended to believe the contrary, that "man's moral nature demanded justice, and the state alone, through capital punishment, acted as the proper agent of revenge."[102] Justice for most Americans meant vengeance, and the state acted as a vehicle of justice.

While most Americans accepted capital punishment as a reasonable and just form of punishment, however, for many it was a conditional acceptance. Capital punishment could be justified, but the point was precisely that it had to be justified. Whether or not the circumstances which motivated John Brown's crimes dictated capital punishment was something that for many Northerners was highly debatable.

John Brown portrayed himself as an honest, dedicated, and pious individual who meant no great harm in his raid. He was, in his own opinion, a noble soldier of God. Northerners read Brown's own words in their newspapers, and many accepted this self-enhanced interpretation at face value, relatively unchallenged as it was by Northern editors. An anonymous correspondent from Philadelphia, for example, had clearly read of Brown in the newspaper, and wrote that Brown "truly has forfeited all claims to mercy by the laws of Virginia -- but his manly and apparently upright course since his arrest and during his trial -- evidence of so much modest true Bravery, in all his language to the Court. . . . I do

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[101]Louis P. Masur, *Rites of Execution: Capital Punishment and the Transformation of American Culture, 1776-1865,* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1989). Masur's work is one of the few I have encountered that deals with the social, as opposed to the legal, aspects of capital punishment in a historical context. "Moral, educable, and savable," p. 7; "both slavery and capital punishment. . . ," p. 157.
[102]Ibid., p. 148.

implore you. My Dear Governor to save this man's life . . . for I think he is honestly misled -- how beautiful was his reply to the court before his sentence -- how truthful."[103]

For individuals persuaded by the raider's own statements, Brown the man had become separate from the actions he had committed. Yes, Brown had violated the laws of Virginia and deserved to be punished. However, to these Northerners, the punishment of death, while fitting the crime, did not fit the man. Sam J. Holley of Oswego, New York, wrote that Brown "is a zealous, Bible beleiving [sic], God fearing, conscientious man and seems only to have acted up to his mistaken convictions of right. Such a man should not meet a wicked murderer's death and be hung like a sheep killing dog."[104] In a similar vein, Ebenezer Irving of Springfield, Massachusetts, citing Brown's character traits as "brave, honest, intelligent, humane, and noble," asked Governor Wise to "suppose that the virdict [sic] of the jury was according to the law and the evidence; are not the qualities of mind which he posseses [sic] . . . worthy of high consideration by the executive of Virginia? Methinks these qualities are not so common in our land as that we can afford to send their possesors [sic] either to the scaffold or to prison."[105]

It should be obvious that Northerners who would admit to Brown's guilt of high crimes against individuals and the nation and yet would make arguments upon which to justify saving Brown from the gallows were probably predisposed to do so by their political and/or religious inclinations, either about slavery or the death penalty or, most likely, both. It is questionable whether a man who led a violent labor protest against a Northern railroad yet demonstrated the same qualities as Brown would have received similar outpourings of support.

Most of these individuals, however, did not simply argue that Brown was fighting for a good cause. There was something noble about Brown himself that, for some

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[103]anonymous to Wise, Nov. 4, 1859, EP-JBR.
[104]Holley to Wise, Nov. 7, 1859, EP-JBR.
[105]Irving to Wise, Nov. 5, 1859, EP-JBR.

Americans, elevated him to near heroic status. As the author of a letter to the New York *Times* suggested, "There is, in the modest and manly bearing of Old Brown, something which commands the respect and touches the sympathies of those who most sternly condemn his conduct. His fanaticism appears to be as sincere as it is undaunted, and his *pluck* is certainly magnificent."[106] These individuals seemed captivated by Brown and bound in the spell he had cast via telegraph and newsprint. They believed his story. But what exactly was it about Brown, beyond the cause for which he struggled, that attracted the sympathy and admiration of so many Northerners?

Richard Slotkin has suggested that stories of the man on a "heroic quest," in which the protagonist seeks to forestall a great calamity from befalling the nation, hold a special place in American cultural mythology. Slotkin has tied the appeal of this myth to that of the frontier, in which individuals were perceived as overcoming great obstacles and conquering the wilderness, often by violent means. In the collective American psyche, then, this "regeneration through violence" allows for those who would battle and kill to attain a mythically heroic status.[107] Brown's quest to end the national calamity of slavery and his willingness to risk his life in pursuit of that quest suggests a possible psychological and peculiarly American appeal for some Northerners.

A more sociological model of Brown's appeal is suggested by Paul Kooistra. Investigating American criminals who have taken on a heroic aura, Kooistra has noted similarities between them in an effort to suggest what makes certain criminals and certain crimes into subjects of admiration and support for Americans. Kooistra argues that criminals who become heroes are usually perceived to be the victims of past injustice which drives them to crime. They commit acts which the state considers criminal but the community does not. They break the law but represent a "higher law." They harm others

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[106]New York *Times*, Oct. 28, 1859.
[107]Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*, (Wesleyan University Press, 1973), pp. 4-22.

only in self-defense. The heroic criminal must possess certain valued social qualities such as honor, duty, honesty, and humility. Finally, the heroic criminal tends to emerge in certain political contexts, when the law is perceived to protect certain people and to oppress others systematically.[108]

While it is somewhat simplistic to suggest that a formula of heroism exists for criminals, John Brown clearly fits into Kooistra's framework. His experiences in Kansas, as relayed by the Republican press, made Brown into a victim of injustice. Aaron Hall, from Athol, New York, for example, echoed many Brown sympathizers when he claimed that Brown "was acting under what he considers the impulse of duty and here I shall disagree with him in principle . . . but may there not be some excuse or palliation in his case . . . taking into consideration his affairs in Kanzas [sic]?"[109] Brown's actions were undertaken at a time when Northerners who opposed slavery saw Southern law as oppressive, and they could see Brown's actions in light of a "higher law" despite the laws of the state of Virginia. Finally, Brown's demeanor after being arrested -- his perceived honesty, his explanation that he had a duty to free the slaves, his humility before God -- make him a nearly perfect heroic criminal, an individual in whom many could easily find redeeming qualities while not condoning his crimes. As one individual wrote, generalizing his own belief to the beliefs of all Northerners, "no one approves of the course Brown has taken. No one thinks him unlawfully condemned . . . and all wish that he may not hang."[110]

Brown was only a "nearly perfect" heroic criminal because clearly he was the kind of criminal who would be most likely to appeal to those who questioned the justice of the laws he violated -- those most opposed to slavery. In 1859, then, John Brown's appeal as

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[108]Paul Kooistra, *Criminals As Heroes: Structure, Power, and Identity*, (Bowling Green, Ohio, Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1989). For studies of American heroes in general, see Marshall W. Fishwick, *American Heroes: Myth and Reality*, (Westport, Ct., Greenwood Press, 1975), and Dixon Wecter, *The Hero in America: A Chronicle of Hero Worship*, (New York, 1972 edition, with an introduction by Robert Penn Warren).

[109]Hall to Wise, Nov. 29, 1859, EP-JBR.

[110]Jed P. Ladd to Wise, Nov. 21, 1859, EP-JBR.

a heroic criminal was limited by Northerners' dedication to ending slavery, which for most was an ambivalent one at best. But for those already inclined to abolish slavery, Brown held an appeal that went beyond his actions.[111]

That much of what the public knew of Brown was a myth is somewhat irrelevant. As Kooistra notes of heroic criminals, "Much of this public understanding is shaped by the media rather than through direct personal experience. . . . The Robin Hood criminals provide a clear illustration of how the media may systematically distort crime for political or economic reasons."[112] Rarely, as we have seen, has this been more true than in the case of Brown, where the Republican press (which antislavery Northerners would be more inclined to read and believe) distorted Brown's past in Kansas and accepted at face value his statements after arrest and at trial for the purposes of political advantage. This disjunction between the public perception encouraged by the press and the reality that the press failed to explore contributed to the veneration of Brown by some Northern citizens, a veneration that could and would be built upon in the Civil War period and beyond.

There was yet another strain of sympathetic Northern opinion. These were individuals who believed that Brown was insane. Some argued, like the Republican newspapers, that Brown had been driven insane by events in Kansas and that the death of his son made him fanatical on the issue of slavery, bent on revenge against the South and its "peculiar institution." One anonymous Northerner played out the entire John Brown/Kansas scenario in all its glory for the Governor:

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[111]There were Southerners who also asserted their respect for Brown's character. Governor Wise, for example, upon witnessing Brown's lack of contrition, stated in a speech to the state assembly that Brown was "the gamest man I ever saw. . . . He is a bundle of the best nerves I ever saw cut and thrust and bleeding and in bonds. . . . He is cool, collected and indomitable . . . and he inspired me with great trust in his integrity as a man of truth. He is a fanatic, vain and garrulous, but firm, truthful and intelligent." Wise, however, was also an individual morally torn by the institution of slavery, despite the fact that he was a slaveholder. As Wise's biographer argues, John Brown's raid aroused Wise's ambivalence toward slavery. This suggests an explanation of the Governor's respect for Brown despite his unwillingness to intervene on Brown's behalf. (See Craig M. Simpson, *A Good Southerner: The Life of Henry A. Wise of Virginia,* [Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1985], [esp. ch. 11. Quote from Wise on p. 204]. Also see Craig M. Simpson, "John Brown and Governor Wise: A New Perspective on Harpers Ferry," *Biography,* Vol. 1, no. 4 [1978], pp. 15-38).

[112]Kooistra, p. 14.

> His [Brown's] sons went to Kansas to find for themselves homes in that Infant settlement. His sons wrote to their Father of the persecutions and annoyance by slaveholders. John Brown like a kind and tender father soon joined his sons. He soon found he had to contend with a formidable force. Armed bands from Missouri of border ruffians entered that territory destroying Property . . . murdering peaceful citizens. . . . Your Excellency cannot be Ignorant of the outrages committed upon the defenseless inhabitants. . . . [Brown had] one Son murdered in the most brutal manner and another son made crazy by brutal treatment. . . . Surely oppression will drive a good man mad.[113]

Quite obviously absent from this account of Brown's Kansas activities, and from most sympathetic Northerners' accounts, was Brown's going to Kansas with wagonloads of weapons (far from being a peaceful citizen), his participation as a guerrilla leader, and his involvement in the Pottawatomie massacre. For Northerners inclined to defend John Brown, however, arguing that he had been driven crazy in Kansas was a useful means of mitigating his actions, of making Brown into the victim rather than the offender. As Oliver Clark of Oberlin, Ohio wrote, "slavery destroyed his his [sic] property and slew his children, hence he became maddened against slavery."[114]

Whether or not they utilized Brown's affairs in Kansas, many Northerners believed that Brown must have been insane to attempt an incursion as ostensibly ludicrous as the raid at Harper's Ferry. A group of citizens from Dayton, Ohio, for example, asked the rhetorical question, "can you possibly believe a man with a dosen [sic] comrades would undertake in his right senses . . . a conflict with a dozen or more slave states having near a population of over 10 000 000 -- Ten millions to contend against. Does this fact alone not assure you positively that that poor old man was insensible at the time or on that particular object?"[115]

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[113]anonymous to Wise, Nov. 21, 1859, EP-JBR. The reference to "another son made crazy" was to one of Brown's children who was involved in free state activities, was arrested for his activities and later went insane.

[114]Clark to Wise, Nov. 4, 1859, EP-JBR.

[115]"Many Citizens the Avengers" to Wise, Nov. 21, 1859, EP-JBR.

Citing Brown's insanity, these people argued that he should not be hanged. Sustaining an insanity defense in an American court was extremely difficult, and the American public of the mid-nineteenth century generally was skeptical of insanity as a mitigating factor in the commission of a crime. As Norman Dain has written, "If a person pleaded insanity in a court of law, he was expected to be a raving maniac; anything less would raise serious doubts about his insanity."[116] Nevertheless, if proven, insanity was an acceptable means of avoiding culpability for a crime. To hang an insane individual was to hang someone morally irresponsible and was generally perceived to be reprehensible. Despite Brown's adamant refusal of an insanity defense during his trial, sympathetic Northerners who sought to spare his life claimed he must have been insane. At the very least they argued he was a "monomaniac" -- insane singularly on the matter of slavery. James McKennan of Frankfort Springs, Pennsylvania, for example, suggested that Brown "deserves to be hung, and perhaps that is the best thing to be done. But with all his wickedness he is manifestly deranged. And there is an instructive shuddering at the thought of hanging a crazy man. The feeling is well nigh universal."[117] Peter Kimball of Lawn Ridge, Illinois summed up that "many here as elsewhere deem John Brown insane, for no sane man would attempt a work so obviously imppossible [sic] as that attempted by him. How will posterity look on Virginia executing as felons men made insane by a series of outrages? You, sir, cannot be indifferent to the verdict, nor to the reputation of the state designated as the 'Mother of the Presidents.'"[118]

It should be obvious that there is a tension within the broad strain of opinion of Northerners sympathetic to John Brown -- between the claim that John Brown was a noble, honest, and heroic figure and the claim that he was insane. If Brown were insane, after all, he would also presumably have had some difficulty in thoroughly understanding

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[116]Norman Dain, *Concepts of Insanity in the United States, 1789-1865*, (New Brunswick, NJ, Rutgers University Press, 1964), (quote on pp. 45-46).
[117]McKennan to Wise, EP-JBR.
[118]Kimball to Wise, Nov. 18, 1859, EP-JBR.

just what he was doing. His heroic pose could quite conceivably be simply the reaction of a lunatic unaware of the consequences of his actions. Certainly the image of the "poor old man" conflicts with that of the "brave, honest, intelligent, humane and noble" soul.

Yet sympathetic Northerners seem to have believed that Brown was both noble and insane. Sometimes, one individual expressed this duality in a single opinion. Nathan Winslow of Portland, Maine, for example. wrote that "I know nothing of Brown save from newspaper report[s] -- by these I infer that whatever his offenses may be, he is no whining hypocrite, but perhaps a monomaniac though an honest one."[119] This certainly seems an odd construction, but many Northerners sympathetic to Brown believed that the tension was reconcilable. They were able to separate completely the man from his actions and the man's reason from his emotions. Brown's beliefs about the evils of slavery could and did send him over the edge of rational thought. Aside from the actions such madness could provoke, however, he was not only sane but a great man who cared deeply for humanity in ways similar to them.[120] As J.J. Hamilton of Bells Mills, Pennsylvania, wrote, "the man's mind is wrong, not his heart."[121]

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[119]Winslow to Wise, Nov. 8, 1859, EP-JBR.

[120]Along similar lines, Robert McGlone recently has argued that the distinction between Brown as a hero and Brown as insane is somewhat a false dialectic, one that assumes that the "lunatic" is not indigenous to the "normal" course of events. If we get beyond this distinction and recognize the "subtle nexus between society and the mentally ill," it helps us understand the tension discussed above. If we accept that the delusions of John Brown were in part culturally conditioned by the importance of slavery to his society, then it helps explain how "among those who thought him insane, some nonetheless believed him morally right about slavery. They had no difficulty in identifying him as only a 'monomaniac' -- a person crazy on one subject -- because his basic values were recognizably their own. In his war against slavery, he simply went too far for them." (McGlone, "John Brown, Henry Wise, and the Politics of Insanity," pp. 242-243).

[121]Hamilton to Wise, EP-JBR. The question of John Brown's insanity is one raised by nearly every historian who has worked on Brown or the Harper's Ferry raid. They have failed to reach a consensus on the matter. Stephen Oates, Oswald Garrison Villard, Jules Abels, and C. Vann Woodward all suggest that Brown was not insane. Oates and Woodward in particular raise the significant point that "insanity" is a vague and relative term, the meaning of which has changed over time. (See Oates, *Purge,* pp. 331-334; Villard, pp. 509-510; Abels, pp. 249-250; Woodward, pp. 46-49). Opposed to these scholars are Allan Nevins and Bertram Wyatt-Brown. Nevins argues that Brown's activities and statements suggest that he had "some psychogenic malady," perhaps some sort of paranoid disorder. (Nevins, pp. 5-11). Wyatt-Brown contends that Brown probably suffered from a mental disorder, possibly depression. (Wyatt-Brown, "'A Volcano Beneath a Mountain of Snow'," pp. 12-16 and 25-29).

Brown was never examined by a physician for mental illness during his lifetime. Governor Wise could have had Brown examined; he actually ordered an examination, but countermanded that order before it was carried out. (Simpson, *A Good Southerner,* p. 214). Brown's lawyers gathered eighteen affidavits from individuals who knew or were related to Brown in order to demonstrate a history of insanity in Brown's

The Northerners discussed above were among those who found some reason to sympathize with John Brown in his fate. Many of these were individuals who, primarily because of their religious or political predilections, believed that while John Brown acted in a way that was criminal, he did not deserve to hang for his crimes. They saw in John Brown a heroic and worthy individual tortured to the point of madness by slavery. This was an internal torture to which perhaps they, in their opposition to slavery, could relate. These individuals would be those most likely to fall into abolitionist or Republican camps, to accept Brown at his word, to compose the audience of sympathy and prayer meetings on December 2, 1859, and to infuriate Southerners who perceived that these individuals represented most Northerners. Significantly, though, the responses of most of these sympathetic Northerners do not indicate an intensified hostility toward slavery or toward the South. Their concern for the moment was primarily with John Brown and only secondarily (if at all) with castigating the South.

The Pragmatic Northerners -- Martyrdom and the State of the Union

There were other Northerners who believed that John Brown should not be hanged. Their reasons, however, lay not in sympathy for the man or his actions, nor in opposition to slavery or in Christian mercy. On the contrary, these individuals resented Brown intensely and rejected his actions as those of a felon. However, they also recognized that the sympathetic Northerners existed. They believed that if Brown were executed, abolitionists would attempt to make him a martyr to the antislavery cause, thus drawing

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family and erratic activities by Brown that might indicate he was a mentally unstable individual. But Brown rejected the use of the affidavits in his trial, and Oates has argued a convincing case for the failure of the documents to prove insanity. (Oates, *Purge,* pp. 331-333).

John Brown was inordinately (almost singularly) preoccupied with the question of slavery, and he fantasized that God had made him an instrument to punish that institution and its promulgators. Many who knew Brown acknowledged that he was one of the most intense and self-righteous individuals they had ever encountered. Also, he was extremely moody, and possessed a nasty violent streak that at its worst made him homicidal. We will never know conclusively whether or not John Brown was clinically insane. Perhaps the most we can say about him in this regard was best stated by David Potter: "One may clearly infer that Brown was not, as we now say, a well-adjusted man." (Potter, p. 372).

more of the Northern population into their movement and giving them greater political influence. This, in turn, would only impel abolitionists to increase agitation on the slavery issue and to intensify antipathy toward slavery and the South among Northerners. Ultimately, this escalation would strain sectional relations and further threaten the integrity of the Union. The citizens who represent this viewpoint can be called "pragmatic Northerners," for while they rejected John Brown and his raid, they also feared for their nation. Thus they advocated sparing Brown as a purely secular and tactical maneuver to undercut the appeal of abolitionists rather than as a Christian gesture of mercy.

John James of Urbana, Ohio was a classic example of a pragmatic Northerner. Calling himself a "conservative Northern Democrat," James warned Governor Wise that "in the present excited state of sectional feeling in many parts of the country . . . everything should be done which can properly be done to allay this feeling and to avoid where it is possible furnishing food for that agitation which all true citizens North and South must deplore." James predicted that "with such a theme as the martyrdom as they [abolitionists] would represent it of Brown and his men, aided by the admiration and sympathy for their daring and their misfortunes, irrespective of their cause, these agitators will not fail to improve their opportunity to add to the sum total of that sectional animosity which is becoming the bane of the politics of the day."[122]

Echoing James, James Dugan of Brewster, Massachusetts, who called himself a "Northern conservative," wrote, "I beg . . . that you will not allow Brown to appear in the light of a *martyr* or a *hero*. He is not worthy of it. . . . I am persuaded that the execution of Brown would do more to endanger the Union and to increase the number of fanatics and radicals on the subject of slavery than 500" sermons by abolitionist preachers.[123] Henry Wagoner, Jr., a Democrat from Springfield, Illinois, demonstrated how the pragmatic argument could be extended to oppose Republicans generally and not simply abolitionists:

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[122]James to Wise, Nov. 8, 1859, EP-JBR.
[123]Dugan to Wise, Nov. 5, 1859, EP-JBR.

> The desperate character of 'Old Brown' . . . [and] his fanatical proclivities, and devotion to what he insanely believes to be the rights of slaves, are inducing an undercurrent and deep feelings, which if he should be hanged, will slowly, but surely and steadily increase in favor of the Black Republicans, by the skillful management of their leaders. . . . I do solemnly believe it would prove to be one of the most impolitic and disastrous act [sic] to the party -- certainly in the Northern states, that could be committed at this particular and peculiar function of political affairs.

Wagoner went on to argue that "if you . . . deprive this fanatical old Brown of the honor [of] martyrdom, the Abolitionist[s] will find themselves deprived of what they now calculate upon as their best card in 1860. . . . If they are executed, all the Abolition and Black Republican prints will claim them as holy saints, who have died for the truth -- But if they are shut up and made to pick hemp or break stone, in prison garb . . . it will be hard to make heroes out of them. The people will forget all about them in a few months."[124]

Most noticeable in the opinions of the pragmatic Northerners is the intense hostility that existed among them toward the abolitionist movement in particular and toward antislavery agitation in general. Frequently abolitionists were referred to by conservatives as "fanatics," "agitators" and "radicals," and abolition leaders as "demagogues." The hostility grew out of a belief that abolitionists were insincere in their opposition to slavery. Instead, those opposed to them argued, abolitionists hated Southerners rather than loved slaves, and they went out of their way to agitate and antagonize the South to the end of achieving political power. William Pam of Philadelphia wrote, for example, that "a more despicable sect of men cannot be found than those . . . who are guilty of agitating the question of slavery, not for a pure principal [sic] conscience but for their own selfish purposes."[125] Some, like W.H. Potter of Batavia, New York, believed that abolitionists cared very little about Brown but saw an opportunity to take advantage of his execution. Potter advised commuting Brown's sentence since it "would disappoint many who

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[124]Wagoner to Wise, Oct. 26, 1859, EP-JBR.
[125]Pam to Wise, Nov. 29, 1859, EP-JBR.

wrongfully style themselves abolitionists and who are even now rejoicing at the verdict of the jury, and anxiously looking for the execution of the sentence; when they will have a new theme of denunciation of the South, and another subject with which to stir up sectional hatred."[126]

This antipathy of some Northerners toward abolitionism further demonstrates that the raid had the capacity to divide the North internally along pre-existing political cleavages. Clearly, those writing as "conservative Democrats" were already opposed to abolitionism, and John Brown's raid only intensified that opposition. Rather than bring Northerners together, John Brown's raid and his looming execution widened divisions among Northerners that predated the event. At the same time, however, the reaction of the pragmatic Northerners shows their concern for the maintenance of the Union with the Southern states. They realized the potential that Brown's execution could have for increasing sectional tensions, and expressed their adherence to the federal Union and their fear of its demise at the hands of political manipulators. As an anonymous writer from Pittsburgh implored Governor Wise, "I assure you my Dear Sir, it is from the best of motives I write, for should you show clemency, it would do more to unite the North and South, than anything that has occurred for years."[127]

Another significant feature of the opinions of the pragmatic Northerners is a recognition of the potential power of martyrdom as a means of accruing sympathy and support for a social and political movement such as abolitionism. As historian Eyal Naveh has suggested, the abolitionist movement was the first social/political movement in the United States to use the concepts of suffering, sacrifice and martyrdom as significant political tools. The movement lent itself well to an exploitation of the martyr tradition. Abolitionists frequently used religious imagery -- they framed slavery as a sin and the United States as a nation in need of redemption -- and they believed that their cause was a

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[126]Potter to Wise, Nov. 12, 1859, EP-JBR.
[127]anonymous to Wise, Nov. 1, 1859, EP-JBR.

holy struggle for freedom. Using an individual like Brown, who portrayed himself as a martyr -- selflessly devoted to the cause, persecuted for his beliefs, willing to suffer and die for others, religiously devout -- abolitionists could build on some obvious parallels to the martyrdom of Christ in their attempts to appeal to individuals who disliked slavery yet were not willing to commit to abolitionism.[128]

Abolitionists were certainly not secretive about their determination to make Brown a martyr should Virginia hang him. Emerson, drawing a direct parallel between Brown and Christ, suggested that Brown was a "new saint, than whom none purer or more brave was ever led by love of men into conflict and death, -- the new saint awaiting his martyrdom, and who if he shall suffer, will make the gallows glorious like the cross."[129] Henry Ward Beecher did not even want Brown spared, declaring, "let no man pray that Brown be spared! Let Virginia make him a martyr! Now he has only blundered. His soul was noble; his work miserable. But a cord and gibbet would redeem all that, and round up Brown's failure with a heroic success."[130]

As already shown, Brown's sympathizers sometimes wrote to Governor Wise that should Brown hang, he would be worshipped after his death and that his execution would spark new interest in and bring new followers to the antislavery cause. The pragmatic Northerners feared precisely that possibility. Both the sympathizers and the pragmatists generally wanted Brown spared, but while the sympathizers believed that if Brown were hanged, the results would ultimately be positive, the pragmatists issued a dire warning and expressed fear of the sympathizers' (and John Brown's) prophecies being fulfilled. T. Fream of Boston, for example, wanted Brown spared, suggesting that Governor Wise "cheat these apostles of treason out of their substance of unholy grief and give a calm

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[128]Naveh, pp. 12-19. For a general sociological approach to martyrdom, see Eugene Weiner and Anita Weiner, *The Martyr's Conviction: A Sociological Analysis*, (Atlanta, Scholars Press, 1990).
[129]quoted in Oates, *Purge*, p. 318.
[130]quoted in Oates, *Purge*, pp. 318-319.

instead of a contagious disease to our portion of the *United States.*"[131] George P. Edgar of New York argued that "John Brown and his Fellow Prisoners can far better afford to 'hang' than Virginia can afford to hang them,"[132] while a fellow New Yorker likewise believed that "Brown is a bold half insane fanatic now, but death may canonize him. Many of the characters we read in school . . . were such a stamp. Rude, rough, energetic -- probably unscrupulous innovators, but death whether deserved or not gave them to history."[133] The state of the Union, these individuals warned, was at stake in containing the damage done by John Brown's raid. This was the most critical concern. If John Brown hanged, a potential disaster loomed over the horizon. As H.F. Boardman of Williamsport, Pennsylvania, wrote to ex-President Franklin Pierce, "how strange and how sad is this preposterous wickedness at Harper's Ferry! What a godsend to the agitators, just as their fuel was giving out! -- I am not over sanguine as to the future of our country. *One* comfort there is: the *Lord reigns!* Looking merely to *man,* we might well despair."[134]

The Vengeful Northerners -- Law, Order, and the Constitution

Still another strain of Northern opinion was prominent in response to John Brown's raid. Some Northerners did not care whether Brown acted on behalf of slaves. They did not care about his upright character. What these "vengeful Northerners" did care about was the maintenance of law and order in American society. T.D.P. Stone of Amerburg Mills, Massachusetts wrote to express his support for Governor Wise, stating that "your course in regard to Brown is *'inevitably right.'* Treason, though impelled by madness, demands its desert if law is worth anything. . . . Our population is *law-loving* and are still as *law-supporting* as were our fathers at Bunker Hill and Saratoga. The prevailing sentiment here is that your course is the only one possible in view of outraged

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[131]Fream to Wise, Nov. 27, 1859, EP-JBR.
[132]Edgar to Wise, Nov. 18, 1859, EP-JBR.
[133]anonymous "conservative Democrat" to Wise, Oct. 30, 1859, EP-JBR.
[134]Boardman to Pierce, Oct. 20, 1859, Franklin Pierce Papers.

feelings of your alarmed community."[135] John R. Pitkins of Woodhaven, Long Island expressed outrage that there were Northerners who supported Brown. Calling Brown "the eternal agitator . . . at the heart of a Band of Robbers armed to the teeth and threatening *instant* distruction [sic] unless obeyed," Pitkins questioned whether there could be "a spark of sympathy to flow from the breast of any ***Just*** man or *woman* in the channel of this foul conspiracy against the peace of society and the Laws of the land? Talk of Sympathy for 'Old John Brown'! He asks for none, is *entitled to none* from the *good,* Law *abiding*, American people. Justice demands his Execution on the day, and at the moment dessignated [sic]."[136] Also hostile toward Brown was William R. Griffin, a "mechanic" from Springfield, Massachusetts, who wrote:

> Thank God the mask is off and you sir as chief magistrate of old Virginia hold a fiend of cold blooded murders in charge and I trust you will do your duty to your state, your country and your God fearless of the threats and vain boastings of these knaves of the North. . . . Teach these inhuman butchers that the day of retribution has come and that they can no longer commit these acts of murder and plunder and go unpunished to spread discontent and desolation over our happy land.[137]

Northerners such as Stone, Pitkins and Griffin shared many similarities with the pragmatic Northerners. Like the pragmatic Northerners, the vengeful Northerners disdained abolitionists as hypocritical agitators who would exploit the Harper's Ferry raid, as George Howland of Newport, Rhode Island put it, "to keep up a political excitement between the South and North, and ultimately to destroy our fair and glorious Union."[138] To such Northerners, abolitionists' professed beliefs in equality for black slaves surely masked other designs. One anonymous Northerner wrote, for example, that abolitionists who pretend "to be such great friends to the coloured population of America would not hire one upon no consideration they profess one thing and practice another all they want is to

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[135]Stone to Wise, Nov. 25, 1859, EP-JBR.
[136]Pitkins to Wise, Nov. 12, 1859, EP-JBR.
[137]Griffin to Wise, Nov. 14, 1859, EP-JBR.
[138]Howland to Wise, Dec. 2, 1859, EP-JBR.

get up an excitement for a division of the people of America."[139] Agreeing, G. Winslow of New York wrote that abolitionists "have no sympathies for the slave, but only hate for their masters, and sectional rancor."[140] These Northerners simply could not accept the possibility that there were individuals who honestly believed in the equality of all men. They resented the fact that someone would even suggest such a thing for it posed a challenge to their own status. Dr. J.A. Weissen of New York made this brutally clear when he wrote that

> If there are among us ignorant and narrow minded negro worshipers and fanatics headed by demagogues and corrupt office seekers, there are also men resolved to stand by the South. Let it come to a crisis, and there will be plenty of men ready to stop this band . . . who, in their madness would sacrifice the fairest fabric of freedom ever reared by man to the emancipation of a genus a little above the monkey. . . . I, for one, am ready to shoulder a musket against these pseudo philosophers, who want to make us believe, that a jackass is as good as an arabian steed simply because it belongs to the equine tribe.[141]

Also like the pragmatic Northerners, these vengeful Northerners were concerned with the impact abolitionist-aroused sympathy for Brown might have on the federal Union. Both pragmatic and vengeful Northerners shared a devotion to a Union with a slaveholding South. The potentially divisive action of Brown's raid, if anything, only served to strengthen that devotion and forced them to find a way to bind the nation together even more tightly. Many vengeful Northerners wrote to assure Governor Wise that abolitionists were a distinct minority in their communities. Alfred Maill of Piermont, New York, wrote that "most of the men I have heard talk on the subject of the late raid at Harpers Ferry regard it as horrible and are tired of hearing and reading of it. . . . Those newspaper editors, abolition speakers, politicians, &c who are always keeping up the hue and cry on slavery, I look upon with intense disgust; men who to further their own selfish motives, would plunge our fair country in ruin. I am for the Union, the whole Union, and nothing

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[139]"Your Faithful Friend" to Wise, Nov. 27, 1859, EP-JBR.
[140]Winslow to Wise, Oct. 31, 1859, EP-JBR.
[141]Weissen to Wise, Nov. 28, 1859, EP-JBR.

but the Union!"[142] A student from Utica, New York, expressed embarrassment and wrote to Wise "to let you know that the people of the North are not all fools or all Abolishonists [sic]. As this late Harpers Ferry affair has led you to think them to be. For my part I am sorry to think that I live in a community who have shown themselves so perfectly disgusting in the eyes of every Southern man."[143] Stating the matter simply and bluntly, George Burbank of Boston wrote that "public opinion of the North with regard to the invasion of Brown at Harper's Ferry is averse to the scheme with exception of these rabid men like [Wendell] Phil[l]ips, [Gerrit] Smith, [William Lloyd] Garrison, and Fred Douglass. Whatever disposision [sic] you see fit to make of old Brown will be all right."[144]

Finally, both vengeful and pragmatic Northerners were most likely Democrats in their politics. Some of these Northerners indicate such a political affiliation in their letters. But even for those who do not, the intense antipathy toward abolitionism and the view of slavery as little more than an artificial political issue used to divide an otherwise united nation (both ideas expressed generally in the Democratic press), as well as the unwillingness to concede any mitigating factors of motivation or mental stability for John Brown's crimes suggest that the politics of these individuals fell along the right rather than the left wing of the political spectrum.

The difference between the pragmatic Northerners and the vengeful Northerners was primarily one of strategy. Given that Brown was a criminal who deserved punishment, and given that the maintenance of the Union and the stifling of abolitionism that threatened it were the goals, what were the best means to achieve them in light of Brown's pending execution? For the pragmatic citizen, it was commuting the sentence as a

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[142]Maill to Wise, undated, EP-JBR.
[143]"A Student" to Wise, Nov. 25, 1859, EP-JBR.
[144]Burbank to Wise, Nov. 8, 1859, EP-JBR.

way of withdrawing momentum from abolitionist efforts to martyrize John Brown and subsequently increase their numbers.

For the vengeful citizen, however, the wisest approach was to carry out Brown's sentence and assure the South that the rest of the North supported the hanging as just and lawful punishment for an immoral crime, repudiated abolitionism as an unrepresentative and provocative movement, and was devoted to the maintenance of a peaceful union with the South in accordance with the Constitutional guarantees that protected slavery. A letter signed "Kezis" from Farmington, Connecticut, received by the New York *Herald* summarized the sympathies of many vengeful Northerners in this regard:

> It is as great an outrage on Connecticut as Virginia; The latter is as much our home as the soil we plough and plant, and we hold ourselves ready to uphold the federal constitution and defend the local institutions and soil of the South from invasion as our own firesides. . . . We have a few bad men among us -- aspiring tyrants, who, because they cannot have all their own way, aim at dissolution. . . . But the second sober thought has come, and the plaudits of the multitude have changed into bitter execration. . . . We admire the justice and forbearance of Virginia, and hope to witness a corresponding firmness in exacting strict and impartial justice. . . . For it is high time the abettors of Ossawatomie Brown were taught that our government was not framed for the negro. . . . It is absurd to suppose these humanitarians care any more for the negro than the slaveholder or the honest man of the North. . . . Their pretend sympathy is a base subterfuge intended to cover up worse designs.[145]

John Brown's execution, these individuals believed, would end the threat of abolitionism in two ways. It would demonstrate the resolve and fortitude of the South. Its unwillingness to concede to abolitionists' pleadings for their beknighted hero would be a flat rejection of the movement. Simultaneously, Northern support for Brown's hanging would stifle the movement's activities where it had thrived. As W.M. McCormick of Knox, Indiana believed, "Let me say to you that I would like to see Virginia the Old Dominion stand firm [and] execute her laws independent of the Northern fanatics. . . . I think the South requires the death of all the conspirators at Harpers Ferry to strike a panic

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[145]New York *Herald*, Nov. 3, 1859.

to our Northern Fanatics. I then think we will have no more fool hardy Abolitionist to try to get up another insurrection in the South."[146]

Each course had its advantages. The approach of the vengeful Northerners would be more likely to appeal to Southerners in the short run. Undoubtedly, it would comfort Southerners to hear that Northerners wanted John Brown executed just as much as they did. But perhaps the approach of the pragmatic Northerners was more realistic in the long run, for it implicitly acknowledged that the abolition movement was a force that had to be reckoned with and would not wither away and die simply by ignoring it or hanging its heroes. The pragmatic Northerners recognized that perceived persecution and suffering for a cause held a strong appeal for a movement grounded heavily in religion, and that hanging John Brown might strengthen rather than weaken abolitionism. Getting the state of Virginia to agree, however, was another matter altogether.

IV. Conclusions -- "But how and in what balance weigh John Brown"

Governor Wise was not persuaded by the sympathy some Northerners felt for John Brown. Neither was he concerned with a tactical maneuver to undercut abolitionist support. Had Wise been a Northerner, he would have been of the vengeful school, insistent upon law, order, the punishment of crimes, and the teaching of lessons. As he explained in a letter to Fernando Wood, the Democratic mayor of New York City:

> The crimes deliberately done by them [Brown and his men] are of the deepest and darkest kind which can be committed against our people. Brown . . . is sentenced to be hung; -- that is the sentence of a mild code humanely adjusted and requires no duty from me except to see that it be executed. . . . And to pardon him I have received petitions, prayers, threats, from almost every free State in the Union. From honest patriotic men like yourself, I am warned that hanging will make him a Martyr. Ah! -- Will it? -- Why? -- The obvious answer to that question shows me above anything the necessity for hanging him. . . . Was it ever known before that it would be impolitic for a state to execute her laws against the highest crimes without bringing down upon herself the vengeance of a public sentiment outside if her limits and hostile to her laws? -- Is it so that it is wisely said to her that she had better spare a murderer, a robber, a traitor, because public

[146]McCormick to Wise, Dec. 2, 1859, EP-JBR.

> sentiment elsewhere will glorify an insurrectionist with Martyrdom? If so it is time to do execution upon him and all like him.[147]

Wise refused to intercede, and John Brown was executed on December 2, 1859. On his way to the gallows, Brown slipped a small piece of paper to one of his guards. On it was written his final prophecy to the American people: "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."[148]

The preceding analysis demonstrates that the North was internally divided by Brown's raid and the question of his punishment. There were Northerners sympathetic to Brown. These individuals tended to believe that slavery was wrong and that, while Brown's actions were misguided and possibly the actions of a deluded and deranged individual, Brown himself was a noble, honest, and heroic Christian devoted to the cause of human freedom in ways that demanded admiration. A man like John Brown, these Northerners believed, simply did not deserve to hang.

Other Northerners were not as certain. They acknowledged that Brown had been able to curry favor among antislavery sympathizers, yet rejected this sympathy themselves. While they derided Brown's actions, they wondered if perhaps it would not be most prudent to commute Brown's sentence as an effort to prevent abolitionists from using Brown as a martyr and pulling other sympathetic but non-abolitionist Northerners into their camp. If abolitionists were able to take advantage of Brown's execution in such a fashion, the increased momentum they would accrue could only escalate sectional tensions and further threaten the Union.

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[147]Wise to Wood, Nov. 4, 1859, quoted in Villard, pp. 503-504. For a recent study of the multiple factors that fed into Wise's thought process on the prosecution and hanging of Brown, see McGlone, "John Brown, Henry Wise, and the Politics of Insanity," pp. 213-252.

[148]quoted in Villard, p. 554.

Still other Northerners were infuriated and embarrassed by the reality of sympathy in their section of the country. These individuals not only condemned Brown's raid, but they also wished to see Brown punished according to the law's dictates. If Northerners assured the South that they supported Brown's execution, they believed, Brown's punishment could in a way provide an opportunity to demonstrate to abolitionists that the North and South shared the same country, and that abolitionists did not speak for the masses of patriotic individuals who saw a nation rather than sections.

These divisions suggest that rather than push the North in any particular direction with regard to the sectional conflict, John Brown's raid forced the North to look internally and take account of itself as much as of its relationship to the South. Northern citizens had to ask themselves how they felt about slavery, about antislavery activism, about the image their section displayed, *and* about the importance of maintaining the Union with the South. The answers Northerners developed were inconclusive and resulted in intense internecine battles over what constituted the character of Northern society. Even the newspapers were unsure about how Brown's raid reflected their section's sympathies and attitudes. While their focus was on partisan political divisions, it is clear that collectively they reached no decisive conclusion about John Brown's raid, who bore responsibility for it, or what to do about it.

Some historians have suggested that even if Northern reaction to John Brown's raid was divided between sympathizers and condemners before December 2, Brown's execution outraged many and served to bring Northerners together in an increased hostility to a South that would hang such a brave and honest soul for the sake of maintaining slavery. Roy Nichols, for example, writes that "Northern response was mixed; there was a struggle between hatred of violence and zeal for the antislavery cause. Out of it came a rationalization that John Brown was a martyr slain for freedom, slain by the barbarous

slaveholders when he struck for liberty."[149] Betty Mitchell writes that "the death sentence further angered many northerners who considered the penalty too severe. As the day of the execution neared, northern citizens, though still opposed to the raid itself, could not help but admire the heroic conduct, moral integrity, and personal courage of John Brown himself."[150]

The internal divisions in Northern society, however, suggest that such an approximation makes little sense. Given the ways Northerners expressed their opinions prior to the execution, it makes more sense to argue that Brown's execution served to harden those internal divisions. There would likely be Northerners whose sympathies for Brown would turn to outrage in the wake of the execution -- who would question their own dedication to the antislavery cause only to find themselves in need of rededication, who would martyrize John Brown as a symbol of slavery's oppressive nature, and who would intensify their hostility to the South. Still others, however, would be increasingly outraged that such sympathy existed. Their antagonism toward sympathizers would only feed off of that sympathy and grow in intensity after Brown's execution. They would continue to deride the notion that Brown was anything more than a common criminal. Also, if sympathizers would rededicate themselves to slavery opposition, others would rededicate themselves to the Union and to fraternal bonds with the South.

Indeed, it appears to be the case that Brown's execution served only to sharpen the divisions in Northern society with respect to the raid, to slavery, to the South and to Brown himself rather than soften and blur them. On the day Brown was executed and for weeks afterward, some Northerners held sympathy and prayer meetings to bemoan Brown's loss and to elevate him to the status of a martyr. Other Northerners, however, gathered to express their indignation toward the raid and the displays of sympathy and to devote themselves to the federal Union in league with the South. In Rhode Island, for example,

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[149]Roy F. Nichols, *The Disruption of American Democracy,* (New York, 1948), p. 267.
[150]Mitchell, pp. 65-66.

on December 2, a sympathy meeting at Providence resolved unanimously that "while we most decidedly disapprove the methods he adopted to accomplish his objects, yet . . . in his willingness to die in aid of the great cause of human freedom, we still recognize the qualities of a noble nature and the exercise of a spirit which true men have always admired and which history never fails to honor."[151] Just over two weeks later on December 17, however, a meeting at Wakefield, Rhode Island resolved

> that in the opinion of this meeting the late attempt of John Brown to excite a rebellion in the State of Virginia, deserves the stro[n]gest condemnation of all peaceable and law abiding citizens. . . . Resolved, that in our opinion the great majority of the people of this town and State are devoted to the Union and constitution. . . . And while the supporters of Brown are constantly from the pulpit and other public places expressing their sympathy for this miscalled martyr,
>
> Resolved, that in our opinion it is not only proper but highly necessary that those who condemn such opinions, should publicly express that condemnation, in order that the opinions of our people should not be mistaken abroad.[152]

These divisions could become explosive when Northern citizens of different opinions gathered together. Rarely was this more evident than at a meeting held at the Cooper Institute in New York City on December 15, 1859. The meeting was called ostensibly for the purpose of raising funds for John Brown's family. More significantly, it was part of the concerted abolitionist effort to martyrize Brown after his death.[153] The meeting featured speeches by abolitionists George Cheever and Wendell Phillips. Quickly after the start of the meeting, however, it became clear that the audience had divided opinions with regard to the sensibilities of the speakers.

Cheever spoke first. Throughout, his speech provoked a mixture of hisses and applause, and he was repeatedly interrupted by outbursts from audience members. Cheever stated "It was John Brown's natural right to protest against slavery, and in every

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[151] quoted in John Michael Ray, "Rhode Island Reactions to John Brown's Raid," *Rhode Island History*, Vol. 20, no. 4 (October 1961), p. 105.

[152] quoted in Ray, pp. 106-107.

[153] On abolitionist efforts to make John Brown into a martyr both before and immediately after his execution, see Paul Finkelman, "Manufacturing Martyrdom: The Antislavery Response to John Brown's Raid," in Finkelman, ed., *His Soul Goes Marching On*, pp. 41-66.

just and righteous way to put that protest into action -- and any State establishing slavery by law -- though God has forbidden it, and forbid[d]ing such a protest -- though God has required it -- instantly makes such a protest not only a right, but a duty, and doubly both." At this, a man from the audience rose to heckle Cheever, yelling "If you are here to talk about John Brown, talk about him; don't talk about anything else, God damn you." To this outburst, other audience members called on the police to "put him out," which the police promptly did.

Cheever continued speaking, only to have a man near the platform rise and shake his cane at the speaker and say "Stop that, sir; stop that," causing another disturbance and the need for police intervention. Cheever's speech was interrupted half a dozen other times, as fights and loud arguments broke out among some audience members, while others shouted at Cheever from the crowd. The New York *Herald* reported that "the latter portion of the speech was delivered amid great disturbance and disorder; hisses and applause, groans and speeches in different parts of the hall, being all the time in progress." The New York ***Tribune*** went into greater detail, writing of a gang of "rowdies" who "for several minutes indulged in unlimited yells" and later formed a crowd that "surged down the aisle, and were in close contiguity to the ladies, yelling, howling, and screaming like a pack of devils."

Between Cheever's and Phillips's speeches, approximately three hundred individuals organized a counter meeting in one section of the hall, where they gave "three cheers for the constitution of the United States" and "three groans for abolitionism." Brown sympathizers yelled "Will you be quiet?" and "This interruption will make thousands of republicans." Phillips took the podium, only to have less success in completing his speech without interruption than had Cheever. Phillips's oration was also met with a mixture of applause and hisses, and he was barraged by verbal assaults from audience members. When he asked the rhetorical question, "Was he [Brown] a murderer?" an audience member yelled "Yes." Phillips continued, saying "I am glad to hear it. And

first let us look at the man. Pure, tender, brave, disinterested," only to be met with the retort, "A Kansas horse thief." Later, as shouts of "treason, treason" emerged from the crowd and the police repeatedly ejected audience members, Phillips asked "He went to Virginia. What did he do?" This was responded to with "He committed murder and got hung afterwards. That is what he did." This outburst, in turn, was met with further shouts of "Put him out. Put him out."

Disturbances in the audience continued through the conclusion of the meeting. More than seventy-five policemen constantly were attempting to quell the near riotous crowd, but heckling of the speakers and small disturbances in the audience continued unabated regardless of the number of people ejected. The *Herald* described the meeting as "one of the most boisterous, unruly, and disorderly meetings ever held in the Cooper Institute."[154]

More important, though, the meeting suggests the impact of John Brown's execution on the Northern populace. If Brown's raid divided Northerners, his execution only widened those divisions. These divisions appeared no less prominent one year later on the first anniversary of the execution, when the crowd gathered at a commemorative meeting at Boston's Tremont Temple erupted into fistfights and screaming matches. Numerous individuals held counter-demonstrations in the hall. A few stormed the stage to protest the abolitionist speeches being delivered. The police ejected some audience members and made numerous arrests.[155]

All of this should not be taken as an argument for the insignificance of John Brown's raid in precipitating the Civil War. Many historians maintain that the raid infuriated and frightened Southerners and heightened their sense, however mistakenly, that most of the North was allied against them and against slavery. If this assessment is

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[154]For accounts of the meeting, see the New York *Herald* and the New York *Tribune*, Dec. 16, 1859.
[155]For accounts of the Boston meeting, see the Boston *Daily Advertiser* and the Boston *Courier*, Dec. 4, 1860.

accurate, then Southern perception, or more accurately Southern misperception, of events and of Northern attitudes makes John Brown's raid significant in the sense of heightening sectional tensions.[156] But making an argument about the mutuality of this increased tension is on less firm ground and needs historiographical qualification. The raid at Harper's Ferry should be seen as a question of perception as much as of reality, and as an event which served to complicate and confuse attitudes toward sectional relations as much as it did to polarize and clarify them.

One significant question remains, however. If the raid produced such divisions in the North, how was it that during the Civil War one of the most popular marching songs of Northern troops was "John Brown's Body," and that Brown posthumously became a heroic symbol of the struggle against the South and slavery? I would argue that Brown's raid and John Brown himself took on new meanings in the context of the Civil War. The image of Brown as a martyr that Brown himself projected and that abolitionists attempted to convey to the Northern populace in the immediate wake of Brown's execution were mostly ineffective in persuading the mass of Northerners. Once the Civil War began in 1861 and became an ideological crusade against slavery in 1863, however, those appeals could be built upon and adopted by Northern citizens and soldiers who now found themselves

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[156]There are historians who reject the notion that the raid had a significant impact even in the South. William Freehling, for example, suggests that the Harper's Ferry raid is an "overrated cause of Southern secession in 1860." (See William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay, 1776-1854*, [New York, Oxford University Press, 1990], p. 178.

I have not located sources that reveal the attitudes of Southern citizens with respect to John Brown's raid. Some of the letters sent to Governor Wise and to newspaper editors did come from Southerners, but generally they are few and far between and are not significant enough in number even to suggest the direction(s) of Southern opinion. If such sources were located, however, they might reveal divisions among the Southern populace as well. If this were the case, larger questions about the role of politicians and others in exploiting the raid to foster crisis between the sections could be explored. For recent studies of the impact of the raid on the sectional dimension of American politics, see Knupfer, "A Crisis in Conservatism," pp. 119-148, and Peter Wallenstein, "Incendiaries All: Southern Politics and the Harpers Ferry Raid" in Finkelman, ed., *His Soul Goes Marching On*, pp. 149-173.

fighting to defeat the same slave system that Brown had prophesized would only be defeated through bloodshed.[157]

The worship of John Brown was, in a way, a public relations coup by abolitionists writ large in the context of war. Masses of Northerners could identify with Brown's attack on the South in response to the unifying spirit that war always produces, but in ways they could not before the firing on Fort Sumter when civil war was a threat and fear rather than a reality. The image of Brown as the violent heroic criminal -- noble, brave, sacrificing -- only helped in solidifying his legend in the particularly martial environment of the Civil War, and allowed individual soldiers to see a model worth emulating.

The veneration of Brown that originated from the abolitionists, however, was only partially successful. The war did not bring about a widespread moral awakening among Northern soldiers with regard to slavery. As Charles Royster has written, "The people who undertook the destructive war that abolitionists wanted did not necessarily thereby become converts to or servants of the reformers' ethical system." For those who had been sympathetic to Brown all along, "John Brown's Body" was an invigorating hymn that renewed their dedication to ending slavery. For most Northerners, however, the song was an acknowledgment of identification with a man less than with his motivations. Ironically, "John Brown's Body" for many had less to do with slavery than it did with a passionate man who had been willing (as Northern soldiers were now) to fight the South to the death. Slavery was only the pretext for a war that had a violent and destructive logic all its own.[158]

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[157]The John Brown song actually originated as a ditty that mocked a soldier in a Massachusetts regiment who happened to share the name John Brown. In the context of the Civil War, however, it became more widely accepted that the song was a tribute to John Brown of Harper's Ferry. For the origins of the John Brown song, see Boyd B. Stutler, "John Brown's Body," *Civil War History*, Vol. 4, no. 3 (Sept. 1958), pp. 251-260.

[158]On slavery and the fighting of the Civil War, see Royster, pp. 260-264 (quote is on p. 263).

Salmon Chase said of John Brown's execution that "it is a tragedy which will supply themes for novelists and Poets for centuries."[159] We are a little more than a century removed from the raid, but Chase appears to have assessed its historical impact accurately. Poets, playwrights, artists, and novelists have picked up on and contributed to the veneration of John Brown. This began just after Brown's execution but rapidly accelerated with the onset of the war, the emancipation of slaves, and the Reconstruction period. Such veneration only served to strengthen the image of Brown as a martyr and antislavery saint. A scholar in 1941 catalogued the appearance of John Brown in American literature and discovered 58 novels, 11 short stories, 245 poems and 31 plays about John Brown. The canonization marched on in paintings such as those of John Brown kissing a slave baby on his way to the gallows.[160] Blacks in particular quite obviously have been inclined to see John Brown as a heroic figure and have greatly contributed to the creation of his legend both through literary expressions and historical works such as W.E.B. Du Bois's 1909 biography of Brown.[161]

The historical literature on John Brown and his raid is vast, and given the emotions engendered by the raid at the time and since, historians have rarely been able to conceal their personal inclinations and opinions about Brown and his activities on behalf of American slaves. Mine may be equally clear, but my intention has not been to praise or to deride Brown or the relative justice of his actions and his punishment. Rather, I have tried to assess how Northerners responded to John Brown's raid independent as they were of

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[159]quoted in Oates, *Purge*, p. 311.

[160]"John Brown in American Literature" was a Ph.D dissertation written by Joy Tolbert in 1941, and is mentioned by Abels on p. 394. In 1990, Naveh cited the number of 250 poems written about John Brown, suggesting that five more have been written since 1941. (Naveh, p. 38, note 70). The story about John Brown kissing the slave baby was originally propagated by the New York *Tribune* on Dec. 5, 1859, and John Greenleaf Whittier wrote a poem including the story later in December. Artists picked up on the story and translated it into visual representation beginning in 1863, with the most famous painting being that of Thomas Hovenden, painted in 1881. John Brown was surrounded by guards from the time he left prison to the time he hanged. The story itself is patently false, but has become part of the John Brown lore nonetheless. (See James C. Malin, "The John Brown Legend in Pictures," *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, Vol. VIII, no. 4 [Nov. 1939], pp. 339-341. Also see Finkelman, "Manufacturing Martyrdom," pp. 50-52).

[161]see Quarles, *Blacks on John Brown*.

the knowledge that the Civil War was on its way. I have suggested that while before the Civil War Brown's raid may have been significant to both the North and the South, it impacted on the sectional calculus in ways different than have been previously argued.

Historians are blessed and cursed with hindsight. We are blessed in that we are able to see events and their consequences in ways the historical actors were not. However, we are also cursed in that we can see those consequences where the historical actors could not. The line between insight and reading backwards is a fine one and treading it is difficult. In 1928, Stephen Vincent Benet asked in "John Brown's Body," perhaps the most famous poem ever written about the Civil War, "you can weigh John Brown's body well enough, but how and in what balance weigh John Brown?"[162] When we "weigh" John Brown, our balance must be that of the past, the present, and the future, keeping each in its proper place and recognizing the integrity of a given historical moment free from the future's intrusion.

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[162]Stephen Vincent Benet, *John Brown's Body*, (New York, Doubleday, Doran, and Co., 1928), p. 55.

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