

John brown, an abolitionist



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

“ All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing. ” – Edmund Burke Throughout the existence of slavery in America, white abolitionists have played a crucial role in the fight for the freedom of blacks. They all risked everything, and fueled by passion stepped outside of the societal norm to fight for those unable to fight. However, few white abolitionists caused as much controversy during their time as John Brown.

Brown was an abolitionist who not only spoke out on his beliefs, but backed up them up with action. He was so contentious that he was able to be considered a hero and a terrorist at the same time. Although Brown's actions were considered debatable, it can be agreed upon today that they were necessary. John Brown was born in 1800 into a deeply religious family with a father who was vigorously opposed to slavery. He went through many jobs including being a farmer, wool merchant, tanner, and land speculator, but was never financially successful. He also traveled about the country living in places such as Ohio, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and New York all while managing to father a total of twenty children. However, his lack of money and his family life didn't stop him for fighting for what he believed in; the abolition of slavery.

Though Brown was most famously known for his raid on Harpers Ferry, his involvement in anti-slavery had begun long before. And although he was known for being violent, not all of his efforts and actions resulted in bloodshed. He began his fight for slavery quite peacefully by giving some of his own land to fugitive slaves. He then adopted and raised a black baby with his wife as his own child. Brown had also participated in the Underground Railroad, helping the hiding and movement of black slaves throughout the

country. In 1847 Brown had met the famous black abolitionist Frederick Douglas who described brown as “ though a white gentleman, [Brown] is in sympathy a black man, and as deeply interested in our case as though his own soul had been pierced with the iron of slavery” (Africans in America). By 1849 Brown had moved into the black community of North Elba, New York, where the blacks referred to him as “ a kind father to them” (Africans in America).

Looking at Brown’s proceedings at this point, it’s hard to imagine how someone who fought for something so good could be considered by many to be so bad. However, as time went on and the fight for freedom in America grew more widespread, Brown’s controversial methods and violence began to develop. Brown’s move in 1855 to the Kansas territory with his five sons was when he started to gain his major significance as a figure in the antislavery fight. During this time there was a huge debate going on if Kansas was going to be a free of slave state due to its new entrance as a territory. Brown saw this as a massive opportunity, and arrived heavily armed, exploding with passion, and ready to fight. Brown was involved in numerous scuffles and hostilities, but one act led by him plunged Bleeding Kansas into more violence. Incensed by the sacking of Lawrence in May 1856 by pro-slavery supporters and the failure of the free-state men to retaliate, Brown led a midnight raid on a group of slavery sympathizers at Pottawatomie Creek.

The raiders killed five men, which sparked the Battle of Black Jack and the border war that raged across northeast Kansas in the summer of 1856. He had also led an attack the same year on a proslavery town and brutally killed five of its settlers. Now Brown was commonly known as an outlaw, due to his

increasingly violent methods of protest. However, his next and final act, the raid of Harpers Ferry, would be the most notorious moment in Brown's life. Brown had spent the summer of 1858 looking to raise money to fund his war against slavery. He wanted to create an "army" that he would lead on a grand "battle" (Reynolds). This army consisted of he and 21 other men, 5 blacks and 16 whites, and the battle was a raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry.

On October 16, 1856 Brown and his men, heavily armed with rifles, attacked Harpers Ferry in West Virginia (at that time it was just Virginia). His plan was to seize the 100,000 muskets and rifles that were located in the armory and use them to arm the local slaves. From there, they would head south, gathering more and more slaves from plantations, and fighting in a manner of "self defense" (Reynolds). He had even asked Harriet Tubman to join him in the raid; however she was ill and unable to join him. Her participation would have been interesting, and perhaps tragic, as she was the escaped slave that founded the Underground Railway. John's plan was that the slaves would revolt and battle against their masters. However, this plan would not succeed.

The Raid at Harpers Ferry would be a beginning to the Civil War and an end for John Brown. The raid initially went well, they were able to capture the armory due it being guarded by a single watchmen. They then rounded up hostages from some local farms, one being the great grand nephew of George Washington, and spread the news to the local slaves. Unfortunately, Brown and his men soon found themselves surrounded by the U. S Marines led by

Colonel Robert E. Lee and were commanded to surrender. Brown initially refused, stating “ No, I prefer to die here” (New World Encyclopedia).

Soon the power of the Marines was too much, Brown had become wounded, and he and the survivors of the raid became detained. Brown was taken to Charleston, Virginia where he was given a trial. Before hearing his sentence Brown was permitted to make an address to the court, where he tried to tell the people to look at slavery in a different way. He spoke of the terrible treatment of slaves, how they were essentially unpaid laborers, how families were torn apart and sold, the terrible housing conditions, and how they were beaten and raped. He told the nation “...I believe to have interfered as I have done,...

in behalf of his despised poor, was not wrong, but right. Now, if it be 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 millions in the slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments, I submit: so let it be done” (Trial of John Brown). John Brown was found guilty and convicted of treason and on December 2, 1859 he was hanged. On his way to be hung at the gallows, Brown had slipped a note to a fellow prisoner that read “ 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 know think: vainly flattered myself that without very much bloodshed; it might be done” (Brogan pg. 309). Not only was this a last word for Brown, but it eerily seemed to also be a prophetic forewarning of the soon-to-come Civil War.

After his trial and death, the news had circulated all over of Brown's life and death. The controversy ignited immediately, as if the country was covered in gasoline and Brown's death was the match dropped upon it. He had even been coined the name "the 'spark' that caused the Civil War" (Frye).

According to some, he was an abolitionist martyr, and had inspired many to keep fighting for freedom. But to others, he was a madman, murderer, and terrorist whose death brought about relief. Brown's death had "hurled the country into conundrum" (Frye). So was he the liberator of Kansas or simply a crazed maniac? What made it such a tough topic was that even for those who supported antislavery, what he was fighting for seemed right but the way he went about it was questionable.

The day after he was executed, Abraham Lincoln had said "old John Brown has been executed for treason against the state, we cannot object, even though he agreed with us in thinking slavery was wrong. That cannot excuse violence, bloodshed, and treason. It could avail him nothing that he might think right now" (Striner pg. 101). However he did have many influential people that considered him to be a hero. Upon the news of his death, William Lloyd Garrison had said "was John Brown justified in his attempt? Yes, if Washington was in his." Louisa May Alcott had called Brown "St.

John the Just" and worshiped him (Frye). When Harriet Tubman heard the news of his death, she "mourned the death of her friends in the raid, and continued to hold John Brown as her hero" (Lewis). Henry David Thoreau had stated "No man in America has ever stood up so persistently and effectively for the dignity of human nature...Is it not possible that an individual may be right and a government wrong...Are laws to be enforced simply because they

were made” (Frye). The controversy that Brown had caused didn’t just exist during his time. Only fifty years ago, in 1959 (the midst of the civil rights movement) the Civil War Centennial Commission, established by Congress in September 1957 wanted to hold a celebratory remembrance of the Harpers Ferry Raid at the site in West Virginia. However research found that “ The people of the South would be unanimous in opposition to any celebration of the John Brown raid, and most conservative people in the North would be strongly opposed to it” (Frye). It turned out that 7/8ths of people at that time in the U.

S were seriously concerned about the celebration. The one-eighth who weren’t? The African-American population. What made him so controversial is that when you have right and wrong clearly laid out, things aren’t that difficult to see. However, Brown didn’t just have people that were on his side, or not on his side. His violent way of fighting for the freedom of slaves caused people that generally were on his side, to find him too much of a hot topic to support, in a sense causing a division within the divisions. However, what wasn’t so clear then that is today is that those violent antics that got him into such trouble may in fact have been necessary as a desperate and final action that would in fact cause a physical reaction. John Brown knew that he had to pay the ultimate price in order to pursue his beliefs.

That is what made him the abolitionist whose words and deeds provided the backbone and impetus for the Civil War and an end to slavery. His actions may have been extreme, but as seen repeated throughout history, the most influential figures and true fighters are the ones that didn’t just sit around and do nothing. Who John Brown was, what he stood for, and what made him

such an important figure in American history can be seen in a quote by Edmund Burke, one of the few Englishmen who supported the American Revolution: “ All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing. ”