The Address of John Brown

By: John Brown
Date: November 2, 1859

Explanation of the Source: By the end of the 1850s, the relationship between the North and South had reached its breaking point. Adding fuel to the fire was white abolitionist John Brown, who attempted to seize the town of Harpers Ferry in Virginia and to start a massive slave rebellion. Brown was captured, put on trial, and convicted of attempting to incite insurrection. When his punishment—execution—was announced, Brown was asked if he had a statement. This was his response.

“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 into 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!”
The Address of John Brown

By: Mahala Doyle
Date: November 20, 1859

Explanation of the Source: In the month and a half that John Brown was incarcerated for his leading role in the Harpers Ferry raid, his image among the Northern population changed drastically. His clear and concise answers to questions by the prosecution team and by newspaper reporters brought to the public a different side of Brown that few who had heard of his terrible Kansas reputation believed possible. One person who was not impressed by Brown though was Mahala Doyle. Mahala was the wife of James Doyle, and the mother of William and Drury Doyle; all three killed by Brown and his men back in Pottawatomie, Kansas in 1856.

The Doyles had moved from Tennessee to Kansas in 1855 because, like many poor whites, they felt the future was not very bright in a slave state for nonslaveholders. To them, the Kansas Territory out west hopefully offered a new start. But, like others that moved to the plains, the Doyles got caught up in the antislavery vs. proslavery fight. In a war like bleeding Kansas, people who sat on the fence about the slavery issue often ended up having to choose a side. The Doyles chose to support the proslavery Law and Order Party, not because they liked slavery, but because they hated abolitionists more; and for that decision they would suffer.

Two events are believed to be the source for John Brown’s rage on the night of May 24, 1856. On May 21, proslavery forces had attacked the abolitionist stronghold of Lawrence, Kansas, burning the Free State Hotel and destroying the printing presses of the town’s printing shops. On May 22, South Carolina Congressman Preston Brooks had clubbed Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner at his desk in the capital building in Washington. Brown, long furious over the pacifism and perceived lack of backbone shown by abolitionists, had had enough. He would make a stand; make an attack, to show that those who opposed slavery could be as brutal as those that favored slavery. As Brown’s men knocked on the cabin door of James Doyle, his wife Mahala and their six children slept. When Doyle opened the door, the men rushed into the cabin and snatched James, and his two oldest sons William and Drury. Mahala begged Brown to spare sixteen year old John, which he did. The three Drury men were taken into the nearby woods and John Brown’s sons Owen and Salmon hacked them to ribbons with fierce broadswords. To make sure James Doyle was dead, Brown fired a shot into his head. The attack was bloody and brutal as fingers and arms were severed from bodies and deep gashes were inflicted to heads and chests.

When Brown was captured and jailed over three years later, word of course spread across the nation like wildfire. Mahala Doyle who had moved back to Tennessee, took a few minutes to scratch out some words to Brown as he sat awaiting his fate. She wrote the following:

“Chattanooga Tennessee 20th November 1859

John Brown
Sir,

Altho vengeance is not mine, I confess, that I do feel gratified to hear that you were stopt in your fiendish career at Harper's Ferry, with the loss of your two sons, you can now appreciate my distress, in Kansas, when you then and there entered my house at midnight and arrested my husband and two boys and took them out of the yard and in cold blood shot them dead in my hearing, you cant say you done it to free our slaves, we had none and never expected to own one, but has only made me a poor disconsolate widow with helpless children while I feel for your folly. I do hope & trust that you will meet your just reward. O how it pained my Heart to hear the dying groans of my Husband and children if this scrawl give you any consolation you are welcome to it.

Mahala Doyle

[Noted on Back] my son John Doyle whose life I begged of (you) is now grown up and is very eager to be at Charleston on the day of your execution would certainly be there if his means would permit it, that he might adjust the rope around your neck if the Governor would permit it.

M Doyle.”

Thank You by Ellen

By: Ellen Watkins
Date: November 25, 1859

Explanation of the Source: Despite that John Brown was seen as a terrorist to the South; many in the North felt that he was the in the right when he raided Harper's Ferry. Ellen Watkins wrote John Brown in jail to express her admiration for such a man.

“Dear Friend: although the hands of Slavery throw a barrier between you and me, and it may not be my privilege to see you in your prison-house, Virginia has no bolts or bars through which I dread to send you my sympathy. In the name of the young girl sold from the warm clasp of a mother’s arms to the clutches of a libertine or a profligate, – in the name of the slave mother, her heart rocked to and fro by the agony of her mournful separations, – I thank you, that you have been brave enough to reach out your hands to the crushed and blighted of race. You have rocked the bloody Bastille; and I hope that from our sad fate great good may arise to the cause of freedom. Already from your prison has come a shout of triumph against the giant sin of our country. The hemlock is distilled with victory when it is pressed to the lips of Socrates. The Cross becomes a glorious ensign when Calvary’s page-browed sufferer yields up his life upon it. And, if Universal Freedom is ever to be the dominant power of the land, your bodies may be only her first stepping stones to dominion.

I would prefer to see Slavery go down peaceably by men breaking off their sins by righteousness and their evils by showing justice and mercy to the poor; but we cannot tell what the future may bring forth.
God writes national judgments upon national sins; and what may be slumbering in the storehouse of divine justice we do not know. We may earnestly hope that your fate will not be a vain lesson, that it will intensify our hatred of Slavery and love of freedom, and that your martyr grave will be a sacred altar upon which men will record their vows of undying hatred to that system which tramps on man and bids defiance to God. I have written to your dear wife, and sent her a few dollars, and I pledge myself to you that I will continue to assist her. May the ever-blessed god shield you and your fellow-prisoners in the darkest hour. Send my sympathy to your fellow-prisoners; tell them to be of good courage; to seek a refuge in the Eternal God, and lean upon His everlasting arms for a sure support. If any of them, like you, have a wife or children that I can help, let them send me word.”

A Plea for Captain John Brown

By: Henry D. Thoreau
Date: October 16, 1859

Explanation of the Source: On October 16, 1859, John Brown led a raid of the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia. He intended to arm slaves with weapons from the arsenal, but the attack failed. Within 36 hours, all of Brown's men were killed or captured by local farmers, militiamen, and U.S. Marines led by Robert E. Lee. Brown was tried for treason, and was hanged on December 2, 1859. Henry D. Thoreau made a speech to try to persuade people in favor of John Brown and his release.

“The newspapers seem to ignore, or perhaps are really ignorant of the fact that there are at least as many as two or three individuals to a town throughout the North who think much as the present speaker does about him and his enterprise. I do not hesitate to say that they are an important and growing party. We aspire to be something more than stupid and timid chattels, pretending to read history and our Bibles, but desecrating every house and every day we breathe in. Perhaps anxious politicians may prove that only seventeen white men and five negroes were concerned in the late enterprise; but their very anxiety to prove this might suggest to themselves that all is not told. Why do they still dodge the truth? They are so anxious because of a dim consciousness of the fact, which they do not distinctly face, that at least a million of the free inhabitants of the United States would have rejoiced if it had succeeded. They at most only criticize the tactics. Though we wear no crape, the thought of that man's position and probable fate is spoiling many a man's day here at the North for other thinking. If anyone who has seen him here can pursue successfully any other train of thought, I do not know what he is made of. If there is any such who gets his usual allowance of sleep, I will warrant him to fatten easily under any circumstances which do not touch his body or purse. I put a piece of paper and a pencil under my pillow, and when I could not sleep I wrote in the dark.

On the whole, my respect for my fellow-men, except as one may outweigh a million, is not being increased these days. I have noticed the cold-blooded way in which newspaper writers and men generally speak of this event, as if an ordinary malefactor, though one of unusual "pluck," as the Governor of Virginia is reported to have said, using the language of the cock-pit, "the gamest man he ever saw." had been caught and were about to be hung. He was not dreaming of his foes when the governor thought he looked so brave. It turns what sweetness I have to gall, to hear, or hear of, the remarks of some of my neighbors. When we heard at first that he was dead, one of my townsmen observed that "he died as the fool dieth," which, pardon me, for an instant suggested a likeness in him dying to my neighbor living. Others, craven-hearted, said disparagingly, that "he threw his life away," because he resisted the government. Which way have they thrown their lives, pray?
such as would praise a man for attacking singly an ordinary band of thieves or murderers. I hear another ask, Yankee-like, "What will he gain by it?" as if he expected to fill his pockets by this enterprise. Such a one has no idea of gain but in this worldly sense. If it does not lead to a "surprise" party, if he does not get a new pair of boots, or a vote of thanks, it must be a failure. "But he won't gain anything by it." Well, no, I don't suppose he could get four-and-sixpence a day for being hung, take the year round; but then he stands a chance to save a considerable part of his soul, — and such a soul! — when you do not. No doubt you can get more in your market for a quart of milk than for a quart of blood, but that is not the market that heroes carry their blood to.

I read all the newspapers I could get within a week after this event, and I do not remember in them a single expression of sympathy for these men. I have since seen one noble statement, in a Boston paper, not editorial. Some voluminous sheets decided not to print the full report of Brown's words to the exclusion of other matter. It was as if a publisher should reject the manuscript of the New Testament, and print Wilson's last speech. The same journal which contained this pregnant news, was chiefly filled, in parallel columns, with the reports of the political conventions that were being held. But the descent to them was too steep. They should have been spared this contrast, — been printed in an extra, at least. To turn from the voices and deeds of earnest men to the cackling of political conventions! Office-seekers and speakers, who do not so much as lay an honest egg, but wear their breasts bare upon an egg of chalk! Their great game is the game of straws, or rather that universal aboriginal game of the platter, at which the Indians cried hub, bub! Exclude the reports of religious and political conventions, and publish the words of a living man.

But I object not so much to what they have omitted as to what they have inserted. Even the Liberator called it "a misguided, wild, and apparently insane — effort." As for the herd of newspapers and magazines, I do not chance to know an editor in the country who will deliberately print anything which he knows will ultimately and permanently reduce the number of his subscribers. They do not believe that it would be expedient. How then can they print truth? If we do not say pleasant things, they argue, nobody will attend to us. And so they do like some traveling auctioneers, who sing an obscene song, in order to draw a crowd around them. Republican editors, obliged to get their sentences ready for the morning edition, and accustomed to look at everything by the twilight of politics, express no admiration, nor true sorrow even, but call these men "deluded fanatics," — "mistaken men," — "insane," or "crazed". It suggests what a sane set of editors we are blessed with, not "mistaken men;" who know very well on which side their bread is buttered, at least.

A man does a brave and humane deed, and at once, on all sides, we hear people and parties declaring, "I didn't do it, nor countenance him to do it, in any conceivable way. It can't be fairly inferred from my past career." I, for one, am not interested to hear you define your position. I don't know that I ever was or ever shall be. I think it is mere egotism, or impertinent at this time. Ye needn't take so much pains to wash your skirts of him. No intelligent man will ever be convinced that he was any creature of yours. He went and came, as he himself informs us, "under the auspices of John Brown and nobody else." The Republican party does not perceive how many his failure will make to vote more correctly than they would have them. They have counted the votes of Pennsylvania & Co., but they have not correctly counted Captain Brown's vote. He has taken the wind out of their sails, — the little wind they had, — and they may as well lie to and repair.

Treason! Where does such treason take its rise? I cannot help thinking of you as you deserve, ye governments. Can you dry up the fountains of thought? High treason, when it is resistance to tyranny here below, has its origin in, and is first committed by, the power that makes and forever recreates man. When you have caught and hung all these human rebels, you have accomplished nothing but your own guilt, for you have not struck at the fountain-head. You presume to contend with a foe against whom West Point cadets and rifled cannon point not. Can all the art of the cannon founder tempt matter to turn against its maker? Is the form in which the founder thinks he casts it more essential than the constitution of it and of himself?

The United States have a coffle of four millions of slaves. They are determined to keep them in this condition; and Massachusetts is one of the confederated overseers to prevent their escape. Such are not all the inhabitants of Massachusetts, but such are they who rule and are obeyed here. It was Massachusetts, as well as Virginia, that put down this insurrection at Harper's Ferry. She sent the marines there, and she will have to pay the penalty of her sin."