



Judgment Day

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John Brown

1800 - 1859



John Brown was a man of action -- a man who would not be deterred from his mission of abolishing slavery. On October 16, 1859, he led 21 men on a raid of the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia. His plan to arm slaves with the weapons he and his men seized from the arsenal was thwarted, however, by local farmers, militiamen, and Marines led by Robert E. Lee. Within 36 hours of the attack, most of Brown's men had been killed or captured.



John Brown was born into a deeply religious family in Torrington, Connecticut, in 1800. Led by a father who was vehemently opposed to slavery, the family moved to northern Ohio when John was five, to a district that would become known for its antislavery views.

During his first fifty years, Brown moved about the country, settling in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and New York, and taking along his ever-growing family. (He would father twenty children.) Working at various times as a farmer, wool merchant, tanner, and land speculator, he never was financially successful -- he even filed for bankruptcy when in his forties. His lack of funds, however, did not keep him from supporting causes he believed in. He helped finance the publication of David Walker's Appeal and Henry Highland's "Call to Rebellion" speech. He gave land to fugitive slaves. He and his wife agreed to raise a

black youth as one of their own. He also participated in the Underground Railroad and, in 1851, helped establish the League of Gileadites, an organization that worked to protect escaped slaves from slave catchers.

In 1847 Frederick Douglass met Brown for the first time in Springfield, Massachusetts. Of the meeting Douglass stated that, "though a white gentleman, [Brown] is in sympathy a black man, and as deeply interested in our cause, as though his own soul had been pierced with the iron of slavery." It was at this meeting that Brown first outlined his plan to Douglass to lead a war to free slaves.

Brown moved to the black community of North Elba, New York, in 1849. The community had been established thanks to the philanthropy of Gerrit Smith, who donated tracts of at least 50 acres to black families willing to clear and farm the land. Brown, knowing that many of the families were finding life in this isolated area difficult, offered to establish his own farm there as well, in order to lead the blacks by his example and to act as a "kind father to them."

Despite his contributions to the antislavery cause, Brown did not emerge as a figure of major significance until 1855 after he followed five of his sons to the Kansas territory. There, he became the leader of antislavery guerillas and fought a proslavery attack against the antislavery town of Lawrence. The following year, in retribution for another attack, Brown went to a proslavery town and brutally killed five of its settlers. Brown and his sons would continue to fight in the territory and in Missouri for the rest of the year.

Brown returned to the east and began to think more seriously about his plan for a war in Virginia against slavery. He sought money to fund an "army" he would lead. On October 16, 1859, he set his plan to action when he and 21 other men -- 5 blacks and 16 whites -- raided the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry.

Brown was wounded and quickly captured, and moved to Charlestown, Virginia, where he was tried and convicted of treason. Before hearing his

sentence, Brown was allowed make an address to the court.

. . . 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 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."

Although initially shocked by Brown's exploits, many Northerners began to speak favorably of the militant abolitionist. "He did not recognize unjust human laws, but resisted them as he was bid. . . .," said Henry David Thoreau in an address to the citizens of Concord, Massachusetts. "No man in America has ever stood up so persistently and effectively for the dignity of human nature. . . ."

John Brown was hanged on December 2, 1859.



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