

God's Stone in the Pool of Slavery

STEPHEN B. OATES

Sectional conflict over slavery existed from the beginning of the Republic. It continued through the Federalist, Jeffersonian, and Jacksonian eras, becoming especially acute with the rise of the abolitionist crusade in the 1830s. Then, during the era of expansion and the Mexican War, the debate over slavery shifted to the Western territories, which slave and free-soil elements alike sought to control for their own political interests. The decade of the 1850s was a time of spiraling violence over the slavery issue, which reached a shattering climax in John Brown's raid at Harpers Ferry in 1859, an event that traumatized the South and spun the nation irreversibly toward the Civil War.

The following essay discusses Harpers Ferry in the context of Southern anxieties and apprehensions over slavery that had been growing for more than half a century. The essay demonstrates that on one score Brown himself was an extremely insightful man, for he correctly predicted the explosive impact his raid would have on Southern whites. For them, Harpers Ferry was no isolated outbreak of little historical import. It was an apocalyptic outgrowth of Northern antislavery agitation, an act of "outside provocation" that caused white Southerners to equate Brown's style of revolutionary violence with Abraham Lincoln and the Republican party and that escalated sectional tensions over slavery to the breaking point. In relating this, the essay stresses the fact that people respond to events according to their perception of reality. Therefore, what people think is true is quite as important as what is true when it comes to reconstructing the past or understanding the present.

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SELECTION 25 GOD'S STONE IN THE POOL OF SLAVERY

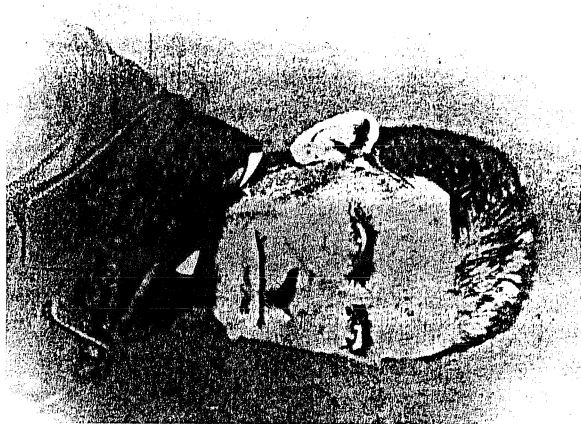
ON A RAINSWEEP OCTOBER NIGHT IN 1859, grizzled old John Brown led a handful of revolutionaries — most of them young, five of them black — in a surprise attack against Harpers Ferry in northern Virginia, in what Brown envisioned as the first blow in an all-out war for slave liberation. With his twenty-one followers, he intended to incite a Southern-wide slave revolt and to establish a black state in the Southern mountains. Or, failing that, he hoped to ignite a sectional holocaust between North and South in which slavery would be destroyed.

For fifty-nine-year-old John Brown, a white man who had failed in virtually everything he had ever tried, this was the supreme moment of his life, the moment he had been working for since he had committed himself to violence in the Kansas civil war of 1856. All the years of trial, of affliction and sorrow, were behind him now. He and his men were going to liberate some four million human beings from bondage, thereby removing a monstrous wrong from American society. For Brown, slavery was an egregious "sin against God," a sin that violated the commandments of an all-wise, all-powerful Providence, and that contradicted the Declaration of Independence, too, which guaranteed all men the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Yes, slavery was "foul and loathsome." Brown believed, a "rotten whore" of an institution which was not only criminally unjust to Negroes, but which offended him personally. When he was twelve years old, he had watched with growing

Reprinted from *Our Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln, John Brown, and the Civil War Era*, by Stephen B. Oates, copyright © 1979 by the University of Massachusetts Press.

rage — a rage he could not then articulate — as a Michigan innkeeper beat a slave boy with an iron fire shovel. In addition to his intense religious convictions, slavery violated Brown's secular views as well: his passionate commitment to the nuclear family (he had read about the inhuman breakup of slave families), his belief in the right of all men to enjoy the fruits of their labor and to raise themselves above the condition of their birth. Yet, instead of eradicating slavery, the United States had institutionalized that cruel institution, surrounding it with a network of legal and political safeguards quite as though the Declaration of Independence did not exist. Such hypocrisy enraged Brown. How could Americans sanction slavery and yet proclaim theirs the freest and most enlightened nation in the world? By 1859 he thought it impossible to remove slavery through regular political channels. For Southerners and their Northern allies dominated the crucial branches of the federal government and were using these agencies not only to preserve and perpetuate slavery, but also to extend it into the Western territories as well. Moreover, the United States Supreme Court, controlled by Southern Democrats, had denied Negroes the right of United States citizenship and had forbidden Congress to exclude slavery from the public lands. And in Brown's opinion few Northerners seemed to care. Northern Democrats, he declared, were all "doughfaces" who enjoyed licking up "Southern spittle." Republicans were too "wishy-washy" about slavery to do anything about that institution. And the bona fide abolitionists were "milk-and-water" pacifists who preferred talk to action. By the late 1850s, Brown asserted, slavery had become too entrenched in American life ever to be expunged except by revolutionary violence — and by the extermination of this entire generation of men, women, and children, if that were the will of Almighty God. Such statements had electrified New England

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John Brown around 1857. By that time Brown had left Bleeding Kansas and gone east to solicit guns and money for a secret "military" operation he had conceived against the South. (Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka)

humanitarians like Ralph Waldo Emerson — who thought Brown was speaking symbolically — and had won him the outright support of six influential Northern reformers, who organized a secret committee to raise guns and money for his projected Virginia invasion.

On the eve of the attack, one or two of Brown's backers began to doubt the wisdom of the operation, but the old man was undaunted.

He was convinced that Northern free blacks and Southern slaves would rally to his standard. He was equally certain that he was an instrument in the hands of God, a special angel of death called to remove slavery with the sword. So deeply did Brown — a devout Calvinist all his life — believe that God was directing the Harpers Ferry enterprise, that he thought it unnecessary to make battle plans to examine the mountainous terrain about Harpers Ferry, to send out agents to contact slaves in the neighborhood, to work out escape plans in case militia or federal troops should mobilize. God would hurl Brown like a stone "into the black pool of slavery" and God alone would determine the outcome.

The outcome was never much in doubt. Brown and his little army seized the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry and threw the town into bedlam. But militiamen soon surrounded the arsenal, and federal troops under Robert E. Lee, moving up from Washington at a killing pace, stormed the fire-engine house and captured the gnarled old captain and his surviving raiders. Virginia authorities brought Brown to a speedy trial and sentenced him to hang for murder, for inciting slaves to insurrection, and for treason against Virginia (although he was not a citizen of that state). But before he went to the gallows, Brown uttered some of the most eloquent words ever to come from a condemned man. What he said was not always the truth — he denied, for example, that he had ever intended to provoke a slave rebellion — but he did not care about that now. What he cared about was enlisting widespread Northern support for Negro freedom by playing on his own courage and self-sacrifice — and by playing on white guilt. "If it is deemed necessary," he told the Virginia court (and a divided nation beyond), "that I should forfeit my

life for the furtherance of the ends of justice and mingle my blood with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments, I say let it be done."

Brown's majestic statements, and the moral complexities surrounding the Harpers Ferry attack, plunged the North into what seemed a confusion of voices. The abolitionists, constituting a small minority there, heralded Brown as a saint who made the gallows — as Emerson phrased it — as glorious as the cross. This did not mean that the abolitionists now embraced revolutionary violence to rid the country of slavery. On the contrary, most of them remained committed to nonviolent protest. But in Brown they had an engaging symbol — of noble idealism and Christian sacrifice — and they used that symbol in a renewed effort to make Americans face the slavery curse forthrightly. Other Northerners agreed that Harpers Ferry involved extenuating circumstances — Brown's opposition to slavery was admirable — but thought the raid itself a criminal act which should not go unpunished. On the other hand, most members of the Republican party, with an eye on forthcoming state elections, disparaged Brown as a solitary fanatic who deserved to be hanged. And what they said reflected the opinions of a majority of Northern whites, who not only condemned Brown for taking the law into his own hands, but asserted the right of Southerners to own Negro slaves.

Southerners, though, were fatefully unable to believe that the mass of conservative Northern opinion was typical of the region. So Southern Democrats and their Northern colleagues branded the raid as a Republican party conspiracy, a wild and vicious scheme to destroy the whole Southern "way of life," while the Repub-

licans emphatically denied the charge, few in the South listened. The Virginia General Assembly, in an outburst of fear and defiance, declared that not just the "Black" Republicans, but the entire North was behind Harpers Ferry: the work of "fanatics" — all Northerners were fanatics — who wanted to incite the slaves to rape and murder. Even though no slaves had risen to join Brown, rumors of slave "stampedes" and abolitionist invasions swept across the South, plunging the region into convulsions of hysteria. In a miasma of imagined revolts and attacks, Southerners mobilized their militia and slave patrols, imprisoned unattended slaves and suspicious-looking strangers, and imposed severe discipline in the slave compounds. As one historian phrased it, "The raid of twenty-two men on one Virginia town had sent a spasm of uneasiness, resentment, and precautionary zeal from the Potomac to the Gulf."

In truth, the raid had done a good deal more than that: it 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 Harpers Ferry than Southern secessionists, who used Brown's name to whip Southern crowds into a frenzy of anti-Republican, anti-Northern hatred. Harpers Ferry, raged one secessionist, "is the first act in the grand tragedy of emancipation, and the subjugation of the South in bloody treason. . . . The vanguard of the great army intended for our subjugation has crossed our borders on Southern soil and shed Southern blood." The only solution for the South, the only way to save "our wives and daughters," was secession and an independent, slaveholding confederacy.

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Such massive overreaction to Brown's abortive venture may seem difficult to comprehend. After all, nothing really had happened. No slave rebellion had occurred, Brown had been summarily hanged, most Northerners thought he deserved it. But Southerners of that time were in no mood to treat Harpers Ferry as an isolated incident. For them, Brown's attack carried sinister implications about the entire past and future of the American Union; and it played on deep-seated anxieties about slavery — and about the safety of the South in the Union — that had been growing for decades.

In fact, from the very beginning of the nation, the planters — the South's master class — had felt uneasy about their slave regime. At the federal convention of 1787, Southern slaveowners refused to discuss the slavery issue, compelling the other delegates to avoid it or to forget about creating a stronger Union. So, apart from allowing the federal Congress to abolish the foreign slave trade (which it subsequently did), the Constitution maintained "a conspiracy of silence" about the slavery problem. In the 1790s, Southern congressmen demanded that all antislavery petitions be tabled, insisting that such documents were "an entering wedge for total emancipation." Although Thomas Jefferson and other enlightened Southerners talked about abolishing slavery in the South, few of them put their words into action. Their racist constituents would never have accepted emancipation anyway, even if it were gradual and even if slaveowners were compensated for their loss.

Why was this so? Because slavery in the South was always more than a labor device; it was also a rigid system of racial control to maintain white

supremacy in a region brimming with Negroes. In this respect, slavery was quite as important to the mass of nonslaveholding whites — always a majority in the Old South — as to the small planter elite that controlled the region. For no matter how low the poor whites sank, no matter how miserable their lives, they were still better than the "nigger" in the levees and cotton fields. They were still white men. Moreover, yeomen and poor whites alike aspired to own Negroes, because slave ownership in the Old South was a tremendous status symbol. Many of these whites were also "expectant" planters who hoped some day to make a lot of money and live in a big white house like the gentry they admired and envied. Such aspirations and feelings melted away whatever class antagonism might have existed in the Old South and united nearly all whites against the Negro himself — "our internal foe." Virginians called him, a common enemy in their midst, a sinister being of an alien and "inferior" race who if liberated would bring about social chaos and racial catastrophe.¹

By the 1820s, the Old South seemed on the verge of another kind of catastrophe. A series of insurrection panics rocked the Deep South, especially the South Carolina tidewater where blacks heavily outnumbered whites. In 1822, authorities in Charleston uncovered a shocking slave plot — that of Denmark Vesey — which called for an all-out race war against the whites. Next there occurred the Charleston fire scare and the Georgetown conspiracy. While nei-

¹Paradoxically, of course, Southern slaveowners often felt genuine affection for their Negroes (as long as they kept in their places), taught them Christianity, and pampered their house servants until some felt superior to "po white trash." And all the while Southerners trumpeted the glories of racial purity, many white slaveowners copulated clandestinely with black women.

ther of these ranked as a rebellion, South Carolinians were terror-stricken. Then came 1831 and the bloody Nat Turner revolt in southeastern Virginia. A slave preacher who believed himself an instrument of God, Turner led sixty or seventy slave insurgents on a gruesome rampage: they hacked some sixty whites to death, including women and children. At last the militia crushed the rebellion and executed Turner and twenty other blacks, but not before vengeful whites had slaughtered more than 120 innocent Negroes.

The Turner uprising shook the Old South to its foundations. For who could be safe now in so grim and treacherous a time? How many more revolts would follow? Who among one's own slaves could be trusted? Virginians were so alarmed that they considered liberating all their slaves and then colonizing them at state expense. But in a dramatic debate over the feasibility of manumission, the Virginia legislature concluded that colonization was too costly and too complicated to implement. And since they were not about to emancipate the blacks and leave them as free people in their state, Virginians rejected abolition outright. Then they set about revising their slave codes and restricting their blacks so severely that they could never again mount an insurrection. Even so, whites in Virginia and everywhere else in the South could never escape the fear that somewhere, maybe in their own slave quarters, another Nat Turner was plotting to rise up and slit their throats.

For intimidated Southerners, it was no mere coincidence that the Turner rebellion came at a time of rising abolitionist militancy in the North. In fact, just six months before the Turner uprising, William Lloyd Garrison began publishing the *Liberator* in Boston, demanding in bold, strident editorials that the slaves be immediately and

unconditionally emancipated. Desperately needing somebody to blame for Turner besides themselves, Southerners insisted that Garrison's rhetoric had incited the Turner outbreak, insisted that all abolitionists were bloodthirsty fanatics who wanted to obliterate the South in a carnage of racial violence. While this was hardly true (Garrison and his followers were Christian pacifists), Southerners believed what they wanted to believe. From 1831 on, slave rebellion and Yankee abolitionism were synonymous in the Southern mind.

Nor were threats to the South confined to the United States. A powerful antislavery movement seemed to be sweeping the entire Western world. In the 1830s, Great Britain abolished slavery in the Empire, and impassioned English emancipators came to crusade in America as well. Inevitably, Southerners came to view their region as a lonely slave outpost in a hostile, changing world. Unable to change themselves, unable to free their blacks and surrender their cherished way of life, Southerners embarked on the Great Southern Reaction of the 1830s and 1840s, during which the Old South, threatened it seemed by internal and external enemies, became a closed, martial society determined to defend its slave-based civilization at all costs. Southern postmasters set about confiscating all abolitionist literature, lest these "incendiary" tracts invite the slaves to violence. Southerners also tightened up slave discipline, refusing to let blacks visit other plantations and vowing to hang any Negro who even looked rebellious. At the same time, Southerners eliminated slave schools and churches, revived their old slave patrols, and strengthened their militia forces. By the 1840s the Old South had devised such an oppressive slave system that organized insurrection was next to impossible.

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By 1859, tensions between Republicans and Southern whites were at a combustible state. All that was needed was an overt act against the South — a spark to set a conflagration roaring. And that spark came in the form of John Brown, who for two years had been secretly plotting his bold and audacious attack against slavery in Virginia. That attack, one must remember, had alternative objectives: should it fail, Brown had repeatedly argued, it would nevertheless ignite a sectional powder keg that might explode into civil war. Though often maligned as a demented dreamer, Brown in one respect was an extremely perceptive man: he understood the depth of Southern anxieties about slavery, understood that all he had to do — being a Northerner and an abolitionist — was to set foot in the South with a gun, announce that he was here to free the slaves, and the effect on the South would be cataclysmic.

And so the Harpers Ferry raid took place. And so the South reacted with even greater hysteria than had followed Nat Turner's uprising. For thousands of Southerners, from poor whites in South Carolina to rich cotton planters in Mississippi, Harpers Ferry was the inevitable result of the "abolitionist" doctrines of the Republican party; the attack was dramatic, conclusive proof that slave insurrection was what the "Black" Republicans had wanted all along. From Harpers Ferry on, the Republican party and Brown-style revolutionary violence were forged like a ring of steel in the Southern mind.

Harpers Ferry, in sum, ensured that some kind of violent rupture would take place should the Republicans win the presidential election of 1860. There were, of course, a number of loyal Unionists in the South who pleaded for reason and restraint, who beseeched their fellow South-

erners to wait for an overt Republican act against them before they did anything rash. For most, though, Brown's raid had been all the overt action they needed. "The Harper's Ferry invasion," exclaimed the *Richmond Enquirer*, "has advanced the cause of Disunion more than any other event that has happened since the formation of the Government." "I have said of Mr. Seward and his followers," cried a state senator of Mississippi, "that they are our enemies and we are theirs. He has declared that there is an 'irrepressible conflict' between us. So there is! He and his followers have declared war upon us, and I am fighting it out to the bitter end."

And to the bitter end, the Republicans kept trying to reach the South, kept denying any complicity in Brown's attack. "You charge that we stir up insurrections among your slaves," Lincoln told the South in his 1860 address at Cooper Union. "We deny it; and what is your proof? Harper's Ferry! John Brown!! John Brown was no Republican; and you have failed to implicate a single Republican in his Harper's Ferry enterprise." After he was nominated for the presidency and the Southern press viciously assailed him, Lincoln could not fathom why Southerners were so incensed. What had the Republicans done to them? What Southern rights had they violated? Did not Southerners still have the fugitive slave law? Did they not have the same Constitution they had lived under for seventy-odd years? "Why all this excitement?" he asked a crowd at Cleveland, Ohio. "Why all these complaints?" He wrote Alexander H. Stephens of Georgia: "Do the people of the South really entertain fears that a Republican administration would, *directly*, or *indirectly*, interfere with their slaves . . . ? If they do, I wish to assure you, as once a friend, and still, I hope, not an enemy, that there is no cause for such fears." Lincoln added: "I suppose, however, this does not meet the case. You think slavery is *right* and ought to

be extended; while we think it is *wrong* and ought to be restricted. That I suppose is the rub. It certainly is the only substantial difference between us."

Stephens and other Southern Unionists begged Lincoln to issue a public statement about his views. But he declined, remarking that he had made his opinions explicitly clear in previous speeches and that Southern militants would misconstrue anything he said. He was undoubtedly right. And anyway, Republicans and Southern whites were no longer speaking the same language. Words like *rights* and *constitution*, like *freedom* and *self-government*, meant one thing to the Republicans and quite another to distraught Southerners. For the latter, freedom meant escape from threats and invasions. And rights meant the right of white supremacy (Southern style), of self-determination and Southern independence. And Southerners were now ready for independence, if that was what it took to protect their slave-based social order from the "Black" Republican menace.

So when Lincoln was elected president, the seven states of the Deep South — with their heavy concentration of slaves — seceded from the Union. As the editor of the *Montgomery Mail* explained: "In the struggle for maintaining the ascendancy of our race in the South — our home — we see no chance for victory but in withdrawing from the Union. To remain in the Union is to lose all that white men hold dear in government. We vote to get out."

For the Republicans, all this was hard to comprehend. They had repeatedly asserted that they had no intention of freeing the slaves in the Southern states. And in any case, the Democrats, though divided themselves, had still won control of Congress and could demolish any abolition bill introduced there. But the Deep South was intractable all the same. And Lincoln himself decided to hold firm. He had won the presidency

CHARLESTON

MERCURY

EXTRA:

Passed unanimously at 11.15 o'clock, P. M., December 20th, 1860.

AN ORDINANCE

To dissolve the Union between the State of South Carolina and other States united with her under the compact entitled "The Constitution of the United States of America."

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the State of South Carolina, in Convention assembled, that the Union between the said State and the said States, under the compact entitled "The Constitution of the United States of America," is hereby dissolved.

That the Ordinance adopted by us in Convention, on the twenty-third day of May, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and eighty-eight, whereby the Constitution of the United States was ratified, and also, all Acts and parts of Acts of the General Assembly of this State, ratifying amendments of the said Constitution, are hereby repealed, and that the same are repealed between South Carolina and other States, under the name of "The United States of America," is hereby declared.

THE

UNION

IS

DISSOLVED!

Front-page headlines of the Charleston Mercury announcing the secession of South Carolina, December 20, 1860. (Rare Books and Manuscript Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations)

in a fair and legal contest. He would not compromise his election mandate. He would preserve the Union and the principle of self-government on which the Union was based: the right of a free people to choose their leaders and to expect the losers to acquiesce in that decision. And so the fateful events raced by in rapid-fire sequence: Fort Sumter, Lincoln's call for troops, the secession of the upper South, and the beginning of a civil war in which slavery itself would perish — the very thing old John Brown had hoped and prayed would be the ultimate consequences of the Harpers Ferry raid.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 Given John Brown's deeply held abolitionist convictions, why do you think he did not join with moral suasionists like William Lloyd Garrison (Selection 18) and instead embraced revolutionary violence as the best method to rid the country of slavery?

2 Compare the effects of John Brown's raid on Northerners and Southerners. Did the Harpers Ferry fiasco make civil war inevitable?

3 How did the institution of slavery function in the South as a means of racial control, uniting slaveholders and nonslaveholders alike? Why did poor whites, in particular, support the slaveholders' regime?

4 What were the reasons why, after the early 1830s, the South became what one historian called the "Militant South" — suspicious, intolerant of dissent, ruthless in its attention to slave discipline?

5 Brown has been denounced by critics as a deluded fanatic and praised by admirers as a clear-eyed visionary. Which, if either of these descriptions, do you feel is most accurate?

Lincoln's Journey to Emancipation

STEPHEN B. OATES

Throughout the first year and a half of the Civil War, Lincoln insisted that the North was fighting strictly to save the Union, not to free the slaves. But a combination of problems and pressures caused him to change his mind, and in September 1862 he issued the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, to take effect on January 1, 1863, which liberated the slaves in the rebellious states. Ever since then, legends have flourished about Lincoln as the Great Emancipator — a man who dedicated his life to liberty and equality for all. On the other hand, counter-legends of Lincoln as a Great Racist eventually emerged in the South. Which view is the true one? Should Lincoln be applauded as a great humanitarian, or was he just another white bigot, as one writer recently contended? Or, as some of his contemporaries charged, was he an unscrupulous opportunist who eradicated slavery merely for political and military expediency? The following essay, drawing on a cornucopia of modern scholarship about Lincoln's life and the times in which he lived, tries to answer the enduring questions about Lincoln as emancipator. It not only traces his changing views about slavery and race and discusses his evolving emancipation policy, but tries to present a realistic portrait of one of the most mythologized men in all American history.