

EXCERPTS from FREEDOM’S MARTYR

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Today is the 150th anniversary of Brown’s hanging — the grim punishment for his raid weeks earlier on Harpers Ferry, Va. With a small band of abolitionists, Brown had seized the federal arsenal there and freed slaves in the area. His plan was to flee with them to nearby mountains and provoke rebellions in the South. But he stalled too long in the arsenal and was captured. He was brought to trial in a Virginia court, convicted of treason, murder and inciting an insurrection, and hanged on Dec. 2, 1859.

It’s a date we should hold in reverence. Yes, I know the response: Why remember a misguided fanatic and his absurd plan for destroying slavery?

There are compelling reasons. First, the plan was not absurd. Brown reasonably saw the Appalachians, which stretch deep into the South, as an ideal base for a guerrilla war. He had studied the Maroon rebels of the West Indies, black fugitives who had used mountain camps to battle colonial powers on their islands. His plan was to create panic by arousing fears of a slave rebellion, leading Southerners to view slavery as dangerous and impractical.

Second, he was held in high esteem by many great men of his day. Ralph Waldo Emerson compared him to Jesus, declaring that Brown would “make the gallows as glorious as the cross.” Henry David Thoreau placed Brown above the freedom fighters of the American Revolution. Frederick Douglass said that while he had lived for black people, John Brown had died for them. A later black reformer, W. E. B. Du Bois, called Brown the white American who had “come nearest to touching the real souls of black folk.”

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By the time of his hanging, John Brown was so respected in the North that bells tolled in many cities and towns in his honor. Within two years, the Union troops marched southward singing, “John Brown’s body lies a-mouldering in the grave, but his soul keeps marching on.”

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