

**EXCERPTS from TODAY'S FANATIC, TOMORROW'S SAINT**

by Rebecca Solnit

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By fanaticism we usually mean two things. One is that someone is dedicated in the extreme to their cause, belief, or agenda, willing to live and die and maybe kill for it, as John Brown was. The other is that the cause, belief or agenda is not ours, and in 1859 John Brown's beliefs were not those of most Americans. No one calls himself or herself a fanatic. It's what you call people who are weird or threatening, extremists in the defence of something other than your own worldview. . . .

. . . I am not so sure about John Brown's means, or that his actions were necessary to start a war that was already brewing, but I am sure that slavery needed to be abolished, and that his general ends were good. The really interesting thing is that in 1839 to be against slavery in the US was an disruptive, extreme position, often seen as an attack on property rights rather than a defence of human rights. Half a century later we held those truths to be self-evident that no one should own anyone else. . . .

Lincoln called John Brown a "misguided fanatic." Thoreau wrote [a defence of him](#) in which he remarked, "The only government that I recognise – and it matters not how few are at the head of it, or how small its army – is that power that establishes justice in the land." . . .

Fanatic is a troublesome word . . . since my hero is your fanatic, and yesterday's fanatic is so often tomorrow's saint. . . .

**EXCERPTED IN ALMOST ITS ENTIRETY from THE 9/11 OF 1859**

By TONY HORWITZ

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ONE hundred and fifty years ago today, the most successful terrorist in American history was hanged at the edge of this Shenandoah Valley town. Before climbing atop his coffin for the wagon ride to the gallows, he handed a note to one of his jailers: “I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with blood.”

Eighteen months later, Americans went to war against each other, with soldiers marching into battle singing “John Brown’s Body.” More than 600,000 men died before the sin of slavery was purged.

Few if any Americans today would question the justness of John Brown’s cause: the abolition of human bondage. But as the nation prepares to try Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, who calls himself the architect of the 9/11 attacks, it may be worth pondering the parallels between John Brown’s raid in 1859 and Al Qaeda’s assault in 2001.

Brown was a bearded fundamentalist who believed himself chosen by God to destroy the institution of slavery. He hoped to launch his holy war by seizing the United States armory at Harpers Ferry, Va., and arming blacks for a campaign of liberation. Brown also chose his target for shock value and symbolic impact. The only federal armory in the South, Harpers Ferry was just 60 miles from the capital, where “our president and other leeches,” Brown wrote, did the bidding of slave owners. The first slaves freed and armed by Brown belonged to George Washington’s great-grandnephew.

Brown’s strike force was similar in size and make-up to that of the 9/11 hijackers. He led 21 men, all but two in their 20s, and many of them radicalized by guerrilla fighting in Bleeding Kansas, the abolitionists’ Afghanistan. Brown also relied on covert backers — not oil-rich Saudis, but prominent Yankees known as the Secret Six. Brown used aliases and coded language and gathered his men at a mountain hideout. But, like the 9/11 bombers, Brown’s men were indiscreet, disclosing their plan to family and sweethearts. A letter warning of the plot even reached the secretary of war. It arrived in August, the scheme seemed outlandish, and the warning was ignored.

Brown and his men were prepared to die, and most did, in what quickly became a suicide mission. Trapped in Harpers Ferry, the raiders fought for 24 hours until Robert E. Lee ordered marines to storm the building where the survivors had holed up. Ten raiders were killed, including two of Brown's sons, and seven more hanged. No slaves won their freedom. The first civilian casualty was a free black railroad worker, shot in the back while fleeing the raiders.

This fiasco might have been a footnote of history if Brown had died of his wounds or been immediately executed. Instead, he survived, and was tried under tight security in a civilian court in Charles Town, near Harpers Ferry. Rather than challenge the evidence, or let his lawyers plead insanity, Brown put the South on trial. Citing the biblical injunction to "remember them that are in bonds," he declared his action "was not wrong, but right."

"If it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice," he said, "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!" He was hanged a month later, before a crowd that included John Wilkes Booth, who later wrote of the "terroriser" with a mix of contempt and awe.

Brown's courage and eloquence made him a martyr-hero for many in the North. This canonization, in turn, deepened Southern rage and alarm over the raid. Though Brown occupied the far fringe of abolitionism — a "wild and absurd freak," The New York Times called him — Southern firebrands painted his raid as part of a broad conspiracy. An already polarized nation lurched closer to violent divorce. "The time for compromise was gone," Frederick Douglass later observed. "The armed hosts of freedom stood face to face over the chasm of a broken Union, and the clash of arms was at hand." This was exactly what Brown had predicted in his final note.

Khalid Shaikh Mohammed is no John Brown. The 9/11 attack caused mass, indiscriminate slaughter, for inscrutable ends. Brown fed breakfast to his hostages; the hijackers slit throats with box cutters. Any words Mr. Mohammed may offer in his own defense will likely strike Americans as hateful and unpersuasive. In any event, the judge probably won't grant him an ideological platform.

But perhaps he doesn't need one. In 1859, John Brown sought not only to free slaves in Virginia but to terrorize the South and incite a broad conflict. In this he triumphed: panicked whites soon mobilized, militarized and marched double-quick toward secession. Brown's raid didn't cause the Civil War, but it was certainly a catalyst.

**EXCERPTS from FREEDOM'S MARTYR**

By DAVID S. REYNOLDS

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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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**EXCERPTS from JOHN BROWN: AMERICA'S FIRST TERRORIST?**

by Paul Finkelman

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**Terrorist, Guerrilla Fighter, Revolutionary?**

Brown's actions in Kansas and at Harpers Ferry were clearly violent. He killed people or at least supervised their death. But was he a terrorist? At neither place do his actions comport with what we know about modern terrorists.

The Harpers Ferry raid was his most famous act. Brown held Harpers Ferry from late Sunday night, October 16, until he was captured on the 18th. He was in possession of almost unlimited amounts of gunpowder and weapons. He had captured prominent citizens, most famously Colonel Washington. He stopped a train full of passengers and freight.

What would modern terrorists have done in such circumstances? They might have let the train go, only after they had robbed all the passengers to fund further acts of terror, and then blown up the bridge as the train crossed from Virginia to Maryland. They might have planted explosives on the train and let it proceed, as terrorists did in Spain a few years ago. What did Brown do? He boarded the train, let people know who he was, and was seen by people who might later have identified him. Then he let the train continue on to Washington. These were not the actions of a terrorist.

While in Harpers Ferry, Brown might have blown up the federal armory (or indeed most of the town) after taking as much powder and weapons as his men could carry. He might have broken into homes of prominent people and slaughtered them. Brown did none of these things. He waited, foolishly for sure, for the slaves in the area to flock to him. He was caught in a firefight with local citizens, and he was captured by the U.S. forces. He proved to be a disastrous military leader and a failed "captain" of his brave and idealistic troops. But he never acted like a terrorist. He ordered no killings; he did not wantonly destroy property; and he cared for his hostages. This is simply not how terrorists act.

### **Remembering, Honoring, John Brown**

So, what in the end can we make of John Brown? If he was not a terrorist—what was he? He might be seen as revolutionary, trying to start a revolution to end slavery and fulfill the goals of the Declaration of Independence. . . .

. . . no one, not even the slaveholders, could deny that slaves might legitimately fight for their own liberty. If slaves could fight for their liberty, then surely a white man like Brown was not morally wrong for joining in the fight against bondage. Thus Harpers Ferry is in the end a blow for freedom, against slavery. Who can deny the legitimacy of such a venture, however foolish, poorly designed, and incompetently implemented? But in a society of democratic traditions, Americans recoil at the idea of violent revolution and raids on government armories, even when, as was the case in Virginia in 1859, democracy was something of a sham, and there was neither free speech nor free political institutions.

In the end, we properly view Brown with mixed emotions: admiring him for his dedication to the cause of human freedom, marveling at his willingness to die for the liberty of others, yet uncertain about his methods, and certainly troubled by his incompetent tactics at Harpers Ferry.

Perhaps we end up accepting the argument of the abolitionist lawyer and later governor of Massachusetts, John A. Andrew, who declared "whether the enterprise of John Brown and his associates in Virginia was wise or foolish, right or wrong; I only know that, whether the enterprise itself was the one or the other, John Brown himself is right."

**TRANSCRIPT EXCERPTS from *THE ABOLITIONISTS*, PBS AMERICAN EXPERIENCE HISTORY TELEVISION SERIES**

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Transcript: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/abolitionists/#transcript>

**Part One**

**Narrator:** For years, John Brown had been trying to divine God's purpose, to make sense of his afflictions. He had once been a successful merchant and tanner, a good provider to his family. But then, suddenly, his life collapsed: a series of business disasters plunged him deep into debt.

**R. Blakeslee Gilpin, Historian:** Brown is drifting just further and further into a very deep and dark relationship with God. He's always trying to discern what God wants for him. That's really what Calvinism is all about. You're eternally in sin. You're just constantly trying to get out of it like a drowning man.

**Narrator:** In November of 1837, news came that an anti-slavery printer had been murdered by a mob in Illinois. Elijah Lovejoy's death struck at something deep within John Brown, conjuring up a memory that had haunted him for years.

**John Brown (T. Ryder Smith, audio):** When I was a child, I stayed for a short time with a very gentlemanly landlord who held a slave boy near my own age. The master made a great pet of me, while the Negro boy was badly clothed, poorly fed, and beaten before my eyes with iron shovels or any other thing that came first to hand.

**Narrator:** For Brown, Lovejoy's death was a sign from God: He must never again stand helpless in the face of evil. As he dressed for a prayer meeting a few days after the killing, John Brown knew what God meant for him. He sat silently at the back of the room as one speaker after another fired up the congregation with accounts of Lovejoy's death. Finally, John Brown stood up and raised his right hand. "Here before God," he announced, "in the presence of these witnesses, from this time, I consecrate my life to the destruction of slavery."

**Part Two**

**Narrator:** In the fall of 1847 . . . Douglass moved to Rochester, New York. Just over the border from Canada, Rochester was the last stop on the Underground Railroad, the network of safe houses used by slaves fleeing north to safety. . . . [There.] he made the acquaintance of a man whose name he had heard in whispers, failed tanner and fervent abolitionist John Brown.

**John Brown (T. Ryder Smith):** Your speeches have been an inspiration to us. I do wonder, though, whether speeches will ever be enough.

**Frederick Douglass (Richard Brooks):** What do you mean, sir?

**John Brown (T. Ryder Smith):** You've been at this for years.

**Frederick Douglass (Richard Brooks):** Freedom is a long road, Mr. Brown. I don't know any shortcuts.

**John Brown (T. Ryder Smith):** I do, Douglass. I do. Sir -- God has placed these mountains here for a reason.

**Frederick Douglass (Richard Brooks):** You know God's thinking?

**John Brown (T. Ryder Smith):** I know these mountains. From here, we can strike a blow against the slave masters. The mountains are full of natural fords. One good man could hold off a hundred soldiers. My plan is to take handpicked men and post them in squads of fives on a line here. They come down off the mountains, raid the plantations, bring off the slaves, offer them a chance to fight.

**Frederick Douglass (Richard Brooks):** Sir, you have no idea -- the entire state of Virginia will rise up against you. They will fight you tooth and claw.

**John Brown (T. Ryder Smith):** The colored people must fight back. They will never respect themselves otherwise, nor will they be respected. I read your book, sir. You said yourself, you became a man when you fought Mr. Covey.

**Frederick Douglass (Richard Brooks):** I did. But I was young and this is very different. We must follow in our Savior's footsteps. We must convert the sinner.

**John Brown (T. Ryder Smith):** This is the sin, right here! We sit here, all of us, debating this point of law, whether the Constitution says this or that, and in the meantime, day after day, year after year, the slaveholders are free to do their worst.

**Frederick Douglass (Richard Brooks):** But if we stoop to bloodshed, we are no better than they are.

**John Brown (T. Ryder Smith):** You can preach for all eternity and nothing will change. Mr. Douglass, how many slaveholders have you converted? How many slaves have you freed?

**David W. Blight, Historian:** John Brown had a very beguiling personality. He was a stunning man. His sense of moral commitment was vivid and overwhelming. He was the real thing, and to a Frederick Douglass, he was also the real thing in terms of actually believing, about as deeply as anybody Douglass had ever met, in racial equality.

**Narrator:** Soon after their meeting, Douglass described Brown in *The North Star* as someone who, "though a white gentleman, is as deeply interested in our cause as though his own soul had been pierced with the iron of slavery."

### Part Three

**Narrator:** On the morning of March 7th, 1857, the papers brought stunning news. Out of the blue, the Supreme Court had radically altered not just the battle over slavery, but the status of every black person in America. The case had seemed inconsequential: a Missouri slave named Dred Scott wanted the court to set him free, because his master had taken him to live in Illinois and then Wisconsin Territory, where slavery was illegal. Chief Justice Roger Taney saw the case as an opportunity to settle the question of slavery once and for all. In a sweeping decision, Taney ruled that Congress had no authority to prevent the spread of slavery to the territories. Most ominously for free blacks like Frederick Douglass, Taney wrote that, "blacks were so far inferior they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect," and that, "any free black might lawfully be reduced to slavery, for his benefit." . . . It was with a sense of foreboding and hopelessness that Frederick Douglass responded to an urgent summons in August of 1859 from his old friend John Brown. Together with Shields Green, a fugitive he had befriended in Rochester, Douglass quietly made his way to a stone quarry at Chambersburg, Pennsylvania.

**John Brown (T. Ryder Smith):** Mr. Douglass!

**Frederick Douglass (Richard Brooks):** Captain Brown -- I would never have known you, sir!

**John Brown (T. Ryder Smith):** Our time has come...

**Narrator:** Brown was secretly encamped at a nearby farmhouse with 22 recruits.

**John Brown (T. Ryder Smith):** I had hoped for more men, of course. But I believe we have enough to achieve our ends -- with your help.

**Frederick Douglass (Richard Brooks):** What end is that?

**John Brown (T. Ryder Smith):** Well, sir: In one stroke we shall rouse this nation. We will deal the Slave Power such a blow, it shall never recover.

**Frederick Douglass (Richard Brooks):** All with 22 men?

**John Brown (T. Ryder Smith):** It takes one spark to light a fire. We are the spark that will set this country ablaze.

**Frederick Douglass (Richard Brooks):** But how?

**John Brown (T. Ryder Smith):** The armory at Harpers Ferry.

**Frederick Douglass (Richard Brooks):** Good Lord, man. You can't be serious.

**John Brown (T. Ryder Smith):** A hundred thousand rifles.

**Frederick Douglass (Richard Brooks):** What will 22 men do with 100,000 rifles?

**John Brown (T. Ryder Smith):** As I said, the spark -- we are but the spark. There are four million men in bondage who will fly to our banner. Not immediately, of course, but even a few thousand slaves in this vicinity will fly to our aid.

**Tony Horwitz, Author:** Douglass expected Brown to unveil a mission to free slaves and funnel them north along the mountains to freedom. But when he gets to the stone quarry, Brown presents a very different plan.

**John Brown (T. Ryder Smith):** I know. My friend, I have been over this a thousand times. I can assure you ...

**Frederick Douglass (Richard Brooks):** And I can assure you that you'll be walking into a perfect steel trap ...

**R. Blakeslee Gilpin, Historian:** He's talking about invading the South and occupying the South and taking over the South, sort of building this republic out, one mile at a time, and that republic is going to be a new country.

**Frederick Douglass (Richard Brooks):** It will kill you. And it will serve no purpose. There will be a bloodbath ...

**John Brown (T. Ryder Smith):** Without the shedding of blood, there's no remission of sin, Douglass.

**John Stauffer, Historian:** Douglass spends two days trying to convince John Brown not to raid Harpers Ferry. Brown spends the same amount of time trying to convince Douglass to go to Harpers Ferry with him to be his right-hand man.

**John Brown (T. Ryder Smith):** My friend, the world will remember what we do here. How do you want the world to remember you? How do you want your children to remember you?

**Frederick Douglass (Richard Brooks):** I don't want them to remember me as throwing my life away for nothing. Captain, it pains me more than you will know, to leave you. Mr. Green, you've heard Mr. Brown. What will you do?

**Shields Green (Thomas Coleman):** I believe I'll go with the old man.

**John Brown (T. Ryder Smith):** Come with me Douglass. I will defend you with my life. I want you for a special purpose. When I strike, the bees will begin to swarm, and I shall want you to help hive them.

**Narrator:** Frederick Douglass returned home alone. The decision to leave Brown would haunt him for the rest of his life.