

EXCERPTS from JOHN BROWN: AMERICA'S FIRST TERRORIST?

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National Archives *Prologue Magazine* Spring 2011, Vol. 43, No. 1<https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2011/spring/brown.html>**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."