

John Brown's Last Speech

November 2, 1859

(American State Trials, ed. by J. D. Lawson, Vol. VI, p. 800 ff.)

I have, may it please the Court, a few words to say.

In the first place, I deny everything but what I have all along admitted,—the design on my part to free the slaves. I intended certainly to have made a clean thing of that matter, as I did last winter, when I went into Missouri and there took slaves without the snapping of a gun on either side, moved them through the country, and finally left them in Canada. I designed to have done the same thing again, on a larger scale. That was all I intended. I never did intend murder, or treason, or the destruction of property, or to excite or incite slaves to rebellion, or to make insurrection.

I have another objection; and that is, it is unjust that I should suffer such a penalty. Had I interfered in the manner which I admit, and which I admit has been fairly proved (for I admire the truthfulness and candor of the greater portion of the witnesses who have testified in this case),—had I so interfered in behalf of the rich, the powerful, the intelligent, the so-called great, or in behalf of any of their friends,—either father, mother, brother, sister, wife, or children, or any of that class,—and suffered and sacrificed what I have in this interference, it would have been all right; and every man in this court would have deemed it an act worthy of reward rather than punishment.

This court acknowledges, as I suppose, the validity of the law of God. I see a book kissed here which I suppose to be the Bible or at least the New Testament. That teaches me that all things whatsoever I would that men should do to me, I should do even so to them. It teaches me, further, to "remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them." I endeavored to act up to that instruction. I say, I am yet too young to understand that God is any respecter of persons. I believe that to have interfered as I have done -- as I have always freely admitted I have done -- in behalf of His despised poor, was not wrong, but right. Now, if it is 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!

Let me say one word further.

I feel entirely satisfied with the treatment I have received on my trial. Considering all the circumstances, it has been more generous than I expected. But I feel no consciousness of guilt. I have stated from the first what was my intention, and what was not. I never had any design against the life of any person, nor any disposition to commit treason, or excite slaves to rebel, or make any general insurrection. I never encouraged any man to do so, but always discouraged any idea of that kind.

Let me say, also, a word in regard to the statements made by some of those connected with me. I hear it has been stated by some of them that I have induced them to join me. But the contrary is true. I do not say this to injure them, but as regretting their weakness. There is not one of them but joined me of his own accord, and the greater part of them at their own expense. A number of them I never saw, and never had a word of conversation with, till the day they came to me; and that was for the purpose I have stated.

Now I have done.

Documents for the Defense of John Brown

Speech by Ralph Waldo Emerson

Jan. 6, 1860 in Salem, Mass.

“I am...surprised at the easy effrontery with which political gentlemen, in and out of Congress, take it upon themselves to say that there are not a thousand men in the North who sympathize with John Brown. It would be far safer and nearer the truth to say that all people, in proportion to their sensibility and self-respect, sympathize with him....All women are drawn to him by their predominance of sentiment. All gentlemen, of course, are on his side....For what is the oath of gentle blood and knighthood? What but to protect the weak and lowly from the oppressor. Who makes the abolitionist? The slave holder!

“A Plea for Captain John Brown”

Speech by Henry David Thoreau

Oct. 30, 1859 in Concord, Mass.

It was Brown’s peculiar doctrine that a man has a perfect right to interfere by force with the slaveholder in order to rescue the slave. I agree with him. I think that for once the sharps rifles and the revolvers were employed in a righteous cause. The tools were in the hands of one who could use them. Some eighteen hundred years ago Christ was crucified; this morning, perchance, Captain Brown was hung. These are not the ends of a chain which is not without its links. He is not Old Brown any longer; he is an angel of light...

Documents for the Prosecution of John Brown

A Misnomer, Daily Herald
Wilmington, North Carolina
October 26, 1859

Why will Editors persist in calling the late affair at Harper's Ferry an "Insurrection?" We have several papers before us -- published in the State and out of it -- and they nearly all of them allude to it as being an insurrection among the negroes. 'Twas no insurrection, and it is a libel upon the slave in designating it as such. They had nothing whatever to do with it. There was not a single slave engaged but what was drawn in by compulsion. The original insurgents consisted of some fifteen or sixteen white men and a half dozen free negroes from the North -- brought there by old Brown. What few slaves engaged in the affair were forced into taking up arms after the original outbreak, through fear of white abolitionists, and not from love of them, or hatred towards their masters. They did not want to join the insurgents. They hesitated, preferring slavery in the South to freedom -- or such freedom as they knew they would get at the hands of old Brown and his devilish crew at the North. We really think the slaves about Harper's Ferry deserve credit for the manner in which they behaved in this treasonable affair. What was easier than for them to seize arms -- for there were any quantity of them on hand -- rush upon their masters in the dead of night, and slay whole families before a step could be taken to prevent the dreadful work. When the deed was done, what easier than to quickly tramp over into Pennsylvania, only a few miles distant, and bury themselves among the abolitionists, where it would be next to impossibility to discover them. These things could have been done easily, but witness how nobly the "poor old slaves," -- as they are called by their would-be friends, but in reality their worst enemies, -- did. They refused to take up arms against their masters -- the only friends they knew -- and not until forced into by threats of death, was it done, and then only a few, comparatively speaking, joined the blood-thirsty, demented fanatics of the North in their treasonable work. Of course, as long as we down South continue to call the late affair an Insurrection, just so long will we be playing into the hands of Northern fanatics. They want it put in that light. It strengthens their doctrine, of course. If they can make it appear that the slaves are dissatisfied with their mode of life, and are desirous of changing it, even at the expense of blood, a great point with them is gained. They then have -- according to their incendiary belief -- an excuse for invading Southern territory. They say the slaves are desirous -- aye, even anxious, to throw off the yoke of servitude; and shall we stand idly by and not help our fellow creatures in their hour of need? Thus they reason, and as long as we continue to insist upon calling a fool-hardy invasion of white men and free negroes an insurrection, just so long will we continue to strengthen the cause of our enemies. Divest the thing of the insurrectionary aspect, and what do we behold? The foundation of their whole doctrine overthrown. -- The negroes do not desire freedom. They had an opportunity -- a good one. Months were wasted in consummating the arrangements and yet when the blow was to be struck and freedom granted, -- the great boon which those wild, deluded fanatics of the North and North-West prate so much about -- where do we find the poor slave? Why quietly sitting at home by his master's fire side, or doing his master's bidding, while a dozen or more crazy fools are battling for his rights which he will not accept.

We are surprised that Southern papers should call this invasion of a few treasonable men upon the South an insurrection, when not the first feature of it assumes that aspect. We say desist from it. It is exactly what the abolitionists want. We could not please them better. And besides it is robbing the slave of his just dues. He is deserving of praise say we, and we almost feel rejoiced that this thing has happened, for it has taught us two things, first that we can put confidence in the fidelity of the blacks as a mass (though of course there must necessarily be some bad ones among so large a number) and secondly it has taught northern fanatics that in future if they desire to liberate the slaves from bondage they must resort to other means, for this thing has taught them that expecting aid and comfort from the slaves themselves is putting faith in a broken reed.

Slaves love, honor and obey their masters, and it would be well for the "Liberators" before making such another foolish attempt as that of Harper's Ferry to bear this in mind. We don't know of any little event connected with this affair which has pleased us more than this reluctance of the slaves to engage in the dirty work. Not even the

capture of old Brown himself can equal the pleasure we experience when thinking about it. To old Brown it must be the unkindest cut of all, if we except the last cut he will experience when the Sheriff cuts the rope which is to rob him of his worthless life.

The Insurrection at Harper's Ferry, Commonwealth

Frankfort, Kentucky

October 21, 1859

The details by Telegraph of the insurrection at Harper's Ferry take up so much space as to prevent their publication in our paper. It appears, however, that the insurgents were lead on by the notorious Abolitionist Brown, who was so conspicuous in the Kansas difficulties; his two sons; and a school teacher named Cook. The developments indicate a conspiracy on the part of a few Abolitionists to revolutionize the entire South by inciting an insurrection among the slaves, which conspiracy, however, we cannot but believe existed chiefly upon paper, and in the minds of a few zealots, whose acts prove them to have been stark mad. In fact, derangement alone can account for their preposterous attempt to effect a revolution in the slave States with only 50 men, with the illusory hope, it is true, that the unarmed and undisciplined slaves would rise and successfully strike for their liberation. The slaves were evidently unprepared for such a step, and those who were implicated at all appear to have been coerced into the ranks. The mob has been promptly quelled and routed and peace restored. For the prisoners, a Lunatic Asylum would be a more proper punishment than the gallows. Below we give a list of the killed and wounded:

Killed, 5 citizens and 15 insurgents; wounded 3 insurgents; prisoners, 5 insurgents.

The names of all his party at the ferry on Sunday night, except three white men, who he admits he sent away on an errand, are as follows, with their proper titles under the Provisional Government, viz: General John Brown, Commander in Chief, wounded but will recover; Capt. Oliver Brown, dead; Capt. Watson Brown, dead; Capt. John Koge, of Ohio, raised in Virginia, dead; Capt. Aaron C. Stephens, of Connecticut, wounded badly; he has three balls in his body and cannot recover; Lieut. Edwin Coppie, of Iowa, unhurt; Lieut. Edwin Coppie, of Iowa, unhurt; Lieut. Albert Haslett of Pennsylvania, dead; Lieut. Wm. Loman, of Maine, dead; Capt. John Cook, of Connecticut, escaped. Privates -- Stewart Taylor, of Canada, dead; Wm. Thompson, of New York, dead; Dolph Thompson, of New York, dead. The above, with three whites previously sent off, make in all seventeen whites. Negroes -- Dangerfield, recently of Ohio, and raised in Virginia, Emperor, of New York, raised in South Carolina, not wounded, a prisoner; the latter was elected a member of Congress of the Provisional Government some time since; Lewis Leary, of Ohio, raised in Virginia, dead; Copeland, of Ohio, raised in Virginia, not wounded, a prisoner at Charleston. Gen. Brown has nine wounds, but none of them are fatal. A bushel of letters were discovered from all parts of the country; one from Geritt.

Trial of John Brown Closing Argument

On October 27, 1859, John Brown was brought to trial for the raid on Harpers Ferry. He was charged with conspiring with slaves to start a rebellion, murdering four whites and one black, and treason against Virginia. After a week, the jury found Brown guilty on all counts and was he sentenced to be killed on December 7, 1859. As a result of this ruling, tensions escalated throughout the country and set the stage for further conflict.

Directions: Imagine that you are a lawyer hired in the trial of John Brown. Your role will be to prosecute (prove guilt), or defend (prove innocence), Brown on the charges of treason. You will be using primary sources and class notes to write the closing argument for the trial.

1. Circle which side is your group working on: **PROSECUTION** **DEFENSE**

2. Read through the primary sources connected with your role. As you are reading, highlight information that you will use in your closing argument that either helps you prove his guilt or innocence for the raid at Harpers Ferry.

3. After you have highlighted, write down at least three pieces of information from each primary source. These must be written in your own words.

Primary Source #1 _____

a. _____

b. _____

c. _____

Primary Source #2 _____

a. _____

b. _____

c. _____

- What were the cultural issues that divided the nation?
- What tensions in the United States led to the raid at Harpers Ferry?

This image shows a full page of blank, lined paper. It features approximately 20 evenly spaced horizontal grey lines across its entire width, providing a guide for handwriting or typing. The background is a solid off-white color.