Thoreau Defends the Harpers Ferry Raid (October 30, 1859)

I trust that you will pardon me for being here. I do not wish to force my thoughts upon you, but I feel forced myself. Little as I know of Captain Brown, I would fain do my part to correct the tone and the statements of the newspapers, and of my countrymen generally, respecting his character and actions. It costs us nothing to be just. We can at least express our sympathy with, and admiration of, him and his companions, and that is what I now propose to do.

...

I should say that he was an old-fashioned man in his respect for the Constitution, and his faith in the permanence of this Union. Slavery he deemed to be wholly opposed to these, and he was its determined foe.

...

[H]e had the courage to face his country herself, when she was in the wrong.

...

A man of rare common sense and directness of speech, as of action; a transcendentalist above all, a man of ideas and principles, — that was what distinguished him. Not yielding to a whim or transient impulse, but carrying out the purpose of a life.

...

Perhaps anxious politicians may prove that only seventeen white men and five negroes were concerned in the late enterprise; but their very anxiety to prove this might suggest to themselves that all is not told. Why do they still dodge the truth? They are so anxious because of a dim consciousness of the fact, which they do not distinctly face, that at least a million of the free inhabitants of the United States would have rejoiced if it had succeeded.

...

[W]hen you plant, or bury, a hero in his field, a crop of heroes is sure to spring up. This is a seed of such force and vitality, that it does not ask our leave to germinate.

...

The slave-ship is on her way, crowded with its dying victims; new cargoes are being added in mid ocean; a small crew of slaveholders, countenanced by a large body of passengers, is smothering four millions under the hatches, and yet the politician asserts that the only proper way by which deliverance is to be obtained is by the " quiet diffusion of the sentiments of humanity," without any "outbreak."
Prominent and influential editors, accustomed to deal with politicians, men of an infinitely lower grade, say, in their ignorance, that he acted "on the principle of revenge." They do not know the man.

...

He did not recognize unjust human laws, but resisted them as he was bid ... No man in America has ever stood up so persistently and effectively for the dignity of human nature ... In that sense he was the most American of us all.

...

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. They who are continually shocked by slavery have some right to be shocked by the violent death of the slaveholder, but no others. Such will be more shocked by his life than by his death. I shall not be forward to think him mistaken in his method who quickest succeeds to liberate the slave.


**Pennsylvania Newspaper Questions Brown's Methods (October 26, 1859)**

The Harper's Ferry Rioters Canonized.

There is a significance in these remarks from the Tribune:

"Never before was such an uproar raised by twenty men as by Old Brown and his confederates in this deplorable affair. There will be enough to heap execration on the memory of these mistaken men. We leave this work to the fit hands and tongues of those who regard the fundamental axioms of the Declaration of Independence as 'glittering generalities.' Believing that the way to Universal Emancipation lies not through insurrection, civil war and blood shed, but through peace, discussion, and the quiet diffusion of sentiments of humanity and justice, we deeply regret this outbreak; but, remembering that, if their fault was grievous, grievously have they answered it. We will not, by one reproachful word, disturb the bloody shrouds wherein (John Brown and) his compatriots are sleeping. They dared and died for what they felt to be right, though in a manner which seems to us fatally wrong. Let their epitaphs remain unwritten until the not distant day when no slave shall clank his chains in the shades of Monticello, or by the graves of Mount Vernon."


**Virginia Newspaper Criticizes Brown (October 25, 1859)**

The Harper's Ferry invasion has advanced the cause of Disunion more than any other event ... since the formation of the Government; it has rallied to that standard men who formerly looked upon it with horror; it has revived, with ten fold strength the desire of a Southern Confederacy. The heretofore, most determined friends of the Union may now be heard saying, "if under the form of a Confederacy, our peace is disturbed, our State invaded, its peaceful citizens cruelly murdered ... by those who should be our warmest friends, ... and the people of the North sustain the outrage, then let disunion come."

Brown Defends Himself (November 2, 1859)

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, of a design on my part to free slaves ...
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 say let it be done.


Lincoln Assesses the Harpers Ferry Raid (February 27, 1860)

John Brown's effort was peculiar. It was not a slave insurrection. It was an attempt by white men to get up a revolt among slaves, in which the slaves refused to participate. In fact, it was so absurd that the slaves, with all their ignorance, saw plainly enough it could not succeed. That affair, in its philosophy, corresponds with the many attempts related in history at the assassination of kings and emperors. An enthusiast broods over the oppression of a people till he fancies himself commissioned by Heaven to liberate them. He ventures the attempt, which ends in little else than his own execution.