

SELF-DECEPTION

John Brown and Self-Deception



John Brown was greatly admired as a hero to some and fiercely hated by others during his lifetime. Abolitionists who supported the end of slavery praised his actions as necessary to destroy the institution; Southerners were horrified by the violence he employed to achieve his ends. Others, such as politician Abraham Lincoln, questioned the means even if they agreed with the end of abolishing slavery. Rarely has an individual stirred such controversy over his historical reputation as a hero or villain. Even today, John Brown provokes a variety of responses among historians and biographers. Judgments of Brown's character range from a self-righteous, fundamentalist terrorist to a crusading abolitionist for freedom.

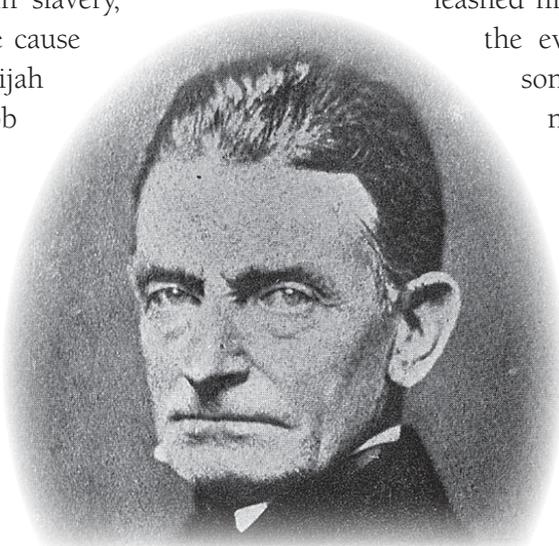
In 1831, abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison launched his newspaper, *The Liberator*, with the principled, uncompromising words about the abolition of slavery: "I will not equivocate—I will not excuse—I will not retreat a single inch—AND I WILL BE HEARD." Brown was swept up by such unbending abolitionist thinking that was consistent with his Calvinist Puritan faith. He asserted that he had an "eternal war with slavery," and dedicated himself to the cause when abolitionist editor, Elijah Lovejoy, was killed by a mob in 1837. "Here before God, in the presence of these witnesses, from this time, I consecrate my life to the destruction of slavery," Brown said in a church meeting.

Over the next few decades, Brown failed in several business ventures

and moved his family around a lot. He was more devoted to the cause of freeing slaves from bondage. He moved near Lake Placid, New York to manage a colony of free blacks and organized a secret society to prevent slavecatchers from catching their quarry of runaway slaves in the North. However, Brown began to deceive himself into thinking that he could and must act violently to end the immoral slave system.

John Brown followed several of his sons who moved to the newly-created Kansas Territory, which was organized under the principle of popular sovereignty, meaning that the people would decide whether Kansas would enter the Union as a free or slave state. Southerners and Northerners flooded the territory with settlers to decide the issue. They were deeply divided and set up rival territorial governments in different towns. Tension was rife and erupted into sporadic violence, threatening to cause civil war. Brown and his sons joined the Liberty Guards militia and the Pottawatomie Rifles militia to fight pro-slavery forces.

On the night of May 24, 1856, Brown unleashed his righteous vengeance against the evil slave system. He and his sons knocked on the doors of nearby cabins of several pro-slavery families (even if they were too poor to own slaves). Armed with pistols, hunting knives, and swords, Brown and his sons took five adult males prisoner at gun-point and led them outside into the darkness while their wives and children cowered in-



side. The next day, the hostages were all discovered killed and their bodies grisly mutilated. When asked about the deeds, Brown said, "I did not do it, but I approved of it." He proclaimed his godly righteousness in murdering pro-slavery advocates: "God is my judge. We were justified under the circumstances." He went into hiding in the woods and soon went back to the Northeast to raise money, weapons, and recruits for his main action against Southern slavery. Brown believed that murder was morally permissible if done in the name of what was right.

As he informed a few abolitionist friends, Brown intended to lead an army on a raid of the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry in Virginia. He planned to seize the weapons and then distribute them to liberated slaves to start a violent race war in which slaves killed their masters and fled to a revolutionary state in the mountains of Virginia. In the summer of 1859, he moved in disguise to a farm near Harper's Ferry but only managed to recruit twenty-one men. He wrote a political manifesto entitled, "A Declaration of Liberty by the Representatives of the Slave Population of the United States of America," modelled on the Declaration of Independence, and a new constitution guaranteeing equal rights to all races.

The small, but righteous band moved out in the dark on the night of October 16 to begin the war. They achieved easy early success when they took a night watchman and an arsenal guard prisoner as they broke into the armory. Brown dispatched a handful of men in a wagon loaded with weapons to break into nearby homes and liberate their slaves. The first victim of the war was ironically a free black railroad worker whom the rebels shot. By the morning, Brown's men had taken some forty prisoners of townspeople going to work, and word of the raid spread instantaneously across the nation by telegraph.

Daylight brought nothing but disaster for the ill-conceived raid. Brown's rebels entered into a shoot-out with the townspeople, and lost one of the band. When Brown sent out three emissaries to negotiate a cease-fire, each were shot. When five

of his men tried to retreat to the Shenandoah River, two were shot and killed, one drowned, and two blacks (one free and one slave) were captured and nearly hanged. In the chaos, some thirty prisoners escaped. By nightfall, Brown only had four or five healthy men. One of his sons was killed, and one was wounded, but he resolved to fight to the end to achieve his goal of liberating the slaves.

The following day, Colonel Robert E. Lee arrived with Lieutenant Jeb Stuart and ninety Marines. Stuart tried to negotiate a surrender, but Brown refused. The Marines battered down the heavy door and stormed into the building. After his other men went down, Brown was the last to fight and was slashed by a saber before being knocked unconscious.

Brown was tried for murder, inciting slave insurrection, and treason against the state of Virginia only a few days later. After five days, he was convicted on all the charges. Transcendentalist author, Henry David Thoreau, delivered an oration praising Brown for breaking an unjust law. "Are laws to be enforced simply because they are made?" Thoreau asked. During his sentencing, Brown was allowed to make a statement and finished by saying, "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!" Brown deceived himself into thinking that any number of deaths were acceptable in his crusade against the evils of slavery.

On December 2, Brown was driven in a wagon to a gallows on a cornfield guarded by 1,500 militia to guard against any rescue attempt. He was bound, hanged, and placed in a coffin. That morning, he handed a scrap of paper with a prophetic warning: "I John Brown am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land: will never be purged away; but with Blood." The John Brown raid helped fuel the sectionalism that led to the bloody Civil War between North and South that claimed more than 600,000 Americans.



Defining Civic Virtues: Deception

To lie to yourself and others either to deceive purposefully or because you are deluded into thinking that something is right when it is wrong and unjust