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John Brown: The Hanged Hero

Sam Derfus

Introduction

On Sunday October 16th, 1859, John Brown and 21 men besieged Harpers Ferry in an attempt to sow chaos and upheave the institution of slavery. Brown held the area for a few days before being captured, taken to court, and killed. Seen as an inciting incident in the American Civil War, the raid's influence far outweighs its actual success. Brown may not have been able to abolish slavery himself, but he started a chain of events that would lead to his dream coming to fruition. Although Brown's use of direct action as a means of creating change at Harpers Ferry didn't achieve results immediately, the legacy of his martyrdom shows that his methods were effective.

A Short History of John Brown

To truly understand the motivations of the raid, we must first understand the motivations of Brown himself. Brown's upbringing was very different from most white northerners at the time. Brown lost his mother at a young age, and spent very little time in formal education. Instead, he spent his time in the wilderness and with local indigenous people. Despite this isolationist lifestyle, he was quite religious, a trait imparted on him by his father, a preacher. His father wasn't a strict protestant, preferring to appeal to the emotional side of Christianity. His father also taught him that slavery was a grievous sin, something that Brown would never forget. Brown proceeded to spend years wandering America, taking in different cultures (DuBois, 8-17).

Brown's life of activism started many years later when he entered Kansas with his sons. Brown spoke with Frederick Douglass often to go over plans and to hold general radical abolitionist meetings. The two thought that Kansas would be a good place to fight. The goal was to make sure that Kansas would be a free state, but they also acknowledged that simply raising awareness about the evils of slavery would be good enough (Russo). Before his arrival in Kansas, Brown heard about the rampant corruption in the emerging state from others. On an

election, he states, "There was no disguise, no pretense of legality, no regard for decency. On the evening before and the day of the election, nearly a thousand Missourians arrived at Lawrence in wagons and on horseback, well armed with rifles, pistols and bowie-knives, and two pieces of cannon loaded with musket balls. Although but 831 legal electors in the Territory voted, there were no less than 6,320 votes polled." Fueled by a new rage, Brown left for Kansas shortly. He entered with two others and a wagon full of weapons. In the conflict known as "Bleeding Kansas", he killed four and proceeded to flee when given chase by the law. Ultimately, the battle was unsuccessful and Kansas became a slave state. This only motivated John Brown further (DuBois, 62)

The Raid at Harper's Ferry

Brown's next plan was an ambitious one- so ambitious that Douglass wanted no part of it. He saw it as suicide and worthless. Brown saw it differently. He thought it could be what tipped the scales against slavery in America. Brown was going to lead a raid on Harpers Ferry. He chose Harpers Ferry because it satisfied his need for a base on a hill- somewhere where he would have the high ground (Dubois, 138)He tried to rally up as many men as he could, but the process was very difficult. After a period of rounding up people and deciding who he wanted to take with him, Brown had a group of 21 people, six of which were former slaves. (DuBois, 140) With his new reinforcements, the plan was set into action. John Brown and his band of men entered Harpers Ferry and took the armory with only one lost life. After capturing the military outposts, he armed local slaves to help him keep the territory. Some time later Southern forces saw fit to reclaim the stronghold and reestablish dominance. Brown met their forces valiantly, but in the end, could not compete with Robert E. Lee, who would later become one of the most infamous generals in American history. (DuBois, 165)

Brown refused to surrender, and carried that attitude into his trial (PBS). When allowed to speak, Brown took his time in the limelight to speak against the evils of slavery. Brown understood that his cause was larger than his own life, and spread the word at the cost of his

very existence. He was found guilty for attempting to commit treason and murder, and was executed. His message resonated throughout the North, leading to him becoming a hero of sorts. Writers like Emerson and Thoreau saw him as a martyr, and churches rang bells to honor his passing. The South took no part in the celebration as expected.

John Brown's Legacy

There is a single memorial in Harper's ferry that even mentions John Brown, and it is to commemorate a freed black man, Heyward Shepherd, who was killed in the raid. Constructed by the "United Daughters of the Confederacy and Sons of the Confederate Veterans", the stone sat as a method of spitting on Brown's work rather than celebrating Shepherd's life. The stone only commemorates Shepherd because he was the south's ideal freed black man- one who didn't cause a fuss. Shepherd became a scapegoat for the South- they were able to deny charges of racism because they honored his death, and by their opposition. (Naveh, 77)

John Brown's legacy comes in many forms. His specific influence in the Civil War was minor but clear. He was a part of the mounting chaos that led to it breaking out. Although he may not have been there to fight in it, his actions certainly did affect it. One could argue that Brown's raid was just a single action of many, or that it was just a single link in the chain reaction that set off the Civil War. Both of these views would be understating his influence, though. Brown worked within a niche. Friedrich Nietzsche once posited that trying to understand all of history is a meaningless pursuit as there is simply too much to know. What he suggested was learning deeply about a particular part of history- a niche. Brown's activism fits into this idea- while he may not have caused lasting change in the entire nation, what he did was very effective within what he wanted to accomplish- raising awareness.

Because Brown focused on raising awareness, he succeeded. His raid was a news event that everyone knew about at the time. It could be compared to the O.J. Simpson trials of the 1990s- a cultural phenomenon. It was inescapable; you had no choice but to know about it. This cultural ubiquity is even more impressive when you take into account how sparse the US

communications network was at the time. Things spread slowly, but everyone knew about John Brown's martyrdom nonetheless.

Martyrdom

Brown also left behind a philosophical legacy- one of martyrdom. The real meaning and intent behind his radical attacks against slavery has been watered down over time, and he has become a hero to radicals from all across the political spectrum. Eyal Navel states, "Brown has provided inspiration to militant black movements, communist intellectuals and politicians, anarchist groups, and ethnic outsiders, as well as, more recently, right-wing antiabortion fanatics claiming to be following in his footsteps. The fact that only these extremist individuals and movements have drawn on the Brown legacy is a further indication of his inability to serve as a focus of consensus and unification" (Navel, 80). This calls to mind the concept first coined by Ronald Barthes called "The Death of the Author". In the essay, Barthes states, "Once the Author is gone, the claim to "decipher" a text becomes quite useless. To give an Author to a text is to impose upon that text a stop clause, to furnish it with a final signification, to close the writing" (Barthes, 5). John Brown is dead and has no way of clarifying what his actions meant. Even if he were alive, his actions have been completed and now belong to all who process them. I disagree with this school of thought in this circumstance. I believe that it is well documented why Brown acted, and that the so-called authorial intent is clear for all to see. People misusing his message may prove the existence of the Death of the Author idea, but that doesn't mean they are in the right.

The existence of multiple interpretations of Brown's acts reveals a larger problem about his methods as a whole. He may have caused chaos, but what real change did he achieve? Brown didn't directly change much of anything in his raid. He caused violence and disturbed the status quo, yes, but no legislature changed because of him. I believe this is what caused his message to be diluted over the years. Brown's direct action was all he could do with his position, and yet it didn't achieve anything besides chaos. This is a classic dilemma- electoral reform

takes a long time and prolongs suffering, but direct action causes chaos and can often lose its point.

Given that point, was Brown's raid worth it? Many including himself died, and little directly changed because of it. I believe it was absolutely worth it. Brown did all he could with the resources he had in order to attempt to fix one of the greatest injustices ever committed by man. Revolution is a justified response to slavery. He was able to raise great awareness and unite much of the North against slavery. The violence Brown committed was in hope of creating a far better future for all black Americans, and for the nation itself. The chaos he caused was an important step in the initiation of the Civil War, indirectly leading to the abolition of slavery. Brown may not have changed legislation, but he caused change. On Brown's legacy of action against oppression, DuBois says it best, "Now is the day to strike for a free nation. It will cost something-even blood and suffering, but it will not cost as much as waiting. And he was right. Repression bred repression, serfdom bred slavery, until in 1861 the South was farther from freedom than in 1800." (DuBois, 196)

Conclusion

To conclude, John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry was a necessary step in the abolition of slavery. Brown may not have achieved legislative change, but his death became a symbol, and he became a hero to many. His ideas carried the North into the American Civil War, and ultimately did result in the abolition of slavery. Although his name is often used in the modern age by anyone performing activism, this dilution of his message does not make his original act any less meaningful or important. John Brown was a shining example of what it means to be an activist, and what it means to stand up for what is right at any cost.

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