

6.

JOHN BROWN AND ABRAHAM LINCOLN

THE INVISIBILITY OF ANTIRACISM IN AMERICAN HISTORY TEXTBOOKS

It is not only radical or currently unfashionable ideas that the texts leave out—it is all ideas, including those of their heroes.

—FRANCES FITZGERALD¹

You may dispose of me very easily. I am nearly disposed of now. But this question is still to be settled—this Negro question, I mean; the end of that is not yet.

—JOHN BROWN, 1859²

I am here to plead his cause with you. I plead not for his life, but for his character—his immortal life; and so it becomes your cause wholly, and is not his in the least.

—HENRY DAVID THOREAU, "A PLEA FOR
CAPTAIN JOHN BROWN," 1859³

We shall need all the anti-slavery feeling in the country, and more; you can go home and try to bring the people to your views, and you may say anything you like about me, if that will help. . . . When the hour comes for dealing with slavery, I trust I will be willing to do my duty though it cost my life.

—ABRAHAM LINCOLN TO ABOLITIONIST
UNITARIAN MINISTERS, 1862⁴

PERHAPS THE MOST telling criticism Frances FitzGerald made in her 1979 survey of American history textbooks, *America Revised*, was that they leave out ideas. As presented by textbooks of the 1970s, "American political life was completely mindless," she observed.⁵

Why would textbook authors avoid even those ideas with which they agree?

Taking ideas seriously does not fit with the rhetorical style of textbooks, which presents events so as to make them seem foreordained along a line of constant progress. Including ideas would make history contingent: things could go either way, and have on occasion. The "right" people, armed with the "right" ideas, have not always won. When they didn't, the authors would be in the embarrassing position of having to disapprove of an outcome in the past. Including ideas would introduce uncertainty. This is not textbook style. Textbooks unfold history without real drama or suspense, only melodrama.

On the subject of race relations, John Brown's statement that "this question is still to be settled" seems almost as relevant today, and almost as ominous, as when he spoke in 1859. The opposite of racism is antiracism, of course, or what we might call racial idealism or equalitarianism, and it is still not clear whether it will prevail. In this struggle, our history textbooks offer little help. Just as they underplay white racism, they also neglect racial idealism. In so doing, they deprive students of potential role models to call upon as they try to bridge the new fault lines that will spread out in the future from the great rift in our past.

Since ideas and ideologies played an especially important role in the Civil War era, American history textbooks give a singularly inchoate view of that struggle. Just as textbooks treat slavery without racism, they treat abolitionism without much idealism.⁶ Consider the most radical white abolitionist of them all, John Brown.

The treatment of Brown, like the treatment of slavery and Reconstruction, has changed in American history textbooks. From 1890 to about 1970, John Brown was insane. Before 1890 he was perfectly sane, and after 1970 he has slowly been regaining his sanity. Before reviewing six more textbooks in 2006–07, I had imagined that they would maintain this trend, portraying Brown's actions so as to render them at least intelligible if not intelligent. In their treatment of Brown, however, the new textbooks don't differ much from those of the 1980s, so I shall discuss them all together. Since Brown himself did not change after his death—except to molder more—his mental health in our textbooks provides an inadvertent index of the level of white racism in our society. Perhaps our new textbooks suggest that race relations circa 2007 are not much better than circa 1987.

In the eighteen textbooks I reviewed, Brown makes two appearances: Pottawatomie, Kansas, and Harpers Ferry, Virginia. Recall that the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act tried to resolve the question of slavery through "popular sovereignty." The practical result of leaving the slavery decision to whoever set-

tled in Kansas was an ideologically motivated settlement craze. Northerners rushed to live and farm in Kansas Territory and make it "free soil." Fewer Southern planters moved to Kansas with their slaves, but slave owners from Missouri repeatedly crossed the Missouri River to vote in territorial elections and to establish a reign of terror to drive out the free-soil farmers. In May 1856 hundreds of pro-slavery "border ruffians," as they came to be called, raided the free-soil town of Lawrence, Kansas, killing two people, burning down the hotel, and destroying two printing presses. An older textbook, *The American Tradition*, describes Brown's action at Pottawatomie flatly: "In retaliation, a militant abolitionist named John Brown led a midnight attack on the proslavery settlement of Pottawatomie. Five people were killed by Brown and his followers." The 2006 edition of *The American Pageant* provides a much fuller account, but one that is far from neutral.

The fanatical figure of John Brown now stalked upon the Kansas battlefield. Spare, gray-bearded, and iron-willed, he was obsessively dedicated to the abolitionist cause. The power of his glittering gray eyes was such, so he claimed, that his stare could force a dog or cat to slink out of a room. Becoming involved in dubious dealings, including horse stealing, he moved to Kansas from Ohio with a part of his large family. Brooding over the recent attack on Lawrence, "Old Brown" of Osawatomie led a band of his followers to Pottawatomie Creek in May 1856. There they literally hacked to pieces five surprised men, presumed to be proslaveryites. This fiendish butchery besmirched the free-soil cause and brought vicious retaliation from the proslavery forces.

Pageant's prose is typical of books written during the nadir of race relations, 1890–1940 (when most white Americans, including historians, felt that blacks should not have equal rights), and comes as something of a shock at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In this rendering, those who fought for black equality had to be wrongheaded.

Indeed, the first edition of this textbook came out in 1956, long before the changes wrought by the civil rights movement had any chance to percolate through our culture and influence the writing of our history textbooks. The choice of language—from "fanatical figure" and "dubious dealings" to "fiendish butchery"—is hardly objective. One man's "stalk" is another's "walk." Bias is also evident in the choice of details included and omitted. The account

throughout makes Northerners the initial aggressors, omitting mention of the earlier murders by pro-slavery Southerners. Actually, free-staters, being in the majority, had tried to win Kansas democratically and legally; it was pro-slavery forces who had used terror and threats to try to control the state. No reader of *Pageant* would guess that pro-slavery men had recently killed five free-state settlers, including the two slain in the Lawrence raid. Nor had Brown moved to Kansas "with his large family"; rather, he had moved to the Adirondacks, hoping his sons would join him there, but five sons and their families instead went to Kansas, hoping to farm in peace. They then asked their father for aid when threatened by their pro-slavery neighbors. Other errors include "presumed to be proslaveryites" (they were), and "literally hacked to pieces" (they weren't).⁷

Of all eighteen textbooks, another of the new books, *Pathways to the Present*, is the most sympathetic to Brown but never goes beyond neutrality. It compactly describes Brown's Harpers Ferry raid:

On October 16, 1859, the former Kansas raider John Brown and a small group of men attacked the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia. . . . Brown and his followers hoped to seize the weapons and give them to enslaved people to start a slave uprising.

United States troops under the command of Colonel Robert E. Lee cornered and defeated Brown's men. Convicted of treason, Brown was sentenced to be hanged. Just before his execution, he wrote a note that would prove to be all too accurate: "I John Brown am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away, but with blood."

Eight other books, new and older, are negative, although they don't imply that he was crazy. The other nine are openly hostile. Several textbooks, including four of the six recent ones, emphasize the claim that no slaves actually joined Brown. Boorstin and Kelley makes the point at length: "The party forcibly 'freed' about 30 slaves. Taking these reluctant people with them, Brown and his men retreated to the arsenal. Ironically, the first person to die in the affair—killed by John Brown and his men—was an already-free black gunned down by these 'liberators.' "

The United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) would love these accounts, because they can be taken to imply that African Americans had no interest in freedom. The UDC erected a monument in Harpers Ferry to Haywood

Shepherd, the free black man referred to by Boorstin and Kelley. At its dedication in 1931, they claimed he was “representative of Negroes of the neighborhood, who would not take part.” But this is bad history. Hannah Geffert and Jean Libby have shown that Brown drew considerable support from enslaved African Americans around Harpers Ferry. His men armed the thirty mentioned by Boorstin and Kelley, including some who came from nearby plantations that the raiders never visited.⁸ These newly freed men then stopped the eastbound passenger train, guarded it, helped the raiders find other slave owners, and probably killed an armed white resident of the town who refused to halt when challenged. (After the raid the state indicted eleven of them for these actions.) Well after the raid, local African Americans continued the resistance to slavery that Brown’s raid had triggered: Libby notes that many slaves from the area were listed as “fugitive” in the 1860 census, and “the barns of all of the jurors of John Brown’s trial were burned—a time-honored signal of revolution.”⁹ Thus, the UDC interpretation that textbooks supply, implying that the slaves themselves were not sympathetic to the cause of abolition, is simply inaccurate.

Four textbooks still linger in the former era when Brown’s actions proved him mad. “John Brown was almost certainly insane,” opines *American History*. *The American Way* tells a whopper: “[L]ater Brown was proved to be mentally ill.” The 2006 *American Pageant*, like its predecessor, characterizes Brown as “deranged,” “gaunt,” “grim,” and “terrible,” says that “thirteen of his near relatives were regarded as insane, including his mother and grandmother,” and terms the Harpers Ferry raid a “mad exploit.” Other books finesse the sanity issue by calling Brown merely “fanatical.” Not one author, old or new, has any sympathy for the man or takes any pleasure in his ideals and actions.

For the benefit of readers who, like me, grew up reading that Brown was at least fanatic if not crazed, let’s consider the evidence. To be sure, some of Brown’s lawyers and relatives, hoping to save his neck, suggested an insanity defense. But no one who knew Brown thought him crazy. He favorably impressed people who spoke with him after his capture, including his jailer and even reporters writing for Democratic newspapers, which supported slavery. Governor Wise of Virginia called him “a man of clear head” after Brown got the better of him in an informal interview. “They are themselves mistaken who take him to be a madman,” Governor Wise said. In his message to the Virginia legislature he said Brown showed “quick and clear perception,” “rational premises and consecutive reasoning,” “composure and self-possession.”¹⁰

After 1890, textbook authors inferred Brown’s madness from his plan.



At left is John Brown as he appeared in 1858. He looked like a middle-aged businessman—which he was. He grew a beard later that year, partly as a modest attempt to disguise himself after becoming wanted for helping eleven African Americans escape slavery in Missouri. Few Americans recognize this portrait. At right is John Brown as he looked in 1837 to John Steuart Curry, who painted a version of his portrait on the walls of the Kansas State Capitol. This Brown is gaunt and deranged, which he had become in our culture by 1937. Astoundingly, at the start of the new millennium, *American Journey* chose a variant of this painting as its only portrait of Brown. Many Americans can name this man.

which admittedly was far-fetched. Never mind that John Brown himself presciently told Frederick Douglass that the venture would make a stunning impact even if it failed. Nor that his twenty-odd followers can hardly all be considered crazed, too.¹¹ Rather, we must recognize that the insanity with which historians have charged John Brown was never psychological. It was ideological. Brown’s actions made no sense to textbook writers between 1890 and about 1970. To make no sense is to be crazy.

Clearly, Brown’s contemporaries did not consider him insane. Brown’s ideological influence in the month before his hanging, and continuing after his death, was immense. He moved the boundary of acceptable thoughts and deeds regarding slavery. Before Harpers Ferry, to be an abolitionist was not quite acceptable, even in the North. Just talking about freeing slaves—advocating immediate emancipation—was behavior at the outer limit of the ideological continuum. By engaging in armed action, including murder, John Brown made mere verbal abolitionism seem much less radical.

After an initial shock wave of revulsion against Brown, in the North as well

as in the South, Americans were fascinated to hear what he had to say. In his 1859 trial John Brown captured the attention of the nation like no other abolitionist or slave owner before or since. He knew it: "My whole life before had not afforded me one half the opportunity to plead for the right."¹² In his speech to the court on November 2, just before the judge sentenced him to die, Brown argued, "Had I so interfered in behalf of the rich, the powerful, it would have been all right." He referred to the Bible, which he saw in the courtroom, "which 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." Brown went on to claim the high moral ground: "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, I did no wrong but right." Although he objected that his impending death penalty was unjust, he accepted it and pointed to graver injustices: "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."¹³

Brown's willingness to go to the gallows for what he thought was right had a moral force of its own. "It seems as if no man had ever died in America before, for in order to die you must first have lived," Henry David Thoreau observed in a eulogy in Boston. "These men, in teaching us how to die, have at the same time taught us how to live." Thoreau went on to compare Brown with Jesus of Nazareth, who had faced a similar death at the hands of the state.¹⁴

During the rest of November, Brown provided the nation graceful instruction in how to face death. In Larchmont, New York, George Templeton Strong wrote in his diary, "One's faith in anything is terribly shaken by anybody who is ready to go to the gallows condemning and denouncing it."¹⁵ Brown's letters to his family and friends softened his image, showed his human side, and prompted an outpouring of sympathy for his children and soon-to-be widow, if not for Brown himself. His letters to supporters and remarks to journalists, widely circulated, formed a continuing indictment of slavery. We see his charisma in this letter from "a conservative Christian"—so the author signed it—written to Brown in jail: "While I cannot approve of all your acts, I stand in awe of your position since your capture, and dare not oppose you lest I be found fighting against God; for you speak as one having authority, and seem to be strengthened from on high."¹⁶ When Virginia executed John Brown on December 2,

making him the first American since the founding of the nation to be hanged as a traitor, church bells mourned in cities throughout the North. Louisa May Alcott, William Dean Howells, Herman Melville, John Greenleaf Whittier, and Walt Whitman were among the poets who responded to the event. "The gaze of Europe is fixed at this moment on America," wrote Victor Hugo from France. Hanging Brown, Hugo predicted, "will open a latent fissure that will finally split the Union asunder. The punishment of John Brown may consolidate slavery in Virginia, but it will certainly shatter the American Democracy. You preserve your shame but you kill your glory."¹⁷

Brown remained controversial after his death. Republican congressmen kept their distance from his felonious acts. Nevertheless, Southern slave owners were appalled at the show of Northern sympathy for Brown and resolved to maintain slavery by any means necessary, including quitting the Union if they lost the next election. Brown's charisma in the North, meanwhile, was not spent but only increased owing to what many came to view as his martyrdom. As the war came, as thousands of Americans found themselves making the same commitment to face death that John Brown had made, the force of his example took on new relevance. That's why soldiers marched into battle singing "John Brown's Body." Two years later, church congregations sang Julia Ward Howe's new words to the song: "As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free"—and the identification of John Brown and Jesus Christ took another turn. The next year saw the 54th Massachusetts Colored Regiment parading through Boston to the tune, en route to its heroic destiny with death in South Carolina, while William Lloyd Garrison surveyed the cheering bystanders from a balcony, his hand resting on a bust of John Brown. In February 1865 another Massachusetts colored regiment marched to the tune through the streets of Charleston, South Carolina.¹⁸

That was the high point of old John Brown. At the turn of the century, as Southern and border states disfranchised African Americans, as lynchings proliferated, as blackface minstrel shows came to dominate American popular culture, white America abandoned the last shards of its racial idealism. A history published in 1923 makes plain the connection to Brown's insanity: "The farther we get away from the excitement of 1859 the more we are disposed to consider this extraordinary man the victim of mental delusions."¹⁹ Not until the civil rights movement of the 1960s was white America freed from enough of its racism to accept that a white person did not have to be crazy to die for black equality. In a sense, the murders of Mickey Schwerner and Andrew

Goodman in Mississippi, James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo in Alabama, and various other white civil rights workers in various other Southern states during the 1960s liberated textbook writers to see sanity again in John Brown. *Rise of the American Nation*, written in 1961, calls the Harpers Ferry plan "a wild idea, certain to fail," while in *Triumph of the American Nation*, published in 1986, the plan becomes "a bold idea, but almost certain to fail."²⁰

Frequently in American history the ideological needs of white racists and black nationalists coincide. So it was with their views of John Brown. During the heyday of the Black Power movement, I listened to speaker after speaker in a Mississippi forum denounce whites. "They are your enemies," thundered one black militant. "Not one white person has ever had the best interests of black people at heart." John Brown sprang to my mind, but the speaker anticipated my objection: "You might say John Brown did, but remember, he was crazy." John Brown might provide a defense against such global attacks on whites, but, unfortunately, American history textbooks have erased him as a usable character.

No black person who met John Brown thought him crazy. Many black leaders of the day—Martin Delaney, Henry Highland Garnet, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and others—knew and respected Brown. Only illness kept Tubman from joining him at Harpers Ferry. The day of his execution black-owned businesses closed in mourning across the North. Frederick Douglass called Brown "one of the greatest heroes known to American fame."²¹ A black college deliberately chose to locate at Harpers Ferry, and in 1918 its alumni dedicated a memorial stone to Brown and his men "to commemorate their heroism." The stone stated, in part, "That this nation might have a new birth of freedom, that slavery should be removed forever from American soil, John Brown and his 21 men gave their lives."

Quite possibly textbooks should not portray this murderer as a hero, although other murderers, from Christopher Columbus to Nat Turner, get the heroic treatment. However, the flat prose that textbooks use for Brown is not really neutral. Textbook authors' withdrawal of sympathy from Brown is perceptible; their tone in presenting him is different from the tone they employ for almost everyone else. We see this, for instance, in their treatment of his religious beliefs. John Brown was a serious Christian, well read in the Bible, who took its moral commands to heart. Yet every recent textbook except *Pathways to the Present* does not credit Brown with religiosity but instead blames him for it.²² "Brown believed that God had called on him to fight slavery," *The Americans* says twice.

But Brown never believed God commanded him in the sense of giving him instructions; rather, he thought deeply about the moral meaning of Christianity and decided that slavery was incompatible with it. Boorstin and Kelley calls Brown "the self-proclaimed antislavery messiah." But Brown never thought of himself as a messiah. On the contrary, he tried to get Frederick Douglass or Harriet Tubman to join him, believing enslaved African Americans would be much more likely to follow them than him.

By way of comparison, consider Nat Turner, who in 1831 led the most important slave revolt since the United States became a nation. John Brown and Nat Turner both killed whites in cold blood. Both were religious, but, unlike Brown, Turner did see visions and hear voices. In most textbooks, Turner has become something of a hero. Several textbooks call Turner "deeply religious" or "a gifted preacher." None calls him "a religious fanatic." They reserve that term for Brown. The closest any textbook comes to suggesting that Turner might have been crazy is this passage from *American History*: "Historians still argue about whether or not Turner was insane." But the author immediately goes on to qualify: "The point is that nearly every slave hated bondage. Nearly all were eager to see something done to destroy the system." Thus even *American History* emphasizes the political and social meaning of Turner's act, not its psychological genesis in an allegedly questionable mind.

The textbooks' withdrawal of sympathy from Brown is also apparent in what they include and exclude about his life before Harpers Ferry. "In the 1840s he somehow got interested in helping black slaves," according to *American Adventures*. Brown's interest is no mystery: he learned it from his father, who was a trustee of Oberlin College, a center of abolitionist sentiment. If *Adventures* wanted, it could have related the well-known story about how young John made friends with a black boy during the War of 1812, which convinced him that blacks were not inferior. Instead, its sentence reads like a slur. Textbook authors make Brown's Pottawatomie killings seem equally unmotivated by neglecting to tell that the violence in Kansas had hitherto been perpetrated primarily by the pro-slavery side. Indeed, slavery sympathizers had previously killed six free-soil settlers. Several months after Pottawatomie, at Osawatomie, Kansas, Brown had helped thirty-five free-soil men defend themselves against several hundred marauding pro-slavery men from Missouri, thereby earning the nickname "Osawatomie John Brown." Not one textbook mentions what Brown did at Osawatomie, where he was the defender, but fourteen of eighteen tell what he did at Pottawatomie, where he was the attacker.²³

Our textbooks also handicap Brown by not letting him speak for himself. Even his jailer let Brown put pen to paper! Twelve of the eighteen textbooks I studied do not provide even a phrase he spoke or wrote. Brown's words, which moved a nation, therefore cannot move most students today.

Textbook authors may avoid Brown's ideas because they are tinged with Christianity. Religion has been one of the great inspirations and explanations of human enterprise in this country. Yet textbooks, while they may mention religious organizations such as the Shakers or Christian Science, never treat religious ideas in any period seriously.²⁴ An in-depth portrayal of Mormonism, Christian Science, or the Methodism of the Great Awakening would be controversial. Mentioning atheism or Deism would be even worse. "Are you going to tell kids that Thomas Jefferson didn't believe in Jesus? Not me!" a textbook editor exclaimed to me. Treating religious ideas neutrally, nonreligiously, simply as factors in society, won't do, either, for that would likely offend some adherents. The textbooks' solution is to leave out religious ideas entirely.²⁵ Quoting John Brown's courtroom paraphrase of the Golden Rule—"whatsoever I would that men should do to me, I should do even so to them"—would violate the taboo.

Ideological contradiction is terribly important in history. Ideas have power. The ideas that motivated John Brown and the example he set lived on long after his body lay a-moldering in the grave. Yet American history textbooks give us no way to understand the role of ideas in our past.

Conceivably, textbook authors ignore John Brown's ideas because in their eyes his violent acts make him ineligible for sympathetic consideration. When we turn from Brown to Abraham Lincoln, we shift from one of the most controversial to one of the most venerated figures in American history. Textbooks describe Abraham Lincoln with sympathy, of course. Nonetheless, they also minimize his ideas, especially on the subject of race. In life Abraham Lincoln wrestled with the race question more openly than any other president except perhaps Thomas Jefferson, and, unlike Jefferson, Lincoln's actions sometimes matched his words. Most of our textbooks say nothing about Lincoln's internal debate. If they did show it, what teaching devices they would become! Students would see that speakers modify their ideas to appease and appeal to different audiences, so we cannot simply take their statements literally. If textbooks recognized Lincoln's racism, students would learn that racism not only affects Ku Klux Klan extremists but has been "normal" throughout our history. And as they watched Lincoln struggle with himself to apply America's democratic principles across the color line, students would see how ideas can develop and a person can grow.

In conversation, Lincoln, like most whites of his century, referred to blacks as "niggers." In the Lincoln-Douglas debates, he sometimes descended into explicit white supremacy, as we saw in the last chapter. Lincoln's ideas about race were more complicated than Douglas's, however. The day after Douglas declared for white supremacy in Chicago, saying the issues were "distinctly drawn," Lincoln replied and indeed drew the issue distinctly:

I should like to know if taking this old Declaration of Independence, which declares that all men are equal upon principle, and making exceptions to it—where will it stop? If one man says it does not mean a Negro, why does not another say it does not mean some other man? If that Declaration is not . . . true, let us tear it out! [Cries of "no, no!"] Let us stick to it then, let us stand firmly by it then.²⁶

No textbook quotes this passage, and every book but one leaves out Lincoln's thundering summation of what his debates with Douglas were really about: "That is the issue that will continue in this country when these poor tongues of Judge Douglas and myself shall be silent. It is the eternal struggle between these two principles—right and wrong—throughout the world."²⁷

Lincoln's realization of the basic humanity of African Americans may have derived from his father, who moved the family to Indiana partly because he disliked the racial slavery that was sanctioned in Kentucky. Or it may stem from an experience Lincoln had on a steamboat trip in 1841, which he recalled years later when writing to his friend Josh Speed: "You may remember, as I well do, that from Louisville to the mouth of the Ohio there were on board ten or twelve slaves, shackled together with irons. That sight was continual torment to me, and I see something like it every time I touch the Ohio, or any other slave-border." Lincoln concluded that the memory still had "the power of making me miserable."²⁸ No textbook quotes this letter or anything like it.

As early as 1835, in his first term in the Illinois House of Representatives, Lincoln cast one of only five votes opposing a resolution that condemned abolitionists. Textbooks imply that Lincoln was nominated for president in 1860 because he was a moderate on slavery, but, in fact, Republicans chose Lincoln over front-runner William H. Seward partly because of Lincoln's "rock-solid antislavery beliefs," while Seward was considered a compromiser.²⁹

As president, Lincoln understood the importance of symbolic leadership in improving race relations. For the first time the United States exchanged dip-