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John Brown's Body: Elites, Heroic Embodiment, and the Legitimation of Political Violence*

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While violence against a legally constituted government is condemned when defined as such, some violent political acts are considered socially proper. I explore how political violence can be legitimated or even venerated by reference to John Brown's raid on the Federal Arsenal at Harpers Ferry in October 1859. Such claims are particularly likely when the violent act has cultural resonance, the actor is supported by cultural and political elites who serve, in effect, as "fellow travelers" for the movement, and when opponents of the violence do not participate in the creation of meaning. Because of Brown's links to cultural elites in Boston and to political elites in the emerging Republican Party, many Americans came to see Brown as a hero or martyr, embodying in his personal actions a committed moral figure. Like most effective narratives, collective memory requires a hero with which audiences identify. By virtue of his physical embodiment of radical abolition, John Brown served as a mnemonic for his cause. The label "John Brown's Body" refers to more than a song title, but to the process of recalling a complex concern through the images of individual action and persona. Images of Brown the man were facilitated by the secession of Southern states, leaving the reputational field open for Brown's supporters to establish his reputation after his death without rival narratives.

I John Brown am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land: will never be purged away; but with Blood. I had as I now think: vainly flattered myself that without very much bloodshed; it might be done.

—John Brown on his way to the gallows (1859)

As a rule, those who attack legitimate state institutions do not receive an effusive press. Until their acts are reconstructed, few admire their passion. What could be worse than attacking one's own nation? The attack can even be seen as aimed at the people of the nation, a point made by those who support the status quo. Today we make this connection explicit by labeling these individuals "terrorists." Even erstwhile allies of the attackers, tied to mainstream discourse, often distance themselves. Perhaps by comparison their extremism and violent action legitimate less militant behaviors by others (Elsbach and Sutton 1992), but in most instances none but fellow extremists issue paeans to their bravery, no marches are staged on their behalf, no statues built to their memory, and no rousing hymns commemorate their passion.

We assume that violent actors lack friends outside the narrow confines of their rabid associates. Americans define themselves as a people repelled by the idea of violent political action, even if it sometimes moves us to respond as the actors wish (Gamson 1975). Reputational

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entrepreneurs (Fine 1996) diminish those who attack state institutions, and few leap to their defense. Yet, on occasion these figures have been embraced. As the case of John Brown, the leader of the 1859 attack on Harpers Ferry, reminds us, some who engage in purposive violence for political ends can be considered, both at the time and in collective memory, as heroic (e.g., Ben-Yehuda 1993; Jenkins 1996).¹

Under what circumstances is political violence embraced? How can attacks aimed at innocent targets and legitimate institutions be justified?² Given the low esteem in which violent insurgents are held, how is it that John Brown could become for many a model of courage and morality, a man who we recall placed his body on the line, fighting for justice?³ What does this say about the construction of political violence and the public reputation of militant social movements? The battles over the reputation of John Brown in the years after his hanging emphasize that the actions of individuals offer a model for understanding broader social concerns and, simultaneously, these events are selectively shaped by social actors for their own ends. That is, they are a *model for history* and a *model of history* (Schwartz 1996).

Gamson (1975) argues that the most effective social movements are those that have been most militant. Radical abolitionism falls within this category. Yet, how does this militancy have its effects? Certain movements, by virtue of the drama and cultural resonance of their actions and the reputations of their leaders, can build alliances with others that allow violence to seem proper to those who would not otherwise support these means. As tragedians are well-aware, dramatic narratives permit audiences to participate vicariously in violence, identifying with heroic figures, shielding themselves from identifying with the aggression, while embracing the claimed moral stance of the violent actor (Harrison 1913). By embodying their beliefs in action, heroic figures serve as cultural mnemonics, revealing morality in drama.

Those audiences so affected are, in effect, *fellow travelers*, not directly involved in the movement's direct action, but willing to identify with the movement, and able to use their own resources as legitimation, while not being stigmatized by the movement's deviant actions. Social movements contain not only active members, but a penumbra of individuals who can on occasion be activated to serve group interests, even if they are not "members" of the group. The impact of Brown's willingness to place his life on the line for his beliefs at Harpers Ferry was not limited to radical abolitionists, but reverberated in society in ways that, arguably, led to achieving John Brown's goals.

However, not all supporters are created equal. Social movements that recruit fellow trav-

1. Although it is rare that those engaging in political violence are ever fully embraced by all citizens—John Brown certainly is not—those acting in the context of national liberation or a great moral struggle can be defined as heroic (Laqueur 1987). The memory of terrorists in the creation of the multi-racial South Africa or the creation of the states of Ireland or Israel are examples, suggesting that John Brown is not unique. It is typically necessary for the struggle to succeed for the reevaluation to occur; otherwise the figure may only be revered among members of a political subculture.

2. John Brown, like virtually all other Americans at the time of the raid, did not contest the legitimacy of the federal government. Although he attacked a federal arsenal, his complaint was not with the government as such, which he called upon to exert more authority. In this, he differs from those who desire to overthrow a government and convince others of its illegitimacy. Surely if one does not accept a government's legitimacy, violent action is easier to justify, such as for those who attempted to assassinate Hitler in 1944.

3. The issue of whether John Brown was a "terrorist" is tricky, as "terrorism" is a cultural frame not used in the Civil War period. Despite the creation of the term during the French Revolution, Brown was not labeled as such by his contemporaries, who described his political violence as "fanaticism." Yet, his actions have all of the characteristics by which we currently define the term. In 1986, the Vice President's Task Force on Combating Terrorism (the Bush Committee) defined terrorism as "The unlawful use of threat of violence against person or property to further political or social objectives. It is usually intended to intimidate or coerce a government, individuals, groups, or to modify their behavior or politics" (Laqueur 1987:144). Like terrorist actions, Brown's raid had the effect of frightening his target audience (white Southerners) through the "propaganda of the deed." Brown's raid has become an image in the arsenal of those who wish radical revolutionary change, including anarchists, Marxists, Eugene Debs, Malcolm X, the Weather Underground (which named their magazine *Osawatomie*), and pro-life radicals. Of course, whether an activity is in practice labeled "terrorism" or a group as "terrorist" involves social construction with political implications (Wagner-Pacifici 1994:135–137).

elers with cultural, economic, or political capital or social placement can transcend small memberships. These forms of capital permit some expressions to carry greater weight and spread through wider networks. Alliances with elites strengthen movements. Some militant organizations that engage in terrorism and guerrilla action are disparaged by cultural gatekeepers (e.g., the militant pro-life and militia movements), while others (e.g., radical abolitionism, prohibition, and the suffrage movement) gain a sympathetic hearing. In-between are leftist revolutionary movements of the sixties (the Weathermen), radical environmental groups (Earth First!), and animal rights activists (PETA), flirted with by some elites, yet not generally accepted.

I wish to demonstrate how the abolitionist movement established and used images of John Brown as resources to gain public sympathy—how Brown's supporters constructed his reputation to overcome the stigma of being labeled a fanatic, madman, and criminal. I use John Brown as an interpretive case study, with the claim that although the specifics of the case are unique, the processes that influenced Brown's reputation occur elsewhere. I focus on Brown's reputation in the years immediately after his raid: examining how his contemporaries in the Civil War period interpreted his actions, leaving the images of Brown in collective memory today for others. I explore the dynamics of the legitimation of political violence, beginning with how John Brown publicized his embodiment of abolition. I examine how Brown became a hero and martyr through biography work by reputational entrepreneurs, including the creation of "public legends," commemorations, and rhetoric designed to justify his violence and present his moral vision. I then present the images of John Brown in both the North and South, emphasizing the decision of Southern leaders, who otherwise would have attacked Brown's persona, to leave the reputational field through secession. Finally I describe how two elite groups—cultural elites and politicians—constructed John Brown's image. I rely upon both primary documents and standard historical treatments of Brown and his period.⁴

This analysis contributes to the literatures on reputations, collective memory, and social construction by examining how negative reputations and political attacks can, under some circumstances, be transformed into positive memories, given the consequences of the narrative facility of images, the placement and interests of supporters, and the retreat or absence of critics. Drawing on Ducharme and Fine's (1995) analysis of Benedict Arnold, I ask how individuals who engage in widely stigmatized actions are recalled. However, in contrast to the reputation of Benedict Arnold, John Brown, despite his political violence, is recalled favorably by many. Through the establishment of John Brown as a humane embodiment of radical abolitionism, the movement, not widely accepted even in the North, gained a sympathetic face. By shaping images of their leaders, social groups create social mnemonics to help audiences define events within a moral context (Olick and Robbins 1998; Zerubavel 1996).

In some regards, the creation of John Brown's heroic image represents the inverse of the creation of social problems (Miller and Holstein 1993; Spector and Kitsuse 1977). In those circumstances, moral entrepreneurs seek to transform what has been taken-for-granted and defined as normal, and redefine it as a problem that needs to be addressed. Here, the "social problem" of Brown's fanaticism is transformed to virtue. Through violence, Brown brought to the fore the "problem" of slavery and, implicitly, the role of a government that supported the continuation of this "peculiar institution."

Following "contextual constructionism" or "cautious naturalism" (Best 1993; Fine 1997; Gubrium 1993), I recognize the existence of historical "reality" and value-based responses to this reality, while also recognizing that such responses can be altered, given discourses that resonate with audiences (Neustadt and May 1986; Olick and Levy 1997). John Brown and his

4. In presenting the "facts" of the case, I focus on those points over which there is little controversy. I treat less documented claims and speculations as such, in some cases seeing them as part of the creation of the legend of John Brown.

supporters had the skills to transform a political situation (a nation divided between slave states and free states) that many felt was unchangeable and demonstrate that this definition of the nation could be “in play,” raising the threat of transforming a legitimate government into one that was illegitimate by redefining the moral basis of citizenship.

As Lang and Lang (1990; Taylor 1996:3–5) note, for reputations to be solidified, someone must take the role of gatekeeper for the reputation, preserving and shaping it. Reputational entrepreneurs (Bonomi 1998; Schudson 1992) have particular influence in controlling fields of memory in which two or more competing perspectives potentially exist; when one group is weak or leaves the field, memory becomes solidified (Fine 1996; Schwartz 1998). Those who, like Brown, engage in actions that, when removed from their particular context, are considered wrong or immoral, are easily placed in social and cognitive categories. How can this placement be overcome? Supporters must develop alliances with those who have cultural, social, or political capital. Together these supporters can recontextualize otherwise stigmatized actors, attaching legitimate values to them (Billig 1992; Gamson 1992; Zerubavel 1995), providing identities both to the actors and to those who recall them (Olick and Robbins 1998). Given the power of narrative (Martin and Powers 1983), this recontextualization gains power with the creation of stories and other forms of discourse with cultural resonance (Ben-Yahuda 1995; Billig 1987; Schudson 1989). This cultural resonance has the effect of transforming potentially sympathetic audiences into audiences of “fellow travelers” that can provide material and social resources, laying the groundwork for additional actions.

Old Brown⁵

John Brown was born in Torrington, Connecticut on May 9, 1800, and died on a scaffold outside of Charles Town, Virginia (today: West Virginia) on December 2, 1859. Brown’s father was deeply opposed to slavery, and Brown learned his abolitionism early. However, it was not until the late 1830s that Brown became interested in abolitionist politics, and not until the late 1840s that he became deeply involved in the movement, writing for abolitionist journals and actively organizing. During much of his life before 1855, Brown engaged in a series of unsuccessful business ventures as a tanner and wool merchant.

In 1851, shortly after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, Brown, with a group of African-American supporters, formed the “United States League of Gileadites.” Noting that “Nothing so charms the American people as personal bravery” (Oates 1984), Brown hoped to create guerrilla bands to fight the “slave-catchers” with violence if necessary. Even though the group had little practical effect, it reveals Brown’s increasing militancy. Further, it reflects Brown’s belief that to oppose slavery, he would have to embody that opposition.

In 1854, a bitterly divided Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, permitting Kansans to vote to enter the Union as a slave state, contravening the Missouri Compromise of 1820 and potentially keeping the balance between slave and free states in the U.S. Senate. As a result of the bitter controversy, emigrants flowed to Kansas from North and South, hoping to influence the forthcoming elections. At first, free state supporters, like Brown’s older children, were outnumbered by slave-state supporters (“Border Ruffians”) from neighboring Missouri. Hostilities were common. Brown arrived in Kansas in autumn 1855 and quickly became involved in direct political action. In May 1856 a group that most historians now claim Brown led—although he denied it—massacred five pro-slavery residents on Pottawatomie Creek.⁶ Subsequently Brown fought a series of successful battles against territorial troops at Osawatomie and Black Jack. Glamorous reports of battles by “Old Brown”

5. Most of the material about the lives and actions of John Brown and his supporters comes from recent historical works (Abels 1971; Boyer 1973; Oates 1984; Renahan 1995; Rossbach 1982). While all historical works have biases, especially about controversial figures, and these are not exceptions, they each hew to a rhetoric of “balance.”

and his men thrilled eastern abolitionists and others who opposed the expansion of slavery into the territories, particularly as free-state supporters eventually triumphed.

By 1857 Brown's focus had turned East, and the idea for an incursion into a Southern state took hold. Biographers disagree whether Brown felt he could (or wanted to) spark a slave insurrection throughout the South by an attack on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry (Warren 1929:413), whether he planned a lengthy guerrilla war in the mountains of Virginia (Wilson 1913:347), whether he planned to provoke the South to secede, or whether he planned to die in the process, becoming a martyr. In any event, on the rainswept night of October 16, 1859, Brown leading a party of two dozen men—black and white—attacked and overran the federal arsenal. After a two day standoff, federal marines, led by Colonel Robert E. Lee, defeated the invaders, partially through several odd and self-defeating decisions by Brown, who claimed these decisions stemmed from a desire to save lives and protect his prisoners. Brown and his party killed five, and ten of his party died with five more captured.

Rather than letting Brown be tried by the federal government, Virginia insisted on trying him for treason to the state. Although it was the federal government that was attacked, a slave state affixed punishment, defining the battle as between pro- and anti-slavery forces. After a speedy trial, before Brown had recovered from his injuries or his attorneys arrived, he was sentenced to hang (as were the other captives). Capitulating to the enormous public interest, Virginia permitted Brown to write letters, speak to reporters, and permitted both friends and foes to visit him in jail (Finkelman 1995b:43).

Embodying Abolition: Brown as Dramatic Persona

Collective memory is known through its dramatic personae. Much historical memory is a pageant of prominent persons who exemplify the issues with which they are associated. As a result, it is crucial that reputational entrepreneurs construct the public selves of historical actors. Such was the case with John Brown, the first American executed for treason.

What were Americans—Southerners and Northerners, blacks and white—to make of John Brown and Harpers Ferry? When the news broke, many, perhaps most, Americans were transfixed, astonished, and repelled (Oates 1984). Some newspaper editorials claimed that there was no more important matter in the history of the nation (Nelson 1973:237). To understand the raid, the public turned its attention to the character of John Brown, virtually erasing the existence of his followers. At first, the responses to the raid were uniformly negative, attacking Brown's fanaticism; the raid seemed literally crazed. What could he be doing by attacking his own government? Brown's grievance was not with the federal government. Early responses (and some later ones) were that John Brown must be literally insane. Such a view comforted those who wished to maintain the Union during this period of increasing structural strain (after passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the battles of Bloody Kansas, the savage beating of Senator Charles Sumner on the Senate floor, and the upholding of the Fugitive Slave Act in the Dred Scott Case). John Brown's actions did not create sectional tension, but they highlighted it. From the days after his arrest, partisans (including Brown himself) made a concerted attempt to use the figure of John Brown for their ends, creating an image that transcended immediate political, partisan, self-interested discourse, linking to core conceptions of the nation's values. Brown's supporters constructed a "myth" (Wilson 1913:26) or "legend" (Malin 1942:455) around his actions—actions that might easily have been dismissed as idiosyncratic or evil.

6. Violence was not limited to abolitionists, "respectable riots," attacking abolitionists were common in Northern cities (Ellingson 1995; Miller 1996; Richards 1970) and throughout the South (Abels 1971:381). No one writing about this period must forget the legal violence aimed at slaves on a routine, daily basis. Of course, given the legal protection of chattel slavery, most Americans did not see this violence as problematic.

John Brown's Construction of Self

Although Brown's life was marked by a string of personal failures, this can hardly be said of the six weeks between his arrest and hanging. Despite his injuries, John Brown's cell in the Charles Town jail became a central meeting place; as many as 800 friends, foes, politicians (including Governor Wise and Senator Mason of Virginia), and reporters visited (Oates 1984:337). These visits were supplemented by letters from Brown justifying his actions. Had the state of Virginia sharply limited access to Brown, his legend might have been curtailed (Finkelman 1995b:43).⁷ Brown's broken and eventually lifeless body became itself the first advertisement for the power of his beliefs and the tenacity with which he held them.

Whatever one might think of Brown's violence, his calm, reasoned, and devout responses inspired many who might have perceived him as a "reckless fanatic," appealing to many in an otherwise divided, multi-constituency society (Wagner-Pacifici 1994). Brown saw his imprisonment and trial as a forum for abolitionism (Oates 1984:308). Notable was his conversation with Senator Mason in which he repeatedly denied intent to harm innocent citizens, expressing his deep faith ("No man sent me here: it was my own prompting, and that of my Maker; or that of the devil, whichever you please to ascribe it to" [Webb 1861:171]), rejecting a wider conspiracy and links with the Republican party, and insisting that he had not wished to provoke a slave insurrection (Fried 1978:269). In a letter to Mrs. George Stearns, the wife of a backer, he noted, "I have asked to be *spared* from having any *mock, or hypocritical prayers made over me*, when I am publicly murdered," indicating that he preferred "that my only *religious attendants* be poor *little, dirty, ragged, bare headed, and barefooted slave boys, and girls*, led by some *grey headed slave mother*" (Aptheker 1989:138). This is in line with the "romantic radicalism" of Northern white abolitionists who pictured blacks as feminine, religious, and docile (Fredrickson 1971:102–117). Brown's actions appealed to the masculine ethos, but his statements were aimed directly at the sentimental (and proto-feminist) ethos of his female supporters (Finkelman 1995b:54), central to American culture of the age (Douglas 1977) and to the abolitionist movement (Donald 1956:28; Sanchez-Eppler 1988). He effectively used extant contexts to define his actions in terms of the gender politics of the age: simultaneously heroic and sentimental.

Brown recognized that he had come to embody abolitionism, and believed that his greatest role was as a martyr, noting "I am worth infinitely more to die than to live" (Boyer 1973:18). On November 10th, he wrote his wife, "I have been whipped as the saying is, but I am sure I can recover all the lost capital occasioned by the disaster; by only hanging a few moments by the neck; & I feel determined to make the utmost possible out of a defeat" (Wilson 1913:389). He consistently rejected plans of his supporters to free him from prison or to request clemency. Brown's prison writings, like those of Gramsci and Martin Luther King, are powerful in being simultaneously constructed inside and outside the social order (Robin Wagner-Pacifici, personal communication 1996).

The Making of a Hero

In the days immediately after the raid, few, except the small proportion of radical abolitionists, supported Brown. The large majority, though fascinated by the raid, viewed Brown as criminal or insane (Malin 1942:282). However, in the North at least, Brown's supporters were well-placed to reconstruct his image.

7. The state's willingness to provide access to Brown (and the courtesies they provided him) was coupled with their rush to bring him to trial, even while he was still recovering from his injuries and without adequate legal counsel. Within two weeks of his capture, Brown had been convicted of treason. This contributed to the sense that Brown was being treated unjustly.

The major contributor to the legend of John Brown was a young Scottish-born journalist, James Redpath (McKivigan 1991), who had previously known Brown in Kansas. From the mid-1850s, Redpath was a propagandist for the abolition of slavery, willing to support its violent overthrow. Redpath sought and was given the assignment by Brown's supporters to write an "authorized" biography.⁸ Redpath recognized that his task was heroic mythologizing, or *biography work*, and presented Brown as a martyred fighter for justice, willing to suffer for his beliefs. Redpath was willing to excise inconvenient facts that might portray Brown as a psychopath or murderer (Fried 1978:68–69).⁹ The book appeared in early January 1860, and was wildly popular, selling 40,000 copies in a month (Renahan 1995:247) and eventually 75,000 copies (McKivigan 1991:305). Other biographies followed (e.g., Hinton 1894; Sanborn 1885; Webb 1861), further enshrining Brown's heroism; it is not until the twentieth century that harshly critical biographies appear (Malin 1942; Warren 1929; Wilson 1913). While Redpath's biography was not the only word on Brown's life—there was an enormous outpouring of biographical work, sermons, essays, paintings, and poems—he distilled the heroic images of Brown. With personal knowledge of Brown and the support of the family, Redpath's *The Public Life of John Brown* proved hardy in justifying Brown's acts.

Along with validating Brown's actions in Kansas and Virginia, Redpath, writing particularly for a New England audience (Abels 1971:3), drew on Brown's own construction of his ancestry (Renahan 1995:110). Redpath linked Brown to Peter Brown, a carpenter¹⁰ who sailed on the Mayflower and to John Brown, a Captain in the Revolutionary War. This patriotic ancestry linked Brown to the two major formative events of the American republic: its founding and independence. Noting Brown's ancestry, Emerson referred to Brown the man as "happily a representative of the American republic" (Drew 1859:103).

Thoreau connected the relatively uneducated Brown to the intellectual values of New England, translating his personal experience and actions into a moral virtue:

He did not go to the college called Harvard, good old Alma Mater as she is. . . . But he went to the great university of the West, where is sedulously pursued the study of Liberty, for which he had early betrayed a fondness, and having taken many degrees, he finally commenced the public practice of humanity in Kansas, as you all know. Such were *his humanities*, and not any study of grammar. He would have left a Greek accent slanting the wrong way, and righted up a falling man. (Finkelman 1995b:54)

Redpath makes Brown's commitment to abolition vivid by an incident Brown related in a letter to twelve year old Henry Stearns, alleged to have occurred when he was twelve:

During the war with England [the War of 1812] a circumstance occurred that in the end made him a most *determined Abolitionist*: & led him to declare, or *Swear: Eternal war* with Slavery. He was staying for a short time with a very gentlemanly landlord once a United States Marshall who held a slave boy near his own age very active, intelligent and good feeling; & to whom John was under considerable obligation for numerous little acts of kindness. *The master* made a great pet of John . . . while the *negro boy* (who was fully if not more than his equal) was badly clothed, poorly fed; & *lodged in cold weather*: and beaten before his eyes with Iron Shovels or any other thing that came first to hand. This brought John to reflect on the wretched; hopeless condition, of *Fatherless & Motherless slave chil-*

8. Later Brown's wife and children played a major role in preserving Brown's memory (McGlone 1989) as reputation entrepreneurs (Lang and Lang 1990), as did his supporter Franklin Sanborn (1885; Malin 1942; Renahan 1995).

9. Originally Lydia Maria Child, the Boston anti-slavery crusader, had planned to write a biography of Brown, but Brown's supporters felt that Redpath's manly support for direct political action would serve the cause better—at least in reaching male political activities—than Child's feminine (and feminist) sensibility (Sanchez-Eppler 1988:28–29). Redpath knew of Brown's involvement in the Pottawatomie massacre (which he denied in the biography), whereas Child might have been repelled (Finkelman 1995b:51–58).

10. Given Redpath's penchant of linking Brown with Jesus, this detail may not have been incidental. Most historians now believe that Brown was not a Mayflower descendent (Abels 1971:3; Jacobus 1957). Sanborn's (1885) claim that Brown descended from John Brown, an English religious martyr of the sixteenth century, also was likely fictitious (Abels 1971:3).

dren: for such children have neither Fathers nor Mothers to protect, & provide for them. (Redpath 1860:29–30)

A second legend, historically impossible, but crucial to the romantic image of John Brown, involved the day of his hanging. Apparently the creation of a supportive newspaper man, Edwin H. “Ned” House of the anti-slavery *New York Tribune* (Abels 1971:368) or his editor Henry Steel Olcott (Finkelman 1995b:51), this account appeared briefly in the *Tribune*, but was expanded by Redpath (1860:397):

As he stepped out of the door [of the jail], a black woman, with a little child in her arms, stood near his way. The twain were of the despised race for whose emancipation and elevation to the dignity of children of God he was about to lay down his life. His thoughts at that moment none can know except as his acts interpret them. He stopped for a moment in his course, stooped over, and with the tenderness of one whose love is as broad as the brotherhood of man, kissed it affectionately. . . . As he passed along, a black woman with a child in her arms, ejaculated, “God bless you, old man; I wish I could help you, but I cannot.” He heard her, and, as he looked at her, a tear stood in his eye.

The oft recounted image of kissing a black child had considerable impact in establishing a beatific image for this violent man. Brown’s bodily acts provide for moral inscription. Drawings captured the event, including an 1863 *Currier and Ives* lithograph of a 1860 painting by Louis Ransom, and an immensely popular 1884 “history” painting by Thomas Hovenden (Quarles 1974:123). Visual representations were matched with poems, notably that of John Greenleaf Whittier:

John Brown of Osawatomie,
They led him out to die;
And lo!—a poor slave-mother
With her little child pressed nigh.
Then the bold blue eyes grew tender,
And the old harsh face grew mild,
As he stooped between the jeering ranks
And kissed the negro’s child!

Others embraced the task of creating a hero and martyr out of Brown’s life and deeds. Thoreau described Brown as an “angel of light.” Even those such as William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips, “peace-men” and no friends of Brown’s violence, helped to create Brown’s heroism, arguing that Brown did not desire insurrection. Garrison claimed—implausibly—that: “John Brown meant to effect, if possible, a peaceful exodus from Virginia; and had not his large humanity overpowered his judgment in regard to his prisoners, he would in all probability have succeeded, and not a drop of blood would have been shed” (quoted in Warch and Fanton 1973:109). Both those who endorsed violent action and those who thoroughly opposed it allied to use Brown for their mutual ends.

The months after Brown’s hanging were consumed by an attempt to exploit his death (Roszbach 1982:218–219). No metaphor was too strained to justify Brown’s action: he was likened to Moses, Joshua, Hercules, John the Baptist, Spartacus, Ignatius Loyola, Cromwell, William of Orange, George Washington, Ethan Allen, Nat Turner, Garibaldi, Socrates, Galileo, and, most significantly, Jesus of Nazareth (Cain 1990). Supporters said Brown was guilty of loving his fellow man too well (Joyner 1995:316). Thoreau made the link to Jesus explicit: “Some eighteen hundred years ago Christ was crucified; this morning, perchance, Captain Brown was hung. These are two ends of a chain which is not without its links” (Boyer 1973:24).

The Creation of a Martyr. The goal was to transform the violent rebel into a martyr, a dead body with powerful cultural resonance. Redpath (and Brown himself) insisted that Brown not be spared or freed (Roszbach 1982:226). John Brown in prison or hiding would be far less effective than as a martyr to abolition (Wagner-Pacifici 1986:228–229). Hanging would be the

powerful and moving conclusion: it would sanitize the killer. Henry Ward Beecher wrote: "Let no man pray that Brown be spared. Let Virginia make him a martyr. Now, he has only blundered. His soul was noble; his work miserable. But a cord and a gibbet would redeem all that, and round up Brown's failure with heroic success" (Warch and Fanton 1973:107).

Despite calls for vengeance and a public hanging, some in the South warned that hanging Brown would create a martyr. The *Frankfort Yeoman* wrote that if Brown were executed: "there will be thousands to dip their handkerchiefs in his blood; relics of the martyr will be paraded throughout the North" (Joyner 1995:308). Indeed, many claimed to sell Brown relics: pieces of the rope or splinters from his scaffold (Scott 1979:311). P.T. Barnum offered Brown \$100 for his clothing and pike to garb and arm a wax figure he planned to display (Greene 1953:205). Clearly it was Brown's physical presence that made him such a powerful figure for both supporters and opponents: a figure like Jesus where physical relics would stand for his presence.

Befitting one whose acts embodied his beliefs, Brown's supporters wished to use his dead body, which Governor Wise graciously provided. Were it not for the objections of his widow, who wanted her husband buried in a private ceremony at their farm in North Elba, New York, supporters would have built a large monument to Brown in Cambridge's Mt. Auburn Cemetery (Finkelman 1995b:46); supporters worried that few would trek to Brown's isolated Adirondacks homestead. Even without the burial in Massachusetts many wanted an impressive funeral in Boston. One abolitionist wrote to Wendell Phillips that the body could be: "put into a metal coffin enclosed except the face in ice. [Brown's body could be taken to] all our principal cities and even the minor ones [to] let the face and hands with rope be seen and even his clothes" (Finkelman 1995b:47). Not only would this scheme raise money, but displaying the body would have great propaganda value. Although the decision was made to take John Brown's body to upstate New York, a large crowd of supporters and opponents met his funeral train in Philadelphia (Finkelman 1995b:47). Church bells rang throughout the North (Villard 1910:559) and crowds turned out along the route up the Hudson valley (Finkelman 1995b:48). The body was dressed in a pleated white shroud with white cravat (Nelson 1973:284), and the Southern coffin was replaced by one of simple Northern pine.

Justifying a Violent Man

John Brown attacked the legal government of the United States. How could such behaviors be justified? Political violence is a strong case for the study of accounts culturally acceptable: justifications are needed for these acts, which are *prima facie* wrong (Scott and Lyman 1968). Like many who engage in violence, Brown and his supporters appealed to accepted moral principles, social consensus, and historical precedent for justification (Gilbert 1994:5), privileging a hatred for injustice over lawlessness (Gilbert 1994:58–59). Fortunately for Brown's supporters, Revolutionary patriots furnished a charter. Ironically the seal of the state of Virginia itself provided legitimation as the *Boston Liberator* noted gleefully:

Below we give the official SEAL AND MOTTO OF VIRGINIA, which, it will be seen at a glance, furnish all the justification that Brown and his assistants need to adduce in the Court of Equity, (according to her own ideas of righteous retribution,) and which are palpably of a most 'incendiary, treasonable and murderous' nature, fully authorizing as they do the extermination of the whole body of slaveholders, and powerfully stimulating to the commission of that bloody deed! The Seal represents LIBERTY armed *cap-a-pic*, with her foot upon the neck of the tyrant, having cut off his head with her sword, and exclaiming, '*Sic semper tyrannis*'—SO BE IT EVER TO TYRANTS! (1859: n.p.)

Tyrannicide and the higher good are culturally resonant legitimations for honorable citizens to act (Laqueur 1987:24). Ex-Governor Charles Robinson of Kansas, dedicating a monument to Brown at Osawatimie, noted that "the soul of John Brown . . . will be the inspiration of all men in the present and the distant future who may revolt against tyranny and oppression,

because he dared to be traitor to the government that he might be loyal to humanity" (Winkley 1905:15). Brown's patron Reverend Theodore Parker justified the killing of slaveholders: "A man, held against his will as a slave, has a natural right to kill every one who seeks to prevent his enjoyment of liberty. . . . It may be a natural duty for the freeman to help the slaves to the enjoyment of their liberty, and, as a means to that end, to aid them in killing all such as oppose their natural freedom" (Cain 1990:311). As Brown himself responded, his acts were based "Upon the golden rule, I pity the poor in bondage that have none to help them. . . . It is my sympathy with the oppressed and wronged" (Aptheker 1960:9). Others made a specific religious link. Charles Langston wrote in 1859: "Does not the holy Bible teach that it is the duty of the strong and powerful to assist the weak and helpless? . . . Does it not tell us to loose the bounds of wickedness, undo the heavy burdens and let the oppressed go free?" (Quarles 1972:12). Brown and his supporters pictured him as the instrument of a just, but not merciful, God. The appeal to higher principles justified the carnage, defining it as "self-sacrifice" (Reverend George Cheever, in Webb 1861:439).

The Effects of the Attack

Some commentators, like the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, concluded that Harpers Ferry led directly to the Civil War, achieving its objective of freeing the slaves. Fifty years after the raid a New York reporter noted, "Harpers Ferry was to the Civil War what the Boston Massacre was to the American revolution. It was the first battle clang, the first flow of blood" (Sabastian 1909, quoted in Renahan 1995:1). Throughout the United States, Brown's raid focused public attention on the issue of slavery as never before.

Northern Reactions

Throughout the North, anti-slavery sentiment was heated (Sartori 1969). Surely the majority in the North opposed immediate abolition—large "Union Saving" meetings were held in Boston and elsewhere—but it was commonly believed at the time (Redpath 1860) and subsequently (Loewen 1995:167) that, as a result of John Brown, more people committed themselves to abolition and committed themselves more strongly. If Brown did not cause a revolution in thinking, he increased the number who accepted militant action. Brown made militant verbal abolition seem moderate by comparison. Wendell Phillips pointedly noted in Brown's funeral oration: "Insurrection was a harsh, horrible word to millions a month ago." Garrison himself abandoned his policy of nonviolence (Abels 1971:385). Charles Eliot Norton, the Boston merchant and scholar, wrote to an English friend:

I have seen nothing like it. We get up excitements easily enough . . . but this was different. The heart of the people was fairly reached, and impression has been made upon it which will be permanent and produce results long hence. . . . The events of this last month or two (including under the word events the impression made by Brown's character) have done more to confirm the opposition to slavery at the North than anything which has ever happened before, than all the anti-slavery tracts and novels that ever were written. (Aptheker 1989:136)

Longfellow wrote in his diary on the day of Brown's execution:

This will be a great day in our history; the date of a new Revolution,—quite as much needed as the old one. Even now as I write, they are leading old John Brown to execution in Virginia for attempting to rescue slaves! This is sowing the wind to reap the whirlwind, which will come soon. (Warren 1929:437)

Mass meetings throughout the North indicate the power of Brown's image, and elections in New York and New Jersey immediately after Brown's raid revealed increased support for the

Republican party. Garrison's *Liberator* noted after Lincoln's 1860 election: "For the first time in history, the slave has chosen a president. John Brown was behind the curtain and the inauguration cannons of March 4 will only echo the rifles at Harpers Ferry" (Nelson 1973:304). The popularity of the song "John Brown's Body," created by a Boston Light Infantry company in Spring 1861 (Abels 1971:391–392; Stutler 1958) indicates Brown's symbolic role in justifying the Civil War by polarizing sectional interests.

Southern Reactions

Just as Harpers Ferry gave Northern abolitionists strength, it did the same for Southern disunionists. Here was evidence that Northerners, in the guise of the "satanic" John Brown (Holden 1996), were prepared to attack them. Both the raid and Northern reactions (selectively culled by secessionists) proved the point. Whether frightening Southern whites with the specter of racial terror was Brown's primary aim, it had that effect. The raid convinced many Southerners that the North, particularly the Republican party, was implacably hostile. Senator Robert Toombs of Georgia emphasized this, speaking to Southerners:

[The Republican party] has already declared war against you and your institutions. It every day commits acts of war against you: it has already compelled you to arm for your defense. . . . Defend yourselves! The enemy is at your door, wait not to meet him at your hearthstone; meet him at the doorsill, and drive him from the Temple of Liberty, or pull down its pillars and involve him in a common ruin. (Villard 1910:565–566)

The pro-Southern *Baltimore Sun* noted:

That the South can afford to live under a Government, the majority of whose subjects or citizens regard John Brown as a martyr and a Christian hero, rather than a murderer and robber, and act up to those sentiments, or countenance others in so doing, is a preposterous idea. (Villard 1910:568)

The mood in the South in the aftermath of the raid parallels the Great Fear in the French countryside of 1789 (Abels 1971:380; Oates 1984:322; Phillips 1986:119; Woodward 1968): an "epidemic of insurrection anxiety" (Robinson 1980:279). Rumors swept the Southern countryside. It was easy to believe that oppressed slaves were preparing to revolt against their masters with the help of Northern supporters. In the classic formulation of Kropotkin's "propaganda of the deed," one raid stood for the possibility of others. No matter how often Southern whites assured themselves that their slaves were content and loyal, the claims rang false. Slaves, for their part, may have used rumors to undercut the security of plantation owners (Robinson 1980:288; Scott 1991). Throughout the South rumors of incendiary fires spread; others believed that slaves had amassed large stocks of strychnine to poison wells (Robinson 1980:288; Woodward 1968:68). Virginia placed itself on a war footing and banned the distribution of the anti-slavery *New York Tribune* (Abels 1971:381). Those who spoke in support of freeing the slaves, however mildly, were liable to be whipped, arrested, or tarred and feathered, as happened in Columbia, South Carolina (Savage 1997:48).

Not all Southerners were dismayed. Secessionists, such as George Fitzhugh and Edmund Ruffin, used John Brown to whip the South into a frenzy of anti-Northern hatred, justifying secession (Joyner 1995:314). Ruffin was so excited that he attended Brown's hanging, believing it could "stir the sluggish blood of the South" (Smith 1972:31).

Elites and the Meaning of Violence

To argue that one who engages in political violence requires supporters who present the attack in the best possible light is only a partial explanation. Those supporters must be appropriately placed to be taken seriously. One reason that justification of bombings and attacks on federal authorities (for instance, the bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City) or

murders of doctors at abortion clinics do not gain much traction is because defenders of these actions—who claim such legitimate justifications as resistance to tyrants or opposition to genocide—lack cultural capital. Even though defenses are based on morality, in practice they gain standing from their proponents. Some militant groups gain support of intellectuals, and serve their implicit interests, while others are scorned (Jenkins 1996; Laqueur 1987:117). To understand this process as it relates to John Brown, I examine the reaction to John Brown by two groups of Americans: cultural elites, particularly those centered around Boston; and political elites, linked to the newly emergent Republican party.¹¹ As images of John Brown were particularly resonant for these groups, they were in position to define and defend Brown's reputation. The cultural elites around Boston were recognized as the dominant force in American arts and letters, a point that was widely acknowledged (Barker-Nunn and Fine 1998). These New Englanders were gatekeepers for much of American thought. The Republican party was also in the ascendancy, gaining control of the House of Representatives in 1859. By the Harpers Ferry raid, the Republicans, comprised of the former Whigs and various anti-slavery groups, were the dominant party in the North.

Cultural Narratives

Any social movement requires resources to survive and flourish (Jenkins 1983; Zald and McCarthy 1987); this is particularly true of movements that play on a national or regional stage. By the 1830s abolitionist organizations were growing (Ellingson 1995; Miller 1996), particularly in New York, the Western Reserve of Ohio, and Boston. Boston, a national center for culture and education, was particularly influential (Dimaggio 1982:35–36; Donald 1956:27). Elites in Boston had wealth, education, and influence—a classic instance of what Bourdieu (1984) labeled cultural capital—as well as a tradition of resistance to oppression. Further, Boston was less dependent on the slave economies (although not Boston's textile industry, whose leaders did not support abolition [Donald 1956:27]) than many regions.

By the 1850s Boston cultural elites had long opposed the expansion of slavery into the territories (the Free Soil Movement), supported the repatriation of blacks to Africa, attempted to prevent the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act, and, in some cases, supported abolition by political or extra-legal means (Boyer 1973:8). (Not all Boston elites had the same view; those associated with the *North American Review* and those involved in textiles were considerably more conservative than the transcendentalists centered in Concord.) Southern attacks on civil liberties and free labor did not play well in New England (Miller 1996:497). It was in this environment that John Brown raised money, first through the Massachusetts State Kansas Committee and then, after news of his actions (suitably reconstructed) in Kansas had spread, through wealthy and influential private donors, notably the Secret Committee, now known as the Secret Six (Renahan 1995; Rossbach 1982; Scott 1979). In addition to these benefactors were vocal, influential supporters and others who, although objecting to Brown's violence, defended his character after his arrest and execution. Many influential literary figures wrote poems or essays, or gave speeches supporting Brown¹² “a veritable flood of poetry” (Malin 1942:288). Added to abolitionist leaders, such as William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, Lydia Maria Child, and Frederick Douglass, were the voices of Emerson, Thoreau,

11. In this paper I do not detail the reaction to Harpers Ferry in the African-American community (particularly in the North where there is more evidence). Harpers Ferry had enormous impact as December 2 was celebrated as Martyr's Day and annual pilgrimages were taken to Brown's homestead in North Elba, New York. Several excellent analyses of reactions to John Brown in the black community are available (e.g., DuBois 1909; Littlefield 1995; Quarles 1972). Unlike many anti-slavery whites (e.g., Lincoln or Jefferson), Brown did not support colonization (deportation) of blacks to Africa, but lived with blacks in a multi-racial community in North Elba.

12. Part of the explanation may be that the North won the Civil War, and Northern scholars have determined the literary and cultural canon. The two regions had different cultural heroes, but most critics at the time believed that the most important writers, poets, and intellectuals of the period lived around Boston.

Bronson Alcott, Louisa May Alcott, Julia Ward Howe, Henry James, Sr., James Russell Lowell, and Henry Wordsworth Longfellow in Boston, and John Greenleaf Whittier, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, and William Dean Howells elsewhere (Ljungquist 1989; Ruchames 1959).

The social placement of Brown's supporters contributes to the power of the legend. Hill Wilson (1913:16), a fierce critic, sarcastically asserts that "After Brown's spectacular fiasco in Virginia, and tragical death, his cultured partisans, in most conspicuous eloquence proclaimed him to have been a philanthropist—an altruistic hero; and placed a martyr's crown upon his brow." When the Chicago Unitarian minister David Utter published an attack on the memory of Brown in the 1880s, he aimed at this elite:

The Boston view of this old man and his deeds and motives needs correction by facts from Kansas which will some day cause men to cease playing tribute to his name. . . . There arose in his defense, and to sing his praises, a company of men and women whose peers did not exist in America. They have made our history and written it, and they have made our literature. They made the public sentiment that abolished slavery, the sword that preserved the Union. When these men said, John Brown is a hero and a saint, the bravest and the cleanest of all the heroes of ancient and modern times, there was nothing for it but to accept the verdict. (Malin 1942:405, 409)

A recent account argues similarly:

Unlike those who murdered innocent people in the past, this new type of assassin was praised by many journalists and hailed by some as a hero of the people. It was the result of efforts by persons from privileged backgrounds, of outstanding abilities, famous for their eloquence and elevated by great success, who built an intellectual movement in which this new type of assassin was welcome. (Scott 1979:3)

These were "the noblest souls of his era" (Aptheker 1960:16), "the most distinguished Americans of his time" (Boyer 1973:xxii), or as Brown's contemporary and supporter Bronson Alcott put it, "our best people" (Boyer 1973:10). Redpath's dedication of his Brown biography to Phillips, Emerson, and Thoreau may have been as much legitimation as veneration.

Central to Brown's support in the North were the resources and networks of his secret committee of supporters—the Secret Six—comprised of Gerrit Smith, perhaps the wealthiest man in America, owner of vast landholdings and a former Congressman from New York; Reverend Theodore Parker, a prominent radical Unitarian minister in Boston; Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe, director of Boston's Perkins Institute for the Blind; Reverend Thomas Higginson, a leading Boston clergyman; Frederick Sanborn, a well-connected Boston teacher and journalist; and George Luther Stearns, a wealthy Boston merchant. Albert Fried (1978:137) notes pungently that the Six were "as noble-minded, humane, and philanthropic a band of men as ever plotted to commit (or encourage) high crimes and misdemeanors against the government of the United States."

More important than financial support was that these men legitimated Brown to other elites. For instance, in 1857 Sanborn arranged for Brown to speak to a crowded meeting at the Town House in Concord, attended by both Emerson and Thoreau. Sanborn, the master of ceremonies, provided a lengthy and glowing introduction, citing Brown's success in Kansas. Sanborn also arranged for Brown to dine with the Thoreaus and spend the following night at Emerson's house. Both Thoreau and Emerson donated money to Brown's cause (Renahan 1995:117). In part as a consequence of this networking, the Concord elite held a large public service to memorialize Brown on December 2, 1859, where, according to Louisa May Alcott, "all Concord was there" (Abels 1971:382).¹³ The desire to have Brown interred in Mt. Auburn Cemetery reflected his ties to these elites.

Yet, it is was not only that Brown's politics were in line with that of these elites. The stories that he and his supporters presented resonated with cultural desires and imagined self-images of this group, linked to gender politics, as noted above. While accounts of Brown's compassion for the suffering of the slave (and particularly of slave children) moved female lis-

13. It would be a mistake to overemphasize the support for Brown. On the eve of his execution, a Copperhead (pro-slavery) mob in Concord burned Brown in effigy (Renahan 1995:235).

teners, the tales of Brown's dangerous exploits in the Border War of Bloody Kansas and then again at Harpers Ferry stirred his elite (male) supporters. These action tales were incorporated into a romantic history in transcendentalist Concord, linked to "midnight rides, Minute Men, and Bunker Hill" (Wyatt-Brown 1995:23). The elite's fantasies could be justified through morality, an instance of what Tom Wolfe (1971) describes, speaking of the Black Panthers' appeal to New York elites, as "*nostalgie de la boue*." Wyatt-Brown (1995:31) notes:

equipped with manly appeal . . . Brown had long exploited the guilt of the armchair revolutionaries in their comfortable Boston clubs and snug Concord houses, and they all knew it. It was now their turn to use these gifts to benefit the antislavery crusade.

As Wendell Phillips told Emerson, exhorting the popular Lyceum speaker to lecture on Brown's behalf, "You know what a vein and stratum of the public you can tap far out of the range of our bore" (Wyatt-Brown 1995:31).

Part of the power of radical abolition was that it was a culturally elite movement; membership was self-enhancing and morally enhancing. To be an active abolitionist validated one's social standing within the circles of the literary elites.¹⁴ As Emerson noted, differentiating the courageous gentleman from the feminized gentleman:

All gentlemen, of course, are on [Brown's] side. I do not mean by 'gentlemen' people of scented hair and perfumed handkerchiefs but men of gentle behavior, generosity, 'fulfilled with all nobleness,' who like the Cid give the outcast leper a share of their bed, like the dying Sidney, pass the cup of cold water to the wounded soldier who needs it more. (Abels 1971:389)

Who would not wish to be part of such a heroic group, whose only cost is verbal and financial, and whose status rivals (planters and manufacturers) would have to bear the direct costs of abolition? To oppose abolition and Brown's raid are to stigmatize oneself. Thoreau emphasized:

I was not surprised that certain of my neighbors spoke of John Brown as an ordinary felon, for who are they? They have either much flesh or much office or much coarseness of some kind. They are not ethereal in their nature in any sense. The dark qualities predominate. Several of them are decidedly pachydermatous. (Abels 1971:389)

Both Emerson and Thoreau, in attempting to draw boundaries *within* their community, recognized their status interest in supporting abolition. As intellectuals, these were men who were—in terms of community status—downwardly mobile, because of the increasing prominence of manufacturers (Dimaggio 1982:39), in New England linked particularly to the (cotton) textile industry (Donald 1956:28), but whose cultural capital gave them a power to create history and influence politics. As Donald (1956:34) notes, these men witnessed, "the transfer of leadership to the wrong groups in society, and their appeal for reform was a strident call for their own class to re-exert its social dominance." By disrupting slavery, abolitionists also disrupted the emerging industrial, manufacturing economy, particularly that segment based on cotton, while at the same time underlining their masculinity in an age in which much culture was becoming feminized. While these appeals to local status concerns were likely unconscious, and surely do not explain the whole of the reaction to slavery, it reminds us of the potency of social and economic status in determining belief (Gusfield 1963; see Richards 1970:165–167).

Political Narratives

The roots of the Republican Party were linked to the radical politics of the 1850s; it was an insurgent party, committed to curtailing slavery (although most party members were not

14. Relatively few Northerners, even those troubled by slavery and the South's political power, were part of the abolitionist movement, which was widely disliked. In fact, despite the support of cultural elites, there is evidence that the heart of the abolitionist movement was middle-class and working class (Magdol 1986). However, it was the presence of the cultural elites that gave Brown's reputation the power that it had.

abolitionists and believed slavery should be limited gradually, beginning with preventing the expansion of slavery to the territories) and to free (native) labor (Gianapp 1987:190; Potter 1976:246–248). In contrast to the warm embrace of John Brown by cultural elites around Boston, the relationship between Brown and the emerging Republican party was more ambivalent. Political impression management involves not saying what one truly means: this “hypocrisy” is part of how the game is played, as successful politicians communicate with several audiences simultaneously. While the number and intensity of radical abolitionists grew after Brown’s raid, Republican politicians had a broader public, which was repelled by violence and mistrusted radical abolition: they had to reassure these voters, yet signal sympathy for Brown’s motives to those more radical.

Brown and the Republicans. Brown admired some members of the Republican party, and met with Joshua Giddings, the old Congressional radical from the Western Reserve, Senator Henry Wilson from Massachusetts, and other prominent Republican officeholders (Finkelman 1995a:7). Montgomery Blair, a radical Republican from Maryland and the lawyer for Dred Scott, was instrumental in providing Brown with attorneys for the latter part of his trial (Nelson 1973:225). In Boston a plan was hatched in Republican Party headquarters to rescue Brown from jail (Nelson 1973:217). Yet, to the party’s relief, Brown claimed after Harpers Ferry that he hated the Republican party, that although they won elections on the issue of slavery, they never saw the slave (Nelson 1973:203). Although Southerners like Governor Wise of Virginia hoped that Brown would implicate the Republicans, Brown repeatedly refused (Redpath 1860:275). Redpath (1860:104–105) “defended” the party:

It has been asserted that he was a member of the Republican party. It is false. He despised the Republican party. . . . But he was too earnest a *man*, and too devout a Christian, to rest satisfied with the only action against slavery consistent with one’s duty as a *citizen*, according to the usual Republican interpretation of the Federal Constitution. . . . Where the Republicans said, Halt; John Brown shouted, Forward! to the rescue! . . . The old man distrusted the republican leaders. He thought that their success, in 1860, would be a serious check to the anti-slavery cause. His reason was, that the people had confidence in these leaders, and would believe that by their action in Congress they would peacefully and speedily abolish slavery. That the people would be deceived; that the Republicans would become as conservative of slavery as the Democrats themselves, he sincerely and prophetically believed.

This statement constitutes a rhetorical distancing of the Republicans from Brown, as Redpath’s volume is consciously crafted to serve abolition politics. Brown’s extremism made Republicans seem moderate by comparison.

Blackening the Republicans. Whatever Brown claimed his relationship with the party, Southerners and Northern Democrats attempted to link the party to Harpers Ferry. (Analogous processes can be seen today as Democrats attempt to link Republicans to the Oklahoma City bombing and Republicans attempt to link Democrats to the excesses of the 1960s.) Democrats had earlier coined the phrase “Black Republican” to tar the party (Scott 1979:311), and used the term after the raid; some referred to the Republicans as the “Black Republican Revolutionary Party” (Nelson 1973:252). Others suggested they be called the “Brown Republicans.” After Lincoln’s election, one South Carolinian remarked, “Now that the black radical Republicans have the power, I suppose they will Brown us all!” (Joyner 1995:327). Southerners, most of whom, given the Whigs’ demise, were Democrats, asserted that the Republican Party was behind Brown’s treason: Brown spoke for the Republicans and the Republicans spoke for the North (Wallenstein 1995:167). In retrospect, this heated rhetoric (Satori 1969)

may have limited their options when Lincoln, a moderate Unionist Republican, was elected President.¹⁵

The *Natchez (Miss.) Free Trader* remarked that "Let Democracy everywhere hold the Republican leaders responsible for the treason they have mediated, uttered and actually by the aid of Old Brown accomplished" (Phillips 1986:127). Senator Jefferson Davis (Dem.-Miss.) claimed on the Senate floor that Senator William Seward (Rep.-NY) deserved the gallows as a traitor, because he had known of the plans from one of Brown's former associates; Harpers Ferry was a grand conspiracy in which leaders of the Republican party played a critical role (Warch and Fanton 1973:129–130). The Joint Committee of the General Assembly of Virginia, investigating Harpers Ferry, concluded that "The crimes of John Brown were neither more nor less than practical illustrations of the doctrines of the leaders of the Republican party" (Villard 1910:567).

Northern Democrats were more restrained, but still willing to blame the Republicans as abolitionist conspirators who supported John Brown's "hellish scheme" (Baker 1983:166; see Silbey 1977:26). Throughout the North, Democrats held "Union Meetings" to support the preservation of the Union and to blame Republicans. At a large meeting at Faneuil Hall in Boston, Democrats, including ex-President Franklin Pierce, Caleb Cushing, and Edward Everett, spoke (Joyner 1995:317). Northern Democrats, while not calling for trials, linked Republican leaders, including Giddings, Seward, Sumner, and Senator Thaddeus Stevens, to Brown. Senator Stephen Douglas asserted on the Senate floor that "the Harpers Ferry crime was the natural, logical, inevitable result of the doctrines and teachings of the Republican party," adding "I am not making this statement for the purpose of recrimination or partisan effect" (Warch and Fanton 1973:131). Although Senator Douglas may have been sincere, such claims were good politics. After secession, Democrats continued to oppose Brown's raid, but demonizing him during wartime no longer was good politics.

The Politics of Insanity. In the aftermath of the raid, Republican officeholders and editorialists expressed shock, dismay, and anger, and denied that Brown had any significance for their policies. They assumed that the public would be revolted, and that Democrats could tar them with the brush of Harpers Ferry. Republicans worried about the effect of the raid on their chances in 1860 (Johannsen 1991:97; Woodward 1968). Massachusetts Senator Henry Wilson noted, "Brown's invasion has thrown us, who were in a splendid position, into a defensive position. . . . If we are defeated next year we shall owe it to that foolish and insane movement of Brown's" (Woodward 1968:45). Dr. Charles Ray, an editor of the *Chicago Press and Tribune* put it, "We are damnably exercised here about the effect of Brown's wretched fiasco on the moral health of the Republican party. The old idiot! the quicker they hang him and get him out of the way, the better" (Abels 1971:386). While the November 1859 election results in New York and New Jersey, electing Republican candidates, might have mitigated that fear, Republicans distanced themselves from Brown. Even radical Republicans, such as Senator Seward, fearing responses of their constituents, condemned Brown, calling his actions "sedition and treason" (Abels 1971:386). Lincoln, more moderate than the radicals and Seward's rival for the presidential nomination, asserted that Brown was no Republican, and that Republicans should not object to his execution (Villard 1910:564). In their 1860 platform the Republican party, hoping to hold Northern unionist votes, denounced Brown, although not by name: "the lawless invasion by armed force of the soil of any state or territory, no matter under what pretext, as among the gravest of crimes" (Joyner 1995:326). The resolution passed unanimously.

15. Secession led to the destruction of Southern agriculture and business, freedom for the slaves, Reconstruction, and the passage of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments which, in time, provided the legal underpinning of the Civil Rights Movement. One can only wonder what might have happened if Southerners had united behind Democratic Party candidate Stephen Douglas in 1860 or, if Lincoln were elected, remained in Congress to fight the radical Republicans.

Some Republicans blamed Democrats for the crisis, asserting in the words of the Republican *New York Tribune*:

Those who are now straining every nerve to make party capital out of Old Brown, are careful not to look back so far as to see how and why he became a monomaniac. They look away from the fact that his attempt to get up an insurrection in Virginia is a legitimate consequence of the Kansas-Nebraska bill, and, but for the passage of that measure, would never have happened. President Pierce and Judge Douglas are thus the real authors of the late insurrection. (Warch and Fanton 1973:121)

However, a more common strategy was to assert that Brown was *sui generis*, a man whose acts had no partisan political import: "an eccentric leader of a tiny organization" (Nelson 1973:283). Horace Greeley and other Republicans referred to Brown as "this private man" (284), in effect erasing any support that he had. While Southerners and Democrats tried to politicize Brown, Republicans hoped to depoliticize him:

Thus arose the myth of John Brown—the myth that he and his compatriots stood outside the political pale. . . . The mythification of John Brown furnished a useful cover for his political sympathizers: It was the ideal solution: to value him while casting him into political exile. (Fried 1978:268)

The charge of insanity by means of "monomania" was a version of this claim: what McGlone (1995:214) calls the politics of insanity.¹⁶ Anyone who would attack a legitimate government must be mad (Laqueur 1987:150–151): an extreme instance of the "medicalization of deviance" (Conrad and Schneider 1980).¹⁷ Surely no one could hold the Republican party responsible for the personal actions of a "madman" and "fanatic." The *Chicago Press and Tribune* put it bluntly in an editorial on October 21, 1859:

What matters is that the stark mad enterprise was the product of addled brains; that in itself is incontestible evidence of the insanity of its originator; that its chief in his confession claims all the credit and all the criminality for himself: that the purposes of the *emeute* are foreign to Republican policy; that the means chosen for its consummation are utterly repugnant to Republican sense of right and wrong,—in spite of these, the journals of the bogus Democracy have already begun their lying assertions that for the insurrection and its consequences the Republican party are to be held accountable! Human mendacity could go no further. (Warch and Fanton 1973:120)

Even Garrison's *Liberator* at first referred to the raid as "misguided, wild, and apparently insane," although "well intended" (Finkelman 1995b:41). The radical Republican Salmon Chase commented: "Poor old man! How sadly misled by his own imaginations! How rash—how mad—how criminal then to stir up insurrection which if successful would deluge the land with blood and make void the fairest hopes of mankind!" (Oates 1984:311).

Not all agreed that Brown was insane. Southerners, like Governor Wise (Redpath 1860:273), wished to demonstrate that Brown was sane, and thus was fit to hang. Brown, for his part, along with his most enthusiastic supporters, was determined to demonstrate his sanity, and his behavior after the raid revealed considerable composure. Redpath accused those who claimed Brown was insane of being "political monomaniacs . . . who could not understand a heroic action when they saw one" (Redpath 1860:308–309). Brown claimed in court that:

I look upon [the charge of insanity] as a miserable artifice and pretext of those who ought to take a different course in regard to me, if they took any at all, and I view it with contempt more than

16. Brown's sanity has been vigorously debated by contemporary historians with some arguing that he was paranoid (Nevins 1950; Woodward 1968), and others that he was not (Fried 1978; Oates 1984). His insanity or fanaticism is a frequent explanation for his actions in high school texts (Loewen 1995:166). McGlone (1995) suggests that Brown's "bipolar disorder" may have contributed directly to his effectiveness as a leader. Even contemporary historians are involved in the "politics of insanity."

17. The early Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso speculated that bomb throwing was linked to pellagra and other vitamin deficiencies. Others pointed to epilepsy, tuberculosis, and alcoholism (Laqueur 1984:151).

others. . . . If I am insane, of course I should think I knew more than all the rest of the world. But I do not think so. I am perfectly unconscious of insanity, and I reject, so far as I am capable, any attempts to interfere in my behalf on that score. (Redpath 1860:309)

If Brown's personal bravery was to serve as a model for others, his identity had to be preserved.

Republican Divisions. However unified it might seem in retrospect, the Republican party was actually a regional coalition. Eric Foner (1970:310) explained, "Resentment of southern political power, devotion to the Union, anti-slavery based upon the free labor argument, moral revulsion against the institution, racial prejudice, a commitment to the northern social order and its development and expansion—all these elements were intertwined in the Republican world-view." Indeed, it was precisely these divisions (the party as a "big tent") that permitted the Republican party to grow and for nearly seventy years after the Civil War become the dominant political party in the United States. As the party grew, competition for leadership became more heated, and one element of this battle involved the importance of the preservation of the Union through compromise with the Southern states over slavery. The divisions in the party connected to attitudes to Brown and to strategies for speaking about the raid. Thus, while the party contributed to a validation of Brown's personal morality (while criticizing his action), Republicans were divided on their appropriate distance from Brown.

John Brown's raid catalyzed all Republican factions (Trefousse 1969:128–31). By attacking Brown's raid, radicals conceded the rhetorical field to those less willing to confront directly the economic and political power of the South (referred to as "Slave Power"). The first skirmish occurred with the choice of the Republican Speaker of the House of Representatives, a battle that lasted from December 5, 1859 until February 1, 1860 with the ghost of John Brown hanging over the affair. Had the radicals not been on the defense, their candidate, Congressman John Sherman of Ohio, might have been elected, but because of his support of abolitionist writings he could not gain a majority (Villard 1910:583–585).

Most consequential was selecting a presidential candidate. Prior to the raid, William Seward was considered the likely Republican nominee, with Salmon Chase second in line (Johannsen 1991:96). However, both were tarred by the claim that they had been informed of Brown's raid in advance, and neither was seen as sufficiently committed to preserving the Union. While there were other factors (e.g., Seward's sympathy for Catholics), Brown's raid provided an opening for the more moderate dark horse candidate—Abraham Lincoln (Nelson 1973:251).

Some radical abolitionists condemned the cowardice of the party, as did an anonymous letter-writer to the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*:

Why, O doughfaces, Old Line Whigs and timid Republicans, try to smother the real issue? It must come. It is upon us. Speak out, then, my fearful Republican friend, your real thoughts about Old Osawatomie! Don't condemn him with your lips while your heart approves, merely to save your party. For that won't save it. If it lives, as I believe it will, the bold outspoken anti-slavery men in its ranks must take the helm.—A REPUBLICAN. (1859:n.p.)

Brown shifted the rhetorical center of gravity to the moderates. However, after the November 1859 elections, Republicans concluded that they could praise Brown's persona and his embodiment of principle, while condemning the deed. Even if delicately phrased, Republicans justified the morality of Brown's activism, if not the acts themselves. The events at Harpers Ferry, producing a moderate Republican candidate and a split Democratic party (with Northern and Southern candidates), helped elect a Republican president and indirectly established a period of Republican dominance until 1932 by cementing regional loyalty.

The Social Construction of Political Violence

Political violence has no fixed moral standing. How a society or social segment responds to an act of violence aimed at a state or its citizens depends on several factors: 1) lines of narrative facility and cultural resonance, particularly as related to the creation of a heroic embodiment of the violent social movement, 2) the placement and interests of potentially supportive reputational entrepreneurs, and 3) the placements and interests of critics. Brown was fortunate in several regards.

The actions of John Brown were sufficiently dramatic, grounded in a set of previous national crises (the Fugitive Slave Act, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Bloody Kansas, and the Dred Scott Case) that actions against slavery were considered newsworthy, and received extensive coverage. Brief though the trial was, the charges against Brown produced the Trial of the Century.

To succeed, Brown the Man had to be constructed and linked to a set of policies. Given Brown's prominence in Kansas, his identity had been well-established and the raid built upon his public image, already positive in certain elite communities. Significantly the attack on the federal arsenal was not interpreted as an attack on the federal government, but as an attack on the institution of slavery and on the South. For his supporters, especially cultural elites but political elites as well, the theme of the narratives was not treason, but a lone man's demand for justice. The claim that Brown was demanding justice from a legitimate government made sense, even though it was this government that he was attacking. Increasing numbers were willing to endorse Brown's moral vision, even if the legitimacy of his violence was disputed. Further, beyond emphasizing Brown's moral outrage, the stories told of Brown defined him simultaneously as a man of adventure and of compassion, linked to issues of gender politics. His female supporters—many abolitionists were women—saw Brown as a man whose compassion for the slave was grounded in sentiment, while the male writers and politicians, whose active support was essential in shaping policy, felt Brown embodied a spirit of adventure. These multiple accounts contributed to their cultural resonance for several groups (Schudson 1989; Wuthnow 1989): those concerned about Southern political and economic power found in the person of John Brown common cause with those concerned about the ill-treatment of slaves.

Brown was fortunate in that the Boston intellectual networks with which he had previously been connected provided a base of supporters who saw it in their interest to legitimate Brown's movement. Having previously established themselves as the center of American arts and letters, now was the time for these fellow travelers to use their rhetorical skills. Those who write a nation's songs, poems, histories, and paint and sculpt its artwork have considerable power to shape collective memory. The cultural community in the United States, situated in the North, was sympathetic, willing to be fellow travelers, avoiding the personal dangers of direct action, while doing their part to legitimate the movement, with few costs to their own interests. Political elites in the emerging Republican party, which had recently become dominant in the House of Representatives, while more circumspect, were also sympathetic to Brown's ideals, although the strategic retreat of the radicals contributed to victories by the more moderate, Whiggish segments of the party, contributing to the party's eventual electoral success.

Finally Brown's critics aided the establishment of his reputation. First, they emphasized the importance of his raid, and concurred with the radical abolitionists that he was rational. The attack on Harpers Ferry with its images of slave revolt had as much narrative facility for Southern slaveholders as it did for Northern abolitionists. By increasingly making treasonous statements themselves, justifying disunion, and eventually by seceding, they left the field open for Brown supporters to cement his reputation. When interested parties retreat from a reputational field, others can secure contested images in public memory (Fine 1996). Even though Northern Democrats remained opposed to Brown's raid, once the war began other issues were more pressing than the demonization of Brown.

Brown's reputation, if never fully positive, was handled with respect. In time Osawatomie became a Kansas state park, the Brown homestead in North Elba became a New York historical site, and Harpers Ferry became a national landmark. By 1897 the political situation was such that President McKinley visited Brown's gravesite and in 1910 ex-President Roosevelt spoke at the Osawatomie Battlefield. John Brown had become part of American historical memory, as schoolchildren were taught to sing "John Brown's Body," commemorating how he embodied heroism and moral courage.

The question is under what circumstances will political violence against legitimate institutions and innocent victims be embraced. First, given its negative connotations, these political attacks will inevitably be redefined, often in light of a strongly held positive and culturally resonant value ("freedom fighter," "fighter for justice") linked to an individual whose identity exemplifies these values. The motivation for violence is often linked to the failure of process: violence is seen as a last resort for a just man with a grievance, legitimizing the violence, while claiming that the system is ultimately illegitimate. Narratives emerge that demonstrate the virtue and moral courage of the violent leader (such as the accounts of outlaws helping the poor, infirm, or oppressed). These stories must be accepted and spread by those with economic, political, social and/or cultural capital, capable of making their accounts part of cultural discourse (Ellingson 1995; Kane 1997). These fellow travelers have interests (self-valuation or economic position) bolstered by their own rhetorical claims. Finally, although there is a presumption against violent political action in democratic systems, when opponents of this violence are removed from the reputational scene or delegitimated as interpreters, the claims of the supporters of the violent actor gain credibility.¹⁸

Obviously there is only so much that can be learned from an interpretive case study; comparative analysis is essential. While moral entrepreneurs create "social problems," they can also claim that what appears to be a problem is actually virtuous. As the case of John Brown reveals, violent actors need not be condemned, but can be constructed in various ways. While violence invariably presents an interpretive challenge when occurring in the context of a legally constituted state, it is a challenge that can be overcome. Given the right stories and the proper placement and interests of relevant social actors, political violence can become heroic. John Brown's body need not be molding in the grave, but can serve as a beacon of hope.

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18. The sympathy for the African National Congress in the 1980s among Western elites suggests that violent groups (particularly when operating in conjunction with a broad-based social movement) can gain respect even in an age that often vigorously opposes terrorism.

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