

John Brown and the Importance of Allyship

John Brown was born in 1800 to a family of successful cattle farmers and grew up in Ohio. His great-grandfather had traveled to America on the Mayflower, and both of his grandfathers had served as officers in the Revolutionary War.

John Brown's parents were deeply rooted in the abolitionist movement, and they taught the young boy to despise the institution of slavery. Frederick Douglass was a close personal friend of his father, and he often stayed with the Brown family when John was growing up.

The family was intensely religious, and John himself became a Baptist minister. He moved to Springfield, Massachusetts, a progressive city where all facets of leadership from the churches, to the business leaders, to the local politicians, to the newspapers were all deeply involved with the anti-slavery movement. John Brown worked to create speaking platforms for the country's most influential abolitionists, helping to host lectures by Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth. He helped to transform the city of Springfield into a major stop on the Underground Railroad, assisting enslaved people to freedom. When the United States passed the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, a law which obligated local authorities in the North to aid in capturing and returning runaway slaves, John Brown formed a militant group in opposition to that law. He instructed his group to protect the runaways at all costs, "quickly, quietly, and efficiently." Not a single person was ever taken back to slavery from the city of Springfield.

Now during this time in the 1850s, Kansas Territory was embroiled in a bitter dispute over whether it would allow or prohibit slavery upon becoming a state. There were many violent confrontations, raids, and murders between pro-slavery and anti-slavery groups. Several of John Brown's sons were living in Kansas territory during this time, and they wrote to their father telling him of the increasing violence from pro-slavery forces. They feared being attacked. Determined to protect his family and fight off pro-slavery advancement into Kansas, John Brown gathered funding and weapons and headed to Kansas Territory.

On May 21, 1856 a county sheriff named Samuel Jones led a group of pro-slavery settlers in an attack on Lawrence, KS. Lawrence, KS was a town which had been founded by anti-slavery settlers who had moved to Kansas in the hopes of making Kansas a free state. The attackers led by Sheriff Jones ransacked the town of Lawrence, destroying the town hotel and halting the production of two anti-slavery newspapers. That same year, pro-slavery forces captured two of John Brown's sons, John Jr and Jason Brown, and destroyed their family homestead. In August, Brown's son Frederick was shot and killed by a pro-slavery group from Missouri.

After these events, John Brown was convinced that the fight against slavery could not be won peacefully. He returned to the North to raise money and support for an organized raid to free enslaved people in Kansas. In January of 1859, he returned to Kansas and waged an attack, taking 2 white men captive and liberating 11 enslaved people. In doing so, he became a fugitive in the South, and a folk hero in the North. Brown planned to continue to free enslaved people and to arm them, so they could rise up against slave owners and continue a rebellion all across

the South. Harriet Tubman joined his efforts and helped to recruit former slaves to join his fighting forces. Some abolitionists opposed his tactics, however, including his old friend Frederick Douglass. Douglass thought Brown was mad, and that he destined for certain failure.

On October 16, 1859 John Brown led his men in an attack on Harper's Ferry in Virginia. They raided a U.S. Armory there containing more than 100,000 muskets and rifles. Brown planned to seize the weapons and distribute them to enslaved people. They cut the telegraph wires in town and quickly overtook the lone watchman in charge of guarding the armory. They spread the news to local slaves that they would soon be liberated.

The local townsfolk of Harper's Ferry surrounded John and his men, and shooting broke out between the two groups. John Brown's son Oliver was among the 14 men shot and killed during the exchange of fire. By the following day, the U.S. Marines arrived and used a battering ram to break down the doors. Brown and his men were captured.

Brown was charged with five counts of murder, inciting a slave insurrection, and with treason against the Commonwealth of Virginia. He was swiftly convicted on all three counts, and sentenced to a public hanging.

Under Virginia law, one full month would need to pass before the public execution. During this time, John Brown was flooded with letters of support from all over the Americas and from Europe. He spent his time writing hundreds of letters in reply and speaking with the press at every opportunity to explain his motives and intentions. His words were published in hundreds of newspapers throughout the country. He made it clear over and over again that his last 30 days were the happiest days of his life. He was filled with spiritual conviction and felt like his death had a great purpose. He felt his execution would deal a mighty blow against slavery. Victor Hugo, the well known French writer who authored *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *Les Misérables*, tried to get John Brown pardoned. He warned of a possible Civil War in America, writing, "Politically speaking, the murder of John Brown would be an uncorrectable sin. It would create in the Union a latent fissure that would in the long run dislocate it."

John Brown was hanged on December 2, 1859 before a crowd of thousands. Among the spectators of his execution was Stonewall Jackson, who would later become a Confederate general, and John Wilkes Booth, who would later assassinate President Abraham Lincoln.

John Brown's death was among the last in a series of events that led to the Civil War. Slave owners feared other abolitionists would attempt to lead slave rebellions. Jefferson Davis feared "a thousand John Browns." The South quickly reorganized their militia system into the Confederate Army.

John Brown became a hero and revered icon in the North, while he was reviled as a traitor and a terrorist in the South. A folk song called "John Brown's Body" was sung throughout the North and used as a marching tune by the Union Army. Those who had doubted him during his life changed their views after his death. W.E.B. DuBois wrote, "John Brown was right. He was a great white light, an unwavering unflickering brightness, making the whole world simply a light and a darkness - a right and a wrong." Frederick Douglass called him "a brave and glorious old man. History has no better illustration of pure, disinterested benevolence."

Harriet Tubman famously remarked “he did more for American blacks than Lincoln did.”

John Brown is among the least commemorated figures associated with the American Civil War. There is no national monument, and no federal, state or local government honors John Brown. In Harper’s Ferry, the site of his infamous last raid, he is not remembered fondly and there is no monument. There is, however, a monument to a loyal enslaved boy who had allegedly refused to join John Brown.

Let’s take a moment to think about the devotion to allyship that John Brown demonstrated throughout his entire life. An ally is a person who commits to fight for the rights of a marginalized group that they are not a part of.

As a Christian man, he felt that abolition was a clear moral imperative. He also felt that it was his patriotic duty to fight for the liberation of men, and have his nation live up to the ideals of the American Constitution. He was not a pacifist. He was not interested in compromise with wicked men. As the grandson of two Revolutionary War officers, he drew parallels between the fight for freedom against the British and the fight for freedom against enslavement. Anybody who supported and celebrated the American Revolution must, by the same logic, support liberation for enslaved people. He used his relative privilege and access to bring attention to the unjust status quo, and to disrupt it.

In his final days, he left us with these words:

“I believe to have interfered as I have done... was not wrong, but right. Now, if it be deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and mingle my blood further with the blood of my children, and with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments, I submit: so let it be done.”