

# Anti-Slavery Zealot John Brown Is No Hero

Yet poets Thoreau and Emerson made him a god  
and helped spark the 'Civil War'.

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Many Americans have been aghast at violent mobs toppling statues and the widespread looting and destructive rampages that followed the killing of George Floyd. Media coverage often ignores the damage inflicted by righteous rioters and the businessmen, black and white, whose livelihoods have been destroyed. Instead, activists are portrayed as heroic because of their political rhetoric and demands for radical changes.

Soaring political animosity is sparking fears of much greater conflicts in the coming months. More than 160 years ago, a similar pattern paved the way for a conflict that ravaged much of the nation. Few people are aware of how one of America's most respected philosophers helped inflame the divisions that led to the first Civil War in 1861.

In his 1849 essay, "On the Duty Of Civil Disobedience," Henry David Thoreau boldly declared: "That government is best which governs not at all." After a night spent in jail for refusing to pay taxes, Thoreau "saw that the State was half-witted." He concluded, "I quietly declare war with the State," withdrawing his allegiance as long as the government enforced unjust laws.

But late in his life, Thoreau mutated into an apologist for bloodthirsty political fanaticism. Thoreau, following in the footsteps of his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson, believed that "our whole life is startlingly moral. There is never an instant's truce between virtue and vice." Thoreau was a Transcendentalist with boundless faith in absolute truth and absolute goodness. And he never doubted that he perceived those absolutes far more clearly

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than the vast majority of people who “lead lives of quiet desperation,” as he wrote in *Walden*.

Thoreau was justifiably fiercely opposed to slavery. He had initially been wary of fire-breathing Abolitionists who wanted the nation to pay any price to end slavery until he met and swooned for John Brown in 1857. Thoreau donated to Brown after hearing him make a rabble-rousing speech. Thoreau bragged that he “never read” the political columns in newspapers because “I do not wish to blunt my sense of right.” Maybe that helped explain Thoreau’s obliviousness (or lack of concern) regarding Brown’s notorious murders in Pottawatomie, Kansas, when he and his sons hacked to death five men living in a pro-slavery portion of the state. That 1856 carnage embodied one of Brown’s favorite sayings: “Without the shedding of blood, there is no remission of sin.”

In October 1859, Brown led a band of zealots attacking Harper’s Ferry, Virginia to seize the federal arsenal, part of his plan to end slavery via the mass killing of slaveowners across the South. Mount Holyoke University professor Christopher Benfey aptly characterized Brown in the *New York Review of Books* in 2013 as someone who was “murderous, inept, politically marginal, probably insane.” Most of the nation was horrified by Brown’s attack at Harper’s Ferry, which was speedily put down by federal troops led by Lt. Colonel Robert E. Lee. Even the nation’s foremost abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator*, condemned Brown’s attack as “a misguided, wild, and apparently insane-effort.” Horace Greeley wrote in the *New York Tribune* that “the way to universal emancipation lies not through insurrection, civil war, and bloodshed, but through peace, discussion, and quiet diffusion of sentiments of humanity and justice.”

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But Thoreau decided that Brown was literally Jesus – or at least that Jesus and John Brown were “two ends of a chain which I rejoice to know is not without its links.” In “A Plea for John Brown,” an oration delivered in Concord, Massachusetts two weeks after Brown’s attack, Thoreau referred to Brown as an “angel of light” and described Brown’s Harper’s Ferry accomplices as his “twelve disciples.” Thoreau hailed “the new saint who would make the gallows as glorious as the cross.”

Thoreau exalted Brown: “No man has appeared in America, as yet, who loved his fellow man so well, and treated him so tenderly.” That was balderdash on par with Stalin’s apologists gushing in the 1930s about the “peace-loving Soviet Union.” When Thoreau and Emerson met Brown in 1857, Brown told them that it would be “better for a whole generation of men, women, and children should pass away by violent death” than for the Golden Rule or Declaration of Independence to ever be violated. Rather than recognizing Brown as a lunatic seeking a pretext to slaughter much of humanity, Thoreau and Emerson hailed him as a moral visionary. But they never explained how to reconcile the Golden Rule with genocide.

For Thoreau, Brown’s self-evident goodness made his killings irrelevant. Thoreau declared, “The question is not about the weapon, but the spirit in which you use it.” As University of Connecticut Professor Michael Meyer noted in 1980, “Thoreau’s Transcendentalism allowed him to disregard any information about Brown which might have tarnished his image as martyr.” Thoreau focused on Brown’s “willingness to be killed – rather than Brown’s willingness to kill indiscriminately for his cause. **Thoreau never**

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mentions that the first man killed by Brown's raiding party at Harper's Ferry was a free black man who was shot in the back." Similarly, Thoreau touted Brown's fight against slavery in Kansas but never mentioned the Pottawattomie massacre. Thoreau also entitled himself to disregard any publications which vigorously criticized Brown: "they are not human enough to affect me at all." Thoreau and Emerson rallied northern opinion to view Brown as a martyr; Emerson also explicitly defined Brown as a "new saint" and labeled him "the rarest of heroes, a pure idealist." David Reynolds, a CUNY professor and author of a book on how John Brown "sparked the Civil War," wrote in 2013 that Thoreau and Emerson's "bold, virtually solitary public support of John Brown rescued Brown from infamy." Thoreau and Emerson swayed northerners to see Brown as a hero; Thoreau's "plea" concluded with a call for vengeance against the South.

As a result, "many Southerners viewed the raid as a larger Northern scheme to directly attack the South, leading to increased sectional distrust and accelerating the approach of secession in 1861," as the American Battlefield Trust noted.

For Thoreau and Emerson, "trust yourself" was effectively replaced by "kill them all and let God sort them out." Thanks in part to their efforts, "a passion for the violent solution to slavery was sweeping the abolitionist citizens of the nation," as historian Thomas

Fleming wrote in *A Disease in the Public Mind: A New Understanding of Why We Fought the Civil War*.

Radical Republican Congressional leaders "unanimously agreed that the integrity of the Union should be preserved, though it cost a million lives," the *New York Times* reported on Christmas Day 1860. Massachusetts governor John Albion declared, "We must

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conquer the South.” Pro-war Bostonians urged the governor to “drive the ruffians into the Gulf of Mexico and give the country to the Negroes.” Massachusetts’ zealots were matched by fanatic South Carolina secessionists who idiotically believed that firing on Fort Sumter was a great idea. Confederate Secretary of State Robert Toombs warned Confederate President Jefferson Davis to oppose launching an attack: “The firing on that fort will inaugurate a civil war greater than any the world has yet seen ... Mr. President, at this time it is suicide, murder, and you will lose us every friend in the North.” But Davis ordered Gen. P.T. Beauregard to open fire. Thoreau’s canonization of John Brown helped drive the nation to a Civil War that left more than 700,000 soldiers dead. With each passing year, the conflict became more unhinged from basic decency. Shortly before he launched his famous swath of destruction through Georgia in 1864, **Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman telegraphed the Secretary of War that “there is a class of people – men, women, and children – who must be killed or banished before you can hope for peace and order.”** Though the end of slavery was a blessing, the war’s aftermath unleashed new poxes. **As a result of illness, poverty, and negligence by federal officials, roughly 25 percent of freed slaves died or became gravely ill in the first years after the war,** as Connecticut College Professor Jim Downs noted in his 2012 book, *Sick from Freedom*.

Was it worth it? It is open to dispute whether a war was necessary to end slavery in America. Abraham Lincoln said in 1859 that he was “quite sure [slavery] would not outlast the century.” Slavery ended almost every place else in the western hemisphere without a civil war. In early 1862, Lincoln asked Congress “to consider a constitutional amendment that would guarantee compensated

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emancipation to any state, including those in rebellion, that would agree to abolish slavery gradually by 1900,” Fleming noted. But abolitionists torpedoed the proposal and demanded that the war continue.

John Brown was the living embodiment of the 19th century quip: “A fanatic is someone who does what the Lord would do if He knew the facts of the matter.” Similarly, the mobs in many cities that are currently unleashing violence are convinced they are doing God’s work – or at least obeying the commandments they imbibed in college sociology classes. But the idiocy of the new saviors knows no bounds, as illustrated by their attacks on statues of Frederick Douglass in New York, the monument of the 54th Massachusetts regiment (one of the most famous colored regiments in the Civil War), and their beheading of the statue of Col. Hans Christian Heg, a Union officer who helped rescue escaped slaves before 1861. The Black Student Union and the Student Inclusion Coalition of the University of Wisconsin are also demanding removal of a statue of Abraham Lincoln on their campus.

Thoreau’s deification of John Brown should be a reminder of the perils of glorifying political violence in the name of any ideal. John Brown’s legacy vivified how hatred is far easier to unleash than to control. Reasonable people can usually reach compromises or craft accommodations with happier results than mobs driven berserk by the latest Twitter hashtag.