

John Brown's Final Speech, 1859

Introduction

At eight o'clock on Sunday evening, October 16, 1859, radical abolitionist John Brown led a party of twenty-one men into the town of Harpers Ferry, Virginia, with the intention of seizing the federal arsenal there. They quickly captured the lone night watchman and cut the town's telegraph lines. Encountering no resistance, Brown's men seized the arsenal, an armory, and a rifle works. Brown then sent out several detachments to round up hostages and liberate slaves.

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Brown's plan soon went awry. Angry townspeople and local militia companies trapped his men in the armory. About twenty-four hours later, US troops commanded by Colonel Robert E. Lee arrived and stormed the engine house. Five of Brown's party escaped, ten were killed, and seven, including Brown himself, were taken prisoner. Brown was tried in a Virginia court, although he had attacked federal property.

The trial's high point came at its end when Brown was permitted to make a speech, which appears on this broadside printed in December 1859 by the abolitionist newspaper, the *Liberator*. In his address, Brown asserted that he “never did intend murder, or treason, or the destruction of property, or to excite or incite Slaves to rebellion, or to make insurrection,” but rather wanted only to “free Slaves.” He defended his actions as righteous and just, saying that “to have interfered as I have done—In behalf of His despised poor, was not wrong but right.” He invoked the Bible to condemn slavery, quoting Hebrews 13:3: “Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them.”

Brown also told the court that he was at peace with his actions and their consequences, proclaiming: “Now if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice and MINGLE MY BLOOD FURTHER WITH THE BLOOD OF MY CHILDREN, and with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments—I submit; so LET IT BE DONE.”

Brown's speech convinced many Northerners that this grizzled man of fifty-nine was not an extremist but rather a martyr to the cause of freedom.

The Virginia court, however, found him guilty of treason, conspiracy, and murder, and he was sentenced to die. Brown was hanged on December 2, 1859, and his body was buried on his family farm at North Elba, New York.

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[Excerpt]

In the first place, I deny every thing but what I have already admitted, of a design on my part to free Slaves. I intended, certainly, to have made a clean thing of that matter, as I did last winter, when I went into Missouri, and there took Slaves, without the snapping of a gun on either side, moving them through the country, and finally leaving them in Canada. I desired to have done the same thing again, on a much larger scale. That was all I intended. I never did intend murder, or treason, or the destruction of property, or to excite or incite Slaves to rebellion, or to make insurrection.

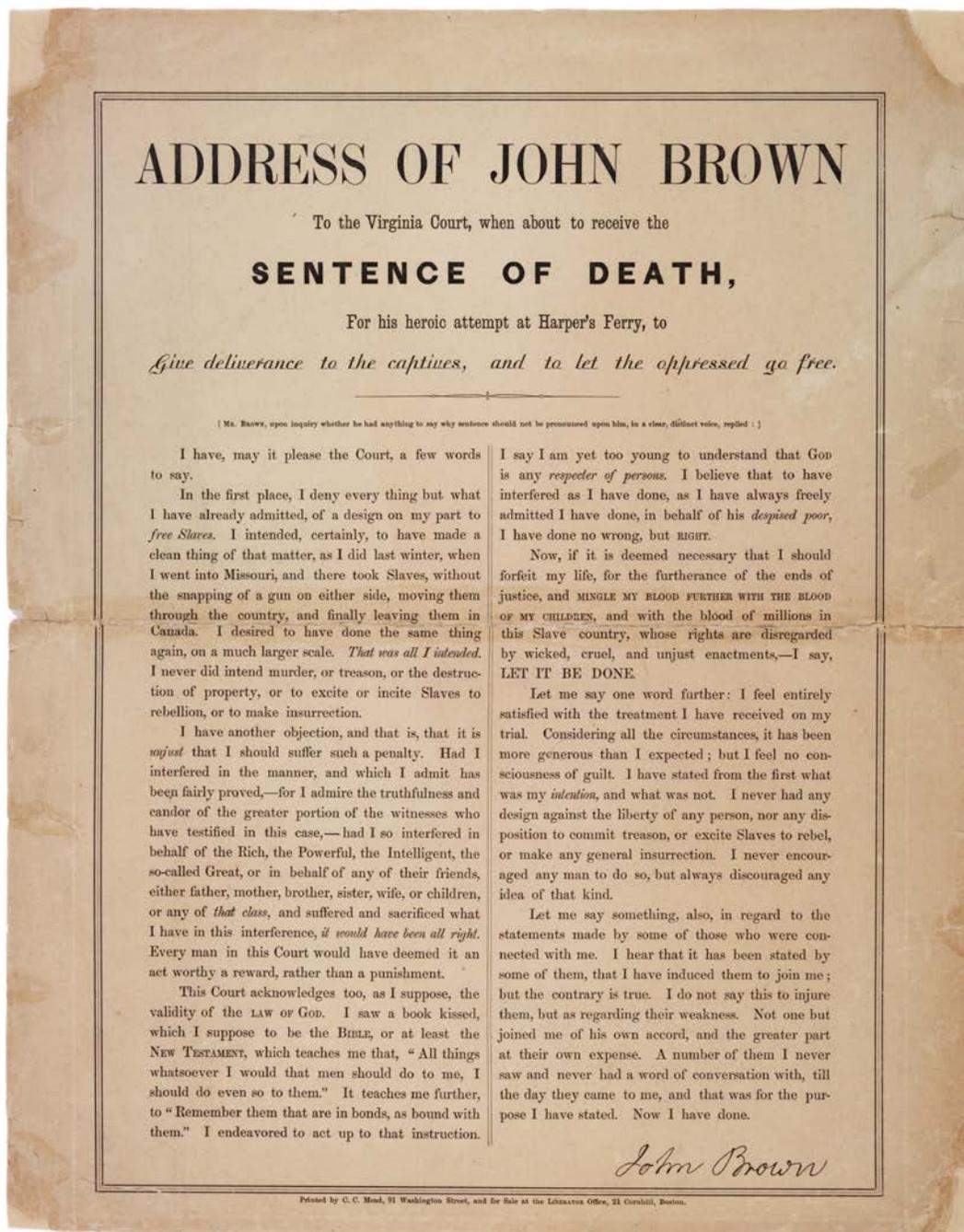
Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction, examine the transcript and the image, and apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer the questions that follow.

1. Illustrations and descriptions of John Brown published in magazines and newspapers during his lifetime and following his execution frequently describe a fiery, violent, wild-eyed radical. How closely do those descriptions match the words in his speech?
2. How did John Brown use Biblical scripture to explain and justify his actions?
3. Why was it particularly appropriate that John Brown's final statement to the court was reprinted in *The Liberator*?
4. Imagine that you are the prosecuting attorney for the State of Virginia. Create a short final statement to the jury summarizing your reasons for bringing the case against John Brown.
5. John Brown has been referred to by some as an honorable man and true patriot and by others as a radical terrorist. Which is most appropriate? Defend your answer using historical facts.

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Image



John Brown, “Address of John Brown to the Virginia Court...” December, 1859 (The Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC05508.051)

John Brown's Final Speech, 1859

Transcript

John Brown, "Address of John Brown to the Virginia Court..." December, 1859 (The Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC05508.051)

ADDRESS OF JOHN BROWN

To the Virginia Court, when about to receive the

SENTENCE OF DEATH,

For his heroic attempt at Harper's Ferry, to

Give deliverance to the captives, and to let the oppressed go free.

[MR. BROWN, upon inquiry whether he had anything to say why sentences should not be pronounced upon him, in a clear, distinct voice, replied:]

I have, may it please the Court, a few words to say.

In the first place, I deny every thing but what I have already admitted, of a design on my part to *free Slaves*. I intended, certainly, to have made a clean thing of that matter, as I did last winter, when I went into Missouri, and there took Slaves, without the snapping of a gun on either side, moving them through the country, and finally leaving them in Canada. I desired to have done the same thing again, on a much larger scale. *That was all I intended*. I never did intend murder, or treason, or the destruction of property, or to excite or incite Slaves to rebellion, or to make insurrection.

I have another objection, and that is, that it is *unjust* that I should suffer such a penalty. Had I interfered in the manner, and which I admit has been fairly proved, – for I admire the truthfulness and candor of the greater portion of the witnesses who have testified in this case, – had I so interfered in behalf of the Rich, the Powerful, the Intelligent, the so-called Great, or in behalf of any of their friends, either father, mother, brother, sister, wife, or children, or any of *that class*, and suffered and sacrificed what I have in this interference, *it would have been all right*. Every man in this Court would have deemed it an act worthy a reward, rather than a punishment.

This Court acknowledges too, as I suppose, the validity of the LAW OF GOD. I saw a

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book kissed, which I suppose to be the BIBLE, or at least the NEW TESTAMENT, which teaches me that, "All things whatsoever I would that men should do to me, I should do even so to them." It teaches me further, to "Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them." I endeavored to act up to that instruction. I say I am yet too young to understand that GOD is any *respector of persons*. I believe that to have interfered as I have done, as I have always freely admitted I have done, in behalf of his *despised poor*, I have done no wrong, but RIGHT.

Now, if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life, for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and MINGLE MY BLOOD FURTHER WITH THE BLOOD OF MY CHILDREN, and with the blood of millions in this Slave country, whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments, – I say; LET IT BE DONE.

Let me say one word further: I feel entirely satisfied with the treatment I have received on my trial. Considering all the circumstances, it has been more generous than I expected; but I feel no consciousness of guilt. I have stated from the first what was my *intention*, and what was not. I never had any design against the liberty of any person, nor any disposition to commit treason, or excite Slaves to rebel, or make any general insurrection. I never encouraged any man to do so, but always discouraged any idea of that kind.

Let me say something, also, in regard to the statements made by some of those who were connected with me. I hear that it has been stated by some of them, that I have induced them to join me; but the contrary is true. I do not say this to injure them, but as regarding their weakness. Not one but joined me of his own accord, and the greater part at their own expense. A number of them I never saw and never had a word of conversation with, till the day they came to me, and that was for the purpose I have stated. Now I have done. –

John Brown

Notes: Printed by C.C. Mead.