



Decisions and Choices

Storming Harpers Ferry: John Brown's Bold Stand Against Slavery

Historical Context

In October 1859, white abolitionist John Brown led a raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia) in an attempt to ignite a widespread slave uprising and destroy the institution of slavery in the United States. Brown, who had already gained national attention for his violent actions in "Bleeding Kansas," believed that slavery was a moral abomination that could not be ended through politics or compromise. He saw armed resistance as the only just response to centuries of enslavement, violence, and dehumanization of Black people. Brown and his group of 21 followers, including both Black and white men, seized the arsenal with the goal of arming enslaved people in the region and sparking a rebellion across the South. However, the raid was quickly suppressed by U.S. Marines under the command of Colonel Robert E. Lee. Brown was captured, tried for treason against the state of Virginia, and executed by hanging on December 2, 1859. Six others involved in the raid were later executed. Though the raid failed militarily, its impact was profound. To many white Southerners, it confirmed their worst fears: that abolitionists would stop at nothing to destroy slavery and incite insurrection. To many in the North, especially Black abolitionists, John Brown became a martyr for the cause of freedom. His actions deepened the national divide over slavery and pushed the country closer to civil war. Brown's raid was not simply an act of violence; it was a deliberate and symbolic strike against the institution of slavery, one that exposed the moral and political crisis gripping the nation. It forced Americans to confront the question: Was slavery compatible with the values of liberty and justice on which the country was founded?

Connection to Habit

John Brown's decision to lead an armed raid on Harpers Ferry highlights how individuals make bold and controversial choices in response to injustice. Using the Decisions and Choices habit of mind, students can analyze the risks Brown took, the values that shaped his actions, and the consequences that followed. His choice to use violence against slavery forced the nation to confront a moral crisis and showed how one person's decision can have lasting impact even if it leads to failure or conflict. This encourages students to think critically about how people weigh their options in moments of deep division and struggle.

Discussion Questions

- What factors might have led John Brown to believe that violence was necessary to end slavery?
- How did Brown's personal values, beliefs, or background influence the decision he made at Harpers Ferry?
- How did Brown's raid affect national debates about slavery, particularly in the North and South?
- How did Brown's actions shape public opinion about slavery and abolition in the years leading up to the Civil War?
- Was Brown's decision ultimately effective or harmful to the abolitionist cause? How so?
- How might enslaved people have felt about John Brown's attempt to start a rebellion?
- Do you think John Brown should be remembered as a revolutionary? Why or why not?
- What does his raid teach us about the difficult moral choices people face when fighting injustice?

Suggested Activity

Materials Needed:

- Printed or digital copies of John Brown's Final Speech (November 2, 1859)
- Highlighters, pens, chart paper

Group Reading and Annotation [10-15 minutes]

Divide students into small groups (3–4 students) and assign each group a role:

- Abolitionists
- Enslaved people (hearing about Brown's words later)
- Southern slaveholders
- Northern moderates or politicians
- Journalists or court observers

Each group reads the speech excerpt and:

- Highlights phrases that show Brown's values
- Underlines statements about slavery, law, or justice
- Circles emotional or persuasive language

Reaction Carousel [20-30 minutes]

Have each group use chart paper to answer the following questions based on their role.

Group Role: _____

1. In one or two sentences, what is the main message of Brown's speech?
2. How does your group (as your assigned role) feel about this speech? Why?
3. What quote stands out to you? Why?
4. What question would your group ask Brown if you were in the courtroom?

After completing, students rotate around the room to read other groups' answers, adding:

- A comment or reaction from their group's perspective
- A follow up question or counterpoint

Whole Class Discussion [10–15 minutes]

- Which groups responded most strongly to Brown's message? Why?
- What moral or strategic dilemmas did Brown face?
- Was Brown's choice to use violence justified, given the historical context?
- How does this activity help us apply the NCHE Habit of Mind: Decisions and Choices?

Primary Source

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 sentence 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 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