**A Behavioral Analysis of John Brown: Martyr or Terrorist?**

**James N. Gilbert 2010**

Americans have commonly assumed that this country would continue to be spared from acts of terrorist activity. Terrorism was associated with a foreign environment and viewed as exceptional in the history of American criminal violence. But in 1993, when the New York World Trade Center was the target of a massive terrorist bombing, the attention of Americans became riveted upon the unique form of criminality that we have collectively termed terrorism. And of course, this criminal act was followed by the far more deadly bombing in Oklahoma City and then the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Although much of the media and public has treated these terrorist acts as precedent-setting domestic attacks, the history of terrorism in the United States actually dates to the founding of the nation. Of the many such violent episodes in our earlier history, John Brown's attack on Harpers Ferry in October 1859 is comparable to these more recent acts in terms of national terror and consequent social and political upheaval.

In late 1859 John Brown and twenty-one followers attempted to rally and arm large numbers of slaves by attacking and briefly holding the United States arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia. Captured by federal military forces and local militia, Brown was hastily tried and executed. While the life and deeds of John Brown are immensely important for their impact Significantly, this powerful historical figure is rarely defined as a terrorist. Instead, a vast collection of literature generally portrays Brown as either saint or madman. On one hand, there is the sympathetic traditional portrait of John Brown as an American hero of near mythical proportions. Such an image is certainly not viewed as criminally deviant, nor does it suggest the status of criminal folk hero. But while a minority historical judgment has questioned his sanity or the radical end-justification logic he appeared to employ, few even in this camp would declare his actions truly terrorist.

Thus, one can only question how and why this imagery has persisted throughout the decades. ls the terrorist label lacking due to the singular rationale of his crimes: the massive evil of slavery? For example, a similar confusion currently exists regarding various violent attacks on abortion clinics and their personnel by those who, like Brown, rationalize their violence by moral or religious conviction. Some would define convicted murderer Paul Hill as a domestic terrorist for his premeditated attack on an abortion doctor and an escort during the summer of 1994. Yet others would fail to define his actions as terroristic due to Hill's justification of his act as a "lesser evil."

In order to define Brown precisely as a terrorist rather than as a martyr, the meaning of terrorism must be explored. As with many singular, emotion-producing labels of criminality, terrorism is easier to describe than define. The Vice President's Task Force on Combating Terrorism describes terrorism as a phenomenon involving "the unlawful use of threat of violence against persons or property to further political or social objectives." In a similar vein, the FBI's Terrorist Research and Analytical Center states that terroristic activity "is the unlawful use of force or violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives."

Additional attempts to conceptualize the terrorist often focus on the perpetrator's motive rather than legal definitions, while others prefer to explain away terrorism through an apologist approach, stressing the anger, hopelessness, and governmental violence brought against various victimized populations from which, inevitably, terrorists will be mobilized.

A final view, particularly popular in fictional portrayals of terrorists, suggests individual psychopathology as the chief cause of terrorism. As detailed by political philosopher and professor of religion Moshe Amon, one form of terroristic crime may originate within the disturbed minds of some perpetrators, triggering myths and fantasies that can be categorized as messianic or apocalyptic. The messianic terrorist ideology streams from a conviction that one has special insight that produces an individual state of enlightenment. Terrorists are then convinced that “they are the only ones who see the real world, and the only ones who are not affected by its depravity. It is their mission, therefore, to liberate the blind people of this world from the rule of the unjust."

Other psychological theorists believe that the most common type of terrorist has a psychopathic or sociopathic personality. The classic traits of the psychopath—impulsiveness, lack of guilt, inability to experience emotional depth, and manipulation—are perceived as ideally suited to the commission of terrorism. The ability to kill large numbers of strangers without compunction or to manipulate others to unwittingly further criminal ends convinces many that the psychopathic personality is a requirement for terroristic action.

With such definitions of terrorism in mind, how are we to view John Brown? After almost a century and a half, the actions of Brown have been preserved with stark clarity, yet his personality and related psychological motivations can only be surmised. John Brown was fifty-nine years old when he was executed by the state of Virginia for treason, conspiring with blacks to produce insurrection, and murder in the first degree. His criminal activities of record include embezzlement and assault with a deadly weapon against an Ohio sheriff in 1842. In 1856 a Warrant was issued by a proslavery Kansas district court charging Brown with "organizing against slavery.” A month later he and eight other men kidnapped and murdered five Kansans, including a constable and his two sons. The killings were particularly brutal: the victims were hacked to death by repeated sword blows. In December 1858 the state of Missouri and the federal government offered a reward for Brown's capture because he was the chief suspect in yet another» criminal homicide. Finally Brown's criminal activities culminated in the seizure of the federal armory at Harpers Ferry on October 16, 1859. A company of U.S. Marines captured him the following day, and history records his execution less than fifty days after his attack against the armory.

The question of whether John Brown was indeed a terrorist must be based on a definitional standard that defies emotional or mythical distortion. The linkage of Brown's cause to the horrors of slavery circumvents the true nature of the man and of his crimes. According to Albert Parry, author of a best-selling work on the history of terror and revolutionary violence, terrorists and those who study them offer innumerable explanations of their violence; yet their motivations can be compacted into three main concepts:

1. Society is sick and cannot be cured by half measures of reform.

2. The state is in itself violent and can be countered and overcome only by violence.

3. The truth of the terrorist cause justifies any action that supports it. While some terrorists recognize no moral law, others have their own "higher" morality.

Comparing John Brown's actions to these criteria produces an inescapable match. On many occasions Brown expressed his solid belief that society, particularly a society that would embrace slavery, was sick beyond its own cure. Brown had clearly given up on public policy reforms or legal remedies regarding slavery when he drafted his own constitution for the benefit of his followers. The document attempts to define his justifications for the upcoming attack at Harpers Ferry and utterly rejects the legal and moral foundation of the US: "Therefore, we citizens of the US and the Oppressed People, who by a Recent Decision of the Supreme Court are declared to have no rights which the white man is bound to respect; together with all other people regarded by the laws thereof, do for the time being, ordain and establish for ourselves the following provisional constitution and ordinances, the better to protect our persons, property, lives, and liberties: and to govern our actions." As to the terroristic belief that violent government can only be over- come by violence, Brown's convictions were preserved for posterity by a note he handed to a jailer while being led to the gallows: "I John Brown am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land: will never be purged away; but with Blood.”

With similar conformity, Brown's beliefs and actions demonstrated his rigid "higher" morality, which served to justify numerous crimes, including multiple homicides. As described by historian Stephen Oates, “Brown knew the Missourians would come after him . . . yet he was not afraid of the consequences for God would keep and deliver him: God alone was his judge. Now that the work was done, he believed that he had been guided by a just and wrathful God."

Brown's deeds conform to contemporary definitions of terrorism, and his psychological predispositions are consistent with the terrorist model. As observed by David Hubbard, founder of the Aberrant Behavior Center and psychiatric consultant to the Federal Bureau of Prisons, the actions and personality of the terrorist are not "merely bizarre and willfully antisocial; but a reflection of deep-seated personal and cultural pathologies." Such behavioral pathology is commonly linked to the psychopathic personality or, less frequently, to some form of paranoia. Virtually unknown to mental health authorities during Brown's lifetime, the psychopathic personality is currently considered a relatively common criminal mental abnormality among violent offenders. Although psychopathic criminals account for a small percentage of overall lawbreakers, psychologist William McCord notes that they commit a disproportionate percentage of violent crime. While psychopaths may be encountered within any violent criminal typology, they appear to be particularly well represented in various crimes of serial violence, confidence fraud, and terrorism.

John Brown demonstrated this guilt-free conscience on many occasions; his calculating leadership in the kidnapping and murder of five people in Kansas provided beyond question his capacity to free himself of normal emotion. On the night of May 26, 1856, Brown led a small party of followers to the various cabins of his political enemies. During what would later be termed the Pottawatomie Massacre, the Brown party systematically dragged the five unarmed and terrified men from their homes and murdered them in a frenzy of brutal violence. When later questioned about his motives during the Kansas murders, Brown offered a classic messianic psychopathic rationalization. Without a trace of remorse, he stated that the victims all deserved to die as they “had committed murder in their hearts already, according to the Big Book . . . their killing had been decreed by Almighty God, ordained from eternity."

John Brown does not stand alone in the annals of American-based terrorism. Yet he obviously remains a unique, paradoxical example of a terrorist whom history has often viewed through rose-colored lenses. As opposed to alarm or disgust, the deeds of John Brown have moved some to great literary inspiration, such as Stephen Vincent Benét’s epic poem *John Brown's Body*. Ralph Waldo Emerson, writing shortly before Brown's execution, referred to Brown as "the Saint, whose fate yet hangs in suspense, but whose martyrdom, if it shall be perfected, will make the gallows glorious like the Cross."

In a pragmatic sense, it is doubtful that the heroic legend of John Brown will ever include the terrorist truth of his crimes. As observed by guerrilla warfare essayist Walter Laqueur, "terrorism has long exercised a great fascination, especially at a safe distance . . . the fascination it exerts and the difficulty of interpreting it have the same roots: its unexpected, shocking and outrageous character." While many American terrorists exert a continuing fascination, none have occupied the unique position of John Brown. By contemporary definition, he was undoubtedly a terrorist to his core, demonstrating repeatedly the various axioms from which we shape this unique crime. Brown quite purposely waged war for political and social change while simultaneously committing the most heinous crimes. That we continue to praise him says more about us today, then it does about him in 1859.

**The Northern Response to Slavery**

**By Martin Duberman - 1977**

The abolitionist movement never became a major channel of the Northern antislavery sentiment. It remained in 1860 what it had been in 1830: the small but not still voice of radical reform. So, why did most Northerners who disapproved of slavery become "non-extensionists" rather than abolitionists? Why did they prefer to attack slavery indirectly, by limiting its spread, rather than directly, by seeking to destroy it wherever it existed?

On the broad level, the answer involves certain traits in the national character. Most Americans have been too absorbed in the enjoyment or pursuit of possessions to take much notice of significant problems in the country. And thus, any radical attack on social problems would compromise our national optimism that everything was all right; it would suggest fundamental defects, rather than occasional malfunctions. And so the majority has generally found it necessary to label "extreme" any measures which call for large-scale readjustment. What we prefer is an approach to problems that are flexible, piecemeal, pragmatic. We do not like radical approaches.

There is much to be said for this defense of the American way--in the abstract. The trouble is that the theory of gradualism and the practice of it have not been the same. Too often Americans have used the gradualist argument as a technique of evasion rather than as a tool for change, not as a way of dealing with difficult problems slowly and carefully, but as an excuse for not dealing with them at all. As a chosen people, we are meant only to have problems which are self-liquidating. All of which is symptomatic of our conviction that history is the story of inevitable progress, that every day in every way we will get better and better even though we make no positive efforts toward that end.

Before 1845, the Northern attitude toward slavery rested on this comfortable belief in the benevolence of history. Earlier, during the 1830s, the abolitionists had managed to excite a certain amount of uneasiness about the institution by invoking the authority of the Bible and the Declaration of Independence against it. Alarm spread still further when mobs began to prevent abolitionists from speaking their minds or publishing their opinions, and when the national government interfered with the mails and the right of petition. Was it possible, men began to ask, that the abolitionists were right in contending that slavery, if left alone, would not die out but expand, would become more not less vital to the country's interests? Was it possible that slavery might even end by infecting free institutions themselves?

The apathetic majority was shaken, but not yet profoundly aroused; the groundwork for widespread antislavery protest was laid, but its flowering awaited further developments. The real watershed came in 1845, when Texas was annexed to the Union, and war with Mexico followed. The prospect now loomed of a whole series of new slave states. It finally seemed clear that the mere passage of time would not bring a solution; if slavery were ever to be destroyed, more active resistance would be necessary. For the first time large numbers of Northerners prepared to challenge the dogma that slavery was a local matter in which the free states had no concern. A new era of widespread, positive resistance to slavery had opened.

Yet such new resolve as had been found was not channeled into a heightened demand for the abolition of the institution, but only into a demand that its further extension be prevented. More positive actions against slavery, they seemed to be saying, was indeed required, but nothing too positive. Containing the institution would, in the long run, be tantamount to destroying it; a more direct assault was NOT necessary. In this sense, the doctrine of non-extension was but a more sophisticated version of the standard faith in "time". America was stalling for time.

One need not question the sincerity of those who believed that non-extension would ultimately destroy slavery, in order to recognize that such a belief partook of wishful thinking. Even if slavery was contained, there remained large areas in the Southern states into which the institution would still expand; even without further expansion, there was no guarantee that slavery would cease to be profitable; and finally, even should slavery cease to be profitable, there was no certainty that the South, psychologically, would feel able to abandon it. Non-extension, in short, was hardly a fool-proof formula. Yes many Northerners knew it. And thus, the question remains: why did not an aroused antislavery conscience turn to more certain measures and demand more unequivocal action?

To have adopted the path of direct abolition, first of all, might have meant risking individual respectability. The unsavory reputation of those already associated with abolitionism was not likely to encourage converts to it. The mere reputation of abolitionism as fanatics and “crazies” was sufficient to repel men from joining its ranks.

But many were opposed to abolition because they also opposed the idea of immediate emancipation, or "immediatism" itself. Immediatism challenged the Northern hierarchy of values. To many, a direct assault on slavery meant a direct assault on private property and the Union as well. Fear for these values clearly inhibited antislavery fervor. As devout Lockeians, Americans did believe that the sanctity of private property constituted the essential cornerstone for all other liberties. If property could not be protected in a nation, neither could life or liberty. And the Constitution, so many felt, had upheld the legitimacy of holding property in men. True, the Constitution had not mentioned slavery by name, and had not evenly declared in its favor, but in giving the institution certain indirect guarantees (the three-fifths clause; noninterference for twenty-one years with the slave trade; the fugitive slave proviso), the Constitution had seemed to sanction it. At any rate no one could be sure. The intentions of the Founding Fathers remained uncertain, and one of the standing debates of the antebellum generation was whether the Constitution had been meant by them to be a pro- or an antislavery document. Since the issue was unresolved, Northerners remained uneasy, uncertain how far they could go in attacking slavery without at the same time attacking property.

Fear for property rights was underscored by fear for the Union. The South had many times warned that if her rights and interests were not heeded, she would leave the Union and for a separate confederation. The tocsin had been sounded with enough regularity so that to some it had begun to sound like a hollow bluster. But there was always a chance that if the south felt sufficiently provoked she might yet carry out the threat. It is difficult today to fully appreciate the horror with which most Northerners regarded the potential breakup of the Union. The mystical quantities which surrounded "Union" were no less real for being in part irrational. Lincoln struck a deep chord for his generation when he spoke of the Union as the "last best hope of earth"; that was the American experiment was thought the "best" hope may have been arrogant, a hope at all, naive, but such it was to the average American, convinced of his own superiority and the possibility of the world learning by example. Clearly, those who wanted the preserve the Union acted from a variety of motives: the Lincolns, who seem primarily to have valued its spiritual potential, were joined by those more concerned with maintaining its power potential; the Union was symbol of man's quest for a benevolent society--and for domination. But if Northerners valued their government for differing reasons, they generally agreed on the necessity of preserving it. Even so, their devotion to the Union had its oscillations. In 1861 Lincoln and his party, in rejecting the Crittenden Compromise, seemed willing to jeopardize Union rather than risk the further expansion of slavery. After war broke out, the value stress once more shifted: Lincoln's party now loudly insisted that the war was indeed being fought to preserve the Union, not to free the slaves. Thus did the coexisting values of Union and antislavery tear the Northern mind and confuse its allegiance.

The tension was compounded by the North's ambivalent attitude toward the Negro. The Northern majority, unlike most of the abolitionists, did not believe in the equality of races. The Bible suggested that the Negro had been a separate, inferior creation meant for a position of servitude. Where there was doubt on the doctrine of racial equality, its advocacy by the distrusted abolitionists helped to settle the matter in the negative.

It was possible, of course, to disbelieve in Negro equality, and yet disapprove of Negro slavery. Negroes were obviously men, even of an inferior sort, and as men they could not in conscience be denied the right to control their own souls and bodies. But if anti-Negro and antislavery sentiments were not actually compatible, they were not mutually supportive either. Doubt of the Negro's capacity for citizenship continually blunted the edge of antislavery fervor. If God had intended the Negro for some subordinate role in society, perhaps a kind of benevolent slavery was, after all, the most suitable arrangement; so long as there was uncertainty, it might be better to await the slow unfolding of His intentions in His good name.

And so the average Northerner, even after he came actively to disapprove of slavery, continued to be hamstrung in his opposition to it by the competitive pull of other values. Should prime consideration be given to freeing slaves, even though in the process the rights of property and the preservation of the Union were threatened? Should the future of the superior race be endangered in order to improve the lot of people seemingly marked by Nature for a degraded station? Ideally, the North would have liked to satisfy its conscience about slavery and at the same time preserve the rest of its value system intact--to free the Negro and yet do so without threatening property rights or dislocating the Union. This struggle to achieve the best of all possible worlds runs like a forlorn hope throughout the antebellum period- the sad, almost plaintive quest by the American Adam for the perfect world he considered his birthright.

So, to the confused white Northerner, non-extension did seem the perfect answer for balancing these multiple needs. Non-extension would put slavery on the course of ultimate extinction without producing excessive dislocation; since slavery would not be attacked directly, or its existence immediately threatened, the South would not be unduly fearful for her property rights, the Union would not be needlessly jeopardized, and a mass of free Negroes would not be precipitously thrust upon an unprepared public. Non-extension, in short seemed a panacea, a formula which promised in time to do everything while for the present risking nothing.

But like all panaceas, it ignored the certain hard realities: would containment really lead to the extinction of slavery? Would the South accept even the gradual dissolution of her peculiar institution? Would it be right to sacrifice two or three more generations of Negroes in the name of uncertain future possibilities? Alas for the American Adam, so soon to be expelled from Eden.

The abolitionists, unlike most Northerners, were not willing to rely on future intangibles. Though often called impractical or crazy or neurotic, they were in some ways the most tough-minded, sane, and moral of Americans. They had no easy faith in the benevolent workings of time or in the inevitable triumphs of gradualism. If change were to come, they argued, it would be the result of man's effort to produce it; patience and inactivity had never yet helped the world's ills. So, over and over, the abolitionists denounced delay and those who advocated it; they were tired, they said, of men using councils of moderation to perpetuate injustice.

Because they saw gradualism as ineffective, by 1840 most abolitionists had become immediatists, and their passion took on a compelling moral urgency. Men learned how to be free, the immediatists argued, only by being free; slavery, no matter how attenuated, was by its very nature incapable of preparing men for those independent decisions necessary to adult responsibility. Besides, they insisted, the Negro, though perhaps debased by slavery, was no more incapacitated for citizenship than were many poor whites, whose rights no one seriously suggested curtailing.

Because they wanted immediate emancipation, the abolitionists were seen as fanatics by the majority of Northerners. Even Northerners who opposed slavery thought abolitionism went too far. As a result, many moderates rejected abolitionism because THESE PEOPLE HAD DISTORTED PERSONALITIS. The stereotype which has long had currency sees the abolitionist as a disturbed fanatic, a man self-righteous and self-deceived, motivated not by concern for the Negro, as he may have believed, but by an unconscious drive to gratify certain needs of his own. Seeking to discharge either individual anxieties or those frustrations which came from membership in a "displaced elite", his anti-slavery protest was, in any case, a mere disguise for personal anguish.

A broad assumption underlies this analysis, which has never been made explicit--namely, that strong protest by an individual against social injustice is proof for his disturbance. Injustice itself, in this view, is apparently never sufficient to arouse unusual ire in "normal" men. Those who hold to this model of human behavior seem rarely to suspect that it may tell us more about our own values than about the reform impulse it pretends to describe; if normal people do not protest "excessively" against prejudice, then we should be forced to condemn as neurotic as those who protested against the Nazi persecution of the Jews or the abolitionists opposition to slavery.

Some of the abolitionists, it is true, were palpably neurotic, men who were not comfortable within themselves and therefore were not comfortable with others., men whose "reality-testing" was poor, whose lifestyles were pronouncedly more compulsive, whose relationships were unusual compounds of fantasy. Yet even here we must be cautious, for it is one thing to demonstrate an individual's "disturbance" and quite another then to explain all of his behavior in terms of it. Let us suppose, for example, that Mr. Jones is a reformer; he is also demonstrably "insecure." It does not necessarily follow that he is a reformer because he is insecure. The two may seem ideologically related, but we all know that many things can be logical without being true.

Actually, behavioral patterns for many abolitionists do not seem to be noticeably eccentric. Man like Birney, Lowell, Quincy--abolitionists all--formed good relationships, saw themselves in perspective, played and worked with zest and spontaneity, developed their talents, were aware of worlds beyond their own private horizons. They all had their tics and their traumas--as who does not--but the evidence of health is abundant and predominant. Yet most historians have preferred to ignore such men when discussing the abolitionist movement. And the reason, I believe, is that such men conform less well than do the Garrisons's to the assumption that those who became deeply involved in social protest are necessarily those who are deeply disturbed.

Does this not say more about the historian than the abolitionist? If we agree that slavery was a fearful injustice, and if motivational theory now suggests that injustice will bring forth protest from mature men, it seems reasonable to conclude that at least some of those who protested strongly against slavery must have done so from "healthy" motives.

The hostile critic will say that the abolitionists protested were simply too strongly But when is a protest too strong? It is too strong to protest against holding fellow human beings as property?

Surely there is now evidence enough to suggest that commitment and concern need not be aberrations; they may represent the profoundest elements of our humanity. Surely there are grounds for believing that those who protested strongly against slavery were not all misguided fanatics or frustrated neurotics--though by so believing it becomes easier to ignore the injustice against which they protested. Perhaps it is time to ask whether the abolitionists, in insisting that slavery be ended, were indeed those men and women of their generation furthest removed from reality, or whether that description should be reserved for those Northerners who remained indifferent to the institution, and those Southerners who defended it as a "positive good." From the point of view of these men, the abolitionists were indeed mad, but it is time we questioned the sanity of the point of view.

Those Northerners who were not indifferent to slavery--a large number after 1845--were nonetheless prone to view the abolitionist protest as "excessive," for it threatened the cherished values of private property and Union. The average Northerner may have found slavery disturbing, but convinced as he was that the Negro was an inferior, he did not find slavery monstrous. Certainly he did not think it an evil sufficiently profound to risk, by "precipitous action," the nation's present wealth or its future power. The abolitionists were willing the risk both. They thought it tragic that men should weigh human lives in the same scale as material possessions and abstractions of government. It is no less tragic that doubt their sincerity.