

## TEACHING AMERICAN HISTORY PROJECT – 2009-2012

*John Brown's Raid: Understanding Regional & National Reactions*  
from Peter Joseph

Grade: 11<sup>th</sup>

Length of class: 48 minutes

Inquiry (Essential Questions):

- How did different sectional regions of the United States react to John Brown's raid, trial, and execution?
- Where was blame placed for the Raid on Harper's Ferry? How was this blame justified?
- What areas existed for compromise between American regions after John Brown's Raid?

Objectives (Content & Skills):

- Students will:
  - Analyze primary source materials
  - Identify rhetoric and arguments used to justify or condemn John Brown's Raid
  - Assess the evidence provided by each speaker
  - Explain the difficulty in finding common ground after December of 1859
  - Brainstorm appropriate consequences for those responsible for Brown's Raid
  - Engage in debate over a historical controversy

Materials:

- Newspaper, sermon, and lecture excerpts from antebellum sources.
- Newspapers include: *Harper's Weekly*, *The Liberator*, *Boston Transcript*, *Eastern Times*, *Providence Post*, *New York Courier and Enquirer*, *New York Journal of Commerce*, *New York Evening Post*, *Cleveland Democrat*, *St. Louis Democrat*, *Richmond Enquirer*, *Charleston Mercury*, *Madison Weekly Visitor*, *Leesburg Washingtonian*
- Speeches and sermons include: Ralph Waldo Emerson's speech at Salem, MA (Jan. 6, 1860), Wendell Phillips' "The Lesson of the Hour" (Nov. 1, 1859), Henry David Thoreau's "A Plea for Captain John Brown" (Oct. 30, 1859), Sermon by Henry Ward Beecher (Oct. 30, 1859)
- All materials are transcribed below

Activities:

Divide the class into 3 groups (South/Midwest & Mid-Atlantic/North). Each group should be given a copy of the documents that pertain to their region. Student should NOT be given access to the views of the other regions.

During the lesson the teacher should circulate throughout the room and facilitate student decoding of the documents. Make sure that students are identifying the underlying motivations of each side

After students have completed reading the documents, the teacher should moderate a debate between the groups to find where common ground existed after John Brown's Raid. If none can be found, students should be asked to discuss the question of why the Civil War did not erupt in 1859.

Assessing Student Learning:

Each group will present a completed action plan (using the attached sheet), with each student's contributions clearly identifiable. The action plan will be scored for historical accuracy, as well as strength of evidence provided. Students will also be assessed based on their contributions to the class debate.

Connecticut Grade Level Expectations:

- Standard 1.1
  - 6. Compare and contrast various American beliefs, values, and political ideologies
  - 7. Analyze the influence of nationalism on American society
  - 9. Analyze the significance of the growing heterogeneity of American society
  - 12. Evaluate the role and impact significant individuals have had on American society
- Standard 1.2
  - 14. Describe how major events in U.S. history have affected Connecticut citizens
- Standard 1.8
  - 40. Analyze the relationship between law enforcement and personal behavior
- Standard 1.9
  - 45. Analyze historical and contemporary examples of the human need to ensure human rights at the national level
- Standard 2.1
  - 1. Find relevant and accurate information from a variety of sources to answer a history/social studies question
- Standard 2.2
  - 3. Cite evidence from a source to determine an author's purpose and intended audience
- Standard 3.1
  - 1. Use evidence to develop an interpretation of a historical event
- Standard 3.2
  - 5. Develop criteria for judging the actions or policies of an individual or group in the past

## *The Northern Reaction to John Brown's Raid*

*The Liberator*, Fri. Nov 4, 1859

At a meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society the following resolution was adopted: "Resolved that it is recommended to the friends of impartial freedom...in case of the execution of Capt. John Brown, to observe that tragic event, ON THE DAY OF ITS OCCURRENCE, in such a manner as deemed most appropriate for the furtherance of the anti-slavery cause, and to consecrate themselves to the patriotic and Christian work of effecting the abolition of that most dangerous, unnatural, cruel and impious system of slavery, which is the source of all our sectional heart-burnings and conflicts, which...tends to promote servile insurrections and civil war, ...which is a burning disgrace and fearful curse..., and by the speedy extinction of which alone can the land be saved from violence, blood, and utter demoralization.

*The Boston Transcript*, Nov. 4, 1859

The really wise men at the South will treat the whole affair as a most foolish, impracticable and unfortunate scheme, planned and lead on by a brave, simple-hearted, unselfish, and modest monomaniac, whose heart has been lacerated by his own sufferings, and whose brain, touched by insanity, has at length become really affected and diseased....Whatever may be his guilt or folly, a man convicted under such circumstances...will be the most terrible fruit slavery has ever borne, and will excite the condemnation of the entire civilized world.

*The Eastern Times* (Maine), Nov. 1, 1859

...that any sane men of any party deliberately counseled Brown, with a view to embarrass the South or to strengthen Northern sentiment, is too preposterous to be believed...Still, Republicanism cannot escape its share of responsibility...That the Republican party have *designed* to encourage such acts we do not charge; but their speeches, their doctrines, and their actions have stimulated them we have no sort of doubt. And...we charge an equal amount of responsibility upon the hotspurs of the South....Northern fanaticism and abolitionism are today being nourished and fattened on the untenable demands of the South....Forbearance is needed on both sides.

*The Providence (R.I.) Post*, Nov. 1, 1859

That John Brown and his associates are fanatics is plain enough, but that they are insane...cannot for a moment be pretended. They are just as insane as Garrison is, but having less caution...they are involved in difficulties from which he has escaped. The most that can be said of them is that they are men...who have allowed a single purpose to take possession of their minds....

Ralph Waldo Emerson, speech on Jan. 6, 1860 in Salem, Mass.

I am...surprised at the easy effrontery with which political gentlemen, in and out of Congress, take it upon themselves to say that there are not a thousand men in the North who sympathize with John Brown. It would be far safer and nearer the truth to say that all people, in proportion to their sensibility and self-respect, sympathize with him....All women are drawn to him by their predominance of sentiment. All gentlemen, of course, are on his side....For what is the oath of gentle blood and knighthood? What but to protect the weak and lowly from the oppressor. Who makes the abolitionist? The slave holder!

Wendell Phillips “The Lesson of the Hour”, speech on Nov. 1, 1859 in Brooklyn, NY.

Whatever calls itself a government and refuses that duty of rendering equal justice between men is no government. It is only a pirate ship. Virginia is a pirate ship, and John Brown sails the sea a Lord High Admiral of the Almighty, with his commission to sink every pirate he meets on God’s ocean of the nineteenth century. John Brown has twice as much right to hang Governor Wise as Governor Wise has to hang him. Harper’s Ferry is the Lexington of today.

Henry David Thoreau, “A Plea for Captain John Brown” speech on Oct. 30, 1859 in Concord, Mass.

It was Brown’s peculiar doctrine that a man has a perfect right to interfere by force with the slaveholder in order to rescue the slave. I agree with him. I think that for once the Sharps rifles and the revolvers were employed in a righteous cause. The tools were in the hands of one who could use them.

Some eighteen hundred years ago Christ was crucified; this morning, perchance, Captain Brown was hung. These are not the ends of a chain which is not without its links. He is not Old Brown any longer; he is an angel of light...

Rev. Henry Ward Beecher, sermon preached Oct. 30, 1859

Let no man pray that Brown be spared. Let Virginia make him a martyr. Now, he has only blundered. His soul was noble; his work miserable. But a cord and a gibbet would redeem all that, and round up Brown’s failure with heroic success....

The condition of the slave must be changed, but...there must be change in the law, ...in the church,...in the upper classes, ...in the middle classes, and in all classes. Emancipation when it comes will come wither by revolution or by a change of public opinion in the *whole community*.... The evil is not partial. It cannot be cured by partial remedies.

Journal Entry of Samuel Longfellow

The second of December, 1859. This will be a great day in our history; the date of a new Revolution, --quite as much needed as the old one. Even now as I write, they are leading John Brown to execution in Virginia for attempting to rescue slaves! This is sowing the wind to reap the whirlwind, which will come down.

## *The Mid-Atlantic and Western States Reaction to John Brown's Raid*

*Harper's Weekly*, Oct. 29, 1859

For whatever opinions a man may hold in reference to the slavery controversies..., all are unanimous against any thing like compulsory emancipation and servile revolts. The horrors of servile war...are vividly realized by men of all parties; even the warmest friends of the slave...would, like Mr. Everett, shoulder a musket at any time to prevent such atrocities. And though the leading Republican politicians and papers may and do repudiate the acts of Brown and his associates, it is likely that a large section of the people of this country will hold them responsible for what has happened. It will be said that men of Brown's stamp would never have committed but for the open sympathy expressed by persons of high standing with the cause they espoused....

*The New York Courier and Enquirer*, Nov. 15, 1859

The North, the Centre, and the West—the great heart and most efficient limbs of the Confederacy—are all true to the Union and the Constitution; and should disunion raise its head at the South, John Brown has taught the world how much opposition from that quarter is really worth. If seventeen fanatics, led on by a madman, could hold in subjection a town containing 2000 Virginians, and keep at bay whole regiments of Virginia militia, who even under the eye of their Governor dared not attack their invaders, but stood by and saw 12 United States Marines made the assault and capture in ten minutes—what would those same boastful soldiers do when confronted by Northern valor...?

*The New York Journal of Commerce*, Dec. 6, 1859

The present is not the first instance when the Union has apparently trembled upon the verge of dissolution....While the Republic was yet in its infancy, partisanship and sectional hate racked the nation, and seemed to portend its inevitable destruction. Matters were then in apparently far greater in extremity than now....Then it was Washington, almost despairing, said: "I can never believe that Providence, which has guided us so long..., will withdraw its protection at this crisis." And it did not....

We are now on the eve of one of the most important Presidential elections...and one apparently involving deeper interests....It is not unusual to hear expressions of earnest desire that Washington was now living to guide us in this emergency. His name is not yet forgotten but such is the bitterness of partisanship and sectionalism that even the 'Father of His Country' would at present fail to reconcile the differences of his wrangling children.

*The New York Evening Post*, Nov. 1, 1859

...there is no party to whose policy and principles the schemes of Old Brown are more abhorrent than the Republicans, and the Democratic office-holders and the abolitionists are the only parties who have the slightest reason to encourage the Kansas madman, or who can make capital out of enterprises like his.

Because the majority at the North are opposed to slavery, shall they be accused of inciting the men who clap the torch to the house of the slave-owner and arm the negro for insurrection?

*The Cleveland Democrat*, Oct. 28, 1859

A bolder or worse man the world never knew. His single virtue, “linked with a thousand crimes,” was bull-dog courage. Fanatic to the highest degree, he has been taught to believe that the killing of a slaveholder was an act which God would approve. When in this city last spring, in his lectures, he told of his stealing negroes and running them to Canada—of his stealing horses, which he then had with him for sale—of his shooting down slaveholders, and of other acts equally atrocious. “And now,” said Brown, “I wish to know if the people of Cleveland approve of what I have done...” and more than one-half the audience shouted “aye,” whilst not a single “nay” was heard.

*The St. Louis Democrat (Free Soil)*, Fri, Nov. 4, 1859

We should be better pleased if Brown and his followers, instead of being shot down like soldiers in battle, were made to die the ignominious death of traitors and murderers. They should have been saved for the gallows—every one of them. Were the slaves themselves to rise in revolt, their guilt, however great, would be light in comparison to the guilt of those white rebels. They not only spilled innocent blood, but they did their utmost to draw down destruction on the slave population of Virginia and Maryland, whose good they pretended to have in view, but who would be undoubtedly exterminated in the event of their uprising. Therefore, we say, they were the enemies of black and white. And here we protest against the weakness of making any plea of abatement, on the ground that “old Brown” is not in his right mind. The madness engendered as the spirit of unholy vengeance is not a mood on which the Spirit of Mercy can look with a benignant eye. Like the drunkenness which culminates in crime, it is but a preliminary stage of that instigation by the devil, which the law itself makes emphatic mention of.

## *The Southern Reaction to John Brown's Raid*

*The Richmond Enquirer*, Oct. 21, 1859

The "irrepressible conflict" was initiated at Harper's Ferry, and though there, for the time suppressed, yet no man is able to say when or where it will begin again or where it will end. The extend of this iniquitous plot cannot be estimated by the number of men detected and killed or captured; the localities from whence these men came—New England, Iowa, Ohio, Kansas—show an extent of the country embracing the whole Northern section of the Union, as involved in the attempt at instigating servile insurrection in Virginia. Alarming as is the fact that so extended a conspiracy is presented in the amount of means at the disposal of these leaders.

... "tents, blankets, spades, and about fifteen hundred Sharps Rifles with ammunition." From whence came the money to buy these things? When the known economy of our Northern brethren is considered, the fact that so large a sum has been furnished for the pillage of our property and the murder of our persons, will give some idea of what the South may expect were the "irrepressible conflict" just begun is finally ended, either by our triumph or subjugation.

*The Richmond Enquirer*, Oct. 25, 1859.

The Harper's Ferry invasion has advanced the cause of Disunion more than any other event since the formation of the Government; it has rallied to that standard men who formerly looked upon it with horror; it has revived, with ten-fold strength, the desire of a Southern Confederacy. The heretofore most determined friends of the Union may now be heard saying, "if under the form of a Confederacy our peace is disturbed, our State invaded, its peaceful citizens cruelly murdered by those who should be our warmest friends...and the people of the North sustain the outrage, then let disunion come."

*The Charleston Mercury*, Nov. 7, 1859

With all due reverence to the memory of our forefathers, I think the time has arrived in our history for a separation from the North. The Constitution has been violated. If the Union stands we have no security for either life or property. Emissaries are in our midst, sent here by a party which claims to have the good of the country at heart, but in fact are assassins. There are papers in the South supported by Abolition money. We must separate, unless we are willing to see our daughters and wives become the victims of a barbarous passion and worse insult.

With five millions of negroes turned loose in the South, what would be the state of society? It would be worse than the "Reign of Terror". The day of compromise is passed. We should not listen to the words of the Northern men who are continually telling us we are safe, while they attempt to ridicule this "Harper's Ferry business." Watch those fellows. Gentlemen may cry peace, but there is no peace. Every gale that sweeps from the North brings new instruments of death in our midst. We publish to the world the causes that impel us to a separation, and throw ourselves upon the justice of God. The hour has now come. The curtain falls, and the Republic framed by the hands of Washington and Jefferson fades from view. Better civil war than injustice and oppression.

*The Charleston Mercury*, Dec. 6, 1859

We are satisfied that every intelligent man in the South has been completely disgusted at the broad and pathetic farce that has been played off before the public about the hanging of that hoary villain, "Old Brown," from the five hundred invaders in possession of Harper's Ferry and the 1,000 negroes carried off to the mountains of Pennsylvania. The actions of the Governor of Virginia and Governor of South Carolina have been a tissue of disgrace, exaggerating, and invention sufficient to stir the gall of any Southerner who has regard for the dignity and respectability of the Southern people. To us it really looks as if those in possession of the telegraph were in league to ridicule the South and make us a laughing-stock to ourselves and before the world.

*The Madison Weekly Visitor (Georgia)*, Nov. 1, 1859

One of the remarkable features in our State and Federal Government at this time is a greatly diminished regard for the statutes of the land. This state of things is peculiar to no section of this country. The fanaticism of New England, acting upon a higher law than the Constitution to destroy the rights of the South, is not more treasonable in its consequences than the encouragement of unlawful enterprises at the South to override a sacred compact of the past in the revival of the slave trade from the coast of Africa.

The difficulty in Bleeding Kansas and the late affair at Harper's Ferry are only additional instances going to show that the law of inclination is being substituted for the law of the land. The law of retaliation is but the incubation of revolution, and an explosion sudden and overwhelming is destined, at no distant day, to burst upon this country.

*The Leesburg Washingtonian (Virginia)*, Nov. 1, 1859

These fanatics have learned by the result that our citizens and slaves are happy and contented, and will resist to the bitter end any interference. We in the South have also learned by this tragedy that the band of fanatics known as the abolitionists proper of the North constitute an exceedingly small portion of the Northern population. After a long and diligent effort, but fourteen white men and five free negroes could be mustered into their service.

*Reaction to John Brown's Raid*  
*Statement of Responsibility*

We, the residents of the American \_\_\_\_\_ States, having considered the evidence before us, find the following to be true in the case of the recent events that occurred in Harper's Ferry, VA from October 16-18, 1859. We find that John Brown and his followers were not the only parties responsible for what transpired. Rather, we further identify that the following groups and/or individuals are responsible for John Brown's Raid:

In the interests of securing justice for the injured parties, we feel that the following remedies should be made, and we trust that the offending parties identified above will find these to be just, honorable, and eminently fair:

Finally, in the interests of restoring harmony and feelings of goodwill and brotherhood to our Constitutional Union, we believe that the following changes should be made to the Constitution and to American society. All sensible parties will agree that these are the only way to preserve national peace: