A DISEASE
IN THE PUBLIC MIND

A New Understanding of
WHY WE FOUGHT THE CIVIL WAR

Thomas Fleming

Bestselling author of *The Intimate Lives of the Founding Fathers*

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To Alice—For Everything.

To see this country happy is so much the wish of my soul, nothing on this side of Elysium can be placed in competition with it.

—GEORGE WASHINGTON

We are truly to be pitied.

—THOMAS JEFFERSON

If you would win a man to your cause, first convince him that you are his sincere friend. Therein is a drop of honey that catches his heart.

—ABRAHAM LINCOLN

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Preface

The Civil War freed almost four million Americans from the humiliations and oppressions of slavery. It is undoubtedly one of America's greatest triumphs. As we celebrate the 150th anniversary of this huge event, however, we must also grieve. The Civil War is simultaneously America's greatest tragedy. No other conflict in the nation's 237-year history can compare to the anguish and grief it inflicted on the men and women who were engulfed by it.

For almost a century, the accepted figure for the number of soldiers killed in the war was 618,222. Recently, an historian who has restudied the census records of 1870 and 1880 has concluded that the toll was at least 750,000. There is a strong possibility that the correct number is 850,000. The Southern Confederacy's records vanished with their defeat. Their toll is only an estimate. If we include the wounded men who died prematurely over the next two decades, the toll for both sides may be 1,000,000. This much is certain: more soldiers died in that four-year struggle than the nation lost in all her previous and future wars combined.[1]

What makes these numbers especially horrendous is the fact that America's population in 1861 was about 31 million. In 2012, U.S. population is about 313 million. If a similar conflict demanded the same sacrifice from our young men and women today, the number of dead might total over 10 million. Think for a moment about how many stricken parents, wives, fiancés, and children would be struggling to cope with this tidal wave of grief and loss.

The enormity of the Civil War's tragedy grows even larger when we realize that the United States is the only country in the world that fought such a horrific war to end slavery. Other nations with large slave populations, such as Great Britain, which had 850,000 slaves in its West Indies islands, Cuba, which had almost 1,000,000, and Brazil, which had at least 3,000,000, ended the deplorable institution with relatively little bloodshed. Even Czarist Russia, with its millions of semi-slaves known as serfs, freed them without a war. Why were the Americans, with a government designed to respond to the voice—or voices—of the people, compelled to resort to such awful carnage?[2]

The question becomes even more perplexing when we consider another startling fact. Only 316,632 Southerners owned slaves—a mere 6 percent of the total white population of 5,582,322. These figures become doubly baffling when a further analysis reveals only 46,214 of these masters owned 50 or more slaves, entitling them to the aristocratic-sounding term, "planter." Why did the vast majority of the white population unite behind these slaveholders in this fratricidal war? Why did they sacrifice over 300,000 of their sons to preserve an institution in which they apparently had no personal stake?

I have devoted much of my literary life to writing about the American Revolution. My exploration of our founding years convinced me of the originality and importance of the heritage created by the men and women who won an eight-year struggle against the most powerful nation in the world and created the modern era's first republic. Ironically, this conviction made me even more baffled by the Civil War's eruption little more than a half century after George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and their compatriots turned the leadership of the new nation over to the next generation.

I never thought I would do more than muse about the Civil War until my good friend, Byron Hollinshead, director of American Historical Publications and former publisher of two distinguished history magazines, asked me to contribute to a book entitled *I Wish I'd Been There.* A gallery of well-known historians was asked to insert themselves into famous events of the past and describe them as if

they were on the scene. I became a spectator/ actor in John Brown's 1859 raid on Harpers Ferry.

I was mesmerized, not only by the chief protagonist, but by the reactions of prominent contemporaries, ranging from Robert E. Lee to Abraham Lincoln to Ralph Waldo Emerson. Especially fascinating was the statement of the president of the United States in 1859, James Buchanan. Brown's reckless venture was caused, Buchanan said, by "an incurable disease in the public mind." In his final message to Congress in 1860, as Southern states seceded and Civil War loomed, he repeated the assertion**.**

Buchanan's frequently hostile biographers have all dismissed or ignored these words. They caught my attention because in two of my previous books, I have explored how illusions play a role in history. Was the president talking about this sort of distortion?[3]

Few presidents have lower ratings than Mr. Buchanan in the polls historians take to rank the nation's chief executives as great, near great, mediocre, or failures. On the other hand, not many presidents had more experience in national politics than "Old Buck." He spent almost forty years as a congressman and senator, plus terms as secretary of state and ambassador to Great Britain, before winning the White House.

I soon discovered that President Buchanan did not originate the phrase "public mind." Thomas Jefferson frequently used the term to describe various aspects of the politics of his era. Writing to George Washington in 1792 about the angry disagreements stirred by the new federal government's financial policy, Jefferson warned, "The public mind is no longer confident and serene." Abraham Lincoln was another man who frequently invoked the phrase. In 1861 he accused the South of "debauching the public mind" about the right to secede. A century later, Democratic presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson declared, "Those who corrupt the public mind are just as evil as those who steal from the public purse."[4]

The public mind is intimately linked with public opinion, which one early nineteenth-century commentator called "that inexorable judge of men and manners" in a republic. But the public mind suggests something less fluctuating than opinion—and more complex than an illusion, which can be swiftly dispelled by events. The phrase implies fixed beliefs that are fundamental to the way people participate in the world of their time.[5] A disease in the public mind would seem to be a twisted interpretation of political or economic or spiritual realities that seizes control of thousands and even millions of minds. Americans first experienced one of these episodes in 1692, when the leaders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony became convinced that witches were threatening their society with evil powers. Over two hundred people were arrested and flung into fetid jails. Twenty-one were hanged, one seventy-one-year-old man was "pressed to death" beneath heavy stones, and at least seven died in prison.

No one has described this public frenzy better than the great New England novelist, Nathaniel Hawthorne. "That terrible delusion . . . should teach us, among its other morals, that the influential classes . . . are fully liable to all the passionate error that has ever characterized the maddest mob. Clergymen, judges, statesmen—the wisest, calmest, holiest persons of their day, stood in the inner circle roundabout the gallows, loudest to acclaim the work of blood, latest to confess themselves miserably deceived."[6]

A similar frenzy seized the nation in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, reaching a climax on January 16, 1919, when Congress passed the Eighteenth Amendment, banning the sale and consumption of alcoholic drinks. Prohibition destroyed the liquor industry, the seventh largest business in the United States. Tens of thousands of people lost their jobs. For the next thirteen years,

the ban corrupted and tormented Americans from coast to coast.

Rather than discouraging liquor consumption, Prohibition increased it. Taking a drink became a sign of defiance against the arrogant minority who had deprived people of their right to enjoy themselves. The 1920s roared with reckless amorality in all directions, including Wall Street. When everything came crashing down in 1929 and the grey years of the Great Depression began, second thoughts were the order of the day. Large numbers of people pointed to the state of mind inspired by Prohibition as one of the chief reasons for the disaster.

In 1933, a new president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, made the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment one of his priorities. But the evil effects of the plunge into moral redemption linger to this day, most notably in the influence of organized crime, better known as the Mafia, in many areas of American life. The experience proved that a passionate minority seized by the noble desire to achieve some great moral goal may be abysmally wrong.

Later in the twentieth century, a European disease of the public mind consumed a horrific number of lives. Communism, with its spurious goal of achieving economic equality, killed an estimated 50 million people in Soviet Russia alone and uncounted millions more elsewhere.

In America, an offshoot of this disease, McCarthyism, roiled our politics and morality for most of a decade after World War II. Spawned by Joseph McCarthy, a junior senator from Wisconsin, McCarthyism prompted thousands of Americans to become enraged investigators and persecutors of their fellow Americans, based on the often spurious accusation that they were or once had been Communists or Communist sympathizers. Many saw their legal, literary, film, or other careers ruined. Some people, driven to despair, committed suicide.

A good example was my friend, novelist Howard Fast, who was forced to write under a pseudonym to make a living. I was among several fellow writers who gave him quotes that his publisher used to help sell these secretly written books.

Analyzing these false beliefs gave me additional insights into how a disease in the public mind works its dark will on the world. It is backed by politicians and other prominent leaders, and often by a media apparatus—newspapers, pamphlets, books, magazine articles, and in the twentieth century, television, radio, and film—that reinforces the disease with massive repetition. At least as important are hate-filled verbal denunciations of real or supposed opponents.

On September 11, 2001, the United States awoke from the illusion that an era of peace and reason was dawning after the collapse of Soviet Communism in 1989. Muslim fanatics flew two passenger planes into the twin towers of New York's World Trade Center, and another plane into the Pentagon in Washington, DC, killing themselves and 2,700 Americans. The disease in the public mind that motivated these true believers was a warped version of the Mohammedan faith.

Perhaps President Buchanan's assertion that a disease in the public mind produced John Brown in 1859 and the ensuing Civil War deserves consideration, at the very least. Let us remember it while we visit a bloodstained Harpers Ferry and begin our journey into the history that inflamed John Brown's already unbalanced brain—the United States of America's entanglement with African slavery.

John Brown's Raid

Sunday, October 16, 1859, was a day of clouds and light rain in the rolling farm country of western Maryland. In a dilapidated two-story house rented from a man named Kennedy, twenty-one young men, five of them black, attended a religious service led by fifty-nine-year-old John Brown. Fiercely erect, with glaring blue eyes in a gaunt face largely concealed by a long grey beard, Brown urged them to ask God's blessing on the insurrection they were about to launch with their attack on the federal arsenal in Harpers Ferry, Virginia.

Brown confidently predicted that the arsenal's twenty thousand rifles and millions of rounds of ammunition would equip a conquering army of slaves from Maryland and Virginia and antislavery whites from nearby Pennsylvania. They would all flock to the cause when they heard the electrifying news that weapons of liberation were waiting for them. With Jehovah's help they were certain to achieve their awesome goal: nothing less than freeing the South's four million slaves.

Brown and his followers had spent the summer at the farmhouse, slowly accumulating weapons and ammunition. In their barn they now had 198 Sharps rifles, 200 Maynard revolvers, and 980 menacing pikes. The Sharps rifles were expensive, highly accurate guns, capable of firing 8 to 10 shots a minute. The six-shot Maynard revolvers were reserved for officers in their prospective army. The pikes, two-edged bowie knives attached to six-foot poles, were intended for the freed slaves, whom Brown assumed would have trouble mastering the intricacies of loading and firing a gun.

Some people, then and now, might wince at the idea of encouraging slaves to plunge these grisly weapons into the bodies of white Southerners. But John Brown was a man who did not flinch from shocking acts on behalf of his cause. The Connecticut-born visionary believed that slavery was an abominable crime, punishable by death—a conviction he had already demonstrated more than once. Among his favorite aphorisms was, "Without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin."[1]

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In the hot days of July and August, the volunteers had pondered maps of the southern states that John Brown had drawn on cambric. Each was filled with numbers he had gleaned from the census of 1850, identifying counties where slaves outnumbered whites, sometimes by ratios of six or seven to one. With the blacks he expected to muster and arm in Virginia and Maryland, Brown planned to focus on these counties, triggering a series of slave revolts that would demoralize and slaughter slave owners and their supporters from the Mason-Dixon Line to the Gulf of Mexico.

If white Southerners counterattacked, Brown planned to retreat into the Allegheny Mountains, where he and his followers would establish "maroon" communities, similar to the ones that escaped slaves had created in the mountains of Jamaica and Haiti. The word is derived from the French word *marron*, meaning a domestic animal run wild.[2]

Brown's band of followers was sure that thousands would rally to a banner held aloft by "Captain" John Brown. To them, he was a famous figure. During the guerilla war that had raged in Kansas earlier in the 1850s, some journalists had hailed Brown as a fighter on a par with the heroes of 1776. Five

prominent men from Massachusetts had joined a New York millionaire in giving him the money and encouragement for this immensely more ambitious attack on what they and Brown called "The Slave Power."[3]

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During the afternoon of October 16, Brown had assigned tasks to his troops. Eighteen would march with him to Harpers Ferry. In their pockets they carried captains' commissions authorizing them to organize the freed slaves into companies. Brown's son Owen and two other men would stay behind at the Kennedy Farm, awaiting word to move the guns and pikes to a site where they could be used by the new recruits.

At eight o'clock, Brown climbed onto a one-horse wagon loaded with pikes, some hickory-and-pine torches, and a crowbar, and led his men toward Harpers Ferry, nine miles away. In the moonless darkness the raiders passed undetected through the thinly populated rural countryside.[4]

Along with weapons, Brown brought two documents he considered of surpassing importance. The first was a "Declaration of Independence by the Representatives of the Slave Population of the United States of America." The declaration denounced slaveholders as pirates, thieves, robbers, libertines, woman killers, and barbarians. Politicians who tolerated this inhumanity were termed "leeches" unworthy of being called "half civilized men."

At least as important was a lengthier document—a "Provisional Constitution and Ordinances for the People of the United States." The constitution's forty-eight articles began by emphasizing that citizenship and participation in the government were guaranteed to all persons "of a mature age" without respect to race or sex. Another article specified that "all persons of good character . . . shall be encouraged to carry arms openly." Other clauses guaranteed protection to slaveholders who freed their slaves voluntarily and declared that the "commander in chief" (Brown) owned all goods and wealth confiscated from the enemy. Toward the close, consistency and order vanished. Brown had written the Constitution in a near frenzy, working day and night.

These documents reveal John Brown's vision of an America in which blacks and whites would live as equals. It was an extraordinary ideal for a white American in 1859, when the vast majority of the nation, North and South, regarded blacks as inferior and potentially dangerous. The presence of five black men in his volunteer army, living in intimate proximity with his white soldiers, proved Brown meant what he had written.

The scrawled, almost illegible pages of the declaration and constitution also offer significant clues to John Brown's personality. A psychologist who made a careful study of Brown's life concluded that their extravagant phrases—and frequent confusion—were part of a pattern that coruscated through his career. Again and again, Brown had nurtured grandiose schemes and dreams that invariably ended in disappointment. The psychologist concluded that Brown was a manic-depressive. In his manic phases he was capable of going for days without sleep and producing magnificent plans that were ruinously short on practical details.[5]

Earlier in the summer, some of Brown's followers had not been as confident as their leader that God had sent them to their rendezvous with history. Prominent among the doubters was twenty-one-year-old Oliver Brown, the youngest of the leader's sons. He had abruptly asked how their handful of men could subdue a town the size of Harpers Ferry—some 2,500 people. Oliver was probably wondering why Frederick Douglass, a former Maryland slave who had become an electrifying antislavery orator and writer, had declined to join his friend John Brown in this venture.

Brown had talked with swaggering confidence about how Douglass's presence would inspire thousands of slaves to rally to their cause. After listening to his plan, Douglass not only declined Brown's invitation, he had predicted that the captain and his followers would be captured or killed within hours of their appearance in the streets of Harpers Ferry with guns in their hands.

John Brown had let Douglass depart without reproaches. The discovery that Oliver Brown had equally grave doubts was a far greater shock. How could his own flesh and blood question the fact, as clear to him as morning sunlight, that God had chosen him to strike this blow that would annihilate slavery? After much debate, Oliver—and others who may have shared his doubts—succumbed to Brown's incandescent faith in his destiny and remained in the game.

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By the time the marchers reached Harpers Ferry, it was eleven p.m. and most of the town was asleep. Situated at the confluence of the Potomac and Shenandoah Rivers, The Ferry, as everyone called it, was a moderately well-to-do community, thanks to the steady flow of government cash to the workers in the federal armory and a private gun-making company, Hall's Rifle Works, on an island in the Shenandoah River. A bridge across the Potomac served the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad as well as foot and wagon traffic. Upstream, another bridge enabled travelers to cross to the right bank of the Shenandoah. Anyone who closed these bridges theoretically isolated the town. This fact, plus the arsenal full of guns, was the reason why John Brown had been attracted to the place.

In his manic confidence in his plan, John Brown ignored aspects of The Ferry that suggested it was a good deal less than an ideal place from which to launch an insurrection. Huge cliffs towered over the town. Any military force in control of those heights could make raiders in the streets or buildings of Harpers Ferry extremely uncomfortable. Another problem was the town's proximity to major population centers. It was little more than sixty miles from Baltimore and Washington, DC, with major highways running to both cities. The Baltimore & Ohio Railroad's main line also ran through the town.

These realities made it unlikely that Brown would have much time to spread the word of his insurrection to the eastern parts of Virginia and Maryland, where slaves were numerous, before whites organized serious opposition. Around Harpers Ferry, there were few large farms worked by gangs of field hands. Almost all the area's slaves were house servants.

Brown's first order, as they approached The Ferry, was to cut the telegraph lines. The strangeness —one might even say the folly—of this command would become apparent in the next few hours. On the Baltimore & Ohio bridge, the raiders quickly subdued the night watchman; they stationed two men on this bridge and two more on the Shenandoah bridge. The rest hurried through the silent streets to the redbrick armory, where an unarmed gateman was their only opposition. He refused to surrender his keys, but Brown used his crowbar to break the lock. Inside they quickly took possession of the armory complex while Brown announced in a prophetic voice: "I want to free all the Negroes in this state [Virginia]." If the citizens interfere with me, I must only burn the town and have blood."[6]

Brown personally led another detachment to Hall's Island to occupy the gun factory there. Meanwhile, other members of his tiny army seized blacks and whites on the streets and herded them into the armory. Another five-man detachment headed into the country to Beall-Air, the plantation house of Colonel Lewis W. Washington, a forty-six-year-old great-grandnephew of the first president. Brown wanted him not only for the moral effect of his name, but also for a ceremonial sword the colonel owned, which the father of the country had supposedly received from King Frederick the Great

of Prussia.

When balding, black-mustached Colonel Washington opened the door in his nightcap and confronted leveled rifles, he stepped back and said, "Possibly you will have the courtesy to tell me what this means." The leader of the detachment, Aaron Stevens, snarled that they were planning to free all the South's slaves, and taking him prisoner was a first step. As Washington dressed, the raiders found the ceremonial sword and several rifles, which they also appropriated.

Stevens asked if Colonel Washington had a watch. When he said yes, Stevens held out his hand. "I want it."

"You shall not have it, sir." Washington replied.

Stevens demanded all the cash in the house. "I am going to speak to you very plainly," the colonel said. "You told me your purpose was philanthropic. You did not mention it was robbery and rascality."

Colonel Washington was encountering one of the clauses in John Brown's constitution—all the property of slave owners could be appropriated for the cause. Intimidated by the colonel's defiance, Stevens contented himself with escorting the colonel, two white neighbors, and ten of their male slaves back to the arsenal. John Brown gleefully strapped on George Washington's sword, apparently thinking it gave him an aura of supreme command.[7]

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The shriek of a train whistle interrupted Brown's playacting. A Baltimore & Ohio express from Wheeling, Virginia, was approaching the bridge. Halted by an impromptu barricade, the engineer and conductor found an agitated man named Higgins standing beside the tracks, blood trickling from a wound in his scalp. He was the bridge's relief night watchman. When Oliver Brown and his partner on the bridge, a black named Dangerfield Newby, tried to seize him, Higgins had slugged Brown and run for it. He got away with a bullet nick in his scalp. The disbelieving trainmen walked toward the bridge and were driven off by several shots. They backed the train out of range and decided to await developments.

Meanwhile, Shepherd Hayward, a free black who worked as a station porter, walked out on the bridge to find out what was wrong with the train. "Halt!" shouted one of the guards on the bridge. The confused Hayward ignored the order and tried to retreat. A bullet thudded into his back and exited under his left nipple. He staggered into the station crying: "I am shot."

It would take Hayward twelve agonizing hours to die. The first victim of John Brown's insurrection was a free black man. There were many ex-slaves like Hayward in The Ferry—no less than 1,251—and only 88 slaves. One of many details that had escaped "Captain" Brown's manic planning was the way slavery was evolving in border states such as Maryland and Virginia.[8]

The shots awoke many people in Harpers Ferry. Men swarmed into the streets, some carrying guns. They dragged the bleeding Hayward into the station and summoned the town doctor to help him. The physician sent a messenger racing to the nearest large town, Charlestown, Virginia, asking for reinforcements.

Soon word of the seizure of the federal armory swirled through the crowd, followed by the fear that a slave revolt was about to explode. There was a general stampede to the heights outside town. Most of The Ferry's blacks fled with the whites. As dawn reddened the eastern sky, church bells began clanging everywhere. It was a long-prearranged signal for the farmers in the surrounding countryside to reach for their guns to repel a slave insurrection.

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In the armory, John Brown did little or nothing in a military way except strap on George Washington's sword. About three a.m. he walked out on the bridge and told the train's conductor it could proceed. Brown knew the train would stop at the next town on the line, Monocacy, Maryland, and telegraph the news of his incursion. This decision made no sense in the light of Brown's previous order to cut the telegraph lines. Apparently, only now had it dawned on him that he needed help in spreading the news of his insurrection. He apparently did not realize that the news would also arouse white opposition throughout Maryland and Virginia.

Around five a.m. Brown sent three men and two freed slaves armed with pikes back to the Kennedy Farm with orders to shift the rifles, revolvers, and remaining pikes to a log schoolhouse on the Maryland side of the Potomac River. This decision also made little sense. There was no sign of an outpouring of support from the area's slaves to use these weapons. Brown compounded this folly by telling his son Owen that everything at Harpers Ferry was going well.

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Rain continued to drool from the dawn-grey sky. When employees of the armory showed up for work, apparently unwarned by the fugitives on the heights, Brown added them to his bag of hostages. He ordered forty-five breakfasts on credit from the town's hotel, the Wager House. Brown ostentatiously refused to eat any of the food, declaring it might be poisoned—but he permitted his sons and the rest of his army to consume it. Aside from evidence of Brown's growing incoherence, the breakfast order revealed that this farseeing military commander had led his men to war without bothering to provide them with a morsel of food.

By now it was also evident that Brown had made no discernible plans to feed the hundreds—perhaps thousands—of slaves he hoped to maintain in his mountain strongholds. He had also wasted the hours of the night without making the slightest attempt to transfer any of the arsenal's twenty thousand rifles beyond the precincts of Harpers Ferry to arm the slaves. Nor had he displayed the slightest interest in spreading the news of his Declaration of Slave Independence and his Constitution for an equal-rights republic.

By this time many of The Ferry's citizens had recognized John Brown as the man who had called himself "Isaac Smith" and had visited the town many times during the summer while plotting his attack. This discovery more or less coincided with the arrival of several hundred armed militia from Charlestown on a Baltimore & Ohio train. They drove the two guards off the B&O bridge, sealing off any hope of Brown escaping into Maryland. Other militiamen cleared the Shenandoah Bridge. That ended the possibility of the raiders escaping southward into the Blue Ridge Mountains.

From the surrounding hillsides, militiamen began firing into the armory yard. One of the first shots killed Dangerfield Newby. A free mulatto, he had joined Brown in the hope of rescuing his wife and children from slavery in Virginia. In his pocket was a letter from his wife: "Oh dear Dangerfield, com this fall without fail, monny or no Monny. I want to see you so much thatt is the one bright hope I see before me."[9]

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With a thunderous roar, a locomotive pulling cars full of armed Baltimore & Ohio employees crashed through the gates into the upper end of the armory, rescuing most of the hostages, who were being

held in the watchman's office. Brown managed to get ten of the most important captives, including Colonel Washington, into the brick firehouse, which had stout oak doors. Confined to this single building, the raiders were still armed and dangerous. They fired often and accurately from the half-open door and from loopholes they created in the walls by knocking out bricks.

Fancying himself a general conducting a siege, Brown sent three of his men out the door under a flag of truce to see if he could negotiate a withdrawal from the town with his hostages. He promised to free them when he was at a safe distance. The militiamen ignored the flags of truce and seized the first man to emerge, William Thompson. They riddled the next man, William Stevens, and mortally wounded the third negotiator, Brown's twenty-four-year-old son, Watson, who crawled back into the engine house to die.

More bullets sang through the open door, mortally wounding Oliver Brown and Stewart Taylor, a Canadian who had been seduced by Brown's faith in his destiny. Another raider tried to escape by swimming the Potomac. He was hit by numerous bullets as he crawled up on a small island in the river and soon died there.[10]

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Perhaps the most distressed man in Harpers Ferry was the mayor, Fontaine Beckham. He had been the local agent for the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad for twenty-five years. Shepherd Hayward had worked for him. When the porter died around four p.m., the agitated Beckham began venturing out on the railroad tracks to get a better view of the firefight raging between the militia and the raiders in the engine house. He took cover behind a water tank and peered toward the embattled Brown and his dwindling followers. Apparently he was hoping for a sign that the raiders might be ready to surrender.

Crouched in the engine house's open door, Edwin Coppoc spotted Beckham and said, "If he keeps on peeking, I'm going to shoot." He thought Beckham was a sniper with a gun. The hostages begged him not to fire. "They'll shoot in here and kill us all!" shrieked one man. Coppoc ignored them and fired. His first shot missed, but a second bullet killed Beckham instantly. It was another ironic death. Beckham was well known for his friendliness to blacks. In his will he left money to help an ex-slave named Isaac Gilbert purchase the freedom of his wife and three children.

Enraged by Beckham's death, some militiamen took the captured Thompson out on the Baltimore & Ohio bridge and riddled him. They threw the body into the Potomac and used it for target practice. By this time, many of these infuriated opponents of John Brown were drunk. The Ferry's three taverns had done a brisk business all day. There were now more than six hundred Virginia and Maryland militia in the town. Their officers found it impossible to control them.

With only five men left in his army, including himself, John Brown permitted a militia officer to approach the building under a flag of truce and ask him to surrender. Brown refused, still insisting he had a right to negotiate a withdrawal with his hostages. The stalemate continued as night fell, punctuated by desultory firing from both sides.[11]

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Around ten o'clock another train steamed into The Ferry. Aboard were ninety marines, led by handsome, dark-haired Lieutenant Colonel Robert E. Lee of the U.S. Army. With him as an impromptu aide was a young army lieutenant, J. E. B. Stuart, who had been a cadet when Lee was superintendent of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in the early 1850s. Colonel Lee was now

commander of a cavalry regiment stationed in Texas.

One of the nation's most famous soldiers, thanks to his heroics in the Mexican War, Lee happened to be home on leave. He resided in Arlington, a handsome house across the Potomac River from the capital. His wife, Mary, had inherited the estate from her father, George Washington Parke Custis, the first president's step-grandson.

Colonel Lee had orders to end John Brown's raid as soon as possible. It was already creating shock waves of panic throughout Maryland and Virginia, with rumors of Brown's numbers mounting from several dozen to several hundred to several thousand.[12]

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Inside the firehouse, Watson and Oliver Brown were dying in awful pain. Oliver asked his father to kill him to end his agony. "You'll get over it," Brown snarled. When Oliver's cries continued, Brown snapped: "If you must die, die like a man." When the boy's sobs and moans finally ceased, Brown called, "Oliver!" There was no answer. "I guess he's dead," Brown said, without a trace of emotion in his voice.

While his sons died, Brown made speeches to his hostages. "Gentlemen," he said, "if you knew of my past history, you would not blame me for being here. I went to Kansas a peaceable man and the proslavery people hunted me down like a wolf." This was neither the first nor the last of John Brown's many lies.

One of the hostages asked Brown if he was aware that he had committed treason by attacking a federal arsenal. "Certainly," Brown said.

Two of the raiders, a brother of the dead Thompson and a young man named Anderson from Indiana, exclaimed in shock at Brown's admission. They announced that they would fight no more. They had joined Brown to free slaves, not commit treason. It was a sad glimpse of the simplicity of Brown's followers.[13]

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Meanwhile, Colonel Lee was conferring with the leaders of the militia. The colonel was inclined to storm the firehouse immediately. The locals demurred. A shootout in the dark seemed likely to prove fatal to some of the hostages. Lee agreed to wait until dawn.

Soon after daybreak, Lee ordered Marine Lieutenant Israel Green to pick twelve good men and storm the place, relying on the bayonet to lower the chances of killing any of the hostages. The signal to attack would come from Lieutenant Stuart, who was ordered to give Brown one more chance to surrender peacefully.

Stuart approached the firehouse door carrying a flag of truce; Brown opened it a cautious crack and pointed a rifle at the lieutenant's head. In spite of Brown's beard, Stuart recognized him as "Old Brown of Osawatomie," the Kansas guerilla. Stuart had served in a regiment of federal cavalry sent to pacify Kansas during the confused fighting between proslavery and antislavery settlers. Once, the cavalrymen had captured Brown, but they had lacked a warrant to arrest him and had let him go.

Stuart did his utmost to persuade Brown to surrender, pointing out that his situation was hopeless. He was outnumbered a hundred to one. When Brown tried to negotiate with him, Stuart tried in vain to make it clear that he had no power to change Colonel Lee's terms. Somewhere behind Brown a deep voice called, "Never mind us, fire!" It was Colonel Lewis Washington. Outside, Colonel Lee

recognized his voice. "That old revolutionary blood does tell," he remarked to no one in particular.[14]

Lieutenant Stuart stepped away from the door and waved his hat—the signal for the marines to attack. While two thousand spectators cheered, three marines with sledgehammers assailed the thick oak door. It remained amazingly intact. Finally, other marines seized a heavy ladder and used it as a battering ram. The door splintered and a chunk fell inward. The marines, led by Lieutenant Green, clambered through the gap. Rifles barked, bullets whined. One marine was killed instantly; another went down wounded. These casualties disinclined the rest of the marines to show anyone much mercy. Young Thompson and Anderson, who had been so shocked to learn they had committed treason, died from multiple bayonet thrusts before they could explain that they had quit fighting.

Lieutenant Green headed for John Brown, who was trying to reload his rifle. Green thrust his small dress sword into Brown's midriff—and was dismayed to see it bend almost double when it collided with the buckle on the strap of George Washington's sword. The infuriated Green beat Brown over the head with the hilt of the dress sword, knocking him unconscious.

In less than sixty seconds the fight was over, the hostages freed. Only one man surrendered successfully—Edward Coppoc, the killer of Mayor Beckham. One of Brown's black volunteers, Shields Green, who was a fugitive slave from South Carolina, tried to mingle with the captured Harpers Ferry slaves, but they showed no desire to protect him. He was seized by rough hands and made a prisoner.[15]

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On the other side of the Potomac, Maryland militiamen raced to the schoolhouse, which Owen Brown and his men had invaded with their guns and pikes, sending the teacher and panicked children fleeing into the countryside. By the time the militiamen arrived, this remnant of Brown's insurrectionary army had fled, leaving the weapons behind. The hundreds of pikes were an especially chilling sight to the militiamen. They shuddered at the havoc these weapons might have wrought in the hands of rebelling slaves.

Back in the firehouse, Brown was bleeding profusely from wounds to the head. They were all superficial; while they were being dressed, he regained consciousness. Marines carried him into the armory paymaster's office, where he lay on a pallet while dozens of curious Ferry townsfolk ogled him.

In the afternoon Virginia's governor, Henry A. Wise, and several other politicians, including Senator James M. Mason of Virginia and Congressman Clement Vallandigham of Ohio, arrived to question him. Reporters mingled with these visitors. Colonel Lee asked Brown if he wished the newsmen excluded. Brown said he wanted them to stay. He was eager to "make himself and his motives clearly understood."

Brown swiftly demonstrated his goal was obfuscation, not clarity. He did his utmost to conceal the identity of his northern backers. He also tried to muddle the scope of his insurrection. He told Senator Mason, "We came to free the slaves, and only that."

Congressman Vallandigham asked him if he had been hoping for a general rising of the slaves. "No sir," Brown lied. "I expected to gather them up from time to time, and set them free."

A reporter closed the interview by asking Brown if he had anything further to say. Brown paused for a moment, then replied: "I have nothing to say, only that I claim to be carrying out a measure I believe perfectly justifiable, and not to act the part of an incendiary or ruffian, but to aid those suffering great wrong. I wish to say, furthermore, that you had better—all of you people of the South

—prepare yourselves for a settlement of this question . . . sooner than you are prepared for it. You may dispose of me very easily—I am nearly disposed of now; but this question is still to be settled—this Negro question, I mean, the end of that is not yet."

While Brown was talking, Lieutenant Stuart led a marine detachment to the Kennedy Farm, where they seized Brown's maps of the South and his correspondence with his wealthy northern backers—proof of the huge slave insurrection he hoped to create and lead. But finding this evidence and convincing the American people that John Brown was ready to commit mass murder in pursuit of his blood-drenched dream turned out to be two very different things.[16]

Slavery Comes to America

Long before the first slaves arrived in the English colony of Virginia in 1619, slavery was a thriving institution in the New World. Hundreds of thousands of black men and women were already toiling on the farms and plantations and in the mines of the Spanish and Portuguese empires in Mexico and South America and on the offshore islands we call the West Indies.

Few people criticized or objected to slavery; it was one of the world's oldest social institutions, with roots in ancient Babylon, Greece, and Rome. Greece, the proud forerunner of rule by democracy, found no contradiction in insisting that slavery was essential to a thriving republic. The Roman republic and later the empire had tens of thousands of slaves within its borders.

The Hebrew Bible described Abraham and other early leaders of the Jews as slave owners. In the book of Leviticus, Jehovah told Moses that Jews were forbidden to enslave their brethren, but they were free to buy slaves "from nations around you." Another biblical passage had a huge influence on associating slavery with black people: Noah's curse on his son Ham for the sin of seeing his father naked while he was sleeping. (This seemingly harmless act may be a metaphor for a sexual assault.) Noah condemned Ham's descendants to be "the lowest of slaves." Among the offspring of Ham was Kush, the supposed progenitor of the blacks who populated Africa.[1]

The later religion of Islam forbade Muslims from enslaving fellow Muslims. But there was no barrier to enslaving "infidels." More than a million Christians, captured in wars and conquests, suffered this fate. The Muslims also transported thousands of Africans from nations and tribes that lived south of the Sahara Desert for heavy labor in their Mediterranean empire. Over the centuries, these luckless people acquired a derogatory reputation. One Muslim writer described them as "the least intelligent and least discerning of mankind."[2]

This early racism was communicated to white Christians in Spain and Portugal, where there was a Muslim presence for several centuries. Black slaves were numerous in both countries. The Roman Catholic Church found little or no fault with slavery. In 1488, King Ferdinand of Spain gave Pope Innocent VIII a hundred slaves as a gift. The prelate distributed them to various cardinals and Roman nobles. This tolerance was by no means limited to Spain, Portugal, and Italy. The great English humanist Thomas More thought slavery was the proper condition for those convicted of crimes, and he included it in his vision of the perfect republic, *Utopia.*[3]

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By the early 1600s, in the capital cities of Lima and Mexico City, half the population was enslaved Africans. France also participated in the imperial game, founding colonies in the West Indies and in what is now modern Louisiana that were heavily dependent on enslaved Africans. When Great Britain entered the competition for colonies, her powerful fleet soon won domination of the world's seas. The British too turned to Africa, where a veritable industry had developed, dedicated to capturing slaves in the interior and selling them on the seacoast. Over the centuries, the price per slave rose over 1,000 percent.

Between 1501 and the 1880s, when the last two South American states, Brazil and Cuba, abolished slavery, an estimated 12.5 million black men and women were purchased in Africa and resold in America. By far the greatest percentage of this staggering number labored to produce the New World's most profitable product: sugar—a rare luxury in Europe before Columbus. To grow and harvest it required unremitting, exhausting toil in a climate that was thick with diseases such as malaria and yellow fever.[4]

For almost four centuries, Brazil and the West Indies consumed (the word is chosen deliberately) 89 percent of all the slaves shipped to the New World. The Spanish mainland colonies imported only 4.4 percent. About 5.6 percent of this involuntary migration came to Britain's North American colonies.

These colonies were soon heavily involved in the slave-based sugar empire. Tons of molasses from the West Indies travelled to New England, where it was used in hundreds of distilleries to make rum. The same ships sold much-needed grain and other farm products to the overpopulated islands. Some colonies, such as Rhode Island and Massachusetts, participated in transporting slaves from Africa. By 1750, there were a half million slaves in the American colonies. Most of these bondsmen were in the South, but some northern colonies had substantial numbers.

At least 14 percent of New York's population was slaves; for New Jersey the figure was 12 percent, and for Massachusetts 8 percent. Like the rest of the New World's settlers, few Americans criticized the institution. "The great majority," John Jay of New York wrote in 1788, accepted slavery as a matter of course. "Very few . . . even doubted the propriety and rectitude of it."

This attitude was reinforced by the knowledge that slavery was hugely profitable. "The Negroe-trade . . . may justly be termed an inexhaustible fund of wealth and naval power to this nation," wrote one complacent English economist.[5]

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There were a few exceptions to this unanimity. In 1688, four Germantown, Pennsylvania, Quakers sent a vehement protest against slavery to their local Monthly Meeting. They declared that purchasing a slave was no different from buying stolen goods. The local Meeting forwarded it to Philadelphia's Quaker elders, who had authority of sorts over all the Quakers in America. The Philadelphia elders deposited it in their files and ignored it. Another century would pass before anyone else heard of it.

In 1700, Samuel Sewall, a Massachusetts judge who was deeply troubled by his role in the 1692 witch trials, freed a black man named Adam. The slave was able to prove that his master, John Saffin, had promised him freedom if he worked hard for seven years. Saffin reneged on the promise, claiming the slave had often been disobedient and defiant. The ex-master objected to Sewall's verdict and the judge responded in a pamphlet, *The Selling of Joseph*, that condemned the injustice of enslaving any human being, black or white. "It is most certain that all men, as they are sons of Adam . . . have an equal right unto liberty and all other outward comforts of life," Sewall wrote.

John Saffin responded in turn with a crude poem that made him one of the first Americans to argue that racial inferiority justified slavery.

THE NEGROES CHARACTER

Cowardly and cruel are these blacks innate
Prone to revenge, imp of inveterate hate
He that exasperates them, soon espies

Mischief and Murder in their very eyes
Libidinous, deceitful, false and Rude
The spume issue of ingratitude
The premises consider'd, all may tell
How near good Joseph they are parallel.[6]

Four decades passed before another American spoke out against slavery—and made a difference in the way many people perceived it.

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John Woolman was a twenty-two-year-old clerk in a dry goods store in Mount Holly, New Jersey. One day in 1742, he looked up from his desk, where he was adding up the day's receipts, when his employer said, "John, I've sold Nancy to this gentleman. Draw up a bill of sale for her."

His employer and the man beside him were both Quakers—the same faith into which John Woolman had been born. Quakers believed they should try to live as if every man and woman were a priest, with a direct relationship—and responsibility—to Jesus Christ and his teachings. Reading the Bible and meditating on the sacred words often brought a message from God—"a new light"—into their lives.

John Woolman got out a fresh sheet of paper and his quill pen. But something seemed to paralyze his arm. He could not write a word. What was happening to him? Why was a voice in his soul telling him that selling Nancy was *wrong*?

Nancy was a black slave who worked in his employer's house. Woolman did not know her well. In 1742, thousands of American Quakers owned slaves. Neither Woolman nor anyone else knew about the Germantown Quakers of 1688.

Suddenly John Woolman heard himself saying, "I believe slave-keeping to be a practice inconsistent with the Christian religion."

Both the buyer and the seller told Woolman this was a "light" that had not yet reached them. Would he please write the bill of sale? With great reluctance, John Woolman completed the document. By evening, Nancy was gone from Mount Holly. For the next few weeks John Woolman remained deeply troubled. In his journal he reproached himself for not asking to be excused from writing the bill of sale "as a thing against my conscience."[7]

Born on a farm in the Rancocas River valley in western New Jersey, John Woolman was a happy child who responded to the beauty of nature and a growing sense of God's presence in his soul. By the time he began working in Mount Holly, he had decided to devote himself to preaching God's word as it was revealed to him.

A few months later, when another Quaker asked Woolman to draw up a bill of sale for a slave, he refused. This man confessed that keeping a slave disturbed his conscience too. The men parted with "good will," Woolman noted in his journal.[8]

Slavery continued to trouble John Woolman. One day a close friend said he was drawn by the Spirit to make a journey to Maryland, Virginia, and the Carolinas to preach. He asked Woolman to join him. Woolman found the journey very upsetting. In the southern colonies, tens of thousands of slaves toiled on large plantations. New Jersey had only about ten thousand slaves. Most worked on relatively small farms, where the owner usually labored beside them.

Whenever Woolman and his friend stayed with southerners who "lived in ease on the hard labor of

their slaves," Woolman found it difficult to accept the food and drink he was offered. Again and again he felt compelled to "have conversation with them in private concerning it." When he revealed his growing conviction that slavery was a sin, many of his hosts politely told him to mind his own business. A few became angry.

Woolman confided to his journal his fear that slavery was casting "a gloom over the land" with consequences that would be "grievous" to future generations. Most colonists—including most Quakers—continued to ignore him. In 1750, Britain's Parliament officially sanctioned the slave trade. The city of Liverpool, which was making millions of pounds from the business, commissioned an artist to portray a black slave as part of their official seal.

John Woolman kept trying to stir consciences. He wrote a pamphlet, *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes*, and a fellow Quaker read it to the Philadelphia Meeting. It was an earnest argument against slavery as an injustice and a violation of the principles of the Christian religion.

With marriage and children, Woolman's responsibilities grew. He worked as a tailor, investing his profits in an orchard. But he spent part of every year traveling to preach against slavery. "What shall we do when God riseth up?" he asked at the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of Friends.

In Rhode Island, Woolman discovered that Thomas Hazard, son of one of the richest men in the colony, had become so troubled by the question Woolman was raising that he had freed all his slaves. His father, who owned far more slaves, was outraged and threatened to disinherit him. In 1758, when Woolman again addressed the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, the Quakers appointed a committee to begin working to abolish slavery in the colonies.

The committee decided to visit Newport, Rhode Island, and John Woolman was invited to join them. It was an agonizing experience. Rhode Island's ships and seamen brought thousands of slaves from Africa each year. The sight of the pens and chains aboard the slave ships made Woolman physically ill. In his journal he told of feeling like the biblical prophet Habakkuk when he saw people do things of which Jehovah disapproved. "My lips quivered . . . and I trembled in myself."[9]

Woolman petitioned the Rhode Island legislature to abolish the slave trade. The Newport Quakers, spurred by Thomas Hazard, expressed a cautious "unity" with the idea. The legislature ignored the petition. But Thomas Hazard vowed to devote the rest of his life to fighting for the abolition of slavery.

Back home in New Jersey, Woolman continued the struggle. To bear witness, he stopped using sugar when he realized it was produced by slaves in the West Indies. He called blacks his brothers and sisters, and reminded people that God was indifferent to the color of a person's skin. When he realized most of the clothes worn by colonists were dyed with indigo produced by slaves, he wore only undyed garments. This meant he wore white all year.

In 1772 John Woolman went to England, hoping to enlist English Quakers in a campaign to outlaw the slave trade in the entire British empire. He appeared at the London Yearly Meeting of Ministers and Elders, the most respected body in Quakerdom. More than a few members were rich, and many of them were distinguished scientists and thinkers.

These sophisticated Londoners goggled at John Woolman. "His dress was as follows," one wrote. "A white hat, a coarse raw linen shirt, his coat, waistcoat and breeches of white coarse woolen cloth, with yarn stockings." He presented to the Meeting his introduction from his brethren in New Jersey. It was read aloud. According to one account of the ensuing scene, Dr. John Fothergill, a noted physician, rose to suggest in an icy voice that Woolman's "service"—the concern that had brought him across the ocean—was accepted without any need for him to speak, and he should go home as soon as possible.