

Name: _____

Date: _____

John Brown

Inquiry Question: Was John Brown a “misguided fanatic”?

John Brown Timeline

1800 John Brown born in Connecticut.

1833 John Brown married his second wife, who took care of his five children and later bore him thirteen of her own. Finances got harder as he attempted to provide for his large family.

1837 November 7: John Brown vowed to end slavery when he learned that an abolitionist newspaperman was killed.

1842 John Brown went bankrupt. Lost almost everything.

1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854: Voters will decide if Nebraska Territory will be slave or free.

1855 John Brown followed his sons to Kansas as Free-Soilers.

1856 May 24: Brown went to nearby Pottawatomie Creek and directed his men in the murder of five proslavery settlers.

1859 October 16: John Brown attacked the armory at Harpers Ferry with 21 men (16 white, 5 black). Within 36 hours, they were almost all captured or killed. Two of John Brown’s sons were killed.

1859 November 2: A Virginia jury found John Brown guilty of murder, treason, and inciting a slave insurrection.

1859 December 2: John Brown was hanged.

1860 November: Abraham Lincoln elected President.

1861 April 12: The South seceded, and the Civil War began.

1865 The Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution abolished slavery.

Document A: John Brown's Speech (Modified)

I have, may it please the court, a few words to say. In the first place, I deny everything but what I have all along admitted -- the design on my part to free the slaves. That was all I intended. I never did intend murder, or treason, or the destruction of property, or to excite or incite slaves to rebellion, or to make insurrection.

I have another objection: had I so interfered in behalf of the rich, the powerful, the intelligent, the so-called great, or in behalf of any of their friends . . . it would have been all right; and every man in this court would have deemed it an act worthy of reward rather than punishment.

I believe that to have done what I have done--on behalf of God's despised poor was not wrong, but right. Now, if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life to further the end of justice, and mingle my blood further with the blood of my children and with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust acts-- I say: so let it be done!

Source: This was John Brown's last speech. November 2, 1859.

Insurrection: Revolt

Forfeit: Give up

1. John Brown delivered this speech on the last day of his trial, after hearing the jury pronounce him 'guilty.' He knew he would be sentenced to die. Given that context, what does this speech say about him as a person?

2. Based on this document, do you think John Brown was a "misguided fanatic"? Why or why not?

Document B: Last Meeting Between Frederick Douglass and John Brown (Modified)

About three weeks before the raid on Harper's Ferry, John Brown wrote to me, informing me that before going forward he wanted to see me . . .

We sat down and talked over his plan to take over Harper's Ferry. I at once opposed the measure with all the arguments at my command. To me such a measure would be fatal to the work of the helping slaves escape [Underground Railroad]. It would be an attack upon the Federal government, and would turn the whole country against us.

Captain John Brown did not at all object to upsetting the nation; it seemed to him that something shocking was just what the nation needed. He thought that the capture of Harper's Ferry would serve as notice to the slaves that their friends had come, and as a trumpet to rally them.

Of course I was no match for him, but I told him, and these were my words, that all his arguments, and all his descriptions of the place, convinced me that he was going into a perfect steel-trap, and that once in he would never get out alive.

Source: In this passage, Frederick Douglass describes his last meeting with John Brown, about three weeks before the raid on Harper's Ferry. Douglass published this account in 1881 in The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass.

1. What are two reasons why Douglass opposed John Brown's plan to raid Harper's Ferry?

2. Douglass's account is written in 1881, twenty-two years after the raid. Do you trust his account? Why or why not?

3. Based on this document, do you think John Brown was a "misguided fanatic"? Why or why not?