

John Brown Lesson Plan

Central Historical Question:
Was John Brown a “misguided fanatic?”

Materials:

- John Brown Powerpoint
- Copies of John Brown Timeline
- Copies of John Brown Documents A and B (Document C is optional)
- Copies of Guiding Questions

Plan of Instruction:

1. Opening lecture: Use PPT as guide, but feel free to add any details that seem important or interesting. *Leave final slide up as students work through documents.*
2. Introduce Inquiry: Explain that John Brown’s raid shocked and polarized the country:
 - In the NORTH:** bells rang; many speeches condemning slavery; Brown considered a martyr
 - In the SOUTH:** horrified that the raid almost succeeded; more convinced that they can’t live in the United States
3. As a class, read through John Brown Timeline.
4. Students work through Guiding Questions for Documents A and B.
5. Discussion:
 - Based on the Timeline and Document A, what kind of person would you say John Brown was?
 - Did the Douglass document change your opinion of John Brown? Why or why not?
 - Was John Brown a “misguided fanatic?” Why or why not?

Citations:

John Brown, Speech to the Court at his Trial. November 2, 1859.
http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/John_Brown's_Speech_to_the_Court_at_his_Trial

Frederick Douglass. *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 1881, p. 278.
<http://books.google.com/books?id=X8ILAAAIAAJ>

Lydia Maria Child to John Brown, October 26, 1859, *Letters of Lydia Maria Child with a Biographical Introduction by John G. Whittier and Appendix by Wendell Phillip* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1883), 280.

<http://housedivided.dickinson.edu/main/index.php?q=node/2188>

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

Vocabulary

Insurrection: revolt

Forfeit: give up

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

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. This account was published by Douglass in 1881 in The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass.

Document C: Letter to John Brown in Prison (Modified)

Massachusetts, Oct 26th, 1859

Dear Capt Brown,

You do not know me, but I have supported your struggles in Kansas, when that Territory became the battle-ground between slavery and freedom.

Believing in peace, I cannot sympathize with the method you chose to advance the cause of freedom. But I honor your generous intentions, I admire your courage, moral and physical, I respect you for your humanity, I sympathize with your cruel loss, your sufferings and your wrongs. In brief, I love you and bless you.

Thousands of hearts are throbbing with sympathy as warm as mine. I think of you night and day, bleeding in prison, surrounded by hostile faces, sustained only by trust in God, and your own strong heart. I long to nurse you, to speak to you sisterly words of sympathy and consolation. May God sustain you, and carry you through whatsoever may be in store for you!

Yours with heartfelt respect, sympathy, and affection.

L. Maria Child.

Source: The letter below was written to John Brown while he was in prison, awaiting trial.

Guiding Questions

Name _____

Document A:

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:

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?