

New York Tribune “Kansas Fruits” (1859)

John Brown’s failed attempt to raid the weapons depot at Harper’s Ferry, Virginia, triggered a wave of condemnations from across the country and exacerbated sectional and partisan tensions over the slavery issue. The objective facts: in mid-October, 1859, Brown with more than twenty supporters attacked the government arsenal but were thwarted by local militiamen and U.S. troops led by Robert E. Lee; Brown and a handful of surviving allies were found guilty of treason by the state of Virginia and executed in early December.

Of course, subjective interpretations of these facts would diverge widely—divisions that are reflected by contemporary press accounts. This first one comes from the New York Tribune, a Republican-leaning newspaper, which published its editorial on October 28. The second one, from the Democratic-leaning Mercury, based in Charleston, was published on November 1.

Those who are now straining every nerve to make party capital out of Old Brown, are careful not to look back so far as to see how and why he became a monomaniac. They look away from the fact that his attempt to get up an insurrection in Virginia is a legitimate consequence of the Kansas-Nebraska bill, and, but for the passage of that measure, would never have happened. President Pierce and Judge Douglas are thus the real authors of the late insurrection.¹ After them, scarcely less guilty are Senators Badger of North Carolina, Pearce of Maryland, and the great body of Southern Whigs who followed their lead; and following, in close and indivisible conjunction, come the whole body of Southern Democrats of every hue and description. There are Senators Mason and Hunter; Representatives Letcher, Bocock, and their associates, from Virginia; Toombs, and Stephens, and Cobb, of Georgia; Keitt, and Brooks, and Butler, of South Carolina; Brown and Jeff Davis of Mississippi, Clay of Alabama, and the whole throng of their associates, whose names need not be enumerated. These are the real guilty parties in this transaction. They are the true authors of this last insurrection, and, as such, are the men to be held to account for its results, present and future. But while these are the men of the South, and such as Toucey & Co. from the North, who are the guilty parties, there are others who are free from all implication with it. The individuals who may wash their hands of all blame and all responsibility for this event, are those few brave men of the South who resisted that fatal measure, on the ground of the mischief it would work to the South; such as Bell, and Etheredge, and Cullom of Tennessee, and Hunt of Louisiana. These men can point to their record with pride and with triumph at this moment. While the great body of Southern legislators and statesmen stand implicated before the country as being the proximate authors of the recent tragedy at Harper’s Ferry, these few truly brave and enlightened guardians of Southern tranquility can point to their arguments and their example as those which, if followed by considerate men, would have spared the country the details, and the South the dangers, it seems barely to have escaped. Sharing in this high position, stand the whole body of Anti-Nebraska men from the North, who resisted that measure of iniquity. That its fruits have returned to plague its inventors is no more than was predicted, no more than was to have been expected.

¹ Democrat Franklin Pierce was U.S. president from 1853-1857; “Judge Douglas” is a reference to Stephen A. Douglas, U.S. Senator, Democrat, and author of the Kansas-Nebraska Act.

John Brown is a natural, born on the soil of Kansas, out of the germinating the great content on the soil of that Territory. Before the day of Kansas outrages and oppression, no such person as Osawatamie Brown² existed. No such person could have existed. He was born of rapine, and
45 cruelty, and murder. Revenge rocked his cradle, disciplined his arm, and nerved his soul. We so not mean to say that revenge alone was the motive-power that actuated him. His moral nature was roused, and its instincts and logic backed his determination with a profound power. But Kansas deeds, Kansas experiences, Kansas discipline created John Brown as entirely and completely as the French Revolution created Napoleon Bonaparte. He is as much the fruit of
50 Kansas as Washington was the fruit of our own Revolution.

Let those, then, who have reproaches to heap upon the authors of the Harper's Ferry bloody tumult and general Southern fright, go back to the true cause of it all. Let them not blame blind and inevitable instruments in the work nor falsely malign those who are in no wise implicated, directly or indirectly; but let them patiently investigate the true source whence this demonstration
55 arose, and then bestow their curses and their anathemas accordingly. It is childish and absurd for Governor Wise³ to seize and sit astride the wounded, panting body of Old Brown, and think he has got the villain who set this mischief on foot. By no means. The head conspirators against the peace of Virginia are ex-President Franklin Pierce and Senator Douglas. These are the parties he should apprehend, confine, and try, for causing this insurrection. Next to them, he should seize
60 upon Senators Mason and Hunter of Virginia, as accessories. Let him follow up by apprehending every supporter of the Nebraska bill, and when he shall have brought them all to condign punishment, he will have discharged his duty, but not till then. ...

Old Brown is simply a spark of a great fire kindled by short-sighted mortals. When Old Virginia had roused herself in the persons of her Governor and Senators, and in the might of her military
65 power, and had extinguished that spark, by getting Old Brown under, why, that was the end. That was all there was to be done. The subsequent valor and activity, the epaulettes and lace, and horses and sabers, afterward displayed, were so much sheer surplus, and the exhibition only provocative of ridicule. The other branch of the display, in pretending to fix the responsibility of the outbreak upon the Republicans generally, we dismiss with the exposition we have already
70 made. There is no just responsibility resting anywhere, no just attribution of causes anywhere, for this violent attempt, that does not fall directly upon the South itself. It has deliberately challenged and wantonly provoked the elements that have concentrated and exploded.

² Nickname for Brown, in reference to his actions during the "Bleeding Kansas" events of 1856.

³ Henry A. Wise was Virginia's Governor from 1856-1860.

Charleston Mercury “The Pan of Insurrection” (1859)

Although BROWN'S effort at an insurrection has been silly and abortive, the developments are rapidly showing that a widespread scheme was maturing at the North for insurrections throughout the South. A carefully concocted plan is published in the New York Herald, republished in the Richmond Whig, and incorporated into the address of the Democratic Committee of the City of New York in an address to the people of New York, by which slavery was to be overthrown in the South with the aid of military force from the North. We forbear laying this scheme before our readers on account of its incendiary nature, but we advise our readers to get it and read it for themselves. It will give them a clearer insight into the true relations they occupy in the Union, and the “priceless value” of its continuance to them, than any other document which has yet seen the light. It is no answer to say that the diabolical incendiaries who can in cold blood get up such a scheme for our destruction, are comparatively few in numbers in the North. It is enough for us to know that, few or many, they have, by the Constitution of the United States, the right to come among us—to live among us—and in their good time carry out their purposes; and even if their purposes should fail again and again, and scaffold after scaffold shall drip with their gore, the elements of mischief and trouble may survive them, and give new impulse to future adventurers and fanatics. The great source of the evil is, that we are under one government with these people—that by the constitution they deem themselves responsible for the institution of slavery, and, therefore, they seek to overthrow it. They do not plot insurrections for Cuba or Brazil. If we had a separate government of our own, the post office, all the avenues of intercourse, the police and military of the country, would be under our executive control. Abolitionism would die out at the North, or its adherents would have to operate in the South as foreign emissaries, in a country armed and prepared to exclude their intercourse or arrest their designs, and punish their intervention. As it is, the “irrepressible conflict” of SEWARD⁴ is destined to go on, although it may be checked and suppressed by repeated failures, until one of two things shall take place—the Union shall be dissolved, or slavery shall be abolished. The experience of the last twenty-five years, of ignominious toleration and concession by the South, with the lights of the present reflected on them, show to the most bigoted Unionist that there is no peace for the South in the Union, from the forbearance or respect of the North.

The South must control her own destinies or perish.

Source for both: Secession Era Editorials Project/Furman University Department of History
<http://history.furman.edu/editorials/see.py?menu=jbmenu&sequence=jbmenu&location=%3E%20John%20Brown%27s%20Raid%20on%20Harper%27s%20Ferry> (accessed 7/30/16)

⁴ “Irrepressible conflict” was from a famous speech by Republican William H. Seward the previous year. Seward, an opponent of slavery, was referencing the growing divide between North and South caused by the institution.