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Source: Gerald Danzer et al, *The Americans*, Evanston, Illinois, McDougall Littell, 1998.

The Reaction to John Brown

... On the night of October 16, 1859, (John Brown) led a band of 18 men, black and white, into Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia). His aim was to seize the federal arsenal there, distribute the captured arms to slaves in the area, and start a general slave uprising.

No such uprising occurred, though. Instead, local troops killed eight of Brown's men. Then a detachment of U.S. marines, commanded by Colonel Robert E. Lee, ...killed two more of the raiders, and captured Brown. Brown was turned over to Virginia to be tried for treason.

... On December 2, 1859, Brown was hanged for treason in the presence of federal troops and a crowd of curious observers. Public reaction was immediate and intense in both sections of the country. Although Lincoln and (Stephen) Douglas condemned Brown as a murderer, many other Northerners expressed admiration for him or his cause. The raid itself may have been the work of a madman, they acknowledged, but Brown's motive was "sublime." Bells tolled at the news of his execution, guns fired salutes, and large crowds gathered to hear fiery speakers denounce the South. Some Northerners began to call Brown a martyr for the sacred cause of freedom.

The response was equally extreme in the South, where outraged mobs assaulted whites who were suspected of holding antislavery views. Harpers Ferry terrified Southern whites, who were convinced the North was plotting slave uprisings everywhere. Even long-time supporters of the Union called for secession. As one former Unionist explained, "I am willing to take the chances of ... disunion, sooner than submit any longer to Northern insolence and Northern outrage."

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