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## One Sunday in America: Echoes of John Brown

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# One Sunday in America: Echoes of John Brown

## Abstract

I had just walked into the house Sunday night and turned on the television, intent on going to bed early for a change. It was a little after 10pm. CNN was announcing that a speech dealing with a grave national security by the President was imminent in just a few minutes. Wolf Blitzer expounded how the Sunday address was unprecedented and telegraphed that it was big news. But no one knew the topic. [*excerpt*]

## Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, John Brown, Osama bin Laden

## Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Public History | Social History | United States History

## Comments

*Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public* is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

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# Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

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**THURSDAY, MAY 5, 2011**

## One Sunday in America: Echoes of John Brown

"So perish all such enemies of Virginia! All such enemies of the Union! All such enemies of the human race!"

-J.T.L. Preston, Virginia Military Institute at the execution of John Brown, 2 December 1859

"In this man's death, there is no sorrowing, no weeping, but the grimmest joy and sternest satisfaction. So perish all such enemies of the Republic, all such enemies of mankind."

-a prominent Lincoln scholar's Facebook status upon hearing of the execution of Osama bin Laden, 2011

Just go with me on this. It has everything to do with Civil War era America and the echoes that the 19th century has today, I promise...

I had just walked into the house Sunday night and turned on the television, intent on going to bed early for a change. It was a little after 10pm. CNN was announcing that a speech dealing with a grave national security by the President was imminent in just a few minutes. Wolf Blitzer expounded how the Sunday address was unprecedented and telegraphed that it was big news. But no one knew the topic.

I tend to be a apocalypse hypochondriac. My mind raced. Nuclear war? Asteroid collision? I (no joke) punched up the [NASA NEO program's close approach table](#) and scoured it for any hint of the bad news (The fact that I know such a table exists and where to find it hints at the way I can get paranoid sometimes).

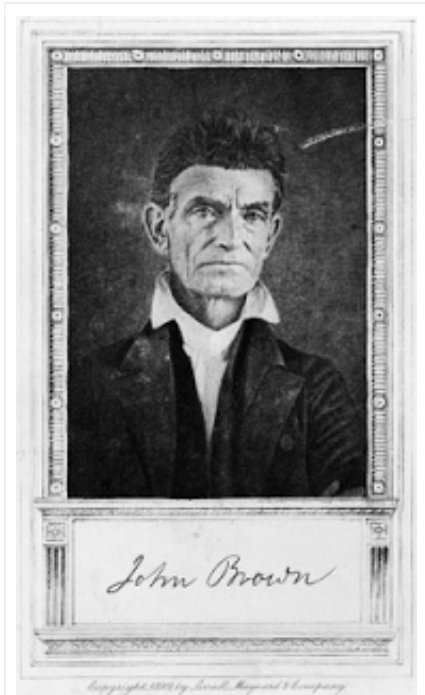
Then the news broke, first on MSNBC, then Fox, then eventually CNN. Osama bin Laden had been killed.

I felt relief, not that he was dead, but that the earth wouldn't become a Sunday night rerun of a Michael Bay film. Then the pictures on my screen transformed. From 'pebble beach' where the White House exterior remotes are shot, the camera panned to Lafayette Square. I know that fence pretty well. Living close to DC, I sometimes wander down to stand there in awe of that building where, just a century apart, Lincoln and LBJ both signed documents which altered the nation forever and helped it limp toward its promise.

Outside the fence were revelers. College kids running down from GWU, the reporters intoned, had spontaneously broken out in celebration. People were leaping up and down in front of the gates, waving flags and shouting slogans. "U! S! A!" echoed across the square (like some Olympic hockey stadium) where once Lincoln and Seward walked. Then they began singing a very off-key version of the Star

Spangled Banner.

My heart sank. It reminded me so much of the celebrations on 9/11 which we saw piped in from around the Arab world. Pockets of distasteful celebration at the loss of a life.



How can one man engender  
so much hatred? / [PD](#) / [LOC](#)

But I'm an historian of the 19th century. My mind slipped quickly from 2001 to 1859. I saw that crowd rejoicing in the street instead wearing sack coats or top hats, wearing militia uniforms or hoopskirts. The drunken reverie of 2011 gave me a glimpse of the Virginian psyche on the death of John Brown in 1859. When Robert E. Lee entered Harpers Ferry, he came upon a scene of drunken reverie. The militia were drinking down their share of the stores of liquor lining the shelves of the town's taverns. Firing shots at Brown's raiders more likely resembled a drunk day at the gun club than a measured military action. In fact, it more than likely looked like that crowd in front of the White House. People were cheering, chanting and shouting slogans as men like Dangerfield Newby fell dead in the streets.

As the week has progressed, I've been following the existential crisis of celebrating death which has cropped up between the stoic and the celebrant. The public comments have been most telling. One commenter named "westTN" on a story asking [how we should feel about bin Laden's death](#) professed having, "no qualms about an enemy being killed. My Marine nephew waiting on new legs is happy, my Marine son-in-law preparing to deploy is happy. Me, an old Marine Sgt, happiness is a warm M-16 and a confirmed kill. Semper Fi." Another commenter named "whadaham" queried, "We're supposed to be happy because now the terrorists have another fallen hero they can use as a recruiting tool." As militia were celebrating the success of the Marines at Harpers Ferry, the "old man," as Shield Green called him, was transforming into a symbol. Brown became a fallen hero and a catalyst for Abolitionists in their continued quest for the freedom of four million. Across the North, in churches on the 2nd of December, 1859, men and women prayed and eulogized as John Brown dangled from a rope in Virginia. And with

their prayers they reconsecrated themselves to ending the slave system which killed their martyr.

Another commenter on that same story, "3511danny," noted his confusion at one student who, "stated in the article that we don't have a right to kill anyone. Of course we do." "ghintlial," summed their thoughts up quite succinctly: "I hope the CIA put at least 3,000 bullets in bin Laden's body before they dumped him in the ocean, for the 3,000 lives that were killed at Ground Zero!"

Meanwhile, 151 years earlier in the streets of Harpers Ferry, a black man, a former slave lay dead, his throat pierced with a makeshift bullet from a militia musket. His name was Dangerfield Newby. As townspeople rifled his pockets in front of the Armory's gates, they found a bundle of letters. Newby's wife had written him begging him to free her from slavery. The militia was incensed. They left the body in the streets, defiled it. They walked up to the lifeless corpse and fired off their pistols and rifles into the cold flesh. They filled the body with holes in the name of the four dead citizens whose lives Brown's raiders took. They sought vengeance on a lifeless form which used to be a man. But to them, he was a dog, an animal. To them he was worthless.

Is celebration at any death right or wrong? I don't know the answer to that question. I know what my gut tells me and I know what my heart tells me. The dilemma, though, is nothing new. It dates to the genesis of the war. [Can we bluntly compare bin Laden and Brown? No.](#) But the feelings they engendered in their fellow man have some striking similarities. The Civil War's moral crises have deep relevance to today.

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One final comment from a forum I frequent often, which resonates with the typical neo-confederate argument of why Southern soldiers deserve universal laud (emphasis added). Take it as a word of caution:

"Admittedly, I am overjoyed at his death; Osama has the blood of hundreds of British civilians on his hands, as well as American blood. *I will however point out that he died fighting for what he believed in; which is an admirable goal in itself.*"