

Armies of God: John Brown and the American Terrorist Tradition

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“John Brown is received of God, though outlawed by those whose very government is itself a piracy against God’s government”

John Brown belonged to a political subculture so outraged by the existence of slavery that it had come close to denying the legitimacy of the American state apparatus, and to arguing that armed resistance was not only justified, but obligatory. The full implications of these views are perhaps not obvious because of the subsequent consecration of his cause, and the national rejection of slavery. In this case at least, the end appears to have justified the means. However, similar approaches have been employed by many subsequent movements which likewise argued for the right and duty to take up arms against the American state, actions which have however been classified as terrorism rather than part of any freedom struggle or protest. This paper will examine the history of such movements that viewed the American polity as so utterly corrupt and dangerous as to demand resistance, active or passive. The paper will concentrate on the Right-wing tradition that stretches from the anti-semitic groups opposing the New Deal through the militant anti-Communist movements of the 1960s to the militias and anti-government extremists of the last two decades. It will also consider the strand of activist militancy in the pro-life movement that has occasionally reflected in violence and murder. Paradoxically, therefore, the true heirs of Brown’s thought may rather be found on the extreme and racist Right as much as on the Left

John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry rapidly acquired a political significance far beyond the immediate circumstances of the local conflict, and its elevation to legendary status has perhaps made it difficult to understand the exact context in which the event should be viewed. What exactly was the nature of the raid, and to what other events in American or world history might it be compared? Should we consider Harper’s Ferry as a failed insurrection, an aborted putsch, or a guerrilla operation? In each case, the terminology inevitably carries its weight of association, heavily laden with value-judgments: in modern thought, “guerrilla“ has implications quite as favorable as those of “putsch” are undesirable. The question of context has been especially significant for those modern movements that have sought to annex the memory of John Brown for their own hagiography. Of what, if anything, was he a precursor?

To understand this issue, we might consider another armed operation from our own times, which superficially at least has quite close resemblances to the Brown episode. In July 1984, roughly a dozen well-armed men wearing paramilitary uniforms robbed a Brink’s truck at Ukiah in Northern California, stealing nearly four million dollars in order to provide a war-chest for a guerrilla campaign which they were then planning, and which they at least commenced before they were halted by federal law enforcement. The group in question was

The Order, a White Supremacist movement of strong Nazi sympathies, which was directly inspired by the pro-Hitler manifesto, the Turner Diaries. The Order was led by Robert Jay Matthews, who has been aptly described as one of the most successful terrorists in American history, at least until his death at the hands of federal law enforcement in late 1984.

Though Matthews' aims were diametrically opposed to those of Brown and his companions, the similarities between the two events were quite strong, however resentfully a comparison would be viewed by the participants in either case. In both instances, a dissident political movement spawned extremists thoroughly dissatisfied with what they viewed as the excessive moderation of the mainstream, and resolved to advance the cause by paramilitary action. In both cases, activists undertook a raid in order to secure the supplies essential to extend and prosecute a war which, they hoped, would culminate in the destruction of the social and political regime they viewed as wholly corrupt. And both Brown and Matthews hoped that the specific action would help detonate an apocalyptic racial confrontation. Incidentally, a superficial resemblance between the two acts, at Harper's Ferry or Ukiah, is reinforced by the heavily Biblical language and symbolism employed by the modern Rightists: Matthews' raid was preceded by a prayerful reading of the 91st Psalm.

The problem here is one of definition. Although the Ukiah attackers did not carry out any of the specific acts that we normally think of as terrorist, the action unquestionably fitted into a broader pattern which can only be so described, and the event is often included in accounts of American terrorism. The Harper's Ferry event, of course, is not, which is interesting, as this conflict was marked by far more bloodshed than Ukiah, and it was Brown, not Matthews, who took hostages to further his goals. It was also marked by tactics and ideology that had much in common with modern terrorist movements.

The question then arises: does Harper's Ferry belong anywhere in the long American tradition of political terrorism? Even posing the question might seem bizarre or even shocking, but the answer is more complex than might initially appear to a generation long accustomed to viewing terrorism as an outside phenomenon, something that originated elsewhere (usually in the Middle East) and which threatened to "come to America". Or such, at least, was the image before April 1995, and the clearest evidence yet that terrorism could be very much a home-grown product.

In reality, John Brown can all too readily be contextualized with numerous other armed extremists whose actions have often been characterized as "terrorist", and the label can only plausibly be removed from him if at the same time we challenge the justice of the appellation for those other notorious counterparts. And strikingly, the great majority of these later activists belong to the political Right or (more commonly) the ultra-Right. What makes John Brown unusual in this company is that the ideological trappings of his movement belonged to the Left, or at least are normally characterized thus. However, a comparison with other groups suggests the shallowness of that Left-Right division in the American context, and points instead to the long continuity of other sources of ideological commitment and division, to the politics of conspiracy theory, and above all to apocalyptic religion. The difference between Brown and Robert Matthews is literally black and white, in that one fought for human equality while the other struggled to suppress the very concept. In tactics and methods, however, the two had much in common.

Brown, it appears, is not viewed as a terrorist leader because his cause soon triumphed, and he was recognized as a hero and revolutionary martyr, an apotheosis which is the dream of every practitioner of revolutionary violence over the last century: to quote Fidel Castro, history will absolve them. In this isolated case, it has done so, and abundantly.

What is Terrorism?

Contrary to a widespread impression, the United States has a long experience of acts that have popularly been described as “terrorist”, in the sense of gun or bomb attacks by paramilitary groups against political or civilian targets, and robberies or arms thefts to sustain such campaigns. At the turn of the century, such actions were often associated with labor violence, and thus had a left-wing character. Prior to Oklahoma City, the bloodiest political bombing in US history was the Wall Street attack of 1920, commonly attributed to anarchists. Puerto Rican nationalists and anti-Castro Cubans have both maintained lengthy campaigns over the last three or four decades, as have Croat nationalists and domestic political extremists of both Left and Right; and of course, there have been the notorious instances of violence directed by Middle Eastern activists. Most recently, violence of this kind has derived from extreme environmental and animal rights groups.

The first and perhaps most difficult question is to decide exactly in what sense these actions constituted “terrorism”? The media tend to work on the basis of “we know it when we see it”, and in cases like Oklahoma City bombing, identification of the act as “terrorism” seems obvious. However, that the word is pejorative rather than objective is indicated by the fact that virtually no so-called “terrorist” group acknowledges that title, and prefers some other terminology. The cliché justly holds that “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter”. Put another way, “I am a soldier; you are a guerrilla; he is a terrorist”.

In contrast to other countries, the United States has no legal definition of terrorism, so that no prisoner has ever been accused or tried on the simple offense of “terrorism”. Laws ostensibly designed to combat the behavior have generally focused on certain specific actions, such as bomb-making, arms offenses and hostage taking. Only with the very recent Anti-Terrorism Act has a classification of terrorism formally been introduced into US law.

The standard FBI definition presents terrorism as “the unlawful use of force or violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social goals”. The problems here are manifold, for example in setting all governments on a moral par, so that an act of resistance against the most savage dictatorship is treated as indistinguishable from that against a liberal democracy, while “unlawful” could in practice mean an act contrary to any statutes, however repressive. The definition makes no allowance for justified resistance, and in fact uses terrorism as a blanket term for any act of political violence which the US government happens to stigmatize. During the 1980s, the imposition of sanctions against “terrorists” of various kinds led to years of intense controversy among academics and policy specialists about whether this label could properly be applied to those engaged in a paramilitary struggle against an oppressive regime. The two cases most frequently mentioned were the I.R.A. and the South African A.N.C., both of whom had substantial bodies of sympathy in North America.

The focus of the definition has subsequently shifted from the armed nature of the violence to its indiscriminate character, and the US government now tends to accept the State Department view, which defines terrorism quite simply as premeditated, politically motivated violence directed against noncombatant targets. Even this delineation is flexible, and on other occasions, the definition is expanded to include factors like the following: the acts must be clandestine or surreptitious in nature; they are random in their choice of victims; they are intended to create an overwhelming sense of fear; and they should be undertaken by a non-state or sub-national group. Other violent actions that do not fall within these categories might be variously classified, as acts of war or resistance, of partisan or guerrilla conflict, of subversion or sabotage. It should incidentally be noted that nothing

in this package of criteria implies anything about the ethnicity, national origins or ideological background of the terrorist: the stereotype of the armed Middle Eastern fanatic active in bombing or hijacking is very much a media creation of the 1970s.

Terrorist or Guerrilla?

John Brown could not conceivably have been termed a terrorist by his contemporaries, as the term in nineteenth century usage generally referred to actions committed by a government against its people, on the model of the Revolutionary Terror in the France of the 1790s, and it was still used in this sense by the Russian Bolsheviks of the 1920s. Moreover, his goal was that of the guerrilla or partisan commander rather than the terrorist, as he sought a general rising rather than the series of pinpricks that so often denote a terrorist war, the “war of the flea”. Was he not Commander in Chief of the Provisional Army created by the Chatham Convention? However, this distinction is interesting in itself. Modern terrorists rarely choose the methods they employ for reasons other than necessity, and like Brown or Robert Matthews, would much prefer to wage a large scale guerrilla or even conventional war. Most movements view terrorist actions as a regrettably essential first phase in which dissidents can gain strength and resources, and carry out armed propaganda among the populace, preparatory to the wider rising. The main force in Irish terrorism in the last quarter century has been the Provisional Army Council of the Irish Republican Army.

Terrorism is thus a detonator rather than an end in itself. It was a century after Brown’s time that his specific strategy acquired a name, when Latin American leftist guerrilla movements of the 1960s evolved the theory of liberating specific rural areas, focos, from which subsequent operations could be undertaken. The transference of foco theory to urban areas and the evolution of the “urban guerrilla” idea by Carlos Marighela and others was pivotal to the development of modern terrorism, and was later employed by armed movements as far afield as Italy, Argentina, Ulster and South Africa.

Marighela was a key influence on the book *Turner Diaries* by “Andrew MacDonald”, properly William L. Pierce, who offers in novelistic form a manual for the armed overthrow of the United States by revolutionary action: the text that so inspired Robert Matthews, as well as the accused Oklahoma City bombers. In *Turner*, a series of sporadic terrorist incidents of extraordinary violence and ruthlessness destabilizes the System to such an extent that the rebels of the fictional “Order” begin to secure liberated zones. This process culminates with an attack by hundreds of guerrillas that secures control of much of southern California. A nuclear civil war ensues, in which a majority of the American population dies. Following the victory of the Order, remaining Jews and non-Whites are exterminated, first on American soil and then on a global scale, and by 1999 the dream of a White world becomes a reality. Once again, terrorism is not an end in itself but a vital stage on the road to conventional warfare, and apocalyptic triumph.

The evolution from terrorism to open armed struggle can be observed in the brilliant 1965 film *The Battle of Algiers*, which has the curious distinction of being one of the items most used in the training and inspiration of terrorist and anti-terrorist forces. Based on real events in Algeria in 1957, the film shows how urban terrorist actions achieve little in the way of direct military success and indeed cause the obliteration of the activists themselves, but failure itself proves sacrificial and ultimately positive: the people are galvanized, and erupt in a general popular insurrection which evicts the French oppressors and secures the birth of the Algerian nation. The closing scenes of national revolutionary regeneration have proved immensely inspiring to terrorists and revolutionaries worldwide over the past three decades.

In the American context, both Marighela and the *Battle of Algiers* were foundation texts for the Weather Underground, the extremely active urban guerrilla band founded in the

late 1960s. In the mid-1970s, however, the Weather movement adopted rhetoric and slogans designed to show continuity with American radical traditions, and especially interracial solidarity. A key theoretical tract was the Prairie Fire statement; while their main journal (founded in 1975) chose the interesting name of *Osawatimie*.

Innocent Bystanders?

The term “terrorist” must admittedly be employed retroactively, but even so, the Brown raid has much in common with modern acts of revolutionary violence, especially in the taking prisoner of noncombatant town residents and landowners. In Brown’s eyes, they were presumably prisoners of war whose inconvenience was a small price to pay in order to secure the wider goal of promoting a slave rising. However, such justifications have regularly been employed by modern hostage-takers, for whom the chief interest lies not in the holding of any specific individual but rather the wider social and political goals which are advanced by such an action. With recent experiences in mind, it is ironic to read the encomia of earlier historians about the tender humanity with which Brown treated his hostages, even in the thick of battle.

Moreover, it is uncertain exactly how Brown viewed the operation of his mountain bastion, his *foco*, in the massively unlikely event that it had been secured. Obviously he saw it as more than a merely defensive slave refuge, as he dreamed of future operations that would lead partisans against the plantations and towns of the slave society. In this scenario, violence against civilians would be inevitable, and would likely have proceeded on the savage model of mutual reprisals already established in the earlier battles in Kansas. Could Brown or his intimates have viewed any member of a slaveholding family as truly innocent? Certainly Brown’s friend Gerrit Smith envisaged the likely rising as involving the mass rape of southern white women, and Brown himself was giving thought to what might be done to prevent a repeat of the horrors of the earlier slave rising in Santo Domingo. As Thaddeus Stevens wrote, “I know what anarchy is. I know what civil war is. I can imagine the scenes of blood through which a rebellious slave population must march to their rights. They are dreadful”. Yet as for Brown, Stevens still believed that violence was justified, whether it meant the killing of a slave-catcher or open insurrection.

The question of “non-combatants” is a sensitive one. The phrase normally refers to individuals other than soldiers in uniform, though international law and military practice extends some kind of combatant status to those who materially support the war effort of a particular state or force, including political leaders and civilian workers in essential communications or manufactures. But the line is often hard to draw. When 240 US Marines were killed by a bomb attack in Beirut, this was conventionally described in the American media as a colossal act of terrorism. US military and diplomatic sources differed sharply on the applicability of this label, some arguing that the victims were serving soldiers with access to weapons, and they had recently been in armed combat with members of the factions which dispatched the truck-bomb. However, the “official” position subsequently decided that the act was in fact terrorism, on the grounds that the Marines were non-combatants as their purpose in Beirut was peace-keeping rather than warfare strictly defined. They were moreover killed by an act of clandestine violence while off-duty. The logic here is tenuous to say the least.

For present purposes, the issue is that the criterion of violence against non-combatants often involves a sizable element of subjective political judgment. In the guerrilla battles in “bleeding Kansas”, it was extraordinarily difficult to determine who might legitimately be accorded the status of non-combatants, and reprisals were regularly taken against individuals and groups on the strength of their real or perceived political loyalties, or

their relationship to known fighters. Brown himself used the term “execution” for such killings, which is of course the parlance common to modern terrorists. As with many modern political conflicts, a case could be made that given such polarization, there were no innocent bystanders.

In summary, let us imagine a modern incident in which a body of heavily armed anti-government protesters raid a government arms depot, and take civilian hostages in the hope of securing a getaway. Moreover, the goal in undertaking such an operation is clearly meant to be the development of future armed operations against the government, and violence against social or ethnic groups with which the protesters disagree violently. Even if the hostages were subjected to no deliberate harm, there is no question that both government and media would unhesitatingly describe such actions as constituting terrorism, and meriting the wholehearted implementation of the laws and policies devised to combat this menace. While the group themselves might claim to be acting as soldiers, partisans or guerrillas, such relatively neutral terms would only be found in those sectarian organs which actively supported their cause, and even then this language would be used with some restraint, for fear of provoking official reprisals. If a modern John Brown had acted thus in 1996 rather than 1859, he would beyond doubt be characterized as a terrorist.

Legally, the ultimate fate of the hypothetical modern Brown would differ only marginally from that of the historical reality: the criminal charges in the case would be a federal rather than a state matter, and the chance of execution might be somewhat reduced (though the fate of the Oklahoma City bombers remains open at the time of writing). Otherwise, he would face charges quite as grave as what Brown faced, and both the laws invoked and the precedents cited would derive from the American experience with terrorism. At the very least, charges would include “non-political” acts including murder, attempted robbery and arms offenses, but there would also be political elements of the sort regularly invoked against modern armed groups like the Order, Puerto Rican nationalists, and White Leftist militants like the Weather Underground and the United Freedom Front, charges like seditious conspiracy and RICO. With such abundant evidence of real and intended revolutionary violence, the imaginary Brown case of the 1990s would be a federal prosecutor’s dream. And it would emphatically be a terrorism trial.

Ideology and Revolutionary Violence

Where John Brown came closest to modern revolutionary and terrorist ideologies was in his belief that armed insurrection was not merely justified, but was a moral imperative. He foreshadows modern radicals in his vision of the state mechanism as wholly corrupted, and his concept of revolutionary violence as a necessary form of self-defense.

In the decades after 1820, abolitionist sentiment became so commonplace among Northern social elites as to constitute a virtual orthodoxy. Most abolitionists accepted that slavery was an unqualified evil and the governments which tolerated it were utterly wrong to do so. What distinguished Brown and other radicals was their more systematic analysis of the ultimately political framework on which the slave system depended. The whole idea of holding or transferring property in human beings relied on defending this notion through the courts, just as the right to seize and return fugitives was inconceivable without the cooperation of the acquiescence of the criminal justice system, both federal and state. The conclusion was that slavery was ultimately upheld by the constitutionally established authorities, and political events of the 1850s showed that the institution could not be changed without a thorough transformation of those authorities, above all at federal level. If slavery was an abomination, then so was the governmental mechanism which defended and legitimized it.

From this point however, different arguments were possible. One response was to withdraw from the workings of the polluted regime, which might take the form of advocating the rupture of the union, or else pursuing a personal “secession” from public life after the pattern of Thoreau. Another course was passive resistance, to refuse to support any law or authority engaged in enforcing the slave system. By the 1850s, this type of reaction had become very common in the northern states, where whole communities refused to obey actions taken under the federal Fugitive Slave law, and when mobs prevented the implementation of legally proper measures against escaped slaves. There were countless confrontations with slave-takers and marshals through the decade. The riots and personal confrontations that erupted from such “rescues” had the effect of drawing into illegality some highly respectable members of a given community,

The most extreme form of resistance to perceived injustice was the revolutionary approach represented by Brown and supporters like the “Six”, for whom effective armed resistance was not only justifiable but essential. For Brown, moderate abolitionists practised “milk and water principles”: “these men are all talk. What is needed is action - action!”. The revolutionary abolitionist approach deserves attention, as its core beliefs had much in common with those of other revolutionary movements through the history of the United States, and indeed of many other Western nations. The central theme was that the government of the day was carrying out policies in direct violation of some perceived higher value or goal, and (equally important) that these policies constituted a direct threat to the lives, safety and property of a large section of the population which it claimed to represent. These harmful policies or acts were not simply the transient decisions of one party or administration, but a pervasive evil which permeated the whole structure of government, and perhaps of the wider society.

Crucially, this evil could not be removed by the use of constitutional, legal or electoral means, so that resort must be made to extra-legal behaviors. Though subversive actions might violate law and conventional standards of conduct, they were justified on the grounds of some value superior to codified or official law. Moreover, they were sanctioned and even demanded on the grounds of self-defense. Like virtually every revolutionary movement, radical abolitionists believed they were under assault by the mechanisms of the state and its corrupt allies, and their illegal actions merely constituted an appropriate defensive response.

Also following a common historical pattern, abolitionists found that their acts of resistance or civil disobedience excited repression, which in turn reinforced their belief in the rightness of their cause, and their conviction of the necessity for self-defense. As conflict and disaffection grew, radical interpretations of the regime they opposed grew steadily more hostile and conspiratorial, so that even relatively innocuous acts of the regime were framed as part of an overarching conspiracy. Such a portrayal of the evils of the established order often ventures into the language of the demonic and dualistic, even if the cause of the dissidents is not explicitly religious. When however divine law is taken as the cause at stake, as in the abolitionist movement, radical rhetoric generally takes on millenarian overtones, of messianic and apocalyptic thought.

The thought-world of the radical abolitionist has been described in David Brion Davis’ classic account of the theory of the “Slave Power Conspiracy”, an idea which he viewed as one manifestation of the long history of the “paranoid style” in American thought. In abolitionist thought, the Slave Power had controlled the United States for decades before the outbreak of the Civil War, violating the wishes of the overwhelming majority of citizens, who were also the real sources of the nation’s wealth. Slavemasters operated as a clandestine

power controlling political and economic life behind the scenes, and often using violence to the point of poisoning and assassination against their enemies. Religious allusions were amply employed to exemplify this sinister manipulation, inevitably so given the profound Biblical element which pervaded the cultural life of Victorian America. Unlike the South, the North would not “fall down and worship the golden image” of slavery, the power of the Antichrist. For writers like Charles D. Drake and Theodore Parker, the conflict was thus “between truth and falsehood, between Heaven and Hell”, and ultimately between God and Satan. The southern slave system was an “Apocalyptic Dragon”, “pouring its vials of wrath upon the nation”. The Book of Revelation was well ensconced in abolitionist thought years before the composition of “John Brown’s Body” .

It was the South which had begun the inevitable struggle, by “levying war against the institutions of their fathers” (George Julian). To quote William Lloyd Garrison, “The spirit of southern slavery is a spirit of EXTERMINATION (sic) against all who dare represent it as a dishonor to our country, rebellion against God, and treason against the liberties of mankind”. In self-defense, Northerners and abolitionists turned to their own models for liberation, from the Biblical David and Moses, Joshua and Gideon, to the American examples of the Puritans, to Paul Revere and the Minutemen (not, generally, to slaveholders like Washington and Jefferson).

The revolutionary thought of the abolitionist era would find many echoes in subsequent radical and revolutionary movements, from Marxists and anarchists through anti-semitic and anti-Communist militants, and to the ultra-Rightists of the last two decades. All such movements held with varying degrees of conviction or plausibility that the government of the day represented not its electors and constituents but dark forces pledged to a conspiracy against the good of the people. Like the Slave Power, the clandestine elite was a parasitic monster sapping the social and economic well-being of True Americans. For the Left, the state mechanism served the capitalist class, founded upon the system of organized robbery known as capitalism, and defended by For the Left, the state mechanism served the capitalist class, founded upon the system of organized robbery known as capitalism, and defended by the guns of state hirelings. For the Right, the secret masters of the United States indeed included capitalists and plutocrats, but these were only elements in a far larger conspiratorial structure in the hands of the Zionist or Communist manipulators. As in Brown’s day, resistance against these foes was demanded by the campaigns which they had initiated against the lives and liberties of Americans, through policies such as the subversion of the middle class, the penetration of godless and communist ideas through the education system, the promotion of sexual immorality and thus the attack on the family. The influence of these ideas is suggested by the emergence of populist paramilitary organizations to resist the further progress of decay, groups such as the Ku Klux Klan or the “shirt “ movements of the 1930s, the Minutemen of the 1960s or the militia groups of the last decade. In each case, the language is that of violence and extra-legal methodology, but the justification is always the same, that “they” started it: revolutionary violence always presents itself as defensive.

Constructing the Beast

As David H. Bennett has shown, the same themes unite the language of the “party of fear” across the decades, and especially the similar ways in which dissidents construct the treacherous monster which their government has become. Monster, or rather, Beast, a word explicitly borrowed by many of the groups from the same apocalyptic mythology that so enthralled the abolitionist generation. This religious vision is perhaps the key distinction between the American extremist groups and the European movements with which

superficially they have so much in common. However much they employ the rhetoric of European ideologies of Left or Right, American revolutionary movements are commonly suffused with religious and especially millenarian concepts and terminology, yet another area in which they echoed the abolitionists. From a European perspective, John Brown seems like an incomprehensible lunatic: from the American politico-religious tradition, he is perilously close to the mainstream.

From recent years, for example, remarkably detailed analyses of the nature of the Beast can be found from two very different but both influential books. The first, *The New World Order* is the work of Pat Robertson a critical political figure, who mounted a serious Presidential bid in 1988. He has since become the inspiration of the “Christian Coalition” movement that has come to dominate Republican party politics in many state. Robertson’s best-selling tract depicts recent world crises as signs of the manipulation of sinister clandestine forces, international financiers linked to “New Age” religion, and ultimately of secret societies like the Freemasons and the Bavarian Illuminati. The goal and slogan of the secret Masters is the “New World Order”, a rationalist, secular and anti-Christian utopia that will in fact be the realm of the Antichrist portrayed in the Book of Revelation. In Robertson’s view, a struggle is inevitable between the “people of faith and people of the humanistic-occultic sphere”

Also from the Right, but from a very different political shade, comes the *Turner Diaries*. For Pierce, the regime encountered by the dissidents is American only in name, as the country is in fact governed by the ZOG, the “Zionist Occupation Government”, and federal law enforcement forces in particular are agents of the ZOG. The true center of power in the United States is the Israeli Embassy, relaying edicts from Jerusalem. The social order administered by the ZOG is collectively known as “the System”, and its goal is the destruction of White society through economic, moral and especially sexual subversion, and the veiled but violent warfare waged by Black and minority criminals with the acquiescence of liberal courts and police. A society where young White people are constantly encouraged by the media to participate in Black and Jewish cultural habits and to engage in sex across racial lines is, in Pierce’s view, a society doomed to extinction through miscegenation.

Only the hardest of hardcore Nazis employ the term “the ZOG”, but the other concepts have become commonplace on the extreme Right: the enemy is the New World Order, the System, and very often with its religious resonance, the Beast. For those who accept such a picture of contemporary society, the struggle against the Beast has been in progress for over a decade now, though so far the battles have been of the brushfire variety that rarely gains media attention. Between 1983 and 1985, the real life Order undertook its organized campaigns in several western states, before going down to ruinous defeat at the hands of the federal law enforcement agencies they had so totally underestimated. Most accounts of American terrorism tend to ignore the violence over the next decade, suggesting a period of relative tranquility until the catastrophe at Oklahoma City, but this would be deceptive. Frequent arrests and trials have illuminated the activities of dozens of individuals active in trading powerful weapons and plotting or actually undertaking attacks against banks, government offices and especially IRS offices. Oklahoma City differed from these precursors only in the scale of the devastation. A similar world view permeates the thought of the militia movement, which contrary to popular impression is arming and training not to launch a rebellion against the government, but to resist the assaults of the Beast should that become necessary.

It is disturbing to find so many of Brown’s counterparts located on an end of the political spectrum that is widely regarded as not merely extreme, but abhorrently so. In fact,

the term normally employed for such groups is not even a conventional political label, but is often a disparaging phrase like “hate groups”.

The Pro-Life Movement

Obviously, racist and white supremacist movements lay no claim to the mantle of John Brown, but other contemporary activists do. Perhaps the most controversial is the anti-abortion “pro-life” strand that has provided one of the most active contributions to the American tradition of political dissidence, with a direct action wing that has enjoyed enormous publicity. And it is the most militant groups who have most directly modeled themselves on the historical tradition of radical abolitionism and civil rights protest, often to the horror of African-American observers.

There is a broad spectrum of anti-abortion organizations, the size of the group being inversely proportionate to its militancy and support for direct action. At the moderate wing of the coalition are groups like the National Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee for Pro-Life Activities, or the National Right to Life Committee, while the uncompromising “action faction” includes several groupuscules like Operation Rescue, the Lambs of Christ, Missionaries to the Preborn, Army of God, and Rescue America. The total membership of the militant organizations should perhaps be measured in the thousands nationwide. At the hard core of these groups are the authentic extremists who have persuaded themselves of the moral rightness of engaging in armed violence to prevent the ultimate evil of abortion, to favor the “justifiable homicide” of abortion providers. The number of such acts in the last fifteen years has been terrifying: since 1977, there have been an absolute minimum of 140 bombings and arsons against abortion clinics with another seventy known attempts: this does not include thousands of other acts of violence such as clinic invasions and vandalism, assault and battery, death threats, kidnappings, burglary and stalking. Since 1991, there have also been at least five murders and a further dozen attempts, making the pro-life movement one of the most actively dangerous terrorist strands in contemporary America. That it is not commonly so regarded reflects the reliance of most writers on sources derived from the FBI, which has come under heavy political pressure to avoid classifying these particular armed militants as “terrorists”.

The core idea of the pro-life movement is that abortion is an absolute evil, at whatever stage of pregnancy it occurs, and some groups oppose contraceptive devices which achieve termination only hours or days after conception. This approach is justified by the strictest possible interpretation of the Biblical view of the sanctity of human life, for the fetus at any stage is viewed not as a potential life, but as a real life that already possesses a soul. The religious bases of this absolute view are seen as superior to any form of worldly legality or political procedure.

The central analogy between the two movements, abolitionist and pro-life, is that both believe the American state permits behavior which is not only harmful and brutal, but which contradicts a higher standard of law and morality. As such, following the natural law tradition, this law can and should be resisted. To quote Aquinas, “. . . in proportion to its justice a law has the force of law . . . Hence all humanly enacted laws are in accord with reason to the extent that they flow from natural law. And if a human law disagree in any particular with natural law, it will not be a law but a corruption of law”. Moreover, the actions of the state are not merely permissive, but the defense of that evil practice implicates many other state agencies, and perhaps condemns the whole social and political order. By far the best-known statement of this doctrine in modern times derives from Martin Luther King’s Letter from Birmingham Jail (1963), which cites Aquinas to argue that “a just law is a

man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law”.

In the pro-life perspective, the state which tolerates abortion has condemned itself as illegitimate, and perhaps as deserving the judgment of God for its collective sins: an equation that was also central to the rhetoric of the abolitionist movement. Both abolitionists and pro-life supporters buttressed their views by an Old Testament perspective of community righteousness, and a divine willingness to punish the sins of an erring nation. This was epitomized in Brown’s legendary remark about purging the land with blood, a notion that is very close to the thought of radical pro-lifers.

The Biblical tone of the movement’s rhetoric is clearly suggested by an Army of God manual found in the possession of Shelley Shannon, a militant involved in numerous armed attacks, including one attempted murder. The book concluded “We, the remnant of God-fearing men and women of the United States of Amerika (sic) do officially declare war on the entire child-killing industry . . . Our most Dread Sovereign Lord God requires that whosoever sheds man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed. Not out of hatred of you, but out of love for the persons you exterminate, we are forced to take arms against you” Randall Terry of Operation Rescue has followed the precedent set by many nineteenth century radical and dissident groups in composing his own version of the Declaration of Independence, which argues that governments exist to defend the right to life. “Governments and rulers that stray from their divinely appointed purpose and tolerate or participate in the oppression and slaughter of its innocent people are held as barbaric and tyrannical, and history happily records the day of their downfall and just recompense . . . it is the right and the duty of a nation’s citizens to act in a manner which seems to them will best secure justice and safety for the oppressed and for future generations” . For pro-life extremists, as for abolitionists, the nation has become so corrupted that the only moral options are secession or revolution.

In order to promote their views about the absolute evil of abortion, pro-lifers regularly compare their actions with those of other activists struggling against other historical abuses, such as slavery, segregation, and Nazi racism. This is ideologically valuable in that a large majority of the potential audience is likely to believe in the inherent wrongness of these precedents, and to praise as heroic freedom fighters those who resisted such evils: the underground railroad of the 1850s, the rescuers of European Jews in the 1940s, civil rights protesters in the 1960s. By aspiring to place themselves in this company, pro-life sympathizers stake a claim to a comparable status of heroic righteousness, and moreover to be struggling on behalf of oppressed minorities. The three historical eras mentioned illustrate the contemporary claim that a state and a legal system can err so severely as to justify a wholly immoral and perhaps homicidal practice.

The most extreme example of this comes in the German Holocaust , but in the American context, the nearest analogy is felt to be the condition of slavery in the 1850s, and specifically the Dred Scott decision, in which the Supreme Court denied the human rights of a whole category of people. In pro-life rhetoric, this is presented as directly analogous to the Roe Vs. Wade decision of 1973, with the implication that future generations will one day view Roe as a disastrous error on the lines of Dred Scott . Analogies are often pursued still further, so that the resistance against slave-takers in antebellum days is seen as comparable to “rescuing” work and clinic blockades in recent years, as both activities violate formal law in order to achieve a higher moral goal. Indeed, “rescue” was the term used by contemporaries for this sort of anti-slavery direct action prior to 1861. Randall Terry draws an extended parallel between the evils of abortion and slavery, emphasizing the crucial difference

between being “anti-slavery” (an intellectual stance) and becoming an abolitionist, that is, one who risked life and reputation to struggle against the great evil of the times: for Terry, the modern counterpart of the true abolitionist is the activist “rescuer”. In 1993, Operation Rescue’s “boot camp” for recruits and potential rescuers included in its program “a lecture by an American history teacher on the connection between the anti-abortion movement and abolitionism”.

Among the most extreme sections of the pro-life movement, the shade of John Brown is invoked to justify the murder of abortion providers. In 1993, for example, following the murder of Doctor David Gunn in Pensacola, Florida, a lengthy defense of such conduct was drawn up by Paul Hill. Hill would later earn notoriety when he killed two further individuals at the same clinic the following year. Hill argues for the crucial “distinction to be made is between what is just and what is legal. It is self-evident that a government may declare an act legal that is actually unjust according to God’s law. A slave owner prior to the Civil War may have abused his slave in a way that was legal, but ultimately unjust. The present abortion laws legalize the killing of unborn children, but they are unjust in God’s eyes. Yet this legalized killing was just about to be carried out when David Gunn’s life was taken.” The homicide was therefore justified on the grounds of a higher, divine law. His 1993 petition argued for “the justice of taking all godly action necessary to defend innocent human life including the use of force. We proclaim that whatever force is legitimate to defend the life of a born child is legitimate to defend the life of an unborn child.” The murders committed by a Hill or a Shelley Shannon were thus defensive in nature, and Hill’s splinter faction takes the name “Defensive Action”. Following the wave of murders in 1993 and 1994, Donald Treshman of Rescue America commented that “There are thirty million dead babies and only five people on the other side, so it’s really nothing to get all excited about”. Treshman is one of many radical leaders who have urged that a civil war might be the only way of resolving the abortion issue.

While violent acts have been the work of a tiny minority within the pro-life movement, the reaction from the wider community has been complex, and in many ways reminiscent of the abolitionist response to the outrageous extremism of John Brown’s raid. While “pro-life” condemnation for individual murders and bombings has been near-universal, the words of caution have often been diluted by remarks that go far towards accepting the extremist position. For example, after the murders of abortion workers, a remarks commonly heard was that while these crimes were blameworthy, they were no more so than the countless killings which the doctors in question had performed within their clinics, thus equating abortion with murder. Human Life Review argued that “The real abortion violence is inside clinics,” while a senior member of the Pennsylvania Pro-Life Federation said “We strongly condemn the violence against the abortionist Dr. David Gunn, just as we condemn the violence taking place within the abortion clinics which destroys human lives”. Anti-abortion radicals canvass support among moderate sympathizers by means of a “Prisoners for Christ” campaign, circulating the names and circumstances of protesters serving time in jail, often for serious criminal offenses: Paul Hill’s family is one of those prominently listed.

This complex relationship between mainstream and “extremists” bears a close resemblance to the structure of the nineteenth century abolitionist movement, which similarly commanded vast support for its general stance, though the number of individuals prepared to participate in illegal protests was considerably smaller, and the hard core ready to take up arms, to proceed to Kansas or West Virginia, was relatively tiny. At the same time, the degree of public sympathy for extremism was a rather confused matter. In 1859, while

abolitionists usually recognized that Brown had engaged in dangerous and perhaps suicidal adventurism, he was widely admired for having the courage to stand up for the principles to which others gave mere lip service. Horace Greeley wrote typically that Brown and his men “dared and died for what they felt to be right, though in a manner which seems to us fatally wrong”. Boston Republican John A. Andrew asserted that “I only know that whether the enterprise as one or the other, John Brown himself is right”. Brown’s execution transformed him into a hero and martyr, Louisa Alcott’s “St John the Just”. Thoreau noted the executions of Christ and Brown as “two ends of a chain which is not without its links”. Emerson believed that Brown’s hanging made “the gallows as glorious as the cross”. While few anti-abortion supporters have drawn such explicitly Christological comparisons for Paul Hill, he certainly has his admirers as a godly man with the courage of his convictions. Modern pro-life extremists can take comfort from the example of John Brown that they too will be vindicated by history, if not actually canonized.

John Brown, Robert Jay Matthews, and Paul Hill: three who believed that obedience to a political imperative far superior to either the law or constitution gave them a moral right to engage in private warfare, in armed violence to the point of taking life. Only the first of these, however, has achieved heroic status in a broad consensus of public opinion, or is likely to merit conferences dedicated to studying his activities. The differences between Brown and the modern counterparts may appear obvious, in that he was struggling for the cause of emancipation and justice, while they represented the politics of bigotry and division. However, much of this evaluation depends on a retroactive evaluation, a sense of Brown’s achievement that depends on an abundance of hindsight. While admitting his vision and his achievement, it is also legitimate to question whether he might not reasonably be placed in the historical company of other individuals whose reputations are far less salubrious. Whether he would acknowledge his spiritual descendants is an open question.