

# The unfinished revolution

written by Vince Copeland  
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Osborne P. Anderson

*An introduction written by Vince Copeland in 1974 to “A Voice from Harper’s Ferry” by Osborne P. Anderson, a former enslaved Black man, who wrote a firsthand account in 1861 about the raid on Harpers Ferry, led by John Brown in 1859. Anderson was one of the few survivors of the raid.*

Much has been written about the Harper’s Ferry raid. But Osborne P. Anderson’s story — in the words of W.E.B. Du Bois “the most interesting and reliable account of

the raid” — has a special significance that has been too long neglected.

First, Anderson was one of the actual participants, and being Black, he might be expected to have a somewhat different view of the affair than even the most inspired white supporter of John Brown. Second, he apparently wrote the pamphlet with the hope of encouraging a general slave insurrection. And third, he obviously expected other whites to imitate the action of John Brown and help supply the arms for the insurrection, as well as take up arms themselves.

He was interested, like most other Black and white abolitionists of that very revolutionary period, in continuing the revolution that John Brown’s band had begun. But he seems to have based his optimism upon the possibilities of slave insurrection, rather more than upon white support, which he must have thought of as an important auxiliary force rather than as the main body of struggle.

He took pains to emphasize the number of slaves who accepted guns the moment guns were offered to them. He pointed out what few subsequent narrators of the event have: namely that of the seventeen revolutionaries who died at Harper’s Ferry (before the legal lynching of Brown and the others after the trial), nine were Black.

Eight whites and two Blacks of the original band were killed in the conflict in addition to the hastily armed seven Black slaves. Two other Blacks were executed with Brown.

History has finally given Brown tremendous credit for what was indeed a tremendous feat. But Brown had been planning it for decades and the others in the band had been thinking for months and for years about how to strike this dramatic blow. What about the seven nameless Black people who died for Black freedom with no prior notice whatever?

They, too, no doubt, had thought for years about freedom — their own freedom. They

had lacked all possibility, all weapons, all communication for struggle. But confronted with an opportunity given them by strangers, most of whom were of the same race as the hated master class, they gave their lives in a moment and apparently without a qualm.

History, even revolutionary history, treats them as fillers — in of blank spaces. Did they simply take the guns and shoot and get shot like so many extras in the movies?

Anderson did not think so.

Although he does not expand upon the facts when he refers to the number of “colored” men killed, his emphasis upon the number is obviously not due just to his racial pride. It must always be borne in mind that he was speaking to a generation to which this incident would conjure up an extremely earth-shaking perspective. And even the slightest emphasis would go a long way.

### **A different civil war**

The Civil War may have begun by the time his story was published, but it is clear from the text that it had not begun when he wrote it. It is also clear that he was not thinking of that kind of civil war; he had a different concept of how the war would be fought, who would fight it, and who would lead it.

The war that Anderson had in mind would have required not just a few Black and white guerrillas, no matter how brave and ready to die, but an all-out participation of the slave population, along with a fairly massive support from the North. He must have felt — and with good reason — that this would paralyze the U.S. government (which was already divided between “free soil” and pro-slavery forces) so that especially with Lincoln now president, it would not be able to intervene powerfully on the side of the South, as it had done in the case of Brown’s raid.

What actually happened was that the South seceded before such a war could get

started and in effect started its own counterrevolutionary war. When the fighting erupted, it seemed at first to have very little to do with slavery. The official battle cry in the North was not “Liberate the Slaves,” but “Preserve the Union.”

Right up until Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861, it must have appeared to Anderson (and many thousands of other passionate Black and white abolitionists in the North) that the Northern capitalist government never would fight. Even after Lincoln’s election and even after several states had seceded, it must have appeared that the U.S. government would never wage ruthless war against the slave owners of the South. The formal Confederacy was already established before Lincoln was inaugurated. And Lincoln waited more than a month before he acted. And even then he acted only under the prod of South Carolina’s provocative attack on Sumter.

It was, of course, a war against slavery when it did come, regardless of the will of most of its official leaders. In spite of its defects, it was a revolution against the slavocracy that had ruled the whole country. It was a revolution that destroyed forever the power of the slave owners as a class and chattel slavery as a system. But it was a revolution most unsatisfactory to the slaves themselves. The ending of slavery as an institution, as is well known, did not lead to any real amelioration of the actual conditions of life, particularly the economic conditions, for the vast majority of Black people at that time.

What would the conclusion have been if the war had been fought as a revolution from start to finish?

First, the slaves would have been freed simply by striking off their own shackles. Second, they would have enforced their freedom by expropriating the plantations of the masters and dividing up the land. The Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, if they took that form, would merely have been legal afterthoughts. The former slaveholders could never have made a comeback of the proportions they actually did, and the whole system of racial inequality that prevails today would have

no material basis at all.

We are apt to think of the United States as being the capitalist country, as completely money-oriented, Babbittish, nonfeudal, dynamic, etc., etc. But in the more historical sense, it is not so purely capitalist after all.

Probably no bourgeois revolution in history was a completely “finished” one that definitively settled all questions of bourgeois democracy and made social and political conditions thoroughly consistent with bourgeois revolutionary ideas. But the southern United States, and in fact the whole United States, in spite of some small and temporary advances during Reconstruction, is to this day a classical example of the most unfinished of all bourgeois revolutions. And one of the fundamental reasons for this is that there was no general thoroughgoing slave insurrection, no division of the land.

### **The masters were cowards**

Did anybody in the United States fully understand the possibilities of Black insurrection in 1859, not to mention 1861?

Yes. The slave masters understood this. And they understood it so well that they didn’t have to write it down or talk about it. In fact, this was probably the subject of their nightly dreams — or nightmares — for years.

Anderson speaks on several occasions about the “cowardice” of the white Virginia aristocracy at Harper’s Ferry, including especially among his targets Colonel Lewis Washington, a direct descendant of the “Father of His Country,” a title Anderson uses with appropriate irony.

This “cowardice” does not seem to fit with subsequent conduct of most Southern white soldiers — and even officers — in the Civil War. At least, it doesn’t fit with the picture we are given in the official history books. But Anderson is not lying, or even

exaggerating. He is describing a special class situation and a class cowardice in the face of a death-threat to that class.

The slaveholding South, in a certain sense, was much more upset by John Brown's raid than by the beginning of the Civil War itself.

How could twenty Black and white revolutionaries have created so much hysteria, while the organized invasion of massed Northern troops was met by a fervor of militant, self-confident, and even temporarily victorious defensism?

The difference between the John Brown raid and the long-fought Civil War was not just in the massive character of the latter as opposed to the allegedly individualist character of the former. It wasn't just that the Northern army had conventional organization into companies, regiments, brigades, and so on, as opposed to the general guerrilla insurrection almost begun by Brown and Anderson.

The real difference lay in the fact that one conceived of a slave uprising and took the first steps in that direction — while the other, although forced to free the slaves in the long run, and forced to enlist nearly 200,000 Black men in its ranks, did not at first contemplate an actual slave uprising, and, in fact, opposed it.

The alleged bravery of the Southern slaveholders in fighting well-regimented and more or less conventionally organized white Northerners was one thing. The really cowardly panic of these same reactionary individuals when confronted with a direct slave uprising was something else again.

Anderson makes much of this cowardice — but not just to satisfy his well-justified personal hatred of the slave masters. He wanted to assure white Northerners as well as Black that the white South would fall apart in the fires of real civil war. The decadent rulers of the South had ruled the country for too long, he was saying. They were a doomed class. And a slave rebellion aided by the progressive North would

polish them off in the shortest time.

## **The ghost of Nat Turner**

No white in the South — and not many in the North — had forgotten the revolt of Nat Turner thirty years earlier. “Small” though it had been, it struck terror into the heart of every single slaveholder. It had spread to many more than its three or four originators within hours after it had broken out. (Like the slaves who took arms from Anderson and the others at Harper’s Ferry, the Blacks of Southhampton County did not need a great deal of urging.)

The whole family of the owner of the plantation on which Turner was enslaved was killed in the night. The revolutionaries had decided that they must be completely ruthless at the beginning and kill all whites in their path so that none could give the alarm and they could enlarge their nucleus of an army without being wiped out prematurely.

The shaken masters of the area effected a furious reprisal campaign, killing at least two Blacks for every white who had died. They would have killed far, far more but for the fact that the slaves cost them money. As it was, they must have beaten and tortured thousands. Among other things, they cut off the heads of some of the rebels and posted them at the four comers of at least one village as an example of their vengeance.

It is safe to say that the masters all over the South remembered Nat Turner better than the illiterate and unorganized slaves themselves did. Rulers are nearly always more aware of the dangers of their slaves rebelling than the slaves are. This is because each slave knows only his own heart and is unacquainted with the overall situation, whereas the masters have all the advantages of communication, travel, information, etc.

These particular rulers hardly needed intelligence reports, however, to tell them they were not loved, not even by the house servants. Whatever their propaganda preachers said to the contrary in the pulpit and the Congress, they knew in their souls that the Blacks might someday rise against them in greater numbers and with greater success than Nat Turner's band.

Thus Anderson was not the only one who was thinking of insurrection. His enemies, the counter-revolutionary slave masters, were desperately afraid of such an event and were thinking of it daily.

And Anderson's friends among the white abolitionists were thinking of it, too. At first they had denied all intention of such a thing. (Brown himself denied it, even in his last defiant speech in the Virginia courtroom, so wicked a thing was such an insurrection considered to be!) But after Brown's raid, more Northerners thought in terms of insurrection.

The redoubtable Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a white minister who took rifles to Kansas and later gave up the cloth to lead a Black regiment in the war, wrote and published a sympathetic sketch of the Nat Turner revolt precisely in 1861, the year the Civil War began and the year of Anderson's present essay. Higginson, too, was obviously thinking of a new slave rebellion on a bigger scale. (He was also one of the "Secret Six," who raised funds for the Harper's Ferry action.)

This was not a case of "Let's you and him fight," either. Higginson had already risked his life several times, most notably in the attempt of several Black and white abolitionists to break into the Boston Court House in 1854 to rescue a captured fugitive slave.

(A deputy U.S. marshal guarding the Black man was killed on that occasion and Higginson, along with others, was accused of the killing. Unlike young Jonathan Jackson, who tried a similar rescue on August 7, 1860, Higginson escaped.)



Even on the Senate floor there were occasional suggestions — after the Civil War had begun and the North was not winning — along the lines of encouraging slave rebellion.

The army of Black soldiers within the Union lines, when it was finally formed late in 1862, was in the last analysis, an embodiment of this slave revolution. But it was much less revolutionary than what Brown and Anderson had in mind.

The Black regiments were revolutionary in that they struggled against their own and their relatives' slavery. But their creation and existence was also a subordination of the Black freedom struggle to the discipline of the anti-slavemaster capitalist class. It was a subordination of the revolutionary Black soldier to the moderate or often only half — revolutionary white Northern officer.

### **Black-white guerrilla army in the South?**

But of course Anderson was not thinking of this kind of revolution in the first place. (As a matter of fact most of the abolitionists in the North — Black as well as white — had been thinking along the lines of Northern secession from the Union.) Anderson was completely sympathetic to Nat Turner with respect to his attitude toward insurrection and toward ruthlessness against the masters. He is critical of Brown — in the present essay — for the latter's last-minute softness with prisoners. But he visualized the coming revolution as one of the Harper's Ferry type rather than that of Southampton County.

He felt that the slaves would rise up with the moral aid of fighters like Brown and himself to inspire them and with material aid of rifles and other supplies to arm them. And these would come from the North.

In the actual Civil War, the slaves were discouraged from rising up behind the lines, when Lincoln countermanded his own more abolition-minded generals and ordered

that escaping slaves be sent back to the tender mercies of their masters. This went on for more than a year. After that, it was little less than amazing that hundreds of thousands of Black soldiers still joined the fight by enlisting in the Union Army. The only explanation is that the revolutionary need was so great and the faith that freedom would come was so deep.

Anderson knew that the slaves could not get enough weapons by themselves or establish communications on a statewide, much less countrywide basis. He knew the masters had the railroad and telegraph, which they had not had in Nat Turner's time. But he also knew that Northern whites had more railroads and better telegraphs. Northern whites were much more familiar with these and other modern inventions than the white masters of the South. He knew that if the Northerners came down and joined the slave rebellion, they would add the necessary strength and technique to insure the victory.

In Anderson's concept, Harper's Ferry was a Black-white military alliance against slavery and was in no sense an episodic display of white altruism, any more than it was one of Black madness.

In the very beginning of his book he broadly hints that other attempts like Brown's, other plans to "invade" the South, were in the works. So he probably knew of three or four Harper's Ferry-type raids being planned and was no doubt personally acquainted with fifty to a hundred whites whom he considered reliable enough and revolutionary enough to do this.

Being a rational person, however, he must also have had a perspective of where to go from there. He must have known as well as anybody else, after his experiences at the Ferry, that neither a hundred nor a thousand whites, even with extra rifles to pass around, would be enough to win the revolution. He must have conceived, therefore, of a much larger struggle, although along the same general lines. He must have had some reason to suppose that many thousands of whites would come down

South and join with the hundreds of thousands of Blacks in the revolution.

But how would the necessary thousands of whites be induced to do this? Assuming that the Blacks would go into the swamps, the hills, and the forests in sufficient numbers to set up a formidable guerrilla army, who would recruit the large numbers of Northern whites to bring the guns, and what battle cry would bring them down to risk their lives in such a fight?

It is true that it never did happen in just this way. But, just to take Anderson's suppositions, would it have been possible to recruit the whites for this kind of war? Could such a war have come about, for example, if the Northern capitalists had waited still longer — as they certainly wanted to wait — before declaring war on the South?

## **Land and the white North**

There were great and compelling reasons why the average poor or middle-class Northerner, who was not usually an abolitionist, should struggle against the slave owners.

One of the greatest reasons was the yearning for free land in the West.

Apparently this land was “free” to any white who killed enough of the Indians who lived on it and “owned” it, if anybody did. But the reality was that it was never even that free. The slave owners were determined to get this land, keep it for themselves, and not permit any general emigration to the West. The Northern railroad capitalists were also determined to get it. But they had an interest in supporting, for a time, the aspirations of the would-be small farmers. When bills came up in Congress for a Homestead Act, the “railroad congressmen” always voted for them, while the Southern representatives voted against them.

Naturally, those whites ready to take up arms to imitate the action of John Brown

would have had to be made of heroic stuff and not just be land — seekers with their individual minds bent on plowing, seeding, and cultivating. They would have had to be ready to give up their lives for their fellow human beings — the other land seekers and the slaves.

But where would such people come from? Would they simply arise from the ground? Could there have been a dozen John Browns or a hundred or a thousand?

Yes. The land problem would, by pressing upon the consciousness of a whole generation in the North, also produce heroism in the struggle against the slaveholders and empathy for Black rebellion in the minds of millions of whites. In fact, it had already done so.

### **Uncle Tom fanned the flames**

One sign of this was the phenomenal popularity of Uncle Tom's Cabin. It was by far the most popular novel of the century. Whatever misconceptions the book may have had about the Black character as personified by Uncle Tom, it certainly did appeal to the sympathies of the Northern whites and fanned the flames for the fight against slavery.

The abolitionists, including Brown and Anderson, had been fighting for many years before Uncle Tom's Cabin came on the scene in 1852. But they had been a tiny minority. The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, along with the virtual repeal of the Missouri Compromise which appeared to close off Western land from small-family settlement - made a mighty impact upon the people. The advent of Uncle Tom's Cabin coincided with the social impact of these events.

And it is worth noting that the great protest novel was not written about the land in the West but about the oppression in the South. This was not due to any deviousness on the part of Harriet Beecher Stowe; it was due to her genuine sympathy for other

human beings. But this sympathy did coincide with the Northern white land hunger for the West.

For the first time in America large numbers of whites identified with the perils of a Black heroine. Eliza escaping her master and crossing the moving ice with her baby in her arms later became the cliché of the century. But it was a burning reality at the time. Familiar as such harrowing stories were to the Black slaves, this was a brand-new concept and a universal political thesis to millions of free Northern whites.

Before Uncle Tom's Cabin the whites' image of the Black slave was that of a subhuman being. The book, in spite of what seems like mere sentimentalism today, made a revolutionary transformation of that image.

In the light of today's racism, the word "subhuman" may seem to be merely a vicious figure of speech. But at that time this was a literal concept and actual belief of the super-brainwashed whites. This appalling ignorance was just as synthetically created by ruling-class propaganda as today's racism is, of course. But it had to be more extreme in order to justify the more extreme torture and degradation of Black people.

There were sober arguments over whether Black people had a soul, for instance. And even among more friendly whites there were discussions about "natural" laziness, "natural" talent for music and dancing, and whether Black people could possibly be taught the ABC's, etc., ad nauseam. Even the brave Higginson does this again and again in his book *Army Life in a Black Regiment*. [15]

The picture of the fervently praying Uncle Tom who forgave his enemies in such a good Christian way supplied a new and at the same time relatively superior image of the slave — an image that many Northern whites, suckled on Victorian Christianity, would fight for, and some would die for.

“Uncle Tom” has a totally different meaning today, of course. And we should not quarrel with history over the fact that this long dead image is useless for today’s tasks.

At the same time, however, we should understand that many whites did die for old Uncle Tom, and he did serve his purpose for the idealism of the white ally, if not for the soldierly passion of the Black revolutionary. (The latter hardly needed a novel to explain about Simon Legree and the sting of the whip!)

Thus, in the social soil of white land hunger and hatred for the slave-owning land monopolists, there grew up the plant of white people’s anti-slavery and here and there the flower of personal dedication to struggle unto death against it.

Brown himself, awakening to the struggle long before the publication of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, had planned the Harper’s Ferry action for at least a decade and perhaps a quarter of a century. His feat in tum had an even more profound effect upon Northern feeling than Stowe’s very successful book (which also helped prepare the masses to more fully appreciate Brown’s action).

Having said all this, it is no put-down to say that the genuine mass hero-worship for Brown’s majestic self-sacrifice, like the sentimental sympathy for Uncle Tom, was closely connected to and deeply rooted in the Northern drive for land in the West.

## **Land and the Black-white South**

Thus Anderson had good reason to count on help from the whites of the North. In the actual event of the Civil War, hundreds of thousands of young Northern farmers and city workers — often whole union locals of them — enlisted en masse in the Union Army with conscious and final commitment to the fight against slavery.

But Anderson, perhaps unbeknown to himself at the time he wrote this book, had an even more powerful lever — the land question in the South itself.

A tiny oligarchy owned the bulk of the land, just as it owned the bulk of the slaves.

But the idea of giving land to the Black landless was never mentioned in the North before the Civil War. And it is possible that neither Anderson nor Brown had considered the idea of dividing up the plantations among the slaves — although this would seem to be a likely enough concept, and not one to frighten men who were already risking so much for freedom.

The slaves themselves, so far as is known, did not raise the demand for land at this time, either. Many factors prevented them from being able to do this. But they surely would have accepted the idea, just as quickly and logically as they accepted guns at Harper's Ferry, particularly in the course of any extended struggle against the great landowners.

The very logic of slave revolt would inevitably lead to the division of the land. The occupation of the land by an army of rebellious slaves would almost dictate it.

And what about the poor whites — in the Southern countryside? The “squatters” who lived on the fringes of the big plantations, as well as hundreds of thousands of impoverished small white landholders and tenant farmers in the less fertile areas — they, too, needed land.

These whites — who did not get land and later became soldiers in the Confederate Army — were already more or less experienced in independent farming. They would have been even more receptive than the slaves to the idea of division of the plantations and to title to the back lands.

If Lincoln had made the Proclamation of Emancipation on April 12, 1861, instead of on January 1, 1863, the Civil War would have been much more thorough and probably much shorter — because the slave rebellion would have been immediate and continuous.

But if Osborne Anderson and his friends had also on the same date made a proclamation that the plantations were to be divided among the slaves, with land also being provided for the white “squatters.” and if they had made the proclamation from an army headquarters, guerrilla or otherwise, what a different Civil War that would have been and what a different South the South would now be!

The masters would not have had a single reliable slave behind their lines. And the poor whites would have seen the Black slaves as their greatest allies. Regardless of the racist past, they would have fought side by side with the slaves to overthrow the masters.

This great solidarity would not by itself have eliminated racism. But this, combined with the division of the land and creation of a more or less equal Black-white yeomanry, would have changed the course of all subjective opinions and attitudes along with the objective course of U.S. history itself.

The consequent new farmers of the South would have not only conquered slave owners who were holding back the Northern capitalists from building railroads, etc., they would also have created a tremendous new market for Northern capital, such as the West later provided.

Why did the capitalists of the North not welcome such a development and not bend their efforts to hasten it along?

Why did the great political leaders of the North — with only a couple of exceptions — close their eyes to this whole perspective? Why did they not even raise the idea or put it into words before or during the war? Why did they, in effect, sabotage their own revolution?

### **They feared their own revolution**

It is generally understood nowadays that Lincoln waited so long to make the



Emancipation Proclamation because he hoped for the capitulation of the slave owners without it — that is, he hoped to convince them that he was not revolutionary and would not touch their property in slaves.

That is quite true and it is a true measure of the general capitalist reluctance to fight the slave owners in the first place. It was the capitalist system that compelled them to fight rather than capitalist ideals, or even necessarily each individual capitalist's individual interests. It was the irresistible drive of capital into the West and the equally desperate drive of the slave system to move its cotton production westward that had come into the kind of collision that involved the big capitalists on the side of the revolution.

In this situation, Lincoln had the same motives with respect to the land that he had with respect to the slaves. Both were property.

The division of the land, like the freeing of the slaves, would have been part of the classical capitalist revolution (such as in France in 1789). And particularly in land — rich America, it should have been the most “natural” thing in the world.

But it wasn't.

The capitalists feared nothing so much as their own revolution — the revolution that was to put them into power over unprecedented wealth and natural resources. They feared it because they questioned their ability to control it.

To take the Western lands from the Native people, difficult and bloody as that task was, involved no blood-letting within their own system, and raised no threat at all to their own property.

But to expropriate the land of the slave owners (many of whom had financial ties to the merchant capital, etc., in the North) was also to question the legality of all huge land ownership. And at this very moment the big capitalists, especially the railroad

companies, were getting land by the millions of acres from Congress, swindling the white masses as well as the Indians in the process.

The most radical political representatives of the capitalists in Congress did propose the “forty acres and a mule” division of the land, after the war, during the Reconstruction. But the majority of Congress never did support that, and in the absence of an active political alliance of a substantial number of whites, the freed slaves were not able to effect this division for themselves.[16]

From the beginning, the capitalists preferred a compromise with the slave masters at the expense of the slaves. But when this proved impossible and the capitalists were absolutely forced into a revolution, they got into a position to control the revolution and bend it completely to their own needs.

They moderated the revolution, even while they extended its scope and threw more tremendous forces into it. They could not succeed in their original intention, which was to leave slavery untouched in the South and merely prevent its extension into the West. But they were able to make their peace with the former slaveholders after Reconstruction and give them back the mastery of the South as agents and partners of the capitalist North. Most important, they helped the Southern masters cheat the freed slaves out of the land — out of those “forty acres and a mule” that the more radical capitalist politicians had promised the slaves during Reconstruction.

Anderson could not be expected to foresee this betrayal, especially in light of the fact that the capitalists themselves did not foresee it — any more than they foresaw their own reluctant half-decision to begin giving the Blacks the land in the first place.

But the successful division of the Southern land, accompanied by the guerrilla warfare that must have been envisioned by Anderson and Brown — that is, the arming of the masses — would have thwarted the betrayal of 1877, or made it nine-

tenths ineffective. So whatever social and political understanding Anderson and Brown may have lacked, it would have been more than made up for by their military program, could that have been put into practice.

## **God — and the God of Battle**

Anderson's story is couched in the literary style then fashionable, with references to religious concepts, etc. He himself most likely shared Brown's and Harriet Beecher Stowe's feeling about a God of Vengeance that worked through devoted human beings his wonders to perform. But his motivations were not nearly as religious as the sentiments expressed in the book might lead a modern revolutionary to suppose.

Considering that he was so strong for new attempts along the same lines as Harper's Ferry, it is clear that he had no faith that the Jericho walls of prejudice and slavery would have simply crumbled to pieces at old Brown's great trumpet blast. He must have taken for granted what Brown seemed to discover only at the end:

"I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with Blood."

People like Henry David Thoreau and Emerson hailed Brown as the man whose self — sacrifice would ennoble and transform white humanity — almost in the literal sense. That is, they did not then see the action as valuable in the sense of being a concrete beginning of a broad military struggle, so much as they saw the "transcendental" aspect and a new redemption of Man — with a capital M.

But Anderson and the more active abolitionists saw Brown's execution and the popular indignation as the point of departure for new military thrusts rather than for any particular moral regeneration. This is concealed somewhat in Anderson's text, perhaps because of his own religious beliefs and undoubtedly because of his own deep respect for Brown's powerful convictions.

He does mention Brown's leading the prayers at the farmhouse headquarters, but he doesn't repeat them. He tends to emphasize, rather, Brown's complete lack of racist prejudice, his stem, fair leadership and his mercy, mixed with terrible swift justice. And much as he is prone to religious sentiments himself, Anderson does not repeat any of Brown's statements about "God's children," etc.

On the other hand, this was partly because he was talking to people already as familiar with Brown's famous words as they were with the Twenty — third Psalm or the Lord's Prayer.

The following excerpt from Brown's speech to the Virginia court had already been printed and reprinted throughout the North by the time Anderson wrote his book.

This court acknowledges. I suppose, the validity of the law of God. I see a book kissed here which I suppose to be the Bible. or at least the New Testament. That teaches me that all things whatsoever I would that men should do to me, I should do even so to them. It teaches me further, "to remember them that are in bonds as bound with them." I endeavored to act up to that instruction. I say, I am yet too young to understand that God is any respecter of persons. I believe that to have interfered as I have done~as I have always freely admitted to have done — in behalf of his despised poor, was not wrong, but right. Now, if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends 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 enactments — I submit; so let it be done!

One can imagine the young men and women of the North reading those words by whale-oil lamp and candle, along with the antislavery poems of James Russell Lowell and John Greenleaf Whittier and the stories of Harriet Beecher Stowe. Given the form of the national crisis, they must have been literally pressing at the leash of social restraint.

Brown's simple, powerful words, "I think I cannot now better serve the cause I love so much than to die for it" — these words so inspired the white North that they were painted on banners and hung across the streets of Cleveland, Ohio (Brown's adopted state) after his execution.

It was not more inspiration that the more revolutionary of the white Northern youth needed now; it was organization and a plan.

### **To strike the red-hot iron**

Naturally Anderson's plans were military rather than political: But it was precisely a military blow that was needed. The land question in the South, like the land question in the West, was bursting to be answered in the actual blow for Black freedom. Like Brown's, Anderson's mind was fixed on freedom itself and on the plans for the military action to get it. And instead of seeing great social and economic questions as fundamental to this freedom, he may have seen them as derivative at best, or have taken them for granted.

The military blow, or more precisely, the idea and example of that blow was the great contribution that the band had already made and the contribution that Anderson and others were preparing to make again. In a revolutionary epoch it is the action itself that counts, more than the theory about it — although it is painfully true that even then, without a correct theory, without an adequate over-all plan, much, if not all, can be lost.

Thus, it is only on the question of military procedure that Anderson makes any criticism of Brown, in spite of his high regard for him. He scores Brown's oversensitivity about the prisoners and especially his unnecessary delay in retreating into the hills.

It is very possible that the old captain made important tactical errors. He himself

admitted one or two of them to his captors. And it is also possible that he was more aware than Anderson of the hopelessness of a general retreat at the time.

But Anderson's insistence on his point about the tactics shows his eagerness to win the actual military struggle and his supreme confidence that the slaves would join the enlarged fight he had in mind. In this he may well have been more perceptive than Brown and more in tune with the possibilities for a more revolutionary civil war.

### **Realism and revolution**

It is hard to prove the possibilities of that which did not happen. It is hard to prove just how realistic Anderson was in his revolutionary optimism.

But the practicality of his outlook is contained, in the last analysis, in the realism of the Harper's Ferry venture itself.

For nearly a hundred years John Brown's feat was viewed as that of an adventurer, a madman, a "putschist." But that was because people had forgotten the old revolution and could not conceive of a new one.

At the time of Harper's Ferry, or shortly thereafter, Brown was regarded as a great leader, a sterling revolutionary, and even something of a saint. (Anderson himself puts Brown partially into the latter category.) And now, after decades of slander as a madman, Brown is again regarded as a great revolutionary and the Harper's Ferry "raid" is again considered a realistic and logically planned act as well as a heroic one.

This is because our age is beginning to duplicate some of the conditions of the pre-Civil War period and today's social situation is beginning to produce new social thinkers and doers. Our minds are flowering in a different social soil than the minds of our conservative parents and grandparents. The needs of the oppressed are seen

by more and more people as requiring a revolutionary solution.

But even in revolutions, the human mind is the last thing to be revolutionized. At the beginning of every new war the generals try to fight the old war. And revolutions of olden times are revived in the mind before the revolution of the new times takes full shape and before the new mental leap is actually made to the full requirements of the present.

So it was that George Washington, John Adams, and the others established the ancient Roman “Senatus.” So it was that John Brown and Osborne Anderson saw themselves and the slaves as the reincarnation of the Chosen People and viewed the nineteenth — century Southern masters as though they were ancient Egyptians who would surely be visited by plague and pestilence for their sins.

Similarly, many heroes of our own time often look for the form of their revolution in the past, even though the essence of it is in the present. And sometimes they think they are the reincarnation of John Brown or Nat Turner. Indeed, there are few better examples of revolutionary heroism to imitate than the kind Brown’s band displayed — if the feat is correctly understood and evaluated. But this can only be done in the light of modern revolutionary theory and international experience — that is, genuine Marxism-Leninism.

The greatest mistakes in judging the Harper’s Ferry raid usually flow from the assumption that Brown and the others were “individualists” in the bourgeois or anarchist sense, and that besides seeing themselves as the elect of God, they saw nobody else as elect, and didn’t conceive of a countrywide revolution.

This assumption shows a total misunderstanding of both the men and the times.

It should be clearly understood that an isolated act, unrelated to the needs or the consciousness of the masses, cannot in any sense be regarded as revolutionary. Even

in a generally revolutionary period it is usually wrong for the conscious revolutionaries to substitute themselves for the masses and expect to win freedom for them without their participation.

But this was not at all the intention of Brown or any of the band.

The realism of the action was proven not only by the alacrity of the slaves in accepting weapons and risking their lives for freedom with hardly a moment to think it over; not only by the tremendous wave of sympathy for Brown and his men that swept the country — and indeed half the world — but also by the fact that substantial numbers of regular armed U.S. troops were required to put out the fires of revolt at Harper's Ferry itself.

It was truly symbolic that Colonel Washington, the descendant of the "Father of his Country," had to give up the original Washington's distinguished sword to Black Osborne Anderson.

But it was more than symbolic that Robert E. Lee, the future general of the whole Confederate Army, and his lieutenant, J. E. B. Stuart, had to lead the counter-revolutionary U.S. troops against this "little," apparently minuscule, revolt.

Had the band lacked support among the people — i.e., the Black people — it would have taken hardly more than a police or possibly a militia action to put them down.

The group's crack shooting certainly did frighten the pro-slavery white populace fully as much as Anderson thought. But the fact that slaves were shooting, too, frightened them still more. Three thousand U.S. troops stood by when Brown and his companions were hanged a few weeks later. They were not serving as an honor guard, but as a grim warning to the restless freedom-yearning slaves.

## **The struggle this time**



In speaking of certain deeper social-psychological problems, Thomas Wolfe said, “You can’t go home again.” And that proposition is a hundred times more true for society itself than for the individual.

Neither white nor Black; neither farmworker, farm tenant, small owner, nor anyone else is going back to 1859 or 1861 to fight the Civil War as it should have been fought.

The idea of individual families trying to make a living on forty acres of average farmland today would be hopelessly reactionary. It would condemn them to lifetime poverty. It would be a “Tobacco Road” society for everybody.

The great big estates still have to be expropriated, but not now by the riflemen of Nat Turner or John Brown. It is the immense North-South agribankers owning the million-acre farms, forests, and plantations who have to be ousted now, but no longer to make way for a couple of million Black-white dirt farmers. Now the problem is to make the huge factories-in-the-fields produce for everybody and be owned by everybody (except the present bank-owners who are entirely parasitic, useless and — being exploiters — worse than useless).

To rise up in Southhampton County was not enough even then; to rise up at Harper’s Ferry was not enough even then; the whole Civil War was not enough to bring about the division of the land — to bring about the capitalist ideal of each family being its own independent production unit. The “free farm” of song and story never really did exist in this country after the Civil War, and never even superficially existed for the Black people. And now the productive system has far surpassed the small farm economy.

Where the material basis for Black freedom once lay in the small, independently owned farm, it now lies in another direction entirely.

Now the struggle is one against the same big business that defeated the Southern landlords, the same big business that is now both landlord-banker and factory lord. Now the struggle is no longer to become a little capitalist in partnership with the big capitalists. Now the struggle is to eliminate the capitalists altogether.

And just as every military move of Brown and Anderson tended inevitably to strengthen some progressive aspect of capitalism against the slave system, so the actual struggle of working people against the corporations today tends to strengthen the forces of socialism and prepare the way for the socialist revolution.

But again, this does not mean that the fight will follow the precise path that rational logic may predetermine for it.

Because white racism is so prevalent and powerful, it is still possible that some new phase of the Black liberation struggle will arise and the Black masses will fight for an entirely separate national development. It is possible that the idea of Black sovereignty and the concept of the Black republic will become the main moving slogans for the Black people.

If so, these slogans will be profoundly revolutionary even if they temporarily revive the idea of small independent farms again. This is because the anti-imperialist aspect of the matter will be the dominant aspect. And what begins as an abstractly capitalist Black republic will most probably end concretely as a socialist one.

But whether or not there is a powerful Black separatist movement, the question of Black-white unity against big business still remains fundamental.

How, for example, will either Black or white be able to conquer the common corporate oppressor in the face of ugly, disunifying white racism?

The white workers will overcome their racism — just as surely as their ancestors overcame their belief in leprechauns, goblins, and witches. But this may be a long

process for most of them, far too long, considering the urgency of the fight and the vital need for early unity against a much more powerful and dangerous oppressor than the Southern slave masters.

Most likely the curse of racism will only be completely washed away some time after the racist ruling class is defeated and the instruments of education are taken over by the revolutionary class. Perhaps only a new generation of children, brought up in the love and equality established by the truly human family — in the true family of humanity — will be really free of racism.

Among those thousands of whites who died for Black freedom in the Civil War, there were very few who were entirely free of racist attitudes of one kind or another. In their own minds they were dying for the white-sentimentalist image of Uncle Tom or Topsy, rather than for the real living children of Nat Turner. And it is possible that many of them were guilty of much worse conceptions, and even actions, than this.

But the totally pure in heart seldom get into revolutions. And even the most dedicated individual revolutionaries seldom prevail upon the revolutionary masses to live up to the revolutionary ideal in all respects, even when the latter are in the process of creating the basis for a wholly new and different society.

Just as the mass of people do not generally support the revolution until they have already made the revolution, so the white masses will most probably fight against racism in society long before they have conquered it in their own minds.

With the cadres and real leaders of revolution, it is of course different. On the one hand, people fight for the future when their minds are still mired in the past. On the other hand, individual heroes catch a glimpse of the future long before it begins and before the open struggle breaks out. And they battle for the minds of the vanguard.

What made the Harper's Ferry group so unlike but yet so like the rest of their

generation was the fact that they did what they did in relative isolation, but they did it as an advance scouting party of those millions who were to fight on the battlefields of the Civil War.

They did it against the social pressure and legal barriers of the day. And yet at the same time they expressed the subconscious feelings of the millions. It was their sublime struggle, needless to add, that raised these mass feelings from the subconscious to the conscious.

It was their confidence in oppressed humanity's ability to end its oppression that gave them the ability to sacrifice themselves under the conditions they did.

The religious form that some of them, especially Brown himself, gave to this confidence had little to do with their own real motivations or their rational - and therefore real - vision of freedom. Their faith in the Christian God was only a symbolic expression of their belief in people.

And the people — that is, the revolutionary generation — did fight, and on the most colossal scale. They did not fight in exactly the way Anderson and Brown hoped they would fight. But they fought hard and long and they did destroy the institution of chattel slavery.

By clearing the field of this ancient evil they laid the basis for the modern struggle against the modern evils.

The fact that this modern struggle, the fight for socialism, is a long time coming, the fact that it must overcome mountains of miseducation, ruling-class racism and deceit, obscures, just as the pre-Civil War official philosophy and racism did, the inevitability of the coming revolution. It obscures the absolutely irreconcilable character of the class antagonisms that will and must be fought through to the end.

The class antagonisms of today are very different from those of 1859 and 1861. The

struggle this time will be led by the oppressed themselves — that is by the Browns and the Andersons of the proletariat rather than by the Lincolns and Grants of the bourgeoisie. Where the heroes of Harper's Ferry failed to effect the kind of revolution they wanted, their descendants will succeed.

### **Who will bring the guns this time?**

It is hard to predict the course of a new revolution, which, like a newly rampaging mountain river cutting into different terrain than before, flows most logically and “naturally” in what later seems to have been a predetermined course. Yet at the same time it astounds all its beholders with its elemental fury, power, and suddenness.

The unfinished old revolution cannot but have a very powerful and profound effect upon the still unperceived new one. And we ought to try to understand what that effect will be.

The living river of that old revolution is the Black people, who have been forced to leave the countryside and come into the city and the factory. And that river will most probably burst from underground, so to speak, into another river of revolt by both Black and white.

The Black workers are already bringing more class consciousness and class struggle into the plants along with national consciousness and the struggle for racial equality. The national feeling and the necessity for struggle as an oppressed nation are residues from the old revolution begun by Anderson, Turner, Brown, and the others — the revolution that was never finished.

The Black workers are still fighting that old revolution — not in the romantic sense of imagining themselves still at Harper's Ferry, but in the all-too-real sense of still fighting against nineteenth-century type oppression. They are still fighting the old

revolution, and in doing so, they are preparing themselves to be leaders of the new one.

The white workers, on the other hand, will at a certain point be as desperately in need of the new revolution as the Black workers have been in need of the old one all along. The most brilliant and daring leaders of the Blacks will at that point also learn how to get the confidence of the whites.

This does not necessarily mean that the leaders of the Black-white working class will all be Black. But it does mean that the Black penetration of the North today, like the white penetration of the South yesterday, will lead to the most revolutionary results. And this time, due to the similar status of both of these groups within the working class (relative to their exploiters), due to the completely counter — revolutionary status of the capitalist class that now exploits both North and South, due to the fact that the coming crisis will hit both Black and white workers with great severity, the revolution will be fought through to the end.

For the present historical moment, it is true, the white majority is still listening to the banalities and the bestialities of the now thoroughly degenerate, outlived capitalist class. But they will begin the great struggle in spite of this. And at some point in that struggle they will turn in another direction altogether and listen to the Black and white revolutionaries of the working class.

They will then learn that history has its lessons, even in the United States. And they will listen with rapt attention to the long unheard and too long unheeded voice from Harper's Ferry.

### *Footnotes*

[15] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962).

[16] After the war, the Black people did fight — magnificently — for the land whenever the opportunity arose and the arms were available, especially between 1868 and 1872 (the height of Reconstruction). But the “war” was then over and the white plebeian alliance was by this time exhausted, while all the “radicalism” of the left Republicans in Congress really amounted to was to use the Blacks virtually alone to put the finishing touches on the crushing of the national power of the Southern white landlords.

