John Brown was greatly admired as a hero to some and fiercely hated by others during his lifetime. Abolitionists who supported the end of slavery praised his actions as necessary to destroy the institution; Southerners were horrified by the violence he employed to achieve his ends. Others, such as politician Abraham Lincoln, questioned the means even if they agreed with the end of abolishing slavery. Rarely has an individual stirred such controversy over his historical reputation as a hero or villain. Even today, John Brown provokes a variety of responses among historians and biographers. Judgments of Brown’s character range from a self-righteous, fundamentalist terrorist to a crusading abolitionist for freedom.

In 1831, abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison launched his newspaper, The Liberator, with the principled, uncompromising words about the abolition of slavery: “I will not equivocate—I will not excuse—I will not retreat a single inch—AND I WILL BE HEARD.” Brown was swept up by such unbending abolitionist thinking that was consistent with his Calvinist Puritan faith. He asserted that he had an “eternal war with slavery,” and dedicated himself to the cause when abolitionist editor, Elijah Lovejoy, was killed by a mob in 1837. “Here before God, in the presence of these witnesses, from this time, I consecrate my life to the destruction of slavery,” Brown said in a church meeting.

Over the next few decades, Brown failed in several business ventures and moved his family around a lot. He was more devoted to the cause of freeing slaves from bondage. He moved near Lake Placid, New York to manage a colony of free blacks and organized a secret society to prevent slavecatchers from catching their quarry of runaway slaves in the North. However, Brown began to deceive himself into thinking that he could and must act violently to end the immoral slave system.

John Brown followed several of his sons who moved to the newly-created Kansas Territory, which was organized under the principle of popular sovereignty, meaning that the people would decide whether Kansas would enter the Union as a free or slave state. Southerners and Northerners flooded the territory with settlers to decide the issue. They were deeply divided and set up rival territorial governments in different towns. Tension was rife and erupted into sporadic violence, threatening to cause civil war. Brown and his sons joined the Liberty Guards militia and the Pottawatomie Rifles militia to fight pro-slavery forces.

On the night of May 24, 1856, Brown unleashed his righteous vengeance against the evil slave system. He and his sons knocked on the doors of nearby cabins of several pro-slavery families (even if they were too poor to own slaves). Armed with pistols, hunting knives, and swords, Brown and his sons took five adult males prisoner at gun-point and led them outside into the darkness while their wives and children cowered in-
side. The next day, the hostages were all discovered killed and their bodies grisly mutilated. When asked about the deeds, Brown said, “I did not do it, but I approved of it.” He proclaimed his godly righteousness in murdering pro-slavery advocates: “God is my judge. We were justified under the circumstances.” He went into hiding in the woods and soon went back to the Northeast to raise money, weapons, and recruits for his main action against Southern slavery. Brown believed that murder was morally permissible if done in the name of what was right.

As he informed a few abolitionist friends, Brown intended to lead an army on a raid of the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry in Virginia. He planned to seize the weapons and then distribute them to liberated slaves to start a violent race war in which slaves killed their masters and fled to a revolutionary state in the mountains of Virginia. In the summer of 1859, he moved in disguise to a farm near Harper's Ferry but only managed to recruit twenty-one men. He wrote a political manifesto entitled, “A Declaration of Liberty by the Representatives of the Slave Population of the United States of America,” modelled on the Declaration of Independence, and a new constitution guaranteeing equal rights to all races.

The small, but righteous band moved out in the dark on the night of October 16 to begin the war. They achieved easy early success when they took a night watchman and an arsenal guard prisoner as they broke into the armory. Brown dispatched a handful of men in a wagon loaded with weapons to break into nearby homes and liberate their slaves. The first victim of the war was ironically a free black railroad worker whom the rebels shot. By the morning, Brown’s men had taken some forty prisoners of townspeople going to work, and word of the raid spread instantaneously across the nation by telegraph.

Daylight brought nothing but disaster for the ill-conceived raid. Brown’s rebels entered into a shoot-out with the townspeople, and lost one of the band. When Brown sent out three emissaries to negotiate a cease-fire, each were shot. When five of his men tried to retreat to the Shenandoah River, two were shot and killed, one drowned, and two blacks (one free and one slave) were captured and nearly hanged. In the chaos, some thirty prisoners escaped. By nightfall, Brown only had four or five healthy men. One of his sons was killed, and one was wounded, but he resolved to fight to the end to achieve his goal of liberating the slaves.

The following day, Colonel Robert E. Lee arrived with Lieutenant Jeb Stuart and ninety Marines. Stuart tried to negotiate a surrender, but Brown refused. The Marines battered down the heavy door and stormed into the building. After his other men went down, Brown was the last to fight and was slashed by a saber before being knocked unconscious.

Brown was tried for murder, inciting slave insurrection, and treason against the state of Virginia only a few days later. After five days, he was convicted on all the charges. Transcendentalist author, Henry David Thoreau, delivered an oration praising Brown for breaking an unjust law. “Are laws to be enforced simply because they are made?” Thoreau asked. During his sentencing, Brown was allowed to make a statement and finished by saying, “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!” Brown deceived himself into thinking that any number of deaths were acceptable in his crusade against the evils of slavery.

On December 2, Brown was driven in a wagon to a gallows on a cornfield guarded by 1,500 militia to guard against any rescue attempt. He was bound, hanged, and placed in a coffin. That morning, he handed a scrap of paper with a prophetic warning: “I John Brown am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty, land: will never be purged away; but with Blood.” The John Brown raid helped fuel the sectionalism that led to the bloody Civil War between North and South that claimed more than 600,000 Americans.
Defining Civic Virtues: Deception

To lie to yourself and others either to deceive purposefully or because you are deluded into thinking that something is right when it is wrong and unjust.
Discussion Guide

Directions: Discuss the following questions with your partner(s).

1. What ideals encouraged John Brown to dedicate his life to abolitionism?

2. When John Brown dedicated his life to the destruction of slavery what means did he use to achieve his goal? Were there other means at his disposal that were less violent? What other courses did abolitionists use to work for the end of slavery in the United States? Which ones were consistent with the constitutional rule of law and a healthy civic society?

3. What is the difference between acting according to uncompromising principles and acting according to the classical idea of prudence, or practical wisdom? Which course guided Brown, and did it benefit his cause?

4. Why did John Brown move to Kansas? What actions against slavery did he take while he was there? Were his actions justified? Explain your answer.

5. Is it ever morally permissible to do a wrong to achieve a good end? Explain your answer.

6. What was Brown’s plan to rid the country of slavery? Was it a realistic plan? Were there other alternatives that he could have pursued to help end slavery? Had he deluded himself into thinking that it was the right and only path? Explain your answers.

7. Did the raid on Harper’s Ferry go according to plan? Were innocent people swept up in the violence and lost their lives? Did Brown consider the loss of life tragic or necessary to achieve his goals? Explain your answer.

8. Did Brown express any remorse for killing people or breaking the law? Did his righteous vision cloud his judgment regarding the rightness or wrongness of his actions? Explain your answer.

9. Did Brown consider the consequences of his raid for human lives? Did he consider the consequences if he had actually succeeded in raiding Harper’s Ferry and starting a race war in the South? Did he consider the consequences of fueling tensions between North and South because of his violent plan? Explain your answers.

10. Why was John Brown considered by some to be a hero and by some to be a villain? Why is his life and legacy still debated as a hero or villain?
At what point then is the approach of danger to be expected? I answer, if it ever reach us, it must spring up amongst us. It cannot come from abroad. If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen, we must live through all time, or die by suicide.

I hope I am over wary; but if I am not, there is, even now, something of ill-omen amongst us. I mean the increasing disregard for law which pervades the country; the growing disposition to substitute the wild and furious passions, in lieu of the sober judgement of Courts; and the worse than savage mobs, for the executive ministers of justice. This disposition is awfully fearful in any community; and that it now exists in ours, though grating to our feelings to admit, it would be a violation of truth, and an insult to our intelligence, to deny. Accounts of outrages committed by mobs, form the every-day news of the times....

Such are the effects of mob law; and such are the scenes, becoming more and more frequent in this land so lately famed for love of law and order; and the stories of which, have even now grown too familiar....

The question recurs “how shall we fortify against it?” The answer is simple. Let every American, every lover of liberty, every well wisher to his posterity, swear by the blood of the Revolution, never to violate in the least particular, the laws of the country; and never to tolerate their violation by others. As the patriots of seventy-six did to the support of the Declaration of Independence, so to the support of the Constitution and Laws, let every American pledge his life, his property, and his sacred honor;—let every man remember that to violate the law, is to trample on the blood of his father, and to tear the character of his own, and his children’s liberty. Let reverence for the laws, be breathed by every American mother, to the lisping babe, that prattles on her lap—let it be taught in schools, in seminaries, and in colleges;—let it be written in Primmers, spelling books, and in Almanacs;—let it be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice. And, in short, let it become the political religion of the nation; and let the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the grave and the gay, of all sexes and tongues, and colors and conditions, sacrifice unceasingly upon its altars.

While ever a state of feeling, such as this, shall universally, or even, very generally prevail throughout the nation, vain will be every effort, and fruitless every attempt, to subvert our national freedom.

When I so pressingly urge a strict observance of all the laws, let me not be understood as saying there are no bad laws, nor that grievances may not arise, for the redress of which, no legal provisions have been made. I mean to say no such thing. But I do mean to say, that, although bad laws, if they exist, should be repealed as soon as possible, still while they continue in force, for the sake of example, they should be religiously observed....

There is no grievance that is a fit object of redress by mob law. In any case that arises, as for instance, the promulgation of abolitionism, one of two positions is necessarily true; that is, the thing is right within itself, and therefore deserves
the protection of all law and all good citizens; or, it is wrong, and therefore proper to be prohibited by legal enactments; and in neither case, is the interposition of mob law, either necessary, justifiable, or excusable.

But, it may be asked, why suppose danger to our political institutions? Have we not preserved them for more than fifty years? And why may we not for fifty times as long?....

They were the pillars of the temple of liberty; and now, that they have crumbled away, that temple must fall, unless we, their descendants, supply their places with other pillars, hewn from the solid quarry of sober reason. Passion has helped us; but can do so no more. It will in future be our enemy. Reason, cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason, must furnish all the materials for our future support and defence. Let those materials be moulded into general intelligence, sound morality and, in particular, a reverence for the constitution and laws; and, that we improved to the last; that we remained free to the last; that we revered his name to the last; that, during his long sleep, we permitted no hostile foot to pass over or desecrate his resting place; shall be that which to learn the last trump shall awaken our WASHINGTON.

Upon these let the proud fabric of freedom rest, as the rock of its basis; and as truly as has been said of the only greater institution,” the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.,
LETTER FROM BIRMINGHAM JAIL, APRIL 16, 1963

You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws. This is certainly a legitimate concern. Since we so diligently urge people to obey the Supreme Court’s decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the public schools, at first glance it may seem rather strange and paradoxical to find us consciously breaking laws. One may well ask: “How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?” The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that “an unjust law is no law at all.”

Now, what is the difference between the two? How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? 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. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority. Segregation, to use the terminology of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, substitutes an “I-it” relationship for an “I-thou” relationship and ends up relegating persons to the status of things. So segregation is not only politically, economically and sociologically unsound, it is morally wrong and sinful. Paul Tillich said that sin is separation. Is not segregation an existential expression of man’s tragic separation, his awful estrangement, his terrible sinfulness? Thus it is that I can urge men to obey the 1954 decision of the Supreme Court, for it is morally right; and I can urge them to disobey segregation ordinances, for they are morally wrong.

Let us consider a more concrete example of just and unjust laws. An unjust law is a code that a numerical or power majority group compels a minority group to obey but does not make binding on itself. This is difference made legal. On the other hand, a just law is a code that a majority compels a minority to follow and that it is willing to follow itself. This is sameness made legal.
Let me give another explanation. An unjust law is a code inflicted on a minority that, as a result of being denied the right to vote, had no part in enacting or devising the law. Who can say that the legislature of Alabama which set up that state's segregation laws was democratically elected? Throughout Alabama all types of devious methods are used to prevent Negroes from becoming registered voters, and there are some counties in which, even though Negroes constitute a majority of the population, not a single Negro is registered. Can any law enacted under such circumstances be considered democratically structured?

Sometimes a law is just on its face and unjust in its application. For instance, I was arrested Friday on a charge of parading without a permit. Now, there is nothing wrong in having an ordinance which requires a permit for a parade. But such an ordinance becomes unjust when it is used to maintain segregation and to deny citizens the First Amendment privilege of peaceful assembly and protest.

I hope you are able to see the distinction I am trying to point out. In no sense do I advocate evading or defying the law, as would the rabid segregationist. That would lead to anarchy. One who breaks an unjust law must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty. I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law.
Directions: Using the narrative on John Brown and the primary sources on Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr., complete the following graphic organizer related their views on just and unjust laws.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is their view of the rule of law in the United States?</th>
<th>When can an individual or a group justifiably decide to break the law? How are laws to be broken?</th>
<th>What is the person’s goal related to the laws of the United States?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>John Brown</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abraham Lincoln</td>
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<tr>
<td>Martin Luther King, Jr.</td>
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Virtue In Action

Read the play, *A Man for All Seasons*, by Robert Bolt, or watch the 1966 movie directed by Fred Zinnemann.

- Discuss the difficult situation that Thomas More contends with under King Henry VIII.
- How does Thomas More preserve both his moral conscience and his dedication to the rule of law?
- What sacrifice does More and his family make for his obedience to conscience and law? How do More and his daughter, Margaret, demonstrate great courage?

Sources & Further Reading


Self-Deception

Directions President Abraham Lincoln was strongly dedicated to the principle of natural rights for all human beings. Although the abolitionists pressed for immediate action, Lincoln was also firmly dedicated to the constitutional rule of law and would not break it to do what was right. The Emancipation Proclamation (1863) demonstrated the Lincoln wanted the slaves to be free while acting under presidential authority in the Constitution.

Answer the following questions: Compare and contrast the goals and methods of John Brown and Abraham Lincoln. Did Brown or Lincoln demonstrate the virtue of prudence, or practical wisdom, in achieving his goal?

“This country’s planted thick with laws from coast to coast…and if you cut them down—and you’re just the man to do it—d’you really think you could stand upright in the winds that would blow then?”

—SIR THOMAS MORE IN ROBERT BOLT, A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS