Annotation – Before the Raid
As a result of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, popular sovereignty (i.e. each state’s vote) was going to decide the issue of slavery. The race for the possession of Kansas was on. By March 1855, Kansas had enough settlers to apply for statehood. With the illegal votes of pro-slavery “border ruffians” from the slave state of Missouri, Kansas voted to become a slave state. Furious over the fraudulent nature of the vote, abolitionists organized a rival government in Topeka in 1855. Before long, violence erupted, and anti-slavery settlers founded a town named Lawrence. With authority granted by a Kansas court, a proslavery posse of 800 armed men swept into Lawrence and burned down the antislavery headquarters, destroyed all of the newspapers’ printing presses, and looted the houses and stores. Abolitionist newspapers dubbed the event “the sack of Lawrence.”

The Pottawatomie Massacre occurred during the night of May 24 and the morning of May 25, 1856 (3 years before John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry). In reaction to the sacking of Lawrence (Kansas) by pro-slavery forces, John Brown and a band of abolitionist settlers killed five pro-slavery settlers north of Pottawatomie Creek in Franklin County, Kansas. This was one of the many bloody episodes in Kansas preceding the American Civil War, which came to be known collectively as Bleeding Kansas. A war of revenge erupted in Kansas. Proslavery Southerners ransacked free farms and took "horses and cattle and everything else they can lay hold of while they searched for Brown and the other "Pottawatomie killers." Armed bands looted stores and farms. In summary, John Brown's men killed four Missourians, and proslavery forces retaliated by blockading the free towns of Topeka and Lawrence. Before it was over, violence in eastern Kansas left 200 dead.

The Raid
On October 16, 1859, John Brown led a group of 22 men in a raid on the Arsenal [a building where weapons and military equipment are stored] in Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia). Five of the men were black: three free blacks, one a freed slave, and one a fugitive slave. During this time assisting fugitive slaves was illegal under the Dred Scott decision. Brown attacked and captured several buildings; and it is widely thought that he hoped to use the captured weapons to initiate a slave uprising throughout the South.

Harriet Tubman, 5 feet tall, some of her teeth missing, a veteran of countless secret Underground Railroad missions piloting blacks out of slavery, was involved with John Brown and his plans. But sickness prevented her from joining him. Frederick Douglass too had met with Brown. He argued against the plan because of its slim chances of success, but he admired the ailing man of sixty, tall, white-haired.

Douglass was right; the plan would not work. The local militia, joined by a hundred marines under the command of Robert E. Lee, surrounded the insurgents. Although his men were dead or captured, John Brown refused to surrender: he barricaded himself in a small brick building near the gate of the armory. The troops battered down a door; a marine lieutenant moved in and struck Brown with his sword. Wounded, sick, he was interrogated.

W. E. B. Du Bois, in his book John Brown, writes:

*Picture the situation: An old and blood-bespattered man, half-dead from the wounds inflicted ... a few hours before; a man lying in the cold and dirt, without sleep for fifty-five nerve-wrecking hours, without food for nearly as long, with the dead bodies of his two sons almost before his eyes, the piled corpses of his seven slain comrades near ...and a Lost Cause, the dream of a lifetime, lying dead in his heart. . . .*
"Old Brown," is fifty five years of age, rather small sized, with keen and restless grey eyes, and a grizzly beard and hair. His hair is matted and tangled, and his face, hands, and clothes, all smeared with blood. The interrogator (Senator Mason) told Brown that he would kick out all visitors from the interrogation room if he were annoyed by them, but Brown said he was by no means annoyed; on the contrary, he was glad to be able to make himself and his motives clearly understood. He converses freely, fluently and cheerfully, without the slightest demonstration of fear or lack of confidence. He puts a great deal of thought into his words, and possesses a good command of language. His manner is courteous and pleasant.

The following is an excerpted report of the conversation (except those words in italics):

Mr. Mason: You mean if you had escaped immediately?

Mr. Brown: ... I allowed myself to be surrounded by a force by being too tardy.

Mr. Mason: Tardy in getting away?

Mr. Brown: I should have gone away, but I had thirty odd prisoners, whose wives and daughters were in tears for their safety, and I felt for them. Besides, I wanted to calm the fears of those who believed we came here to burn and kill. For this reason I allowed the train to cross the bridge, and gave them full freedom to pass. I did it only to spare the feelings of those passengers and their families, and to calm the fear that we were a band of men who had no regard for ... or any feeling of humanity.

Mr. Mason: But you killed some people passing along the streets quietly.

Mr. Brown: Well, sir, if there was anything of that kind done, it was without my knowledge. Your own citizens, who were my prisoners, will tell you that every possible attempt was taken to prevent it. I did not allow my men to fire, nor even to return a fire, when there was danger of killing those we regarded as innocent persons, if I could help it. They will tell you that we allowed ourselves to be fired at repeatedly and did not return it.

Mr. V[allandigham](member of Congress from Ohio, who had just entered): Mr. Brown, who sent you here?

Mr. Brown: No man sent me here; it was my own prompting and that of my Maker, or that of the devil, whichever you please to ascribe it to. I acknowledge no man in human form.

Mr. Mason: What was your reason for coming?

Mr. Brown: We came to free the slaves, and only that.

A Young Man (in the uniform of a volunteer company): How many men?

Mr. Brown: I came to Virginia with eighteen men only, besides myself.

Volunteer: What in the world did you suppose you could do here in Virginia with that amount of men?

Mr. Brown: Young man, I don't wish to discuss that question here.

Mr. Mason: How do you justify your acts?

Mr. Brown: I think, my friend, you are guilty of a great wrong against God and humanity. It would be perfectly right for any one to interfere with you to free those you wickedly hold in bondage. I do not say this insultingly. I think I did right, and that others will do right who interfere with you at any time and all times. I hold that the golden rule, "Do unto others as you would that others should do unto you," applies to all who would help others to gain their liberty.

Mr. Mason: You considered yourself the Commander in Chief of these "provisional" [makeshift] military forces.
Mr. Brown: I was chosen commander in chief of that force.

Mr. Mason: What wages did you offer?

Mr. Brown: None.

Lieut. Stuart: "The wages of sin is death."

Mr. Brown: I would not have made such a remark to you, if you had been a prisoner and wounded in my hands . . . .

Mr. Vallandigham: Have you had any correspondence with people at the North about this movement?

Mr. Brown: I have had correspondence.

A Bystander: Do you consider this a religious movement?

Mr. Brown: It is, in my opinion, the greatest service a man can render to God.

Bystander: Upon what principle do you justify your acts?

Mr. Brown: Upon the golden rule. I pity the poor in bondage that have nobody to help them; that is why I am here; not to revenge. My sympathy is with the oppressed and the wronged, that are as good as you and as precious as you in the sight of God.

Mr. Vallandigham: Did you expect a general rebellion of the slaves if you were successful?

Mr. Brown: No, sir; nor did I wish it. I expected to gather them up from time to time and set them free.

Dr. Biggs: Who treated that woman's neck on the hill?

Mr. Brown: I did. I have sometimes practiced in surgery when I thought it a matter of humanity and necessity, and there was no one else to do it, but have not studied surgery.

Dr. Biggs: It was done very well and scientifically.

Reporter of the Herald: I do not wish to annoy you; but if you have anything further you would like to say I will report it.

Mr. Brown: I have nothing to say, only that I claim to be here to aid those suffering great wrong. I wish to say, furthermore, that you had better—all you people at the South—prepare yourselves for a settlement of that question[slavery] that must come up for settlement sooner than you are prepared for. The sooner you are prepared the better. You may dispose of me very easily; I am nearly disposed of now; but this question is still to be settled—this Negro question I mean—the end ... is not yet. These wounds were inflicted upon me -both saber cuts on my head and bayonet stabs in different parts of my body minutes after I had surrendered. [Mr. Brown insisted that the marines fired first.]

Reporter of the Herald: Brown, suppose you had every n***** in the United States, what would you do with them?

Brown: Set them free.

A Bystander: I think you are fanatical.

Mr. Brown: And I think you are fanatical. "Whom the gods would destroy they first make mad," and you are mad.

Reporter of the Herald: Was it your only goal to free the negroes?

Brown: Absolutely our only goal.
John Brown Speaks at Trial: (we will watch the speech)

"I have, may it please the Court, a few words to say. In the first place, I deny everything but what I have all along admitted, of a design on my part to free slaves. I intended certainly to have made a clean thing of that matter, as I did last winter when I went into Missouri, and there took slaves without the snapping of a gun on either side, moving them through the country, and finally leaving them in Canada. I designed to have done the same thing again on a larger scale. That was all I intended to do. I never did intend murder or treason, or the destruction of property, or to excite or incite the slaves to rebellion, or to make insurrection. I have another objection, and that is that it is unjust that I should suffer such a penalty. Had I interfered in the manner which I admit, and which I admit has been fairly proved for I admire the truthfulness and candor of the greater portion of the witnesses who have testified in this case had I so interfered in behalf of the rich, the powerful, the intelligent, the so called great, or in behalf of any of their friends, either father, mother, brother, sister, wife, or children, or any of that class, and suffered and sacrificed what I have in this interference, it would have been all right, and every man in this Court would have deemed it an act worthy of reward rather than punishment. This Court acknowledges, too, as I suppose, the validity of the law of God. I see a book kissed, which I suppose to be the Bible, or at least the New Testament, which 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 I have done in behalf of His despised, poor, is no 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 say let it be done. Let me say one word further. I feel entirely satisfied with the treatment I have received on my trial. Considering all the circumstances, it has been more generous than I expected. But I feel no consciousness of guilt. I have stated from the first what was my intention, and what was not. I never had any design against the liberty of any person, nor any disposition to commit treason or excite slaves to rebel or make any general insurrection. I never encouraged any man to do so, but always discouraged any idea of that kind. Let me say also in regard to the statements made by some of those who were connected with me, I fear it has been stated by some of them that I have induced them to join me, but the contrary is true. I do not say this to injure them, but as regretting their weakness. Not one but joined me of his own accord, and the greater part at their own expense. A number of them I never saw, and never had a word of conversation with till the day they came to me, and that was for the purpose I have stated. Now, I am done."

End Annotation

In John Brown's last written statement, in prison, before he was hanged, he said: "I, John Brown, am quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with blood." Ralph Waldo Emerson, not an activist himself, said of the execution of John Brown: "He will make the gallows holy as the cross."

The national government would never accept an end to slavery by rebellion. It would end slavery only under conditions controlled by wealthy northern whites, and only when required by the political and economic needs of the business elite of the North.

On December 2, 1859, Brown was hanged for high treason. The hanging was in public – in the presence of federal troops and curious observers. Public reaction was immediate and intense. Many northerners expressed admiration for him and his cause. Some began to call Brown a martyr for the cause of abolition.

For the website of pics: http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/learning_history/brown/john_brown_own_words.cfm