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John Brown, Slavery, and the Legacies of Revolutionary Violence in Our Own Time: A Conference Commemorating the 150th Anniversary of the Harpers Ferry Raid

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Mob Violence

David C. Rapoport, UCLA

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Abstract

The two most important examples of successful mob violence in American politics are the Sons of Liberty (1765-76) and the Ku Klux Klan (1867-18-77). One created a nation and ignited the American Revolution; while the other won the peace the South wanted after the South's armies lost the Civil War. Because their ultimate aims were so different, one is honored while the other is reviled. But there are some striking similarities between the two, especially with respect to organization and methods, similarities which help explain their successes. The groups have not been systematically compared largely because the place of each in American consciousness is so radically different.

European mobs in the period were episodic but the American groups each conducted a campaign which lasted a decade which remained consistent with the original object. Each consisted of autonomous, often loosely coordinated ad hoc groups. Their violence was unrestricted by the rules of war, which would make both Americans entities terrorist groups by definitions used today. The enormous sizes of the early groups make them very different from

terrorists we are familiar with. In their attacks they always outnumbered their victims while the opposite is the case today. They also exhibited some very important restraints that enabled them to avoid arousing public responses that would have made their ultimate objectives much more difficult or even impossible to achieve. The KKK, for example, worked to prevent kindred groups from using similar tactics in the North and it made every effort to avoid attacking Union troops. The object was the same in both cases; it believed that those restraints would make it more difficult for Reconstruction supporters to gain more political strength. The Sons of Liberty were very adamant that individuals did not go beyond the limits specified by the organizers of an attack and in the process help the opposition make more effective political appeals. When individuals in both groups were brought to trial, they *never* admitted responsibility or “claimed credit”, a pattern which stands in striking contrast to that employed by John Brown. The assumption that one could and should conquer by one’s own suffering or martyrdom was alien to both groups, but it has been utilized by the overwhelming number of terrorists our world is familiar with. Ironically, this pattern of using one’s own suffering to move relevant audiences is *the* distinguishing characteristic of non- violent resistance movements such as those led by Gandhi and by his disciple Martin Luther King who finally reversed the KKK’s achievement and realized Brown’s ultimate objective.