

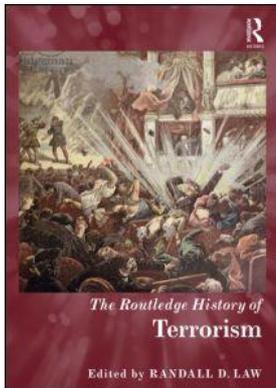
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TERRORISM IN AMERICA FROM THE COLONIAL PERIOD TO JOHN BROWN

Matthew Jennings

As far back as we can see into the North American past, terror-inducing tactics are present. They were one piece of a larger toolkit that featured violence of various kinds in Native America. The arrival of Europeans challenged Native ways of violence and brought new technologies and styles of terrorism to bear. There is no shortage of provocative and symbolic acts of violence associated with European colonization; an attempt to catalog all of these acts would run to an absurd length. On colonial plantations, Europeans relied upon terror to keep a large enslaved population in check and at work. When the seaboard colonies rebelled against British authority in the late eighteenth century, both sides relied upon acts of violence to terrorize their adversaries. As the newly independent United States established itself as a continental power, it relied on something akin to state terror to stake its claim to a wide swath of North America, and Native people and the Mexican republic responded in kind. Finally, as the fight over slavery and slavery's expansion became the consuming political passion, pro-slavery and anti-slavery partisans used terror tactics to advance their cause. The fact that "terrorism" as a term is of comparatively recent vintage presents some difficulties when it comes to applying the concept to the distant past, and many of the incidents below do not fall into neat categories.¹ For example, the European and later US genocide against Native peoples could be considered "state terror" from the perspective of the United States, since Native land claims were seen as invalid. Native nations perceived the conflict between themselves and colonizers as between sovereign entities, so the use of the phrase "state terror" would privilege the US perspective. Other terminological problems arise because few people in early America drew the same lines that contemporary commenters might between public and private violence, or state and non-state violence. Rather than dissect each violent act which follows to figure out which specific brand of terrorism it may constitute, this chapter focuses on events which provoked controversy in their own time or seem striking for some other reason, in an effort to show that violence intended to provoke terror has been present from the very beginning of American history.

Terrorism before the advent of Europeans

When discussing the use of terror-inducing tactics in early North America, scholars face an intriguing and frustrating historiographical dilemma. Most of the sources left behind from the early years of colonization were produced by the invaders, who viewed their violence and terrorism as legitimate tools to conquer and pacify a strange land. At the same time, from the very moment of the first European presence in the Americas, two powerful and remarkably long-lived images of Native American violence took hold. On the one hand,

Europeans could sometimes view Native people as peaceful, even admirable, albeit in a primitive way. On the other hand, Europeans believed that Native people engaged in extraordinary, shocking acts of violence, which fed the notion that Native people were somehow savage – the “noble savage” and, for lack of a better term, the “just plain savage.”² This dichotomy of stereotypes began when Columbus questioned his guileless and virtuous Taíno hosts about their neighbors and learned of the presence of another group of islanders, the Caribs, who were grotesque and fierce and prone to extreme acts of violence. The juxtaposition persists in modern times as well. Witness the New Age romanticizing of a peaceful Native past before savage Europeans ruined an American Eden, as well as the wide array of United States military equipment named after Native people, nations, and weapons. It is necessary to set aside these stereotypes since Native American societies were no more “warlike” or violent than other societies around the world. Violence played an important role in Native America, but American Indian violence was not savage, and it was not the sole salient feature of indigenous communities.

North America had been home to large, complicated societies in the centuries prior to European colonization, and all of these societies likely employed terror-inducing violence. The archaeological record, oral history, and documents from the earliest European expeditions can help scholars reconstruct, at least in an imperfect way, the ways in which terrorism functioned in early America. The large polities of the Native Southwest, such as those that flourished at Chaco Canyon, New Mexico, from 900 to 1250 or so, may have relied on forced labor and provocative acts of violence to construct their great houses (*casas grandes*). There is some evidence that widespread, provocative violence marked the rise of the elites at Chaco Canyon and that this violence also included public episodes of terror-inducing violence that may have served to demonstrate the price of resistance or enforce subjugation to Chacoan authority.³ During roughly the same time period, the rule of elites at Cahokia, a massive city that grew on the east side of the Mississippi River near modern St. Louis, appears to have rested at least in part on a state monopoly on violence. Archaeologists believe that highly provocative sacrifices of war captives or people given as tribute occurred on top of the platform mounds and served as a graphic reminder of the costs of opposing the regime. Archaeological evidence from Mound 72 supports such assertions: the two elite men buried there were joined by dozens of others who probably met a violent end.⁴

Though the Chaco and Cahokia civilizations dispersed, their descendants, as well as other societies throughout indigenous America, continued to use terrorizing tactics as part of a varied toolkit. The Crow Creek site in South Dakota speaks to mass violence. An attack, dated tentatively to 1325, totally annihilated nearly 500 townspeople. Many of the remains showed signs of scalping and other forms of mutilation. The large number of victims at Crow Creek is extraordinary, but evidence of terrorizing violence in Native America before the arrival of European is not.⁵ Sources from the early Spanish exploration and invasion tend to bear this out. The accounts associated with Hernando de Soto’s expedition, which encountered the descendants of Cahokia in the form of Mississippian-era towns as it tore through the indigenous Southeast from 1539 to 1543, show the world of Mississippian violence in some detail. In one notable incident, soldiers from the town of Alimamu confronted de Soto’s army in April 1541 from atop a fortification they had constructed. The Alimamu men wore only breechclouts, but their bodies were painted black (to represent death) and red (to represent success in war), and some wore horns and feathers. Their appearance was carefully cultivated to terrorize their adversaries, as was their behavior. They taunted the Spaniards and pantomimed roasting one of the invaders over a fire. Once

Spanish reinforcements arrived and the force breached the barricade's outer wall, the Alimamu soldiers retreated to a strategic location, safe from Spanish assaults. All in all, nearly two dozen Spanish fighters died, while the Alimamu defenders lost just three.⁶ While this incident would likely not qualify as "terrorism" in the modern sense of the term since it was enacted between opposing soldiers, in other ways it fits quite well. Not only does it include the symbolic violence of certain colors (even if only understood by the Alimamus) and the threatened roasting, but the violent pageantry was staged *outside of battle*.

The terror of colonization

The early Spanish expeditions in North America not only witnessed and experienced Native violence as it existed in the mid-1500s, they also unleashed a vast amount of violence, often using tactics designed to terrorize as they did so. As de Soto's army probed the interior Southeast, it seized hostages from both the top and bottom of Mississippian society. Kidnapping elites might ensure safe passage through their provinces, given ordinary Mississippians' reverence for their leaders. At Cofitachequi (in present-day South Carolina), the Spanish seized the female leader and held her hostage until she escaped with one of the African slaves accompanying the expedition. Taking hundreds of ordinary townsfolk hostage also guaranteed that plenty of people would be available to carry Spanish luggage and otherwise labor to assist the expedition.⁷ When the Spanish met military resistance, they often responded with highly provocative acts of violence. For instance, de Soto's army brought along a number of dogs trained to attack human adversaries. It also employed group executions, as well as other terrifying acts such as the cropping of ears and noses, the amputation of hands and feet, and burnings at the stake. Even when Mississippian communities did not offer resistance, the presence of wealth could provoke the Spanish to use terror tactics. Upon learning that deceased elites at Cofitachequi underwent elaborate burials in which their body cavities were stuffed with freshwater pearls, one of the Spanish officers ordered the bodies cut open and the pearls removed. While perhaps not intentionally designed to terrorize, such desecrations almost certainly had that effect. The Spanish entry into the Southwest also featured the use of terrorizing violence. When the Pueblo of Arenal resisted Spanish incursions in the winter of 1540–1, Francisco Vázquez de Coronado's expedition made an example of it. Spanish officers put the town to the torch, captured the residents as they fled their burning homes, and burned them at the stake.⁸ The Pueblos were familiar with some forms of violence, but this was novel.

Neither the de Soto nor the Coronado expedition managed to establish a permanent colony. But the Spanish returned in later years and once again employed terror tactics. The Spanish foundation of St. Augustine is described in detail below, but beyond that particular spasm of violence, Spanish armies were not at all timid about the use of terrorism. In fact, they believed they had divine sanction for doing so, based upon their understanding of the twentieth chapter of Deuteronomy, in which God lays out the rules of war against enemies of Israel: "Thou shalt save nothing alive that breatheth." Sometimes this type of conflict is referred to as a "war of fire and blood." If non-Christians resisted the introduction of Christianity into their homelands by invading armies, then any tactics, no matter how terroristic, were fair, and, by Spanish logic, the blame for the harsh tactics lay with the resisters themselves.⁹

Backers of English colonization recounted the terrorism of the Spanish presence in the Americas with great zeal, primarily because it helped justify their own presence in North America and stressed the difference between Protestant virtue and Spanish cruelty. Richard

Hakluyt, an early, vociferous advocate of English colonization, wrote in his *Discourse of Western Planting* that the Spanish had committed “moste outrageous and more then [sic] Turkishe cruelties” in their invasion of the Americas. They were “without manhodde, emptie of all pitie, behaving themselves as savage beasts, the slaughterers and murderers of mankind.”¹⁰ English armies might use terrorizing tactics on occasion, but they paled in comparison to the atrocities attributable to the Spanish that later became known as the Black Legend. English readers snapped up translated copies of the writings of Bartolomé de Las Casas and others who criticized Spanish mistreatment of indigenous peoples.¹¹ In reality, English colonization also featured terrorism at the outset. In 1585 at Roanoke, Ralph Lane (a veteran of Elizabethan campaigns in Ireland), became convinced that a massive conspiracy was brewing among the local Algonquian communities. It may well have been, as the English had been ruthless in pressing their hosts for relatively scarce food stores. Lane determined to stop the plot, and so, after gathering many Native leaders together under the pretense of a peace talk, Lane’s soldiers ambushed the party and beheaded one of the most powerful men in the region, Wingina (also known as Pemisipan). Relations deteriorated thereafter, and the English abandoned the colony.¹²

In the contest between English and Powhatans in early seventeenth-century Virginia, both sides used the tactics of terror to get their point across. Powhatan himself was no stranger to violence, having used open hostilities in combination with economic pressure and intimidation to rise to rule most of eastern Virginia.¹³ The arrival of the English presented a grave threat to American Indians in Virginia, but it provided an opportunity as well. In late 1607, Powhatan’s soldiers captured the English military chieftain John Smith, and, after a lengthy tour of Powhatan’s dominion, Smith came face to face with the man himself. After consulting his religious advisors, Powhatan raised his war club over John Smith’s head. That’s when the leader’s daughter, Pocahontas, intervened to save, or rather ritually adopt, Smith. The act was a terrifying prelude to Smith’s (and by extension the English) adoption into Powhatan’s world. The English failed to recognize what had happened and continued to expand, sometimes quite violently, beyond the pale at Jamestown. There are plenty of incidents one could highlight, but George Percy’s attack on the town of Paspahegh stands out for the level and type of violence employed. As the English force approached Paspahegh, it fanned out in small groups. After an initial surprise attack routed the defenders, the English beheaded one of their captives, then proceeded to burn the town, including the adjacent cornfields. The English also started to carry the “Queen” and her children back to Jamestown, before they decided it was a mistake to let them live. They executed the children by “throweing them overboard and shoteinge owtt their Braynes in the water,” before eventually putting their mother to the sword, according to Percy’s account. While Native Virginians were certainly familiar with terror tactics as perpetrators and victims, this level of brutality seems to have been exceedingly rare before the English arrived. By 1622, any slim chance of peaceful coexistence had been exhausted, and Powhatan’s successor, his brother Opechancanough, spearheaded an attack against the English who had broken the rules by moving beyond Jamestown. Hundreds of colonists perished, and the Native army employed a provocative form of violence in an effort to teach the English a lesson: some English victims were beheaded or otherwise mutilated after death. The English claimed such attacks were unwarranted and proof of Native savagery and used them to justify an all-out war of their own.¹⁴

Farther to the north, many elements of this drama were replayed near the first English colony in the land they called New England. From the Plymouth colonists’ grave robbing

and provocative militia exercises to the mass slaughter of the Pequot War, the religious zealots who founded New England made great use of terroristic violence, and their Native neighbors responded in kind. In 1637, in conflict over trade and land, the New English army and the Pequot army marched against one another – and missed. The English happened upon a large fortified town on the Mystic River. The fact that the main Pequot force was out after the English meant that a disproportionate number of the inhabitants of the town were women, children, and men above military age. In modern terminology, they were non-combatants. The New English set fire to the town, and Captain John Mason estimated that between 600 and 700 Pequots died. Most were burned alive, but the few that managed to escape the flames suffered a systematic genocide at the hands of the English soldiers. Mason wrote that “God was above them, who laughed his Enemies and the Enemies of his People to scorn, making them as a fiery Oven . . . filling the place with dead bodies.” William Bradford of Plymouth described the scene thusly:

It was a fearful sight to see them thus frying in the fire and the streams of blood quenching the same, and horrible was the stink and scent thereof, but the victory seemed a sweet sacrifice, and they gave praise thereof to God, who had wrought so wonderfully for them, thus to enclose their enemies in their hands and given them so speedily a victory over so proud and insulting an enemy.¹⁵

Native people in southern New England took away several key lessons from the Pequot War and deployed their own military forces to great effect in Metacom’s War, also known as King Philip’s War, which raged in the mid-1670s. Native soldiers put entire towns to the torch and also demonstrated an affinity for flintlock muskets, which most of the English deemed too expensive to be practical.¹⁶ The violence of the early stages of Metacom’s War mirrored that of the Pequot War as Native armies sought to terrorize the English. It seems clear that attacking Wampanoags and their allies sought to destroy the very things on which the English based their identity of themselves as “civilized.” Entire families were murdered in their homes, and the attackers destroyed houses and cattle as well. Scores of English who survived the attacks were taken captive, which carried its own brand of terror.¹⁷ Many Native groups took captives – European, Native, and African – in the course of conflict, and the experiences of these captives varied widely. Some found themselves adopted and integrated into Native communities to the extent that they preferred not to return to their homes. Others lived in a state of constant fear, while some were tortured.

Episodes of Europeans committing acts of terror-inducing violence against other Europeans were not unknown in early America, and one of these incidents occurred near the very outset of a permanent European presence in what would eventually become the United States. A small colony of French Protestants in northern Florida was too close to Spanish treasure shipping lanes for that empire’s comfort, and the Spanish responded swiftly. After destroying Fort Caroline (near present-day Jacksonville) and over 100 of its inhabitants, Governor Pedro Menéndez de Avilés met two separate forces of French soldiers who had just survived shipwrecks. The first surrendered and tried to negotiate for safe passage back to Fort Caroline, only to have Menéndez announce that

their fort had been taken and those who had been inside had their throats slit, because they were there without the permission of Your Majesty and because they

were sowing their evil Lutheran sect in these provinces of Your Majesty I made *war with fire and blood* as governor and captain-general of these provinces.¹⁸

Menéndez put most members of both of these unfortunate parties to death, employing a sort of state-endorsed terrorism that was going out of style in Europe itself, where non-combatants were increasingly understood to be illegitimate targets of warfare.¹⁹ Terror and colonization went hand in hand in North America.

Terror in the fight for empire and the birth of the United States

As Europeans expanded from precarious coastal footholds further and further into the interior of North America, they employed state terrorism to dominate their weaker neighbors when it was possible to do so. At the same time, Native communities also employed tactics that would today be considered terrorist in their attempt to push back against the invaders. When the European superpowers of the day, Great Britain and France, struggled over North America in the Seven Years' War, both relied on Native proxies to strike terror into the hearts of the other side's colonists. It should come as no surprise that when thirteen of Great Britain's mainland colonies declared independence and went to war to win it, both sides used tactics designed to inspire terror. As the war spread into Indian Country, the Continental Army deliberately sought to undermine Native independence through attacks on food supplies and civilian populations.

The main exports of the European colonies are well known: furs, fish, timber and naval stores, grain, as well as more profitable crops such as sugar, indigo, tobacco, and rice. Less well known is the fact that Europeans also exported violence from their settlements into the interior of the North American continent. According to the hoary mythology of the Black Legend, the Spanish were the main perpetrators. A clear-eyed reading of the evidence indicates that all of the European powers were capable of committing acts of state terrorism. To note just a few examples, traders from Charles Town led joint Anglo-Creek expeditions in the first decade of the eighteenth century that captured thousands of Native slaves from the mission towns of Spanish Florida. In New France, the governor expressed fear of Native violence, describing it as "the cruelest war in the world. They are not content to burn the houses, they also burn the prisoners they take, and give them death only after torturing them continually in the most cruel manner possible."²⁰ Of course, the French also sowed terror on occasion. In the 1720s, France declared war on the Fox, or Mesquakie, Indians, described by colonial officials as "cunning and malignant" and "insolent." The campaign hit home in the 1730s, with the French governor Charles de la Boische de Beauharnois ordering his soldiers to "kill Them without thinking of making a single Prisoner, so as not to leave one of the race alive in the upper Country." In campaigns in what is now Wisconsin and Illinois, the French and their Native allies routinely killed Mesquakie soldiers and their families, enacting a terrifying, though ultimately failed, genocide.²¹

The subject of slavery poses an interesting conundrum for students of the history of terrorism. After all, the European practice of taking and exploiting slaves of color was, at root, an economic endeavor, although one rooted in deeply entrenched notions of racial and civilizational superiority. Slavery was not intended as a form of symbolic violence: victims and audience were one and the same. But in some ways, it makes sense to view the enslavement of thousands of Native Americans and exponentially more Africans and African Americans as a form of terrorism. From the perspective of those caught up in the

abominable practice, it surely was terrifying. And within the context of the plantation, the forms of violence that were deployed to maintain slavery were clearly performative. Well-recognized rituals of violence against the few were used to intimidate the many and to reinforce racial hierarchies.

And yet, from the perspective of the people doing the enslaving, slavery entailed a form of violence so banal that it rarely elicited mention in plantation records, save in cases of extraordinary violence. Disrupting the efficient harvest of a valuable staple crop could certainly bring down the wrath of the planter class. Francis Le Jau, employed as an Anglican missionary in Carolina, wrote of one suspected arsonist that the “poor Slavewoman was burnt alive near my door without any positive proof of the Crime she was accused of.”²² Such public violence enacted upon the living bodies of enslaved people, to say nothing of the mutilation of the deceased bodies of slaves or their descendants who faced lynchings’ ropes and desecration in future generations, carries such symbolic weight that it is difficult to consider them anything else than a state-sanctioned form of terrorism. Slaves who attempted to run away could face cruel punishments as well. Enslaved women and men who consistently absented themselves from their plantations for short periods of time faced an increasingly violent progression of punishments. They were whipped publicly at first, and subsequent offenses brought brandings, ear croppings, severed Achilles heels, castration for male slaves, and death (with the accompanying loss of property to be reimbursed by the colonial government).²³

On one memorable occasion in 1739, enslaved Africans, newly arrived from Angola and forced to labor on a public works project near the Stono River in South Carolina, repaid the mundane terror employed by slave owners with a spectacular episode of terrorizing violence of their own. Scholars dispute whether the Stono Rebellion was a long-germinating conspiracy or an impromptu response to ill-treatment, but the violence employed by the slaves clearly had a terror-inducing component. After breaking into a store and seeking food and drink – or perhaps firearms – a group of slaves surprised two men in the store, killed, and then beheaded them, placing the severed heads on the steps of the store. The slave rebels, who eventually numbered between 60 and 100, managed to kill 23 white colonists before meeting a force of colonial militia. The militia dispersed the rebels and captured the leaders. In the aftermath of the Stono Rebellion, Carolina’s colonists took trophy heads and, according to one account, set these heads on pikes, perhaps as a warning to future would-be rebels.²⁴

In the imperial contest known in Europe as the Seven Years’ War and in America as the French and Indian War, the British, the French, and Native Americans from diverse nations used terror tactics to inspire fear and send messages across cultural lines. Tanaghrisson, the so-called Half King, joined Colonel George Washington of Virginia on a mission to reconnoiter Fort Duquesne at the Forks of the Ohio in 1754 and stunned those present when he killed the leader of a French patrol, Joseph Coulon de Villiers de Jumonville. Though the precise motives for killing the officer remain fuzzy, it is possible that Tanaghrisson intended to spark a conflict between imperial powers that could restore some measure of Native autonomy.²⁵ He succeeded in the former but failed in the latter. The war that ensued between Great Britain and France, the superpowers of the day, quickly spun out of any individual’s ability to control, and terrorist violence was present in nearly every chapter of the conflict. Civilian populations wedged between competing armies and associated guerrilla forces fared particularly poorly. The early phases of the war witnessed massive attacks on the western edges of the British colonies of Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia by the French and

their Native allies. While in today's conflicts some of this might be described as "collateral damage," there are enough instances, in which the British and their allies specifically sought to target and destroy Indian settlements, and Native people infuriated by squatters and ill-treatment sought to do likewise to English towns, that these should probably be understood as terrorism. Civilians also suffered in the aftermath of the surrender of the garrison that defended Fort William Henry, though not nearly as badly as viewers of the film *Last of the Mohicans* might be led to believe. As the siege of Quebec unfolded in 1759, the British general James Wolfe ordered his soldiers to pillage the farms and Native towns in the area, in part to force the French into battle, in part to terrorize the French and their allies.²⁶ This is another example of the trickiness of applying modern terminology to early conflicts: Wolfe used terror as a legitimate, to his mind, piece of his tactical toolkit. War erupted in the southern theater in the late 1750s when English colonists surprised Cherokee families, scalped them, and sold the scalps for bounty money. Cherokees protested, but when a delegation of headmen came to Charles Town to talk, they were detained and several were executed. A bitter partisan conflict between Cherokees and backcountry colonists occurred, and both sides committed atrocities.²⁷

The racial situation deteriorated in the aftermath of the war as Great Britain struggled to administer vast new territories and, to a lesser extent, tamp down violence between Native people and colonists. Multiple Native nations attacked British forts in the West in a conflict the British laid at the feet of the Ottawa war leader Pontiac, calling it Pontiac's War (he was the nominal mastermind of a much wider-ranging conflict); bloody and terroristic violence ensued. In one of the more closely examined incidents of terrorism associated with this conflict, Jeffrey Amherst, a British general who had himself accused the French of dishonorable tactics, may have ordered the distribution of blankets from smallpox patients to Native Americans near Fort Pitt (on the site of the former Fort Duquesne). If he did not explicitly order it, he certainly would have approved it. Amherst's feelings about Native Americans in general, and those who opposed the British in particular, are well documented: they were "the Vilest Race of Beings that ever Infested the Earth & whose Riddance from it must be Esteemed a Meritorious Act for the Good of Mankind."²⁸ For their part, groups of Native people surrounding English forts like Pitt often shouted stories designed to terrify garrisons and speed their surrender.²⁹ In a chilling closing chapter to this already bloody era, a vigilante band in Pennsylvania, the Paxton Boys, carried out a genocidal assault on their Conestoga Indian neighbors in late 1763 and early 1764. The racialized terrorism of their campaign would have long-lasting effects in the mutual mistrust between English colonists and Native people, as well as the fairly violent form of white identity forged by colonists.³⁰

As most schoolchildren in the United States know, the American patriots declared their independence in July of 1776. As fewer know, the contest began years before that pivotal date, and both the British and their colonial adversaries resorted to terror-inducing tactics. The Patriot movement in Boston drew strength from groups like the Sons of Liberty. There is little doubt that the British Empire looked upon the Sons of Liberty as a terrorist organization, even though the first uses of the term were still a couple of decades away, as the group endorsed the use of violence, sometimes symbolic and other times more concrete, to bring about their desired political ends. Violence between Patriots and Loyalists predated Lexington Green and continued alongside the official War for Independence. Tarrings and featherings, beatings, and even extra-legal killings were not infrequent occurrences. These acts, while they may have been directed at individuals, were designed to intimidate larger

populations, helped to determine who was on which side, and, as they accumulated, undermined the chance for a peaceful rapprochement.³¹ Nor was violence limited to persons: in the best known of many instances, Patriots in “Mohawk” disguise destroyed an enormous amount of tea belonging to the British East India Company. General Thomas Gage wrote in 1775 that the colonists were waging a campaign of “daily and indiscriminate invasions upon private property, and with a wantonness of cruelty . . . carry[ing] depredation and distress wherever they turn their steps.”³² The British responded with demonstrations of force designed to cow the colonial population into submitting to Parliament’s authority. One result was the onset of open hostilities at the Massachusetts towns of Lexington and Concord in April 1775. Farther to the south, the royal governor of Virginia, Lord Dunmore, believed he had hit upon a tactic that would terrify that colony’s insurgent planters into giving up their rebellious schemes. Dunmore offered freedom to any slave of a rebel master who served the British military. Eventually, hundreds of African Americans took up arms against their owners in Dunmore’s Ethiopian Regiment. Though not terribly effective militarily (and weakened by disease), the sight of armed slaves fighting for their freedom in the service of the British could not have been more frightening to Virginia’s Patriot planters. It also spurred rebellious sentiment. One Patriot noted that “men of all ranks resent the pointing [of] a dagger to their Throats, thru the hands of their slaves.”³³

As the War for Independence unfolded, regular and irregular forces on both sides sought to terrorize their enemies. To remain in the field required food and fuel, and both armies availed themselves of civilian resources at every turn. Both armies also deployed sexual violence, though incidences of rape were likely underreported.³⁴ In occupied cities and in the backcountry, civilians lived in constant fear of whichever army happened to be operating in the area. The conflict in the southern backcountry was a particularly nasty undertaking, as small groups of partisans, operating only loosely in conjunction with the larger militaries, ravaged their opponents’ farms. More regular forces were only slightly better behaved: in the aftermath of the battle at King’s Mountain, Major Patrick Ferguson’s body was stripped and left where he died as Patriot forces rushed to seize souvenirs. At least one account suggests that enraged colonists took turns urinating on Ferguson’s corpse. Banastre Tarleton noted that “mountaineers . . . used every insult and indignity toward the dead body of Major Ferguson.” And Tarleton was intimately familiar with insult and indignity. Indeed, “Tarleton’s Quarter” was a phrase used to describe the bayoneting of wounded or surrendering soldiers, as Tarleton’s dragoons had used that tactic at the Waxhaws massacre in 1780.³⁵

It should come as no surprise that some of the most savage instances of violence occurred when the Continental Army moved against its Indian enemies. The Declaration of Independence made reference to “merciless Indian savages whose known rule of warfare, is undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions,” and while Native people did commit atrocities, this more accurately describes the way the American armies behaved in Indian country. George Washington desired that John Sullivan’s army invade Iroquois country in 1779 to “carry the war into the Heart of the Country of the six nations; to cut off their settlements, destroy their next Year’s crops and do them every other mischief of which time and circumstances will permit.” George Rogers Clark invaded Shawnee country believing that “to excel them in barbarity was and is the only way to make war upon Indians.” Clark practiced what he preached when he ordered Indian prisoners bound and tomahawked at Vincennes.³⁶ American armies committed similar atrocities in repeated invasions of the Cherokee towns over the course of the war.³⁷ The United States was born in a struggle that

involved terror tactics on all sides, and the young nation secured its independence through the use of such tactics against its Native American neighbors.

Terrorism in the early republic and antebellum America

From the era of the American Revolution to the crisis that resulted in the Civil War, terrorism shaped American communities in myriad ways. The United States continued to terrorize the denizens of Indian Country as it pressed western land claims. On the international scene, terror tactics accompanied the American army as it invaded British North America in the 1810s and again when it invaded Mexico in the 1840s. Americans inspired by nativist sentiment terrorized recently arrived immigrants. Enslaved African Americans and their free cousins in northern cities routinely faced terrorism of various kinds. As the sectional crisis heated to a boil in the middle of the nineteenth century, white Americans terrorized each other based on their beliefs regarding slavery, culminating in the spectacular raid on Harpers Ferry in 1859.

The threat of violence was at the very heart of the United States' expansion across North America. Long after the guns had fallen silent at Yorktown in 1781, the US continued to terrorize its Native neighbors. Violence at the edge of the country became mundane, and the pattern was broken only by spasms of large-scale conflict, such as the massive victory a confederacy of nations won over the American army led by Arthur St. Clair in 1791 on the Wabash, or the retaliatory blow struck by the Americans at Fallen Timbers in 1794.³⁸ By the early nineteenth century, white ideas about race were changing and hardening, and US policy took a harder edge as a result. Though it may not fit a narrow definition of terrorism, Indian removal should probably be seen as a series of episodes of state-sponsored terrorism.³⁹ While an evenhanded rendering of the violence of the early nineteenth century must admit that Native American fighters took a heavy toll, as at Fort Mims in August in 1813, the end result was clear and lopsided.⁴⁰ The United States carried out a military and administrative campaign that sought to ethnically cleanse the lands east of the Mississippi and very nearly succeeded. The architects of this campaign would have found the notion that there was any such thing as an Indian civilian or non-combatant laughable – not only were they the heirs of a long tradition of perceived European superiority, they were of the mind that Providence had set aside all of North America for their unique blend of Protestantism, capitalism, and democracy. Examples such as the Cherokee removal of 1838 and 1839, which cost that southeastern nation approximately one-quarter of its population, are certainly stark and well known, but it is sometimes difficult for citizens of the modern United States to fully comprehend the havoc wrought on Indian communities by the republic in its early years.⁴¹ California's Native communities, for instance, suffered a perfect storm of racist violence when their lands came under the purview of the United States by the terms of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. Regular forces and vigilantes alike committed atrocity after atrocity in their drive to exterminate California's Indians. The *Yreka Herald* put it succinctly in 1853: "Extermination is no longer a question of time – the time has arrived, the work has commenced, and let the first man that says treaty or peace be regarded as a traitor."⁴² The US campaign of terror had the desired effect of securing the nation's claims to a wide swath of North America by the middle of the nineteenth century. Consolidation of American rule over the Great Plains would proceed apace in the years after the Civil War.

When the United States went to war against other imperial powers in the first half of the nineteenth century, it suffered opponents' terror tactics but certainly employed its own as well. American forces invaded British North America in 1813, and while General Henry Dearborn decried some of his soldiers' more outlandish actions in the campaign, his American army inflicted a great deal of damage on targets of questionable military worth, such as civilian homes and abandoned governmental buildings in the burning of York (present-day Toronto). The next year, a British force returned the favor by burning Washington.⁴³ Something approaching state terror – or perhaps what are identified by today's international law as war crimes – could play an even larger role when invading American armies believed themselves racially superior to their foes. Such was the case when the United States went to war against Mexico on dubious grounds in 1846. The regular army fought reasonably honorably against Mexican regulars, but the volunteers that fought alongside it did nothing of the sort, choosing to wage a war that featured sexual violence against Mexican women, confiscation of civilian property, and the too-frequent destruction of non-combatants.⁴⁴

Mob violence regularly struck fear into marginalized populations in antebellum America, and groups as varied as Irish immigrants, Mormons, and free people of color found themselves targeted by mobs in the first half of the nineteenth century. Irish people had been migrating to the United States since before there had been a United States, but famine and British imperialism swelled their ranks in the 1840s, and they came to the States in ever larger numbers.⁴⁵ Native-born Protestant whites – who feared economic competition, mistrusted Irish culture, and hated Catholicism passionately – tried to terrorize the Irish into submission. In one striking incident at Kensington, outside of Philadelphia, a group of Protestants, believing the Protestant flavor of their public schools to be in danger, took to the streets in a series of “Bible Riots” in 1844. Angry crowds descended in force upon local Catholic institutions and people, reflecting the notion that the very foundation of the republic was at risk: “if the BIBLE should be suppressed and liberty of conscience destroyed . . . the walls of our glorious Republic would be thrown down, and the foot of Roman power be set upon our sons, and our daughters become subject to the control of the Papal priests.” In all, the fighting left a handful dead and dozens more wounded.⁴⁶ Latter-day Saints faced persecution almost from the moment the sect came into being, and anti-Mormon sentiment, as well as terrorizing violence, drove Joseph Smith and his followers from upstate New York to Missouri and eventually to Nauvoo, Illinois, where they attempted to set up their own version of a godly community. Mob violence ensued, and in June 1844, Smith and his brother Hiram were lynched by anti-Mormons. Smith's successor, Brigham Young, led the Mormons to the shores of the Great Salt Lake.⁴⁷ American mobs seem to have reserved special fury for free communities of color. African American freedom in northern cities was fragile and imperfect, and free blacks tended to exist at the margins in poor-paying jobs with little security. These tenuous conditions worsened at various points in the nineteenth century, as mobs vented their racialized rage in countless incidents targeting black schools, churches, and other institutions.⁴⁸

American slaves continued to face the constant terrorism of the master class prior to the coming of civil war. The fact that there were comparatively few large-scale slave revolts should not be taken to mean that slaves were complacent and content in their bondage. Rather, it speaks to the demographic realities that confronted the victims of slavery. There were plenty of ways to cope with enslavement and resist it apart from taking up arms.

Of course, few events inspired terror among southern whites more than the actual occurrence of rebellion, and one name was synonymous with the practice: Nat Turner. Nat was born in southern Virginia in 1800 and from a young age demonstrated extraordinary gifts. As a young man, he described events that preceded his birth and also claimed to have visions of black and white spirits fighting in the sky. By the 1830s, he had come to interpret these signs to mean that he had been specially chosen to lead an uprising against slavery: “by signs in the heavens . . . it would make known to me when I should commence the great work . . . I should arise and prepare myself and slay my enemies with their own weapons.” In the late summer of 1831, Nat and a dedicated band of followers struck terror into whites in Virginia (and beyond) as they moved from plantation to plantation, killing nearly sixty people. Nat was eventually apprehended and executed, but not before local whites, wielding their own brand of terrorism, captured alleged rebels, beheaded them, and placed their severed heads on pikes along the road, an action that hearkened back to prior episodes of corpse mutilation designed to terrify and send a message.⁴⁹

The institution of slavery as practiced in the United States clearly carried within it the potential for terroristic violence in a variety of contexts, as described earlier. What may be a bit more surprising is the ferocity with which white people attacked each other over their views on the subject. Some of these white actors were intimately connected to the struggle to free African Americans or to the desire to keep them in bondage, while others fought for or against slavery in a more abstract sense. Indeed, one recent account has described the long-simmering conflict that flared wherever slavery and freedom abutted one another as a “border war.” Each side of this border war employed tactics designed to terrorize its opponents.⁵⁰ Attempts to recapture fugitive slaves and browbeat those who harbored them often ended in violence. Such was the case at Christiana, Pennsylvania, in 1851. Anti-abolitionist mobs were especially prone to violence: witness the 1837 death of the abolitionist newspaper editor Elijah Lovejoy in Alton, Illinois. Finally, in the 1850s, a nasty guerrilla war took shape in Kansas, as pro- and anti-slavery territorial governments and their partisans skirmished throughout the middle of that decade. One of the anti-slavery heroes of that particular contest was John Brown, a man who fits most definitions of terrorism quite well. It also bears mentioning that the causes he adopted, the social equality of the races and the destruction of slavery, are ones that are more or less universally applauded today. Brown came to understand that slavery was violence, even terrorism, at its core, and he dedicated his life to its destruction. His tactics, borrowed from Toussaint L’Ouverture and other slave rebels, including Nat Turner, were explicitly aimed at striking terror into the supporters of slavery. At Potawattomie Creek in 1856, Brown directed the murder of pro-slavery settlers, ostensibly as repayment for the beating of Charles Sumner by Preston Brooks on the floor of the Senate earlier that year. After going into hiding and raising an army to “carry the war into Africa,” as he put it, by invading the slaveholding South, Brown and a biracial strike force raided the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, intending to distribute the captured arms to slaves, thus enabling them to liberate themselves in a sort of rolling revolution. Though Brown may have failed to spark the massive slave uprising he had envisioned, his actions and his performance at trial in 1859 certainly succeeded in terrorizing white southerners. Brown expressed no regret for his actions and reminded the jury, as well as the riveted, news-hungry American republic, that “had I so interfered in behalf of the rich, the powerful, the intelligent, the so-called great . . . every man in this court would have deemed it an act worthy of reward rather than punishment.” (For more on John Brown and particularly his legacy, see Chapter 10 by R. Blakeslee Gilpin in this volume.) There is also

no small irony that whereas in 1859, Brown was executed as a traitor to Virginia for attempting to liberate slaves, the federal government itself, spurred by secession and war, would encourage slave rebellion in the rebellious states and act as a liberating force by late 1862 and early 1863.⁵¹

Terrorism, though perhaps not known by that particular term, has deep roots in American history. Indigenous communities used terror tactics against each other before Europeans ever arrived. Once Europeans did arrive, they employed terror tactics against each other and their Native hosts. European colonies established their dominance using terror, and the struggles for empire and independence of the mid- to late-eighteenth century unleashed a bewildering array of violent possibilities. The newly established American republic lashed out at neighbors north, south, and west as it secured its dominion over much of North America. Using terror-inducing tactics, forces within the United States threatened to pull the country apart at the seams in the conflict that prefigured the Civil War.

Reflecting on the violence that shaped early American history can be a sobering experience, but it is necessary – not just as a corrective to jingoist versions of the past, but because it moves us toward a fuller, more accurate rendering of that past. And by placing terrorisms past in the proper historical context, we can begin to see our own violent times more clearly. From this perspective, terrorism is not an aberration or something that al-Qaeda imported on September 11, 2001, but rather a crucial aspect of American history from the very beginning.

Notes

- 1 For more on the problem of naming acts of terrorism before “terrorism” was named, see Chapter 4 by Steven Isaac in this volume.
- 2 Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *The White Man’s Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).
- 3 Stephen A. LeBlanc, *Wayfare in the Prehistoric Southwest* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2007).
- 4 Timothy Pauketat, *Ancient Cahokia and the Mississippians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Pauketat, *Cahokia: Ancient America’s Great City on the Mississippi* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009).
- 5 Colin Calloway, *One Vast Winter Count: The Native American West before Lewis and Clark* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003).
- 6 Robbie Ethridge, *From Chicaza to Chickasaw: The European and the Transformation of the Mississippian World, 1540–1715* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).
- 7 Matthew Jennings, *New Worlds of Violence: Cultures and Conquests in the Early American Southeast* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2011); and Charles Hudson, *Knights of Spain, Warriors of the Sun: Hernando de Soto and the South’s Ancient Chiefdoms* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997).
- 8 David Weber, *The Spanish Frontier in North America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).
- 9 Patricia Seed, *Ceremonies of Possession in Europe’s Conquest of the New World: 1492–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 69–99. Seed discusses the *Requirimiento*, the legal document which justified violence and blamed it on Native people, in great detail.
- 10 Richard Hakluyt, *Discourse of Western Planting*, ed. David B. Quinn and Alison M. Quinn (London: Hakluyt Society, 1993), 59.
- 11 Las Casas’s work was published in English as early as 1583 under the title *The Spanish Colonie*. See also William S. Maltby, *The Black Legend in England: The Development of Anti-Spanish Sentiment, 1580–1660* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1971).
- 12 Michael Leroy Oberg, *The Head in Edward Nugent’s Hand: Roanoke’s Forgotten Indians* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).
- 13 “Powhatan” here refers to the specific leader who was in power in eastern Virginia at the time the English arrived. It can also be used, sometimes in plural, to describe the various peoples ruled by Powhatan.

- 14 Frederic Gleach, *Powhatan's World and Colonial Virginia: A Conflict of Cultures* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997). George Percy's account, *A Trewe Relacyon* . . . , appears in Edward Wright Haile, ed., *Jamestown Narratives: Eyewitness Accounts of the Virginia Colony* (Champlain, VA: Roundhouse, 1998). The excerpt quoted appears in James Horn, ed., *Captain John Smith: Writings with Other Narratives of Roanoke, Jamestown and the First English Settlement of America* (New York: Library of America, 2007), 1104.
- 15 Quotations appear in Alfred Cave, *The Pequot War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996) 151, 152.
- 16 Patrick Malone, *The Skulking Way of War: Technology and Tactics among the New England Indians* (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, [1991] 2000).
- 17 Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998).
- 18 Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, *Cartas Sobre la Florida, 1555–1574*, ed. Juan Carlos Mercado (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2002), 143, quoted in Matthew Jennings, *New Worlds of Violence*, 74 (emphasis added); and John McGrath, *The French in Early Florida: In the Eye of the Hurricane* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000).
- 19 For more on medieval Europe's shifting understanding of the "rules of war," the role of non-combatants, and the protections that should be afforded them, see Chapter 4 by Steven Isaac in this volume.
- 20 Quoted in Alan Taylor, *American Colonies* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2001), 370.
- 21 Quoted in Calloway, *One Vast Winter Count*, 322, 324.
- 22 Francis Le Jau, *The Carolina Chronicle of Doctor Francis Le Jau, 1706–1717* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1956), 55. See also Jennings, *New Worlds of Violence*, 158–9.
- 23 A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr., *In the Matter of Color: Race and the Americans Legal Process, the Colonial Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 167. See also Thomas Cooper and David J. McCord, eds., *Statutes at Large of Carolina* (Columbia, SC, 1840), 7:352.
- 24 Peter Charles Hoffer, *Cry Liberty: The Great Stono River Slave Rebellion of 1739* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), esp. 82, note 26; and James Taylor Carson, *Making an Atlantic World: Circles, Paths, and Stories from the Colonial South* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007), 113–14.
- 25 Fred Anderson, *Crucible of War: The Seven Years' War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754–1766* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 2000), 56–8.
- 26 Daniel Marston, *The Seven Years' War* (New York: Osprey Publishing, 2001), 83.
- 27 John Oliphant, *Peace and War on the Anglo-Cherokee Frontier, 1756–63* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001).
- 28 Quoted in Colin Calloway, *The Scratch of a Pen: 1763 and the Transformation of North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 73.
- 29 Gregory Evans Dowd, *War Under Heaven: Pontiac, the Indian Nations, and the British Empire* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), esp. 128–30.
- 30 Kevin Kenny, *Peaceable Kingdom Lost: The Paxton Boys and the Destruction of William Penn's Holy Experiment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); and Peter Silver, *Our Savage Neighbors: How Indian War Transformed Early America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008), esp. 177–82.
- 31 Thanks to Randall D. Law for helping to clarify this point.
- 32 Quoted in T. H. Breen, *American Insurgents, American Patriots: The Revolution of the People* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 13–14.
- 33 Quoted in Douglas R. Egerton, *Death or Liberty: African Americans and Revolutionary America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 73.
- 34 Carol Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the Struggle for America's Independence* (New York: Vintage, 2005), 38–42.
- 35 Walter Edgar, *Partisans and Redcoats: The Southern Conflict that Turned the Tide of the American Revolution* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003), 55–6; quoted material from 119.
- 36 Colin Calloway, *The American Revolution in Indian Country: Crisis and Diversity in Native American Communities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), quoted material from 48 and 51.
- 37 Tyler Boulware, *Deconstructing the Cherokee Nation: Town, Region and Nation among Eighteenth-Century Cherokees* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011), 152–77.

- 38 Frederick Hoxie, Ronald Hoffman, and Peter J. Albert, eds., *Native Americans and the Early Republic* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999).
- 39 Ronald N. Satz, *American Indian Policy in the Jacksonian Era* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1975).
- 40 Gregory A. Waselkov, *A Conquering Spirit: Fort Mims and the Redstick War of 1813–1814* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006); and Jeremy Black, *Fighting for America: The Struggle for Mastery in North America, 1519–1871* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 160–229.
- 41 Theda Perdue and Michael D. Green, *The Cherokee Nation and the Trail of Tears* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008).
- 42 Quoted in James J. Rawls, *Indians of California: The Changing Image* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984), 180.
- 43 J. C. A. Stagg, *The War of 1812: Conflict for a Continent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
- 44 Paul Foos, *A Short, Offhand, Killing Affair: Soldiers and Social Conflict during the Mexican–American War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); and Timothy J. Henderson, *A Glorious Defeat: Mexico and its War with the United States* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2008).
- 45 Kerby A. Miller, *Immigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).
- 46 Katie Oxx, *The Nativist Movement in America: Religious Conflict in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2013). Quoted material appears on 133.
- 47 Kenneth Winn, *Exiles in a Land of Liberty: Mormons in America, 1830–1846* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 208–27.
- 48 James Oliver Horton and Lois Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest among Northern Free Blacks, 1700–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), esp. 163–4.
- 49 Kenneth Greenberg, ed., *The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents* (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1996), quotation from 48; see also Greenberg, ed., *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), esp. 79–102.
- 50 Stanley Harrold, *Border War: Fighting Over Slavery before the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).
- 51 Robert McGlone, *John Brown's War Against Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Brian McGinty, *John Brown's Trial* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); and Jonathan Earle, *John Brown's Raid on Harpers Ferry: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008), trial transcript quoted on 86–7.

Further reading

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