William Lloyd Garrison and the Problem of Non-Resistance

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In 1838 William Lloyd Garrison and several fellow nonresistants broke with the American Peace Society over the issue of defensive warfare. The organization they formed was the New England Non-Resistance Society, and although it faded out as an organization in the early 1840s, the principles that defined the Society remained with the individuals, shaping their approach to life, their individual crusades, and, most importantly, their fight against slavery. These nonresistants, however, would find their belief in nonviolence challenged as tensions increased between the North and South over slavery. As violence became a more widely accepted method for abolitionists, nonresistants found themselves in a difficult position of having either to hold fast to their strict pacifist principles or to acknowledge the use of other means in speeding the abolition of slavery. The Compromise of 1850, with its unpopular Fugitive Slave Law, pushed nonresistants to alter their willingness to accept violent means in the “war” against slavery.

Radical abolitionists formulated their initial ideas about the acceptability of physical force in the 1830s, at the same time that William Lloyd Garrison promoted the shift from gradualism to immediatism. The Constitution of the American Anti-Slavery Society, written by Garrison in 1833, included a clause that rejected any use of violence. “Ours forbids the doing of evil that good may come, and lead us to reject, and to entreat the oppressed to reject, the use of carnal weapons for deliverance from bondage; relying solely upon those which are spiritual, and mighty through God to the pulling down of strong bonds.” In November, 1837, Elijah Lovejoy, an abolitionist and nonresistant in Alton, Illinois, died while defending his printing press. After several previous attacks on his press, he chose to use weapons of self-defense. Most nonresistants deplored the use of violence by either side. Garrison wrote in The Liberator that “we solemnly protest against any of [Christ’s] professed followers resorting to carnal weapons under any pretext or in any extremity whatever.” At a meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society, nonresistant Samuel May proposed a resolution “declaring Lovejoy’s actions inconsistent with the principles of the society” because it was essential to be “especially careful in our adherence to our principles.” Prior to 1850, the nonresistants were perfectly willing to protest the use of any sort of violence.

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3 The Liberator, 24 November 1837, 191.

The formation of the New England Non-Resistance Society in 1838 formalized the ideological split between conservative peace advocates and the radical nonresistants, led by Garrison. John Demos, in his article “The Antislavery Movement and the Problem of Violent ‘Means,’” states that the nonresistant movement “paralleled various contemporary experiments in religious perfectionism; and its long-range expectations were little short of millennial.” Perfectionism was “the notion that individuals could become sanctified while on earth” and this notion of perfectionism guided nonresistants in following the example of Jesus Christ. They believed that love, not force, would change society. In this way, nonresistants were radical because they wanted a “regeneration of American society, which would require a profound ideological reorientation and ultimately abolish the government.” Nonresistants would acknowledge no allegiance to human government, they repudiated all war and all resorts to violence, they refused to come to any compromise over their principles, and they would rely on moral suasion to convince the unregenerate to accept nonresistance, always working to perfect themselves in the image of Christ.

While nonresistants accepted notions of perfectionism and the coming of the millennium as integral to their movement, perhaps one of the most important characteristics of their ideology was the focus placed on private judgment. The role of individual, private judgment was a significant aspect of most antebellum reform movements, stemming from the Protestant Reformation’s insistence on the primacy of the individual’s relationship to God, and heightened by the revivals of the Second Great Awakening. According to Lewis Perry, private judgment “suggested a responsibility to live up to individual and personal understandings of virtue. It was a corollary of moral accountability and the government of God.” The nonresistants accepted the right of individuals to be free to make their own decisions, but those decisions had to be done in light of the teachings of Jesus Christ.

As such, nonresistants wanted a government of God. Slavery, human government, and violence were all part of the same paradigm; “they were sinful invasions of God’s prerogatives; all tried to set one man between another man and his rightful ruler.” From this belief stemmed an abhorrence of human government; it was natural although all nonresistants were abolitionists, not all abolitionists were nonresistants. Fearful of being associated with such “radicalism,” the American Anti-Slavery Society rejected May’s resolution.

The nonresistants were never a large group, existing primarily on the fringe and considered to be “ultraists.” Indeed, David Lawson wrote in his dissertation “Swords into Plowshares, Spears into Pruninghooks: The Intellectual Foundations of the First American Peace Movement, 1815-1865” (Ph.D. diss. University of Mexico, 1975) that the “society was on the periphery of the peace movement” and that nonresistants “were not very active participants in the peace crusade.” (17) Although it is likely that the participation was marginal, Valarie Ziegler (The Advocates of Peace in Antebellum America) and Lewis Perry (Radical Abolitionism: Anarchy and the Government of God in Antislavery Thought [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973]) make good arguments illustrating that there were nonresistants who actively promoted peace. In fact, Henry C. Wright, a prominent nonresistant, went on a tour of Europe to promote the peace principles of the New England Non-Resistance Society. It is evident, however, that the nonresistants, particularly Garrison, were primarily concerned and deeply involved in the abolitionist movement.

Demos, 501; also in Perry, 63.


Kraditor, 103.

Perry, 246.

Perry, 58.
that nonresistants would oppose such government for "nothing must be permitted to fetter
the spirit of the individual." Nonresistants were not supposed to vote or hold public
office or in any way participate in supporting a government that was plainly going against
the teachings of Christ and the New Testament. This extreme opposition to government
in the nonresistant movement kept many abolitionists who believed in nonresistance from
joining Garrison and the New England Non-Resistance Society. For some abolitionists,
and many critics of the new organization, the nonresistants were too closely associated
with anarchism, even if it was "Christian Anarchism."

Significantly, for nonresistants, the refusal to resort to violence did not imply that
they were passive agents. At a meeting of the New England Non-Resistance Society in
1839, Maria W. Chapman stated:

Passive non-resistance is one thing; active non-resistance another. We mean to
apply our principles. We mean to be bold for God. Action!—Action!—thus shall
we overcome the violent. Not by their own weapons... but it behooves us to
preach. We need no body of men to tell us when, and where, and how we may
speak, but each one is bound to speak as his own reason and conscience dictate.

Nonresistants relied on moral suasion and individual determination in their attack against
violence. Words, spoken or written, were the weapons of choice and would be used in
whatever forum nonresistants could find. For William Lloyd Garrison, one of the
founders of the New England Non-Resistance Society, nonresistance was passive only in
the sense that "it will not return evil for evil, nor give blow for blow, nor resort to
murderous weapons for protection or defence." In the Society's Declaration of
Sentiments, written by Garrison, it states that "we propose, in a moral and spiritual sense,
to speak and act boldly in the cause of GOD; to assail iniquity in high places, and in low
places; to apply our principles to all existing civil, political, legal and ecclesiastical
institutions; and to hasten the time, when the kingdoms of this world will have become
the kingdoms of our LORD and of his CHRIST, and he shall reign forever." Nonresistants repudiated obedience to a government that had proven itself, through its
support of slavery, its willingness to resort to coercive measures, and its willingness to
resort to war, as going against God.

While Garrison played only a small role in the actual nonresistance movement of
the late 1830s, he did act as its "cynosure." As one of the historians of the movement
notes, his real contribution was "his moral conviction as well as the strength of his
personality, his gift for leadership, and his ability to inspire unswerving confidence in his
disciples." His role as the founder and editor of The Liberator, a major abolitionist and
reform newspaper of the era, and the importance of his position in the nonresistant

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11 Demos, 513; also in Perry, 246.
12 For a detailed account of how Garrison and the nonresistants were associated with Christian Anarchism,
see Lewis Perry, Radical Abolitionism: Anarchy and the Government of God in Antislavery Thought
13 Quoted in Perry, 247.
14 Garrison, 88.
16 Perry, 62.
17 Brock, 527.
movement makes Garrison a central figure to consider. *The Liberator* was Garrison’s forum. In the first issue he stated emphatically that “I will not equivocate—I will not retreat a single inch—AND I WILL BE HEARD.”18 Garrison did not believe in holding his tongue. When accused of damaging the movement with the harshness of his language, Garrison responded by demanding “new and stronger dialect.”19 In a letter to Samuel May, dated January 13, 1850, Garrison wrote that “we must use great plainness of speech; like the reformers of all ages, we must call things by their right names; like Jesus, we must be willing to make ourselves of no reputation, as without conflict there can be no victory—without the cross, no crown.”20 When it came to declaring his tenets, careful language was not a concern.

Garrison certainly possessed a militant stance on speaking out against oppression. He did not, however, present his convictions at the expense of others. Indeed, for Garrison, truth was only possible if there was freedom of discussion. People could not be persuaded towards the “right” way unless they were free to consider the alternatives. More importantly, he believed that to ignore the beliefs of others was a form of coercion for it “forced” one ideology to take precedence over others.21 As a correspondent from the *Providence Herald* wrote, in a piece reprinted in *The Liberator*: “We differ with him, perhaps in our views on slavery; certainly in our choice of a remedy for the evil. But we cannot wonder that our path seems to him, as his does to us, the highway to destruction, through turmoil and tribulation.”22 *The Liberator*, therefore, served as the voice of many, not just Garrison and his supporters.

Garrison’s openness to differing opinions foreshadowed his eventual acceptance of violence by those who were not nonresistants, provided that the violence was committed for the greater good. In 1837 Garrison wrote: “If the slaves of the South have not an undoubted right to resist their masters in the last resort, then no man, or body of men, may appeal to the law of violence in self-defence—for none have suffered, or can suffer, more than they.”23 It is evident that Garrison believed the slaves had suffered, and suffered greatly, but it could not justify violence. Evil could not be returned for evil. Later, however, his position was not so clear cut. In a piece included in his *Selections from the Writings and Speeches of William Lloyd Garrison*, published in 1852, Garrison stated: “We grant that every successful struggle for freedom on the part of the oppressed, even with the aid of cannon and bomb-shells, is to be hailed with rejoicing; but simply in reference to its object, and not to the mode of its accomplishment.”24 He claimed not to support the use of violence, but his unwillingness to refute its use clearly represented his ambiguous position. This seemingly vacillating position on the use of physical force represented a problem of consistency in the implementation of the nonresistants’ peace principle.25

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*Garrison, 63.*

*Ibid., 122.*


3 *Kraditor, 104.*


5 *Quoted in Kraditor, 86.*

6 *Garrison, 86-87.*

7 See Lewis Perry, Charles DeBenedetti (*The Peace Reform in American History* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980]), and Valarie Ziegler for the argument that the oscillating position of Garrison and the nonresistants over the issue of violence was due to the lack of a clear program.
The events of the 1850s put nonresistants’ principles to a severe test. Henry Clay, a prominent slaveholding politician from Kentucky, hoped to calm the increasing antagonism between North and South over the issue of slavery by proposing a series of measures. Irritated by the Wilmot Proviso of 1846, the dispute over the expansion of slavery had reached a peak, with South Carolina threatening disunion should the Proviso be passed. Clay’s proposals included several different measures for resolving sectional disputes. The Compromise admitted California as a free state, abolished the slave trade in the District of Columbia, instituted popular sovereignty as the method of determining whether New Mexico and Utah would be slave or free states, provided a settlement for the boundary dispute in Texas, and included a more stringent fugitive slave law. The Compromise was supported, much to the chagrin of abolitionists and nonresistants, by Daniel Webster, a congressman from Massachusetts. The Compromise was passed through Congress as separate bills in September of 1850 and was signed into law by President Fillmore.

The Compromise of 1850 was significant to nonresistants because it further exemplified the coercive nature of the government and the power of the slave states. As early as February 1850, denunciations of the Compromise had made their way into the pages of The Liberator. The author of an article, reprinted from The New York Independent, adamantly demanded no compromise: “If compromises of the Constitution include requisitions which violate humanity, I will not be bound by them. Not even the Constitution shall make me unjust.” Garrison, as editor of The Liberator, clearly indicated his unwillingness to accept the Compromise. This stance was hardly surprising given that one of the main aspects of nonresistant ideology was an opposition to compromise with slaveholders: “For that fellowship requires sanction and cooperation in perpetuating ‘the sum of all villainies.’” Selections from other newspapers which appeared in The Liberator, along with letters from readers, indicated the extent to which support of the Compromise was limited among radical abolitionists. Discussion of the Compromise constituted a significant portion of the newspaper from the time the measures were first proposed until long after the Compromise had been enacted.

Criticism of the Compromise came to focus primarily on the new Fugitive Slave Law, which was much more stringent than the 1793 statute. Among some of its characteristics, the law appointed Commissioners in each state to oversee individual cases, denied the fugitive a jury trial, refused the right of the fugitive to present a defense, paid the Commissioners $10 for each fugitive returned to slavery and only $5 for those

26 Introduced in August, 1846, the Wilmot Proviso was proposed by David Wilmot, a representative from Pennsylvania. Hidden in a larger bill, the Proviso prevented the expansion slavery into new territories. It was not passed into law.

27 Daniel Webster’s speech, given to the Senate on March 7, 1850, indicated his support for the Compromise. It caused a great uproar in the North. “We have read Mr. Webster’s speech with profound sorrow. Its moral level seems to us low. Its highest principle appearance to be allegiance to the letter of the Constitution without much regard to the essential right and wrong of the conduct in which such loyalty involves us.” (The Liberator, 29 March 1850, 49). Webster’s support of the Compromise was a disappointment to abolitionists and nonresistants because of his previous antislavery positions.

28 The Liberator, 8 March 1850, 37.

29 Ibid., 38.

30 The previous Fugitive Slave Law was enacted in 1793. It was enforced at both the state and federal level, “permitted an owner to seize a fugitive and to carry him back to servitude simply by presenting an affidavit of ownership,” and fined those who attempted to obstruct the law $500 (John C. Miller, The Federalist Era, 1789 - 1801 [San Francisco: Harper Torchbooks, 1960], 104).
not returned, subjected those who assisted fugitive slaves to heavy fines and possible
prosecution, and, if a fugitive was rescued after being turned over to the authorities by the
claimant, the federal treasury would repay the slaveowner the value of the slave. The
new Fugitive Slave Law was justifiably seen as a law that imposed “upon every man,
woman, and child in this Union, a participation in slavery.”

In September, Garrison vehemently presented his view of the Fugitive Slave Law.
In The Liberator’s section, “Refuge of Oppression,” Garrison introduced the new law
with the following statement: “It is a bill to be resisted, disobeyed, and trampled under
foot, at all hazards.” While Garrison did not explicitly suggest the use of violence as
one of the “hazards,” his language certainly indicated a vague willingness on his part
towards the use of any means necessary to oppose the statute.

Garrison’s passionate response to the Fugitive Slave Law did not stand alone.
Angry responses filled the pages of The Liberator. One subscriber wrote, “If we live not
to see it repealed, we will teach our children to oppose it after we are dead.” Another
demanded that if a fugitive is “seized by any one” they should “make the air resound with
the signal-word” so that others might come to the fugitive’s aid, being “prompt in their
hour of peril.” A set of resolutions adopted by the Boston Protective Union resolved
that “we recommend the appointment of a Vigilance Committee of 14 citizens, whose
duty it shall be to see that no person is deprived of liberty without due process of the
law.” The Fugitive Slave Law would be vigorously rejected by nonresistants and
abolitionists alike.

Of the nonresistants, Henry C. Wright was one of the most outspoken in his views
on the Fugitive Slave Law. As early as 1842 Wright had “raised the abstract issue of
slave revolts to fill out his critique of voting and constitutional government,” comparing
slave revolts to the struggles of the revolutionary heroes. Initially, Wright’s
nonresistant philosophy had been to encourage slaves to refuse the acceptance of their
bondage. After the Fugitive Slave Law had been enacted, however, he no longer took
that position, stating instead that slaves should escape from bondage “by running away,
or by such other means as, in their opinion, are right.” In a letter he wrote to Garrison,
published in The Liberator, Wright demanded: “DEATH TO KIDNAPPERS!”
Immediately after this impassioned declaration, he stated: “I am a non-resistant; I believe
it to be the greatest crime that man can commit, to take, or to assume the right to take, the
life of man; and would far rather die than stain my own hands with a brother’s blood.”
Furthermore, he reinforced this belief by negating the argument used by others that

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31 A common technique used to get around the inability of providing a defense was the use of a writ of
habeas corpus, which had to be granted by a federal judge. If a person was being held for a crime, the writ
required that person to be brought before the court and the charges explained to the individual, who would
then have a right to present a case for release from unlawful restraint. While the use of habeas corpus was
not always successful, it did allow some fugitive slaves to get their cases dismissed, such as the one
involving Richard Neal (see page 15 of this paper).
32 The Liberator, 6 September 1850, 142.
33 Ibid., 27 September 1850. The Liberator’s column on the “Refuge of Oppression” was dedicated to
presenting views taken from those sources considered proslavery.
34 Ibid., 27 September 1850, 154.
35 Ibid., 11 October 1850, 162.
36 Ibid., 25 October 1850, 170.
37 Perry, 234.
resistance to tyrants is obedience to God. Yet in the same letter, just after his repudiation of physical violence, Wright wrote:

If it ever was right for any man to kill those who seek to enslave them or their wives and children, I believe it is the right and duty of every fugitive slave, of every human being in the North, to inflict instant death, without judge or jury, on all who seek, with law or without law, to return the fugitive slave to his chains.

In the span of one paragraph Wright refuted the use of brute force and justified it, even suggesting that those who did not follow the tenets of nonresistance were “bound” to “inflict death, with [their] own hand, on each and every man who shall attempt to execute the recent law of Congress.”

Wright’s reaction was, to be sure, more extreme than other nonresistants. William Jay, a judge and nonresistant, wrote an opinion on the law compelling people to avoid the use of forcible resistance. He believed that the resort to such actions would simply cause greater violence on part of the slaveholders. He also argued that if acts of violence were left to the slaveholders, Northerners would respond in outrage when seeing their “streets stained with human blood, shed by the slave-catchers.” Another correspondent to The Liberator wrote that an associate had announced boldly that he would open the doors of his home to those fugitive slaves seeking asylum, for it was as Jesus Christ would have done. Yet another wondered where the nonresistants had gone, fearing that they had given up their principles in a time of trial. He wondered that others could not see as clearly as he that as “the spirit of war subsides, slavery must correspondingly vanish.”

Four distinct acts of opposition to the Fugitive Slave Law revealed the increasing willingness of abolitionists and nonresistants to adopt violent measures. These acts consisted of the rescue of escaping slaves who had been seized by the authorities. The first important fugitive slave case took place in Boston, in February 1851. A fugitive slave, by the nickname of Shadrach, was arrested and brought before the Commissioner. Through a writ of habeas corpus, a stay was granted until the case could be heard properly. At the moment the case was put over, “The door of the court room was pressed open by a crowd of sympathizing colored persons, who, without any deliberate concert—without any weapons in their hands—without any wish or intention to do personal violence to any one,” pulled Shadrach peacefully from the court room. Once free, Shadrach fled to Canada.

Garrison emphasized the lack of violence in the Shadrach rescue: “Nobody injured, nobody wronged, but simply chattel transformed into a man, and conducted to a spot whereon he can glorify God in his body and spirit, which are his!” Nonresistants, as noted earlier, did not take a pledge of inaction. Their focus was simply to avoid using force, violence, or coercion as means of bringing about their desired result. It is not

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38 The Liberator, 4 October 1850, 158.
39 Ibid., 8 November 1850, 179.
40 Ibid., 4 October 1850, 159.
41 Ibid., 10 January 1851, 7.
42 Ibid., 21 February 1851, 30. Another description of the Shadrach rescue included a number of whites in the crowd that rescued the fugitive (The Liberator, 21 February 1851, 30).
43 Ibid.
surprising, therefore, that Garrison and other nonresistants rejoiced in the actions taken to rescue Shadrach. The Shadrach rescue, for Garrison and nonresistants, represented the ideal; it was a peaceful opposition to an unjust law.

Later in the same year, however, a fugitive slave incident concluded with quite a different result. In September, 1851, a slaveowner, in the company of his son and several other men, came to Christiana, Pennsylvania looking for a fugitive slave. The fugitive, aware that he was being hunted, fortified his home. With the aid of several black friends, they armed themselves, prepared to defend the supposed fugitive from the slavehunters. When the blacks were fired upon they returned the gunfire, killing the slaveowner and mortally wounding the slaveowner's son. Despite Garrison's oft-repeated views on nonviolence, in response to the episode he wrote: "The blacks are fully justified in what they did" because the example of the nation was one that declared the legitimacy of freedom through the use of armed resistance. Garrison continued to avoid stating explicitly that there was a justification for violence, but he was becoming more publicly tolerant of it, especially in the cases of those who did not claim to be nonresistants; the unregenerate could resort to violence.

In October, to the relief of nonresistants, another successful nonviolent fugitive slave rescue took place, in Syracuse, New York. The fugitive, "Jerry," was in custody and was having his case heard in the courthouse. A large crowd which had gathered outside broke into the courthouse and removed Jerry. He was soon recaptured, but a second attempt proved to be successful and Jerry was able to flee, much like Shadrach, to Canada. The only incidences of violence consisted of some rocks being thrown at the courthouse windows, although police did fire into the crowd in an attempt to prevent the rescue and disperse the gathering. Even though one Southern newspaper went so far as to say that some officers of the law were "subjected to severe bodily injuries," no one was actually injured.

The Jerry Rescue is particularly interesting because it plainly represented the ambiguity of the nonresistant position on the use of physical force. The results of the rescue were nonviolent, but Samuel May, an ardent nonresistant, preached shortly before the incident that the Fugitive Slave Law ought to be resisted, even if the result was violent. On the day of the actual rescue, May encouraged the crowd to remain peaceful. When Garrison commented on the rescue he noted that May "filled every friend of humanity with joy" when he "called upon the free men and women of Syracuse to pledge their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor, to protect the trembling fugitive in his distress." Garrison was either not aware that May had advocated violence just before the rescue or he chose not to mention it when he reiterated that there was much to learn from this "peaceful, determined opposition to the Slave Power."
In 1852 Garrison continued to advocate peaceful means in the abolition of slavery. In his introduction to a new year of The Liberator Garrison wrote that the purpose of the newspaper continued to be the “overthrow of slavery by moral and peaceful instrumentalities, for the benefit alike of the oppressor and the oppressed.” 48 In April, however, he added an editorial note to a letter from a correspondent who wrote questioning the consistency and legitimacy of advocating slave resistance to capture under the Fugitive Slave Law, even if resistance ended in violence. His correspondent wondered where the violence would end. Garrison, in a condescending manner, responded by saying that the letter was “such a jumbling together of assumed nonresistance, Fugitive Slave and Maine Liquor Law, pretended leverance for legislative enactments, and false notions of moral obligations.” 49 Garrison’s position remained ambiguous. Despite his continued support of nonviolent means, his opinions were wavering and he remained unwilling to come out completely against the use of brute force.

Garrison further confused his position in a proposed amendment at an antislavery meeting. He suggested that violence may be justifiable after all:

if ‘resistance to tyrants,’ by bloody weapons is ‘obedience to God,’ and if our revolutionary fathers were justified in wading through blood to freedom and independence, then every fugitive slave is justified in arming himself for protection and defence... in taking the life of every marshall, commissioner, or other person who attempts to reduce him to bondage; and the millions who are clanking their chains on our soil find ample warrant in rising en masse, and asserting their right to liberty at whatever sacrifice of the life of their oppressors.” 50

As long as “resistance to tyrants was obedience to God” was the rule followed, then violence was legitimate. Only for those who advocated nonresistance was such brutality not acceptable. His resolution did little to clarify his position. One month later, at the New England Anti-Slavery Society meeting, Garrison was noted as closing the anniversary discussions “with a most effective statement of the methods of abolishing the slave system—deprecating for our own sakes, and for the slave’s sake, any nurturing of the spirit of violence and blood.” 51

This gradual accommodation of nonresistants to violence did not go unnoticed. Micajah Johnson, for example, wrote to Garrison via The Liberator expressing his distress over Henry Wright’s embrace of “any means as they see fit” in preventing the return to slavery of an escapee. For Johnson, as for the correspondent criticized by Garrison above, Christian morality made it abhorrent to “justify war, or the use of carnal weapons in any shape” and that such a justification “lets down the purity of Jesus to the common level of public opinion.” In the same paper, another correspondent, signing as “A Friend of Progress,” wrote that “to do away with Slavery we must have the spirit of Christ.” 52 Not all nonresistants were ready to give up their doctrines, at least not in theory.

48 Ibid., 2 January 1852, 2.  
49 Ibid., 30 April 1852, 70.  
50 Ibid., 23 April 1852, 67.  
51 Ibid., 21 May 1852, 83.  
52 Ibid., 23 July 1852, 119.
Numerous incidents related to the Fugitive Slave Law followed the October Jerry Rescue. In November, 1852, a group of slaves being transported through the Port of New York were encouraged by several abolitionists to go to court to plead their case. The court that heard the case determined that the slaves were free because "no one has a right to take slave through a country where slavery does not exist."\textsuperscript{53} Another case involved a charge brought against a free black man, Richard Neal, of "enticing" away slaves from the neighborhood where he used to be a slave. A writ of habeas corpus was issued, but when the claimant failed to appear, the charges against Neal were dropped.\textsuperscript{54} Yet another incident occurred in September, 1853, in Wilkesbarre, Pennsylvania. Whites accused William Thomas of being a fugitive slave and attacked him in the restaurant where he was employed. Supposedly not knowing why he was attacked, he fought back, fled, and was eventually aided in fleeing to Canada.\textsuperscript{55} The significance of this particular case actually involved those who had attempted to capture Thomas. The Judge who presided over their trial released them, claiming that he would not allow those who were merely doing their job to be "harassed at every step in their performance of their duties by every petty magistrate who chooses to harass them, or by any unprincipled interloper who chooses to make complaints against them."\textsuperscript{56} The decision reinforced the power of the pro-slavery element to nonresistant and abolitionists alike, and hardened the resolve to oppose the Fugitive Slave Law.

The culmination of resistance to the law was the case of the fugitive slave Anthony Burns. In Boston in May, 1854, Burns was being held at the court house on the charge of being a fugitive slave. A large group of people had gathered outside the court house to protest his incarceration, but they remained peaceful. At a meeting at Faneuil Hall, abolitionists tried to decide upon a course of action. Those presiding, most notably Wendell Phillips, called for nonviolence. At that moment, however, the crowd learned that a rescue attempt was in process. A group had rushed the court house in an attempt to get inside and rescue Burns. During the rescue attempt a scuffle occurred. One of the slavecatchers was stabbed and several shots were fired, although no one was wounded by the shooting. Abolitionists denied any responsibility for the failed rescue attempt. Garrison stated that it had been the "act of some half dozen impulsive and unreasoning persons, without plan or system of any kind."\textsuperscript{57}

In the hopes of preserving peace, Boston's Mayor called for more military personnel, and eventually soldiers surrounded the courthouse. Protests remained peaceful and a judge decreed that Burns would be sent back to slavery. A military escort, followed by a large crowd in a silent procession, took Burns to the transport that would

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 19 November 1852, 186. This case was actually outside of the actual sphere of the law that provided for the return of fugitive slaves. It represented, however, how the turmoil caused by Fugitive Slave Law continued to affect the actions of the courts.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 4 February 1853, 18. The Commissioner who heard Neal's case decided in favor of the claimant and Neal was taken into custody. Some abolitionist and black friends managed to get a judge to issue a writ of habeas corpus Neal was returned to the care of the court after a hot pursuit.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 16 September 1853, 146. Thomas was chased to a nearby river, where he dove in and refused to come out, even if it meant his death. The ruckus caused a crowd to gather and provided witnesses who could affirm that the claimants shot at Thomas, as if to kill him. The sentiment in the crowd grew hostile and the claimants were forced to flee, but they were eventually arrested and brought to trial for attacking Thomas.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 14 October 1853, 161.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 2 June 1854, 86.
send him south. There were some isolated incidences of violence, mainly on the part of military personnel, but no one was injured and no rioting occurred.

This particular incident was especially irritating to nonresistants because of the massive use of troops to enforce what was seen as a bad and unjust law. Coercion and the threat of violence on the part of the troops to “maintain peace at all costs,” was offensive. There was a huge outpouring in The Liberator responding to the outrage. Perhaps one of the best examples of how deeply this fugitive slave incident affected people was in nonresistant Angelina Grimke’s letter, cited by Garrison in The Liberator, in which she repudiated the peace principle, stating her “hope that the arrest of every fugitive slave may be contested even unto blood.”58 Slowly but surely nonresistants were coming to the conclusion that violence, with or without them, may be the only way to end slavery.

Garrison, however, continued to remain ambiguous and contradictory. In the May 26 issue of The Liberator, printed on the very day of the attempted rescue, Garrison reiterated his nonviolent views. In a statement given to the American Anti-Slavery Society, he wrote that he did not “believe in killing any man for any purpose.”59 Yet just one month later, in the June 23 issue, Garrison responded to criticisms made by the newspaper, The Courier, stating that the “murderous blow struck by ruffians,” was good in its quality, and as lofty in its purpose, as any blow struck during our revolutionary struggle.” He argued further that since it was accepted by most of the American people that individuals could defend their liberty, a fugitive too could then act in self-defense should someone try to take his liberty from him, even if his response meant the use of violence. Ironically, in the same essay Garrison continued to claim that “we have not counseled violence or retaliation in any case, but only patience and forbearance.”60 It was a curious dichotomy of views. The climax of Garrison’s outrage over the Burns incident came on July 4, 1854, when he burned a copy of the Fugitive Slave Law, a copy of the court’s decision on the Burns case, and a copy of the Constitution.61 Although Garrison would claim to remain a nonresistant up until the Civil War, he had clearly come to the decision that he could support the resort to force, provided that it was done by those who considered it an appropriate measure.62

The nonresistant accommodation to violence was gradual, taking shape especially in response to the provocation of the 1850s. Valarie Ziegler states that “by and large the nonresistants stuck to their principles” although “some of the faithful did slip, and certainly everyone considered doing so.”63 During the second half of the 1850s, as violence increased substantially and tensions between the North and South escalated, nonresistants were led to repudiate their position. “Bleeding Kansas,” the beating of Charles Sumner, a senator from Massachusetts, on the floor of the Senate, and John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry in 1859 all lead inevitably to a repudiation of the

58 Ibid., 28 July 1854, 117.
59 Ibid., 26 May 1854, 82.
60 Ibid., 23 June 1854, 98.
61 Ziegler, 133.
63 Ziegler, 133.
principles of nonviolence. The Civil War, which was the penultimate act of violence, was ultimately accepted by most nonresistants, including Garrison. One of the few nonresistants who remained faithful to his principles and who refused to accept the Civil War was Adin Ballou. In the same issue that noted Angelina Grimke’s departure from nonresistance, Ballou stated, “Few (how few!) remain faithful. The rest have re-embraced the War Principle, or have become dumb on the subject, or while professing to be Non-Resistants themselves, spend their main strength in exhorting fighting people to be sure and fight on the right side.” On June 23, 1854 Garrison wrote:

Though a non-resistant myself, I am not willing to see contumely heaped upon the heads of those who abhor slavery, because they have forcibly interposed, even to the shedding of blood, to save a fellow-man from becoming a victim to its power—heaped by those who, in their own case, maintain that ‘resistance to tyrants,’ to any extent, ‘is obedience to God.’ Surely, if there be any one who is worthy of death, it is, first of all, the slave-hunter; and, next to him, the wretch who is willing to act as his accomplice, whether officially or otherwise.

Although Garrison continued to profess allegiance to the principles of nonresistance, by the mid-1850s his views were contradictory enough to indicate a clear acceptance of the use of violence in fighting against slavery. This gradual accommodation would ultimately allow him to exclaim, “‘Thank God’ for the war.”

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64 The Bleeding of Kansas caused Charles Stearns to repudiate nonresistance and take up arms against the slaveholders. Stearns claimed that the slaveholders were not human and therefore not entitled to the safety of nonresistance. Furthermore, because there was no law in Kansas, the laws of Christ were irrelevant (Perry, 241). For a brief synopsis of Stearns’ change of heart, see Ziegler, 116 - 118. The attack on Charles Sumner was made by Preston Brooks, a representative from South Carolina, because of insults Sumner made concerning Brooks’ uncle, Senator Butler, also of South Carolina.

65 The Liberator, 28 July 1854, 117.

66 Ibid., 23 June 1854, 98.

67 Quoted in Jannuzzi, 38.