

# THE HISTORY & HUMANITY OF JOHN SINGLETON MOSBY

*Researcher sifts through thousands of period newspaper articles looking for truth about American icon's entire career*

**HUMAN NATURE REJECTS AND DESPISES HEROES** who engage our admiration and our veneration only to ultimately fail us. The failed hero cannot be redeemed. Like the suicide of old, he is buried outside the consecrated ground of public esteem. It matters not how heroic his acts, how wondrous his achievements or how noble his character, with his fall from grace his name is forever tainted and his memory universally reviled. But what of that man whose supposed culpability is the result of error or, worse, deliberate lies? What transpires when his actions are misconstrued and his honest explanations and credible justifications rejected? Where does this victim go when the court of public opinion is a mockery? Sadly, the answer seems to be nowhere—until such time as a comprehensive and effective plea is entered on his behalf. And that is the purpose of this article and the writer's new book on John Singleton Mosby.



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**By V.P. Hughes**

**C**onfederate cavalry officer John Singleton Mosby [1833-1916] is a so-called “failed hero”—and there can be no doubt that he *was* a hero in the South for his service to the Southern war for independence. Of course, he was a villain in the North because he fought as a guerrilla, but it was not Mosby's *method* of warfare that condemned him but his success. Nevertheless, by June of 1865, with passions cooling, Mosby was finally paroled, and there was no honor or tribute that a grateful Southern people would not have bestowed upon him. Indeed, his future seemed bright even in a ruined South. This was Mosby's condition at the end of the war: a hero to his people and an idol to his section.

However, life then took an ominous turn. Blessed (or cursed) with an original and unique intellect, Mosby reasoned that as long as the South continued to fight the war, albeit in the social and political arenas, there was little chance of regaining any prosperity or safety especially under reconstruction. And whereas he totally rejected Republicans in the South as nothing but car-

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**Left, a portrait of John S. Mosby painted in 1865 by Edward Caledon Bruce.**



**Secretary of War Edwin Stanton was terrified the Confederate Army** (and particularly Mosby's Rangers) would invade and conquer Washington, D.C.—and maybe even take him as a hostage. Concerned they couldn't hold the Long Bridge over the Potomac River between Washington and Arlington, Virginia, U.S. troops thus were ordered to remove planks to make the bridge impassable.

SOURCE: *THE PHOTOGRAPHIC HISTORY OF THE CIVIL WAR, POLITICAL OBJECTIVES—WASHINGTON* (P. 123)

petbaggers, scalawags and ex-slaves, he greatly desired an amicable relationship between white Southern Democrats (Conservatives in Virginia) and the national—or Northern—Republican Party. Even more problematic, Mosby refused to worship at the altar of “the Lost Cause,” believing that it did not benefit the South to fixate on a war that was indeed lost.

But his final descent into disgrace began with the election of 1872 when he supported Ulysses Grant rather than Horace Greeley, a Republican who ran on the Democratic ticket. Indeed, Mosby was so successful in his advocacy of Grant that the president actually won Virginia. But this “success” initiated Mosby's ultimate descent into infamy and in 1876, driven from the Conservative Party, he joined the Republicans in support of Rutherford B. Hayes. From that time to this, John Mosby has been the model of the failed hero.

Sadly, as well as his political apostasy, Mosby's person came under attack especially in his old age. First, it was said that he created his own legend by continually publishing in the press tales glorifying his war service. It was further alleged that he was profane, uncouth and, as he grew older, cantankerous, abrasive and senile to the point of being removed from his position at the Department of Justice, a kind of “pension” bestowed upon him by a generous Republican administration. Indeed, it was eventually avowed that Mosby was so poor a lawyer that he could not earn a living without being aided by important men in both government and the private sector.

Naturally, when these slanders were added to his alleged political betrayal, he was no longer respected except for such service as he had rendered in the war. This

widely accepted conclusion appeared in a comment written in the *Ponchatoula Times* in 1963. The author used for Mosby, Gen. Omar Bradley's opinion of Gen. George Patton in Bradley's book, *A Soldier's Life*:

“I believe it was better for Gen. Patton [Mosby] and his professional reputation that he died when he did. ... He would have gone into retirement hungering for the old limelight, beyond doubt indiscreetly sounding off on any subject anytime, anyplace. In time he would have become a boring parody of himself—a *decrepit, bitter, pitiful figure, unwittingly debasing the legend*” [author's emphasis]. Of course, unlike Patton, Mosby did not die, and so, according to the court of public opinion, he was fully deserving of the rejection and contempt he suffered for that lapse.

Yet as this writer transcribed almost 8,000 newspaper articles about and by John Mosby, I began to notice a pattern that put the lie to the prevailing orthodoxy. To begin with, many of the slanders proceeded from some of these very articles, but the newspapers involved were all very much “anti-Mosby” and avowed claims against him that had little or no basis in fact. On the other hand, a much larger percentage of press coverage stated exactly the opposite. But even more interesting was Mosby's response to these intense periods of humiliation and personal tragedy. For every foul remark and every evil done to him, Mosby's response was essentially polite, professional and praiseworthy.

Of course, he could be a difficult man. One of his friends noted that when his ire was aroused it was akin to holding a wasp in one's hands. He was called “prickly” in his dealings with those with whom he had no nat-

ural affinity. A passionate man, he did not flee a contest though he was quick to point out that he “hated a row.” Mosby could be blunt and profane privately, and he did not suffer fools gladly. Yet in public, Mosby was ever the Virginia gentleman.

Overall, there were seven periods in Mosby’s press life: the war; immediate postwar; service in China; life in San Francisco with the Southern Pacific Railroad; service in the Department of the Interior in Colorado, Nebraska and Alabama; service in the Department of Justice in Oklahoma and his forced “retirement” spent in Washington. During all of these periods Mosby received voluminous press coverage. Directly after the war, the most prolific coverage concerned his support of politicians: first Republican Ulysses S. Grant in the election of 1872, then Conservative James Kemper in the Virginia gubernatorial election of 1873 and, finally, former brigadier general of the Union Army Rutherford B. Hayes in the disputed election of 1876. Only a tiny percentage of this coverage was positive or impartial. The vast majority was categorically negative—sometimes viciously so—from almost all newspapers in every section and representing both parties.

In his defense, Mosby made many public statements hoping to defuse accusations ranging from treason to Virginia and the South to claims that he had sold his honor for gold. And it is in these statements on the Grant-Greeley election that his actual motive is revealed for the first time. Mosby made it clear to Grant and the press, that if a Democrat ran (Greeley was a Republican who never repudiated his party affiliation) he would vote for the Democrat. Most of his biographers claim that Mosby supported Grant out of personal gratitude. But the fact is that Mosby did not vote for Grant; rather, he voted against Greeley. Until that fact is accepted, the matter—and the man—are totally misunderstood.

In the *Daily State Journal* (a Republican paper) on August 26th, 1872, Mosby challenged the suitability of the Democratic nominee:

The Baltimore convention represented constituencies, but no principles, and the Cincinnati Convention principles but no constituencies, and the efforts of the two were to secure the support of the remarkable coalition for Greeley. Among the “Liberals” who are now leading in this venal transaction are McNeill of Missouri, whom President [Jefferson] Davis outlawed at the same time he outlawed Beast Butler; Kilpatrick, who led the “pitch, tar and turpentine” raid on Richmond, and afterward of unsavory Chilean notoriety, and Charles A. Dana, editor of the vilest and most malignant sheet on Earth, next to the *New York Tribune*, and who was sent by [Sec. of War Edwin] Stanton to Fortress Monroe to see the chains put on Jefferson Davis. These are the men who in this new dispensation are to prescribe my political duties and control my political acts.

Earlier, Mosby had written in the *Spirit of Jefferson*, a Democratic organ, that the choice of Greeley by the Democrats flew in the face of their condemnation of Grant; that is, that the president enforced what they considered to be “unjust laws.” Meanwhile, the party had chosen as its nominee the man who forced the passage of those same laws.

I can’t recognize Horace Greeley as the apostle of democracy, or his disciple John Brown as entitled to a place in the Calendar of Saints. Having spent the best years of my life in combatting the ideas of Horace Greeley, which found their expression in the clash of arms and tread of armies during the war, and in the infamies of reconstruction since, I am not willing even in defeat to admit that we were wrong all the time by voluntarily exalting the chief author of our woes. Nor can I see the force of the logic of those who argue that Radicalism would be extinguished by surrendering to the control of its high priest, the only organization that opposes it, or how the cause of Conservatism would triumph by the election of the Red-Republican defender of the Commune and the advocate of the theories of Fourier.

Now, when the Democratic Party does this thing, *it is dead, its life has gone, its soul has fled* [author’s emphasis].

Even more to the point, John Mosby, and his whole family, had been *Henry Clay Whigs* before the war and thus had more in common politically with Abraham Lincoln than Jefferson Davis. After the war Mosby went with the Conservatives because he could not abide the local Radicals, but little or nothing has been made of his Whig background to explain that by becoming a Republican in 1876, he had merely returned to his political roots. At this time, some “brave” cavalier took a shot at him from ambush one night, and, fearing for his friend’s life, Grant asked Hayes to give him an office far away from Virginia. During the campaign of 1872, Mosby had promised that he would not take any office to avoid the appearance of self-interest. But now his wife was dead, leaving him with seven minor children and no income. Also, he had become an embarrassment to Republicans—state and federal—because he was so hated and vilified. As a result, Hayes was pleased enough to send him to Hong Kong as American consul.

In China, Mosby discovered a ring of consular thieves who had purloined hundreds of thousands of dollars from the government. Their leader was Frederick Seward, nephew of William Seward, Lincoln’s secretary of state and a very powerful Republican. Of course, the new consul’s efforts to end the corruption in China set a pattern that followed throughout Mosby’s service with the government for the rest of his life—he was punished and the criminals rewarded. Apparently the fate of whistleblowers was no better then than now. Aside from some



# STANTON'S FEAR OF MOSBY RIDICULED

In early 1868, all-powerful Secretary of War Edwin Stanton suddenly became fixated with the idea that Mosby and his raiders were going to carry him away; that is “gobble him up” in the parlance of the time. Apparently, Stanton did not fear assassination, though he had named Mosby as the leader of the conspiracy to assassinate Lincoln. There had been (incorrect) reports that Mosby was meeting with large numbers of his former command, and, perhaps for that reason, Stanton created a sanctuary in the War Department and put soldiers on the bridges into Washington, to protect against the ubiquitous and unstoppable Mosby.

Of course, the newspapers had a field day, showing more respect for Mosby than for Stanton. On April 2, the *Cambria Freeman* reproduced an unusual story from the *Metropolitan Record* which included a full scale “theatrical performance” “starring” Stanton and other members of the government. The article was introduced with a poem entitled:

## STANTON'S LAST SCARE

The night was dark, the night was chill,  
All nature was at peace and still,  
The hurly-burly of the day,  
The sounds of pleasure or of fray;  
The jester's laugh, the mourner's sigh,  
Were heard no more. The starless sky  
Gave not a ray to light the gloom,  
Opaque, impervious as the tomb;  
Impeachers and impeachee slept,  
And rich and poor forgot a space  
The cares that hide in rags and lace,  
By all of which I would convey,  
Though in a periphrastic way.  
The fact, with wordy trimmings dight,  
That day had yielded unto night,  
And lamps, man's substitute for Sun,  
Lit up the streets of Washington.  
What though 'tis locked with jealous care!  
What though no strangers enter there—  
What though a “trooly loil” guard  
Its sacred precincts watch and ward  
With vigilant, unsleeping care—  
I and Asmodeus\* enter there.  
But hark! What sounds are those that strike  
Upon the ear and heart alike?  
What means that measured, steady tramp?  
Is Washington once more a camp?



**Left, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton.** Stanton was paranoid that John Mosby might slip into D.C. with his rangers and capture him, like Mosby did to Union Gen. Edwin H. Stoughton. At right is a photo of John S. Mosby taken by the Matthew Brady Studios in 1865. At this point in time, Mosby was about 32 years old. He looks quite different without his beard and Confederate uniform.

Does Stuart still our pickets drive?  
Is Stonewall Jackson yet alive?  
See where a light in yonder room  
Strikes like a lancehead through the gloom!  
Surely there's something going on there—  
Ah, friend Asmodeus! Through the air  
Convey me quick, that I may know,  
And tell't to the Portfolio.  
“Up with the roof,” Asmodeus cries,  
And up it goes. Before my eyes  
The War Office lay open all,  
From attic down to basement hall;  
A quaking, shivering wretch displays  
His coward fears without a blush—  
Is it a man or what?— “Hush, hush,”  
Asmodeus whispers, “he will speak,  
List the half-bully and half-sneak.”

At this point the article went on with considerable glee to produce dialog both poetic and apoplectic in nature. Of all the many press articles extant, this was certainly the most unique and testified strongly to the Fourth Estate's dislike of Edwin Stanton. ♦

### ENDNOTE:

\*Asmodeus—“king of the demons.”



Above, Hong Kong harbor at the time Mosby served there, ca. 1880. Right, a silver cup presented to Mosby by Chinese merchants.

nasty personal attacks, the vast majority of press coverage during his years in Hong Kong [1880-1885] involved his war against the “consular ring” and, as a consequence, the stonewalling of the Department of State.

With the election of Grover Cleveland, the first Democrat president since James Buchanan, Mosby was relieved of his position and returned home. Knowing that he was still hated in the South for his “apostasy” and in the rest of the country for his “war crimes,” he had written to his friend Grant asking his help to obtain a position. Unbeknownst to Mosby, Grant was dying—but on his deathbed he wrote a letter to California Sen. Leland Stanford asking him to find Mosby a place with the Southern Pacific Railroad, and there Mosby remained for 16 years, until January of 1901. Yet his position with the company was never very secure. Many have implied that this was the result of his failure as an employee, but the newspapers provide overwhelming testimony to Mosby’s excellence as an attorney. It is probable that he suffered from the enmity of former Union officers as an article in a San Francisco paper in 1910 reveals:

The first time Col. Mosby presented to Assistant Treasurer Charles H. Redington of the South Pacific a pay voucher, he remarked that he supposed that he would have to be identified, whereupon Redington (who had belonged to the Eighth Illinois Cavalry) replied: “No, that is not necessary. I have chased you and been chased by you too many times down in Virginia to need any identification for you.”

Mosby, who was naïve in many ways, thought the matter humorous, but the fact that his employment appeared tenuous virtually from the beginning suggests that it was a very different matter to men like Redington. During his time with the railroad Mosby appeared extensively in the

press on all of the important issues of the day because the press aggressively sought his opinions. He also wrote and lectured about the war to earn extra money to send to his children, some of whom he had barely seen since leaving Virginia years earlier. When Collis P. Huntington, president of the railroad and Mosby’s friend, died in 1900, there was a general “housecleaning,” and Mosby, along with many others in the “old guard,” was released.

After Mosby returned from China, he had hoped for a position in a Republican administration. But neither Benjamin Harrison (Mosby’s cousin) nor William McKinley reached out to him—or any other Southerner for that matter, illustrating that Mosby’s belief that the national Republican Party had no prejudice against Southern whites was seriously flawed. However, once Mosby became unemployed, McKinley had no choice but to offer him *something* as many important people—even Democrats—believed it was the right thing to do, a belief strongly reflected in the press. But instead of a consulship, a position fitting for his age and talents, Mosby was offered “a job” in the Department of the Interior at a yearly salary inferior to the amount that his Rangers earned for an hour’s work during the famous “Greenback” raid of 1864.

But, alas, the same thing happened as had happened in Hong Kong—and he was eventually removed first from the Department of the Interior and then from the Department of Justice for uncovering corruption that the government wanted overlooked or attempting to enforce laws that important people found “inconvenient.” President Teddy Roosevelt himself removed Mosby for attempting to enforce a fencing law at Roosevelt’s explicit direction. Roosevelt did so in order to preserve the votes of the cattle states in the election of 1904, thus proving that he “would rather be president than right.” Of course, all of



these matters were covered extensively in the press and put the lie to the charge by “Mosby scholars” that he was removed for failing to do his job or for doing it poorly and/or with impropriety.

The last two chapters of *A Thousand Points of Truth: The History and Humanity of Col. John Singleton Mosby in Newsprint* cover first, Mosby’s character and then the claims made against him, all of which are credibly refuted by the evidence. In the character chapter, there appears a most fascinating vignette arising from an interview by a journalist from the *Alliance Herald*. Alliance, Nebraska was the epicenter of “cattle power” and, as such, the man sent to remove illegal fences erected by the cattle barons might expect to encounter hostility. However, at the end of the interview, the reporter wrote that he:

... enjoyed immensely an hour’s visit with the gray-haired old veteran. The Mosby of today doesn’t impress one as the Mosby of history. About the battle-scarred old trooper there is nothing that smacks of ferocity, nothing to indicate the daring, dashing cavalry commander, who, with never more than 300 men, neutralized and held at bay for two years from 40,000 to 50,000 splendidly armed and equipped federal soldiers. *But instead there is every indication of the plain, unostentatious, intelligent old gentleman with a mind as vivid and active as in the years of long ago, and a bearing as pleasing and manner as courteous as a diplomat* [author’s emphasis].

Where now was the “bull in the china shop?” Where was the blowhard and the irascible, old curmudgeon who whined and complained and demanded? Where was the loose cannon who couldn’t keep his mouth shut, and humiliated both himself and his government?

In fact, that caricature never existed, and it is time for it to be consigned to the oblivion it deserves. I firmly believe that upon consideration of the evidence, intelligent people will reject the unjust, unmerited and mistaken “judgment of history” passed against a man who deserved so much better from his country and his fellow men.

A century ago, the book of John Singleton Mosby’s life closed. Hopefully, *A Thousand Points of Truth* will validate the claim he made during his life that in the end he would be vindicated by time. ♦

*V.P. HUGHES* has a background in historical research devoting special attention to men who, using wit and skill, fought and defeated larger, more powerful foes—men whose strategic legerdemain made them legends then—and now. In Confederate Colonel John Singleton Mosby, she found a man whose character and exploits made him such a hero. Hughes’ understanding of Mosby established a relationship of scholar and subject that produced a book exonerating him of the many calumnies from which he continues to suffer to this day.

A MESSAGE FROM THE AUTHOR

## *A THOUSAND POINTS OF TRUTH: THE HISTORY AND HUMANITY OF COL. JOHN SINGLETON MOSBY IN NEWSPRINT*

My interest in Colonel John Singleton Mosby began in 1950. However, it wasn’t until 2002 that it led to extensive research on the subject, centered upon newspaper reports on the man published during the Civil War and throughout—and even after—his life. And while I rejected Virgil Carrington Jones’s observation on Mosby, contained in the preface of my new book on Mosby, I did not contemplate writing it until an even more disparaging observation came to my attention during my research.

The comment was contained in an article in the *Poncha-toula Times* of May 26, 1963, as part of a six-article series written by Bernard Vincent McMahon, entitled “The Gray Ghost of the Confederacy.” Mr. McMahon, in turn, based his comment upon Gen. Omar Bradley’s judgment of what might have been the postwar life of Gen. George Patton: “Now substitute Mosby for Gen. Patton in the book *A General’s Life*, by Omar Bradley: ‘I believe it was better for Gen. Patton [Mosby] and his professional reputation that he died when he did. . . . He would have gone into retirement hungering for the old limelight, beyond doubt indiscreetly sounding off on any subject anytime, any place. In time he would have become a boring parody of himself—a decrepit, bitter, pitiful figure, unwittingly debasing the legend’” (emphasis mine).

McMahon, however, only proffered in his writings the widely accepted view of John Mosby held by many, if not most. However, like Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, I have come to know Col. Mosby rather more intimately through the testimony of countless witnesses over a span of 150 years, and I believe that it is time for those who deeply respect John Mosby the soldier to now also respect John Mosby the man.

A century ago, the book of John Singleton Mosby’s life closed. It is my hope that this book will validate the claim he made during that life that he would be vindicated by time.

—V. P. HUGHES

*A Thousand Points of Truth* (softcover, 790 pages, illustrated, released August 2016, \$39 minus 10% for TBR subscribers plus \$5 S&H inside the U.S. Outside the U.S. email [sales@BarnesReview.org](mailto:sales@BarnesReview.org) for best S&H to your nation). Mail order with request to TBR, 16000 Trade Zone Avenue, Unit 406, Upper Marlboro, MD 20774 or call 1-877-773-9077 toll free to charge, Mon.-Thu. 9-5 ET. Order online at [www.BarnesReview.com](http://www.BarnesReview.com).

