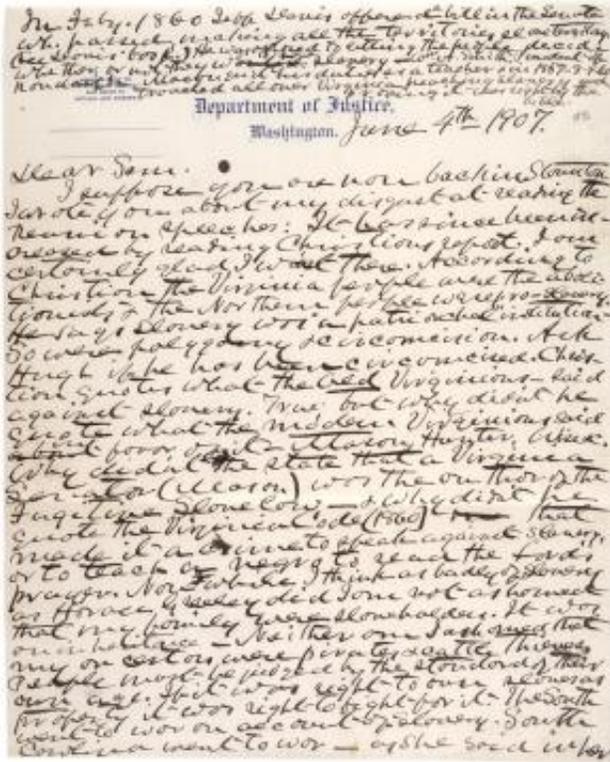


A former Confederate officer on slavery and the Civil War, 1907



Letter from John S. Mosby to Sam Chapman, June 4, 1907. (Gilder Lehrman Collection)

How can a soldier be proud of the country he defends while at the same time opposed to the cause he is fighting for? John S. Mosby, the renowned Confederate partisan leader, dealt with this moral dilemma years after the Civil War ended. Mosby despised slavery and believed the South had seceded to protect it. Yet he fought to defend the Confederacy, as he felt his patriotic duty to his nation outweighed all other factors. After the war, Mosby befriended General Ulysses S. Grant and joined the Republican Party, but firmly stated, “I am not ashamed of having fought on the side of slavery – a

soldier fights for his country – right or wrong – he is not responsible for the political merits of the course he fights in . . . The South was my country.”

In the wake of Reconstruction a growing number of southerners began to argue that protecting slavery had not been the real cause of the war, and some even claimed that slavery was in fact a just institution. These ideas spread and grew into the “Lost Cause” movement, a romantic vision of the South that would eventually gain exposure from the popularity of films including *Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind*. In this letter written in 1907, when he was an attorney at the Justice Department, Mosby furiously attacked the men who supported this mindset. Mosby expressed a complex and fascinating set of beliefs about the Civil War at a time when its history was just beginning to

be written.

A full [transcript](#) is available.

Excerpt

I wrote you about my disgust at reading the Reunion speeches: It has since been increased by reading Christians report. I am certainly glad I wasn't there. According to Christian the Virginia people were the abolitionists & the Northern people were pro-slavery. He says slavery was "a patriarchal" institution – So were polygamy & circumcision. Ask Hugh if he has been circumcised. Christian quotes what the Old Virginians – said against slavery. True; but why didn't he quote what the modern Virginians said in favor of it – Mason, Hunter, Wise &c. Why didn't he state that a Virginia Senator (Mason) was the author of the Fugitive Slave law – & why didn't he quote The Virginia Code (1860) that made it a crime to speak against slavery, or to teach a negro to read the Lord's prayer. Now while I think as badly of slavery as Horace Greeley did I am not ashamed that my family were slaveholders. It was our inheritance – Neither am I ashamed that my ancestors were pirates & cattle thieves. People must be judged by the standard of their own age. If it was right to own slaves as property it was right to fight for it. The South went to war on account of Slavery. South Carolina went to war – as she said in her Secession proclamation – because slavery w^d. not be secure under Lincoln. South Carolina ought to know what was the cause for her seceding. . . . I am not ashamed of having fought on the side of slavery – a soldier fights for his country – right or wrong – he is not responsible for the political merits of the cause he fights in. The South was my country.