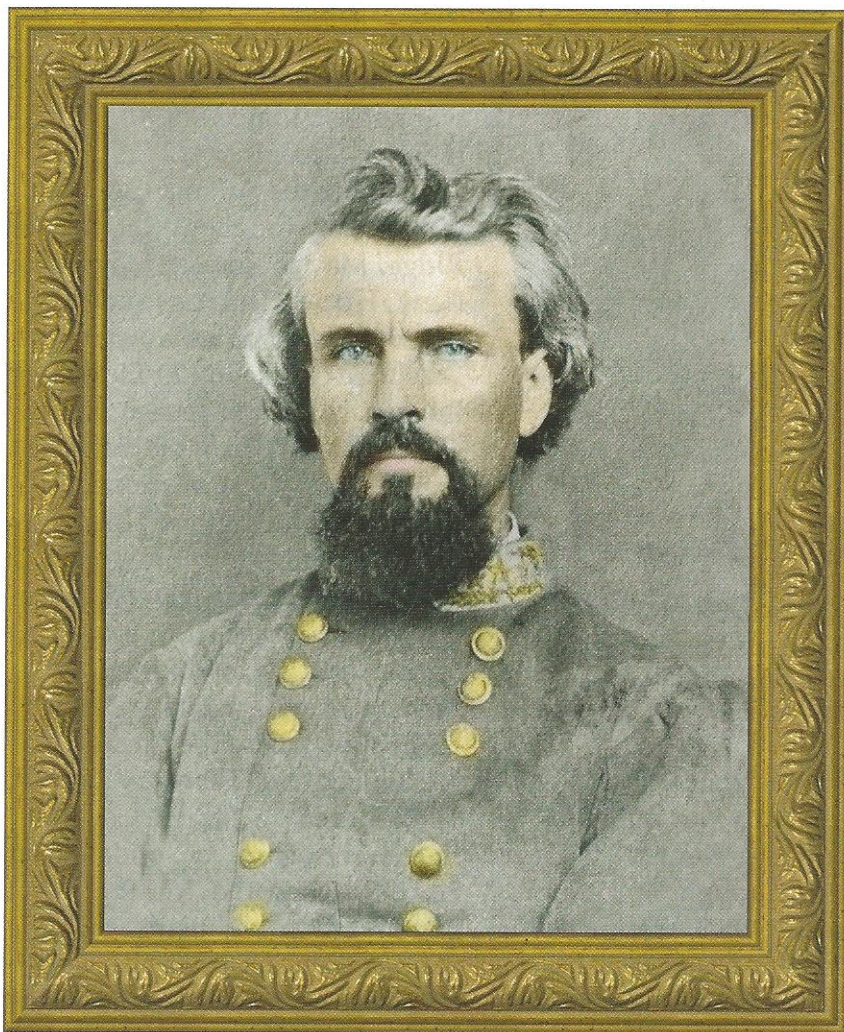


# Nathan Bedford Forrest

## *And the Ku Klux Klan*

By Dr. Michael R. Bradley



**"B**edford Forrest founded the Ku Klux Klan!" And, "Forrest was the Grand Wizard of the KKK." Whenever a controversy concerning Confederate Cavalry General Nathan Bedford Forrest arises these statements are sure to appear in print, in electronic media, and on broadcast news.<sup>1</sup> These statements have been repeated so often they have been accorded the status of facts although no one ever bothers to cite the historical source which addresses the truth of the statements. If it is true Forrest was a founder of the Klan or that he was head of the entire organization, there should be some source, some body of material, some historic record which could be cited to prove the assertion. Historians, one would think, would be at the forefront of those calling for proof of such statements; after all, historians are required to provide footnotes in which their sources are cited. Historians are supposed to be guardians of the truthfulness of the representations of the past, but, in the case of Forrest, historians are often among those making claims Forrest had a close connection with the Klan, including being a founder and leader of the organization. None of the various news sources ever cite proof for their statements and historians often make use of assumptions and weak secondary, even tertiary sources for their assertions.

No serious historian argues Forrest organized the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan was begun

by six men, whose names are known, in Pulaski, Tennessee. Intended to be a social club, the Klan quickly adopted political goals and began to oppose the Radical Republican plan for Reconstruction. Popular news media today ignore these well-established facts, charging Forrest founded the Klan, and academic historians do not speak out to correct the misinformation.

One prominent historian, Robert Selph Henry, states the issue clearly. Speaking of Forrest he says, "His second public career, in the days after the war, however, rests entirely on tradition and legend, for most of what he did in those desperate days of struggle was never written down and some of it, no doubt, never told. The Klan was a secret organization and no man who could have known the fact of his own knowledge ever wrote it down and published it, but it is universally believed in the South, nevertheless, that Forrest was the Grand Wizard."<sup>2</sup> An even earlier historian, John Allan Wyeth, considered the matter of the Klan carefully before writing his biography of Forrest in 1899. Wyeth concluded Forrest was not intimately involved in the Klan for a very simple reason: he was too obvious a candidate for the position of leader. Forrest felt it was inevitable; suspicion would focus on the Klan as it began to make an effective resistance to the policies of

Reconstruction. Of all the men in the South who might be thought to be involved in the organization, he knew he would be the first to be suspected of being its leader. Forrest was too good a strategist to occupy such an obvious position. Forrest readily admitted knowledge of the Klan but denied any personal involvement.<sup>3</sup>

Henry is quite honest and very accurate in saying the Reconstruction Era Klan was, and is, surrounded by legend and mystery. He is true to historical sources in saying the link of Forrest with the Klan is a matter of tradition and of folk belief, not of demonstrable historic fact. The firmly stated association of Forrest with the Klan is the position taken by more recent writers who have no more facts than Henry did but who choose to draw very different conclusions.

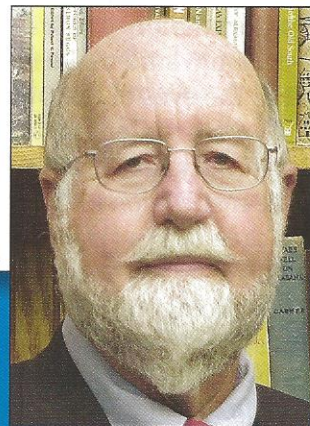
Rather than deal with all the books which assert Forrest was the head of the KKK, I will focus on two. There are two recent biographies of Forrest which link the general to the Klan. They are Brian Steele Wills' *A Battle From the Start* and Jack Hurst's *Nathan Bedford Forrest*. Both are good books and I have read and appreciated them both. Both are written by competent historians who are good writers; however, I disagree with some of their conclusions. I will use their books to allow me to make an examination of commonly cited

evidence that Forrest was the Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan.

For example, Brian Steele Wills, in his biography of Forrest, states Forrest traveled from Memphis to Nashville in an attempt to join the Klan. In Nashville Forrest met John Morton, his former artillery commander, and Morton inducted Forrest into the KKK. Wills says of Forrest, "if he did not command the Ku Klux Klan, Bedford Forrest certainly acted like a commander."<sup>4</sup> This is a reasonably fair statement since Wills makes no assertion Forrest was definitely the head of the Klan, although Wills fails to comment on the obvious fact Forrest was a lifelong "commander" by nature and by habit. Forrest always acted like a commander. Wills draws the assumption Forrest was indeed the commander of the Klan, and proceeds to write accordingly. What is the evidence to back up this assumption?

Wills cites Robert Selph Henry's biography of Forrest, but references two pages on which Henry says that the connection of Forrest with the Klan is a matter of tradition and folk belief. No proof of KKK activity there.

Wills also cites John Morton's



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book, *The Artillery of Nathan Bedford Forrest*, and this book does indeed state he inducted Forrest into the Klan. Morton wrote his book in 1909, more than forty years after the incident was supposed to have occurred, and at a time when the Klan had a positive reputation in white folk memory. Actually, the account of Forrest joining the Klan is in an appendix to Morton's book; the story was not part of the original manuscript. The material first appeared in a magazine article written by Rev. Thomas Dixon, Jr., a Baptist preacher who also wrote novels. The best known of Dixon's books is *The Clansman*. So, a question must be raised here. Dixon was a great admirer of the Klan, as were many other people, North and South. Dixon spent much of his career as a minister serving large Baptist churches in Boston and New York City. The movie *Birth of a Nation* was based on his novel *The Clansman*, and the movie was a smash hit across the nation. Did Dixon's enthusiasm for the Klan influence Morton so that Morton overplayed the involvement of Forrest with the Klan? In short, did Morton "remember" inducting Forrest into the organization because such an association would make Forrest look good in the eyes of the public in the early Twentieth Century? It has been suggested by some writers Forrest was the inspiration for Dixon's novel, but a careful reading of *The Clansman* shows no resemblance between Dixon's protagonist and Forrest. So we must ask, "Was Morton's memory accurate?"

Wills also cites Wyn C. Wade, *The Fiery Cross: The Ku Klux Klan in America*, a book published in 1987. Wyn also depends on Morton as his evidence Forrest was a member of the Klan, but he goes on to assert without reservation Forrest was head of the group. As we have seen, Morton provides slim evidence for Forrest's membership in the Klan

and no evidence at all for his having been head of the group. Wade produces no new evidence but makes a bold, unsupported claim linking Forrest to the Klan. Wade rests his case on Morton's material, which is historically suspect. Wills depends on Wade's work and so is on shaky ground also.<sup>5</sup>

Another piece of *evidence* cited by Wills is an account in Stanley F. Horn's *Invisible Empire*, in which a former Klansman, George W. Libby, said Forrest was the Grand Wizard and claimed to have heard Forrest speak to a gathering of the Klan in Memphis. The account given by Libby was printed in an article in the *Confederate Veteran* for November 1930.<sup>6</sup> This means the account depends on the memory of an aged man who could produce no documentary evidence to support his account. The article was also written at a time when a second version of the Klan had emerged and had gained national acceptance and prominence. During the decade of the 1920s the Klan held parades in Washington, DC, and members numbering in the thousands marched down Pennsylvania Avenue. The popularity of the second version of the Klan stretched coast-to-coast and border-to-border. This, then, may be viewed as another attempt to allow Forrest to bask in the glow of an organization with which he may, or may not, have been affiliated. In the article Libby says the Klan never put anything in writing, so no documentation can exist. This article was written twenty-one years after the account given by John Morton, and like Morton's, depends on memory to recreate events of many years before. This is not the most solid evidence on which to found so weighty an accusation as being Grand Wizard of the Klan. Horn also cites the Morton account, but, as we have seen, this citation does nothing to strengthen the case being made by Horn.

It will be argued many people can remember events which happened to them much earlier in their lives; most people have memories of events dating back to their childhood. This is true, but the question remains: Are the memories reliable? When psychiatrists examine memories it is not unusual to find the "memory" consists of things held in memory from the time of the event but which have been mixed with information acquired later. People "remember" what happened to them, but mix with that information things they learned or heard later. The greater the amount of time which has passed between the event and the recalling of the "memory," the greater the amount of "learned" material will be mixed with the original material. In the case of the 1930 article in the *Confederate Veteran*, it should be asked, "How much of this account happened as the author remembered it; how much of the account reflects what the author had heard over the last sixty years?" It must also be asked, why had this "memory" not been related earlier? Why did the author wait so long to tell what he knew? The author may have been a very truthful man, but was his memory dependable?

The evidence provided by Morton and Libby that Forrest was the Grand Wizard of the Klan is properly identified by historians as "anecdotal evidence." *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines "anecdote" as the narrative of a detached incident that is interesting or striking. When one is engaged in research it is common to happen on non-scientific observations or studies which do not provide proof of the thesis being investigated, but which may assist in the research. Because there is only one, or a few, such observations (a small sample), there is a large chance that the information may be unreliable. So, the anecdotal evidence is considered dubious sup-



*The General Forrest statue in Memphis, Tennessee at an event in 1906.*

port for a claim even if the person who is the source of the anecdote is otherwise thought to be truthful. This is not a matter of questioning the truthfulness of the source of the anecdote; it is a questioning of the accuracy of the evidence. Anecdotal evidence must be open to testing from other sources; in history, anecdotal evidence would ideally be open to verification by reference to documents. Since the anecdotal evidence of Morton and Libby cannot be verified, it must be considered weak and their testimony does not prove an association between Forrest and the Klan.

All the sources cited ignore the fact there is another person who it is claimed held the post of Grand Wizard of the Klan. In an unpublished manuscript Mrs. George W. Gordon claims her husband was supreme

head of the Reconstruction-era Klan. General George W. Gordon was from Pulaski; he was often identified with the Klan and later personally claimed to have been involved with the group. His business affairs caused him to travel extensively in Tennessee, Alabama and Mississippi following the war and some of his Klan regalia is in the possession of the Tennessee State Museum.<sup>7</sup>

This means the identification of Forrest as Grand Wizard of the Klan rests on sources written from memory long after the events of the 1860s at a time when the reputation of the Klan was very positive in the minds of many white Americans. No documentation exists which provides solid, historically accurate evidence of the association of Forrest with the Klan.

Stanley Horn sums up the di-

lemma into which too many historians have gotten themselves. Horn says, In the nature of things, such an organization as the Ku Klux Klan could have no written records. It left no archives to which the curious researcher may refer. There is, therefore, no documentary evidence to support it, but the statement may be safely and authoritatively made that the first, last and only Grand Wizard of the original and only Ku Klux Klan was General Nathan Bedford Forrest, the celebrated Confederate cavalry leader who was the idol of the South.<sup>8</sup>

No documentation, but an authoritative statement may still be made, says Horn! This is not the rules of historical evidence learned in any graduate course on historiography; this is not the way history is supposed to be written. When the

**"The system (of Jim Crow)  
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in force."**

**—C. Vann Woodward**

only "evidence" is folk belief and two statements made by old men at a time when it was to their own interest to say what they did, no "authoritative" statement can be made and still be called *history*.

Brian Wills and Stanley Horn's books, like that of Wade, are properly called "secondary sources" by historians; that is, they are books written by people who were not present at the events they are describing; they are basing their description and analysis of the historical events on what other people have said. Clearly, most history books are "secondary sources." Good history, well-written secondary sources, use "primary sources" as the basis of their description and conclusion. A "primary source" is something written at the time an event happened. A "primary source" may be written by an eyewitness or by a person who was alive at the time of the event. Wills, like all other Forrest biographers, does not cite a single primary source to document Forrest was a member of or the head of the Klan. The closest any biographer can come to a primary source connecting Forrest to the Klan is the appendix of the 1909 book by John Morton and the 1930 article in the *Confederate Veteran*. The rest of the "evidence" connecting Forrest to the Klan is circumstantial.

Circumstantial evidence can be important but it cannot stand alone and be considered conclusive. Historians, if honest, should admit there is no clear, truly conclusive

evidence linking Forrest to the Klan; the strongest evidence of such is only circumstantial.

Jack Hurst, in his biography of Forrest, is more tentative in identifying Forrest as leader of the Klan. He points out there are several versions of stories of how Forrest is said to have an involvement with the organization, and all these stories lack documentation. Hurst also points out the Klan did not gain significant numbers of adherents until Congress passed a Reconstruction Act on March 2, 1867. This act divided ten of the former Confederate states into five military districts and stated they would be kept under martial law until they ratified the 14th Amendment to the US Constitution which granted citizenship to African-Americans.<sup>9</sup> The votes of the Southern states were needed to ratify this amendment because so many Northern states had rejected the amendment. Without Southern votes the citizenship amendment would not become law. Among the Northern states which rejected the 14th Amendment were Delaware, California, Oregon, New Jersey and Ohio. California ratified the Amendment in 1959, Oregon in 1973; New Jersey and Ohio finally did so in 2003.<sup>10</sup> In 1867 Arkansas, Florida, North Carolina and South Carolina ratified the 14th Amendment, but their action presents a very bizarre situation; they could not qualify as members of the Union until they performed a function which only members of the Union can perform, namely, ratify a Constitutional amendment! How these *states* could act as states when they were not legally states was, and is, a conundrum.

This imposition of military occupation and forced agreement to an amendment, which was widely rejected in the North, infuriated the ex-Confederates and fueled the recruiting efforts of the Klan. Also fueling the fire of Klan activity were

the often-expressed goals of the radical members of Congress. This faction called for the long-term disenfranchisement of former Confederates so the Freedmen and Southern Unionists could take charge of Southern state governments; private property would be confiscated and given to the Freedmen so they could become self-sufficient ("Forty acres and a mule" was the popular slogan which described this plan); and federally supported schools would be established for the education of the Freedmen.<sup>11</sup>

In the face of such Congressional action, coupled with the attitude of many in Congress who wished to be even more harsh, a strong Southern reaction is hardly a surprise. Two notes: Tennessee was not affected by this Congressional act since the Volunteer State had been readmitted to the Union in 1866. This means Forrest had no direct personal motive for involvement with the Klan unless he felt a sense of solidarity with those Southern states which were reduced to the status of territories by the Reconstruction Act. Second, the vindictive nature of the Radical goals, and the abolition of all civil government in ten states, provides an understandable motive for resistance to the Reconstruction policy of the United States government in 1867. Even had African-Americans not been involved in the Reconstruction government of the Southern states — had these governments consisted solely of white Unionists — there would still have been an active opposition to these governments. Race, "keeping the black man in his place," was not the sole motive, or necessarily the first motive, of the Klan. Protection of property and family, along with preservation of civil rights for former Confederates, provided motivation to support the Klan in the areas affected by the Reconstruction Act of March 2, 1867. African-American participation in

government was opposed because they supported the Radical plans, not merely because of skin color. The Klan was just as harsh toward white Radical supporters as they were toward blacks.

Racial views certainly intensified the political struggle. The Southern Unionists depended on the political support of the Freedmen, but neither did they believe in the concept of racial equality. Even a staunch Confederate-hater such as "Parson" Brownlow had contempt for African-Americans. An equal share of racial antipathy was found in the North. C. Vann Woodward, in his seminal work *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, points out that; "the system (of Jim Crow) was born in the North and reached an advanced age before moving South in force."<sup>12</sup> No attempt should be made to excuse the Klan for its attacks on black men and women or to deny their racial prejudice. But it is necessary, in order to understand the situation in which they existed, to recognize the fact the Klan had a political motivation and a political goal, which went beyond the question of race. It is also necessary to recognize and admit the racial views of the Klan members were not unique to the South. Racial prejudice is, and always has been, a national and not a sectional problem.

Political conditions produced the Klan; radical extremism fueled the Klan; racial animosity enhanced the appeal of the Klan. But, did Nathan Bedford Forrest participate in, much less lead, the Klan?

Allen W. Trelease, in *White Terror*, says "There never has been any serious doubt that the first and only Grand Wizard was General Nathan Bedford Forrest. He never admitted the fact in so many words, but his later statements to the press and to a Congressional committee in 1871 help to confirm the notion, which was almost universally shared by members and nonmembers alike ....

"It is impossible to say when Forrest heard of the Klan and became attracted to it ... he seems to have joined the order ... and to have assumed command of it, probably in May 1867." Trelease then cites the account of John Morton and states the meeting at which Forrest joined the Klan took place in Room #10 at the Maxwell House Hotel in Nashville. Trelease goes on to say "A good deal has been written about the Klan's further organization at the top levels, but most of it lacks substantiation and much of it is clear fiction." He then goes on to undermine his own argument concerning Forrest. "There was a tendency after a generation or so to sanctify the Klan along with the Lost Cause and to make it more widespread, more fully organized, more highly connected, and more noble than it actually was."<sup>13</sup>

Popular conceptions about the Klan picture it as a vast, well-organized, paramilitary force which followed a plan of action conceived and administered by leaders acting from the top down. Such a concept is totally wrong. The Klan existed in pockets across the South and each local organization, or "Den," was relatively small. In Obion County it is estimated that there were sixty Klan members; about fifty Klansmen participated in a riot in Bedford County; in Shelby County the presence of Federal troops and State Militia provided a damper on Klan activity. The area around the Middle Tennessee towns of Columbia and Pulaski seems to have been the center of Ku Klux strength.<sup>14</sup> In addition, there were a number of regional groups which functioned as nightriders who used terror tactics to intimidate Republican voters. These groups included the Palefaces, the Knights of the White Camellia and the Redshirts. Popular imagination has lumped all these into a single group, which it has labeled "KKK." This process began during

Reconstruction so a large, unilaterally controlled organization exists more in fiction than in fact. Given the nature of the Klan's organization, there was no need for a supreme head from which all members took orders. Such an office would have served as a figurehead more than as a commander.

John Morton's account of Forrest joining the Klan, an account actually penned by Klan admirer Thomas Dixon, Jr., was written a generation after Reconstruction, just at the time Trelease says there was a tendency to embellish the membership of the Klan with the names of popular Confederate heroes. Is this what Morton did? Was Morton telling the truth in saying he inducted Forrest into the Klan? Did the vanity of an aging man cause him to add luster to his book by adding an appendix which linked Forrest to the then honored and respected Klan? These questions cannot be answered with finality but they are questions which an honest historian has to consider. Morton's account should not be taken at full face value unless it can be substantiated with other evidence.

Trelease continues to destroy his own case linking Forrest to the office of Grand Wizard by pointing out an

Was Morton telling the truth in saying he inducted Forrest into the Klan? Did the vanity of an aging man cause him to add luster to his book by adding an appendix which linked Forrest to the then honored and respected Klan?

error in Morton's account. In a footnote Trelease observes it is possible that Forrest's initiation (to the Klan) took place as late as November 1867. *The Nashville Republican Banner* on November 19 announced his arrival in the city the previous day for the first time since the war.<sup>15</sup> Trelease has based his case for Forrest being the Grand Wizard on Morton's book, but he then admits Morton may have his dates wrong by eighteen months. By November 1868 the Radical movement in Tennessee was on the verge of collapse. A few months after that date, the new governor, DeWitt Clinton Sentor, would remove all prohibitions against former Confederates voting and holding office and a conservative white majority would put an end to Reconstruction in the state. Morton also says that the Klan was disbanded in 1870.<sup>16</sup>

What did Forrest himself have to say about the Klan? In 1868 a reporter for the *Cincinnati Commercial* interviewed Forrest about the organization. Forrest replied: "Well, sir, there is such an organization, not only in Tennessee but all over the South and its numbers have not been exaggerated." Forrest then said the Klan had forty-thousand members in Tennessee and more than half a million in the South. Forrest said he understood the original purpose of the Klan had been to protect former Confederates from the Union League and the Grand Army of the Republic, but it had taken on political motives, including the support of the Democratic party. The Klan was well-organized throughout the South, Forrest told the reporter, down to the local level with a person in each voting precinct who kept lists of who belonged to which party. Forrest also said the target of the Klan was Radicals and not Negroes.<sup>17</sup> For some writers this has provided proof that Forrest was a high-ranking officer in the Klan; more likely, this is a good example of Forrest "pulling

the leg" of a man who was ready to believe anything the fabled former cavalryman told him. The numbers cited as members of the Klan are obviously pure fiction; no reputable historian has ever suggested the organization was so large or so well organized. Indeed, it was to the advantage of the Klan not to be too well-organized. Any insurgency, and the Klan was that, understands the wisdom of "compartmentalization" so the members of one cell or group within the larger organization do not know who is the next person up the chain of command. Those who know nothing can reveal nothing.

During the summer of 1871 Forrest was summoned to Washington, DC, to testify before a congressional committee, which was investigating the activities of the Klan. The testimony took place on June 27. By 1871 Tennessee had been under the control of conservative Democrats for two years and several other Southern states had also ended the rule of Radical Republicans. A bill passed by Congress had made membership in the Klan a crime, and this law had been firmly enforced in those states where Radical rule remained in place. This Federal intervention brought the Klan to its knees so it was no longer an effective force by 1872.<sup>18</sup> Thus, when Forrest appeared before the Congressional committee he had to be very careful in answering their questions. Popular opinion identified him with the Klan, even made him its leader, and although no legal evidence could be brought as proof against him, Forrest knew that the committee would be quite willing to place the worst possible interpretation on anything he said.

During his testimony Forrest gave answers which revealed he knew things about the Klan which would be knowledge, available only to insiders. He also refused to answer some questions, and dodged some others. On the basis of this

performance some historians assume Forrest was an insider, that he was the Grand Wizard of the Klan. Although stated as facts, these are merely assumptions and assertions. It is also possible Forrest knew men who were active in the Klan and he got his information from them without himself being personally involved. It is also asserted Forrest could not have helped bring an end to the Klan unless he was a member, and probably the head, of the Klan. Such assertions ignore the influence Forrest had on many former Confederates; many men admired Forrest and would have been willing to follow his advice even if he was not the titular head of the organization.

The most-often cited source linking Forrest to the Klan is John Morton. As has been shown, Morton's book has flaws in it, was written long after the events which it discusses, and the evidence linking Forrest to the Klan did not come from the pen of Morton but from a man who admired the Klan. Morton's material was written at a time when there was a trend of making the Klan appear bigger than it really had been and when it was thought to be an advantage to claim links existed between the Klan and famous men. The assertion Forrest was widely believed by members of the Klan to be the leader means nothing in itself since there is no documentation for the statement such a belief was held by any members at all. The members of the Klan certainly were not surveyed and asked who they believed to be their leader. Trelease asserts that members and non-members of the Klan thought Forrest was the leader of the group, but Trelease offers no proof of this belief; no sources are cited, no footnotes are provided. Trelease commits an error far too common among historians; he cites an assumption as if it were fact.

*Continued on page 24*

# Forrest and the Klan

Brian Steele Wills, Jack Hurst, Allen Trelease, Wyn Wade — all these historians depend on John Morton's book to link Forrest to the Klan. Forrest is also identified by other writers as the supreme leader, the Grand Wizard of the Klan. But, where is the evidence? Morton does not make Forrest the head of the Klan; indeed, there are problems with Morton's account which make it questionable to depend on him as the only evidence for Forrest's membership in the organization. Historians need evidence. Where is the evidence? Why is Morton's account so widely believed? Why, in the absence of documentation, is Forrest identified as the Grand Wizard of the Klan?

This positive, though unsupported, identification of Forrest as head of the Klan can be traced to rather recent historiography. Historians have not always interpreted the evidence in such a way as to assert without reservation that Forrest was the head of the Klan. Historians are subject to fads and cycles in the way they view the past. Beginning in the decade of the 1970s, following the height of the Civil Rights Movement and during the

rise of the woman's movement, the history of the United States began to be viewed from the perspective of race and gender. During this time the way historians interpreted the causes of the War for Southern Independence changed. Instead of seeing many causes for the conflict, many academic historians came to advocate the view there was only one cause for the war, namely — slavery. This led to the idea the entire Confederate effort was based on an attempt to perpetuate the institution of slavery. The actions of Confederate leaders came to be evaluated primarily in terms of how those actions affected people of color. Of all Confederate leaders whose actions were thought to affect people of color, Bedford Forrest rose to the head of the list. His supposed association with the Klan was seen as the continuation of his views and attitudes which had led him to be a slave trader before the war and to order a massacre of black soldiers at Fort Pillow in April 1864. Because race was the perspective, which determined historical interpre-

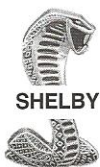
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# Forrest and the Klan

tation, Forrest was damned without a hearing. The *evidence* against him was so overwhelming it did not require examination. Forrest was to be condemned because the Confederacy was to be condemned. In short, Forrest was the Confederate most easily associated with race, and he was easiest to dislike and to damn.

Thus, Forrest is portrayed as the founder and head of the Klan because so many people seem to want to believe this is the case; to paraphrase Admiral David Farragut of the US Navy, "Damn the facts; full speed ahead!" In the minds of many people Forrest has a bad reputation and, therefore, anything bad which is said about him, must be true. For example, Forrest is damned as a slave trader, as a plantation owner, and for his action in "massacring" the USCT at Fort Pillow. None of these things are examined in terms of accuracy or discussed in a historical perspective; these things are thought to be bad by people of the 21st Century; therefore, they must be bad and anyone who says otherwise is wrong and, perhaps, a racist.

What are the facts? What are the historical circumstances? Forrest was a slave trader. This did not involve the occasional sale of one or two slaves, but was a full-time occupation in which Forrest traveled to find numbers of slaves for sale, brought them to Memphis, and resold them to the surrounding areas, perhaps as far away as Texas. Forrest, and a succession of partners, maintained an establishment in Memphis in which slaves were collected and resold. Forrest was in this business for about eight years, from 1852 to 1860.

Slave traders did not have a good

reputation among the plantation aristocrats, although the plantations depended on slave labor. Often the fact a plantation owner had to secure the services of a slave trader usually meant the plantation was in financial difficulty and slaves were being sold to acquire capital. When a plantation's work force produced a surplus of labor through childbearing, the plantation owner preferred to sell the extra hands to friends or neighbors instead of to a slave trader. To use a modern analogy, slave traders were viewed with the same suspicion many 21st Century people have for used car salesmen or telemarketers or hedge-fund managers.

Forrest did not care what the plantation aristocrats thought of him, especially since he made a good deal of money in the slave trade and diversified his economic activities by going into agriculture and the mercantile business. In the 19th, as in the 21st Century, money eventually buys social acceptance. By the end of the decade of the 1850s Forrest was a powerful figure in the political and economic life of Memphis.

The slave trade was profitable, but what about its morality? In the 19th Century slave trading was legal and, if of questionable social acceptance, was not generally condemned as immoral. Most Americans, North and South, accepted the existence of slavery and the presence of the institution meant the presence of those who bought and sold slaves. This acceptance of slavery made it possible for the nation to make political compromises on the issue in the *Northwest Ordinance of 1787*, during the Constitutional Convention, the *Compromise of 1820*, and the *Compromise of 1850*. For most of the

first eighty-five years of our national existence, slavery was considered by most people to be an economic, not a moral issue. For most Americans, North and South, slavery was not considered immoral.

This statement, that slavery was acceptable flies in the face of the sentiments, beliefs, and standards of 21st-Century citizens of the United States, and many other countries, but the fact our moral standards are different does not make us morally superior to the people of earlier times, nor does the difference in standards give us the right to judge them. The practice of using the moral standards of today to judge the actions, beliefs, and attitudes of the past is called *presentism*. Presentism is practiced by the historically uninformed and by some historians who should know better. Presentism argues that if something is thought to be wrong today, it has always been wrong. This assumes people of today know completely and totally what is right and wrong, and people of an earlier age who differ from us are to be both pitied and condemned. Disinterested historians make the point the actions of a person must always be judged relative to the standards of their own time and place in order to determine their morality. This practice is sometimes called *relativism*.

The practice of presentism ignores the nature of morality. The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines "moral" as "Of or concerned with the judgment principles of right and wrong in relation to human actions and character; conforming to standards of what is right or just in behavior." Morality in a society is not defined by some set of abstract universal principles, which exist

# LEADERS OF THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY.

A searing, election-year indictment of four prominent figures in the Democratic party, three of them former Confederate officers from 1868.

Former New York governor and Democratic presidential nominee Horatio Seymour is portrayed as a "rioter." Standing in a burning city, he waves his hat in the air while he steps on the back of a crawling figure. In the background a corpse hangs from a lamppost. Between 1862 and 1864 Seymour had opposed Lincoln's war policies, and he was branded as instigator of the 1863 New York draft riots. Below the portrait are inflammatory passages from his speeches. Tennessee General Nathan Bedford Forrest is called "The Butcher Forrest." He waves a flag labeled "No Quarter" and fires a pistol. Extracts from reports of the Pillow massacre are given below his picture. Confederate admiral Raphael Semmes is portrayed as a pirate, wielding a knife in one hand and holding aloft a flaming torch in the other. Behind him flies a flag with a skull and crossbones. To the right a family cowers in fright. Under his command the Alabama, a British-built ship, captured sixty-two merchant vessels, most of which were burned. An excerpt from Semmes's July 1868 speech at Mobile, Alabama, appears below this image.

Confederate Cavalry General Wade Hampton appears as a hangman. He holds his plumed hat at his side and wears a uniform embossed with a skull and crossbones and a belt inscribed "C.S.A." In the distance three Yankee soldiers hang from a gallows. This ad was drawn by Thomas Nast, famous for creating the image of Santa Claus we know today.

THE RIOTER SEYMOUR



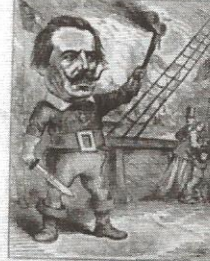
"The rioter Seymour, the most unscrupulous and unprincipled character of the age, and the most infamous of the South, is represented here, standing on the back of a crawling figure, in a burning city, with a corpse hanging from a lamppost in the background. Seymour was the instigator of the 1863 New York draft riots. Between 1862 and 1864 Seymour had opposed Lincoln's war policies, and he was branded as instigator of the 1863 New York draft riots. Below the portrait are inflammatory passages from his speeches. Tennessee General Nathan Bedford Forrest is called 'The Butcher Forrest.' He waves a flag labeled 'No Quarter' and fires a pistol. Extracts from reports of the Pillow massacre are given below his picture. Confederate admiral Raphael Semmes is portrayed as a pirate, wielding a knife in one hand and holding aloft a flaming torch in the other. Behind him flies a flag with a skull and crossbones. To the right a family cowers in fright. Under his command the Alabama, a British-built ship, captured sixty-two merchant vessels, most of which were burned. An excerpt from Semmes's July 1868 speech at Mobile, Alabama, appears below this image. Confederate Cavalry General Wade Hampton appears as a hangman. He holds his plumed hat at his side and wears a uniform embossed with a skull and crossbones and a belt inscribed 'C.S.A.' In the distance three Yankee soldiers hang from a gallows. This ad was drawn by Thomas Nast, famous for creating the image of Santa Claus we know today."

THE BUTCHER FORREST



"The Butcher Forrest, the most unscrupulous and unprincipled character of the age, and the most infamous of the South, is represented here, waving a flag labeled 'No Quarter' and firing a pistol. Extracts from reports of the Pillow massacre are given below his picture. Confederate admiral Raphael Semmes is portrayed as a pirate, wielding a knife in one hand and holding aloft a flaming torch in the other. Behind him flies a flag with a skull and crossbones. To the right a family cowers in fright. Under his command the Alabama, a British-built ship, captured sixty-two merchant vessels, most of which were burned. An excerpt from Semmes's July 1868 speech at Mobile, Alabama, appears below this image. Confederate Cavalry General Wade Hampton appears as a hangman. He holds his plumed hat at his side and wears a uniform embossed with a skull and crossbones and a belt inscribed 'C.S.A.' In the distance three Yankee soldiers hang from a gallows. This ad was drawn by Thomas Nast, famous for creating the image of Santa Claus we know today."

THE PIRATE SEMMES



"The Pirate Semmes, the most unscrupulous and unprincipled character of the age, and the most infamous of the South, is represented here, wielding a knife in one hand and holding aloft a flaming torch in the other. Behind him flies a flag with a skull and crossbones. To the right a family cowers in fright. Under his command the Alabama, a British-built ship, captured sixty-two merchant vessels, most of which were burned. An excerpt from Semmes's July 1868 speech at Mobile, Alabama, appears below this image. Confederate Cavalry General Wade Hampton appears as a hangman. He holds his plumed hat at his side and wears a uniform embossed with a skull and crossbones and a belt inscribed 'C.S.A.' In the distance three Yankee soldiers hang from a gallows. This ad was drawn by Thomas Nast, famous for creating the image of Santa Claus we know today."

THE HANGMAN HAMPTON



"The Hangman Hampton, the most unscrupulous and unprincipled character of the age, and the most infamous of the South, is represented here, holding his plumed hat at his side and wearing a uniform embossed with a skull and crossbones and a belt inscribed 'C.S.A.' In the distance three Yankee soldiers hang from a gallows. This ad was drawn by Thomas Nast, famous for creating the image of Santa Claus we know today."

outside the realm of that society. The morality of a society consists of principles, practices and values on which the society has agreed. This is why the concept of morality varies from society to society and from century to century, and why the agreed-upon content of moral standards is subject to change. Many examples of this can be cited. At the time of the War for Southern Independence, capital punishment had universal moral acceptance in the society of the United States with only a very tiny group raising religious objections; indeed, all the mainstream religious groups supported capital punishment. Today, there is widespread moral opposition to capital punishment and many states do not permit it, and most of those who do permit it seldom carry out an execution. Our moral standards have changed. Our Victorian ancestors would have been scandalized by the attire worn

at public swimming pools and at beaches, but most people of today find two-piece swimsuits for women not a matter of concern. At the time of the War, abortion was practiced only surreptitiously and was condemned across the board. Today the society of the United States is divided over the morality what has become a legal and widespread practice. The morality, as well as the legality, of same-sex marriage currently divides the United States. No doubt, 150 years from now, this issue will be settled and we will have labeled one side or the other *immoral*. The ongoing national debate over these issues represents a changing moral landscape. As of today we have not reached a consensus as to which side of many issues are *right*; that is, which point of view is accepted by the majority. Obviously, what we call *moral* is a changeable concept. Obviously there is no single

social standard which can be applied to past, present and future.

So how does an historian deal with the question of morality? An historian can only be honest and say "this practice was (or was not) considered moral by the people of the time." If the standard of morality was changing during the period the historian has under consideration, the historian must say that not everyone agreed on a single standard; but the view of the majority must be presented as what that age considered moral. But if the historian adopts the practice of presentism, the people of the past will always be wrong simply because they are not us — we have changed to a different standard. When a person writing history adopts the practice of presentism and begins to use the moral standards of today to judge the past, that person ceases to be a disinterested historian and becomes

a propagandist.

So, was slave-trading moral? To the people of the Nineteenth Century it was a logical concomitant of the practice of slavery. Slave trading was odious but it was within the realm. Only to that small group who were moving to a different standard of morality, the group we call Abolitionists, was slave trading immoral. The majority moral opinion of the Nineteenth Century gave slave trading a grudging acceptance. Students of history should recognize Nathan Bedford Forrest was a slave trader in the Nineteenth Century in a society which did not consider the practice immoral. We have changed our moral standards, but we cannot impose our standards on the past. We can recognize and be glad that we have changed, but the past must be judged on its own terms.

Nathan Bedford Forrest was a slave trader. That sounds bad to Twenty-first Century ears, but Forrest lived in the Nineteenth Century. His actions must be judged by the morals of that day, not ours.

Forrest was a plantation owner and that means in the minds of some, he must have been an exploiter of his labor force. Forrest certainly owned plantations. *Plantation* means a place where something is planted; *plantation* is a synonym for *farm*, although the denotation is a *plantation* is larger than a *farm*. The Pilgrims who landed in what became Massachusetts in 1620 called their settlement Plymouth Plantation. Roger Williams called his colony Rhode Island and Providence Plantations (which is still the official name of the state). Perhaps recognizing the use of the word *plantation* in a New England setting will take some of the sting out of the word for those of a sensitive conscience (even if they are lacking in knowledge of the proper meaning of English terms). A farm requires a labor force, no mat-

ter what the acreage of the operation, and Forrest had a labor force. In his case the labor force was composed of enslaved people. But there is no evidence Forrest exploited his labor force.

A persistent story claims Forrest and one of his brothers, John, beat to death a slave, using chains for the purpose. This story is another case of rushing to judgment without careful inquiry as to the facts. The brother who is said to have participated in this event was a cripple and could not walk without the aid of crutches. How a disabled person could have helped beat another human to death using a chain is not discussed since raising the fact of being a cripple discredits the story. Never mind the story first appeared in a New York newspaper in 1864 and no eyewitnesses were cited; never mind the story was part of the propaganda campaign surrounding Fort Pillow. Ignore the circumstances and the facts; the story makes Forrest look bad so the story continues to be told.

No doubt some will object that being a slave meant one was exploited. In that broad sense the statement is true. But in the realistic sense of conditions of day-to-day living, the work force on Forrest's farms were not exploited. Slaves worked from daybreak to sundown during planting and harvest seasons; so did free white farmers; so do farmers today. Slaves had a diet, which depended heavily on pork and cornmeal; so did free white farmers. Slaves received rudimentary medical care; so did free white farmers. In short, the day-to-day conditions of work and life do not show exploitation. Of course, if the free white farmer made a profit, he got to keep it, while the slave had little to no opportunity to make a profit. Again, this is a condition based on the status of being a slave; it is not a condition unique to the work force used by Bedford

Forrest. The most a slave could hope for in terms of financial reward was food, clothing and shelter. That, by the way, was the most the industrial work force of the United States or Great Britain could hope for in the way of financial reward. If working for subsistence is exploitation, then the Nineteenth Century factory worker was exploited. The most exploitative conditions faced by slaves were psychological, not physical. Forrest was no more exploitative of his work force than was any other person who used enslaved labor. This is not to argue that Forrest was outstanding as a *good master*, but it is to argue he was part of a widespread system of labor and he was not notorious for the way in which he used his labor force. Forrest must face the judgment of history, but the honest judge must use the standards of the time in which an event occurred and does not export the moral code of today to condemn or exonerate the people of the past.

Forrest is condemned by many people today as having planned and carried out a *massacre* at Fort Pillow during the War for Southern Independence. This is another case of rushing to judgment in order to affirm preexisting negative opinions.

On April 12, 1864, two brigades of cavalry under the overall command of Forrest attacked and captured a fortified position on the banks of the Mississippi River. The garrison of Fort Pillow amounted to 580 men and was made up of Tennessee Unionists and men of the United States Colored Troops, soldiers recruited among former slaves. In a daylong fight the Southern troops captured the position, inflicting 182 deaths on members of the garrison.<sup>19</sup> This event would become the most controversial fight in the career of Forrest and is a subject of heated debate even today. Many

*Continued on page 56*

# Forrest and the Klan

historians refer to the battle as a *massacre* without questioning what the term means and without looking into the facts of the engagement. The term "Fort Pillow massacre" is used to condemn Forrest without qualification or inquiry.

In April 1864 the war was not going well for the United States. The Confederacy had been battered but showed no signs of immediate collapse. It was clear much hard fighting lay ahead if the war was to be won, but an increasing number of people were asking if the price of victory was too high. Enlistments in the US army were declining in number and the resistance to the draft was growing. Bounties to encourage enlistments had risen to the astronomical figure of \$1,000 (several times the average annual cash income), and still enrollment was slow. The North needed something to arouse public enthusiasm in favor of the war. Fort Pillow offered an opportunity to create that response.

Historians who speak of a *massacre* at Fort Pillow universally ignore the record, which was established by the United States armies from the very onset of the war. As early as the spring of 1862, US troops had looted Athens, Alabama, and had committed sexual assaults in the process. The officer in command of these troops, J. B. Turchin (Ivan Vasilovich Turchinof), had faced a court martial but had been acquitted through the intervention of his friend, Abraham Lincoln. Turchin was promoted to brigadier at Lincoln's insistence.

During 1863 and 1864 US officers such as Eleazer Paine, Robert Milroy, Fielding Hurst, and Stephan G. Burbridge made reputations for themselves as butchers by killing civilians

without trial and without evidence. These same men adopted as policy the looting of civilian homes, confiscating household goods on behalf of the United States Government as is documented later in this essay. First Lt. W. H. Nelson, 5th Tennessee Cavalry, US, kept a diary in which he recorded the killing of prisoners as routine: May 18, 1864. Lieut. Creasy killed two prisoners, one unknown. Warm and pleasant. Nothing important happening. June 14, 1864. We were in a fight today. We burned the houses where the fight took place and took the men of the houses to Lynchburg. June 15, 1864. We killed the prisoners we took yesterday.<sup>20</sup> Human life had become cheap in Tennessee by 1864, and the debaser of its value were not Confederates.

Forrest attacked Fort Pillow with some 1,500 men and four howitzers. This force was the minimum which should have been sent against the position since the usual rule of thumb was attackers should outnumber defenders by three to one. Forrest did not have that level of advantage in numbers.

The fighting at Fort Pillow began before daybreak and the Confederates stormed the fort at about 4:00 PM. Firing ceased by 4:30 PM. Three hundred-ninety-eight US soldiers survived the attack; 182 were killed. Based on the testimony of three letters written by Confederate soldiers, letters which speak of *slaughter*, two newspaper articles, and stories told by survivors to a US investigating committee, many historians have been quick to label the capture of Fort Pillow a *massacre*. History students should remember that *slaughter* does not mean or imply *massacre* in the sense of unlawful killing. The

story has been buttressed with the account many of the dead were found with powder burns on their clothing and skin. This latter fact is an excellent example of the way the story is interpreted to fit a foregone conclusion: Powder burns must mean the soldier was killed at short range; *short range* must mean the person had surrendered; hence, the person was *massacred*. Now, think logically. Fort Pillow was captured by direct assault when Confederates charged up to and into the ditch in front of the fortification. After a very brief pause the attacking party went onto and over the parapet where they met the garrison face-to-face. The attack force carried single-shot rifles, but each man carried at least one revolving pistol. Confronting the defenders face-to-face and firing rapidly with their revolvers, is it any surprise the attackers left behind powder-burned bodies of defenders? But instead of logical thinking about what happened, there is a tendency to rush to judgment, a judgment which holds Forrest and his men guilty of the worst possible behavior.

The story of the fort has been told over and over, emphasizing the killing of US soldiers following their surrender. But the record presents problems with such an interpretation.

First, the fight for Fort Pillow lasted all day, from before daylight until late afternoon. How many of the 182 casualties had been suffered before the final assault was made? The garrison of the fort had loudly stated they did not intend to take any Confederate prisoners; did the garrison know the Southern boys had accurate information of the robberies, murders and rapes the garrison had

committed and so had determined to fight to the end? The garrison had fought stubbornly in defense of their position for many hours; Forrest had three horses killed under him during the day so the garrison knew how to fight; this was not a case of a weak force being overwhelmed by a more experienced opponent. Many of the bodies of the US soldiers were found lying on the steep slope leading from the fortifications to the river. Also found on this slope were 3,000 rounds of ammunition in open boxes, ready to be handed out to the soldiers retreating down that slope. It appears the commander of Fort Pillow had planned to make a fighting withdrawal to the river. There were US gunboats present to provide covering fire, a rescue force, and a place of refuge for the garrison of Fort Pillow. Were the men on the slope killed while running away or while fighting? Even if they were running away, a soldier who is running is still a valid target even if he has thrown away his weapon. This was, and is, true under any reasonable rules of engagement. If men were killed after surrendering, were these killings done *in cold blood* or were they the result of the madness of combat when an attacker bursts into a position, sees an enemy, and fires immediately to assure his own survival? If men were killed unjustly, after surrendering, how many were so killed? Did Forrest have anything to do with such deaths?

This last question is crucial to the validity of a massacre occurring at the instigation of Forrest.

All Confederate accounts agree that no order was given for a massacre to take place. All Southern accounts agree Forrest was at an observation post on a hill some 800 yards from Fort Pillow when the final attack was made, and no US account places him in the attacking party. Indeed, it would have been a violation of all principles of com-

mand for Forrest to have been in the assault; his place was where he could coordinate the movements of all his men. No historian disputes the garrison, as a whole, did not surrender nor even attempt to surrender. The US flag was flying from the fort's flagpole when the final attack was made; it continued to fly until a Confederate cut the halyards and let the flag fall. The flag came down about twenty minutes after the final attack was made, and just about the time Forrest entered the fort. It is also agreed that Forrest ordered all firing to cease as soon as he entered the fort, and this order was carried out rapidly. If any unlawful killing took place, it happened before Forrest was personally on the scene and without his ordering such. Of course, Forrest was the commanding officer and so bears responsibility for the actions of the men under him, but the only reasonable conclusion is Forrest took immediate steps to control his men and to put a stop to whatever action may have been taking place when he entered the fort. Instead of being guilty of leading a massacre, Forrest should be credited with stopping the fighting once it was clear the Confederates controlled the fort.

The US garrison had been at Fort Pillow since mid-March and had established a reputation for theft, murder and rape throughout the surrounding area. This brutish behavior was not a new feature of the war, and the attempt to paint Forrest specifically, and Confederates generally, as the originators of killing prisoners is a falsification of history. The Union Provost Marshal records (UPM), housed in the National Archives in Washington, DC, show the truth about the US policy of killing prisoners, a policy which took shape early in the war. The UPM contains a standard format, which local Provosts were to follow by filling in the names of people to be arrested and killed, after which

their houses were looted. The form to be followed consisted of an introduction and ten paragraphs:

You will proceed to the residences of the persons herein named and deal with them in accordance with the following instructions. In all cases where the residences of the persons are ordered to be destroyed you will observe the following previous to setting them on fire. You will first search their houses and premises to see if they have any article belonging to the US Govt or that are contraband of war, which you will bring away in case any are found. Also all or any of the following articles that may be found belonging to aforesaid persons.

#### FIRST

All horses, hogs, sheep, cattle, and any other animals or articles of whatever description that may be valuable to the US Govt especially that are valuable to the Quartermaster, Commissary and Hospital Department.

#### SECOND

All stoves and stove pipes of whatever description and all kitchen utensils, Queens ware, beds, bedding, knives, forks & etc also all chairs, sofas, sociable lounges and everything of the character of household furniture.

#### THIRD

All windows, sash, glass, looking glasses, carpets, & etc.

#### FOURTH

Every article of household furniture which you do not bring with you must be destroyed or burned with the house.

#### FIFTH

All barns, stables, smoke houses, or any other outbuildings of any description whatsoever or any building or article that could possibly be of any benefit or comfort to Rebels or Bushwhackers, their friends or any person aiding, abetting or sympathizing with Rebels, Bushwhack-

ers & etc which could be used for subsistence for man or beast will be destroyed or burned.

#### SIXTH

All animals, forage or other articles brought in by you will be turned over to the AAQM on this Staff to be subject to the order of the general commanding to be disposed of as he may think proper, taking a receipt therefore from the AAQM.

#### SEVENTH

The wagon train accompanying will be subject to your orders, together with all the persons connected with it, whether civilians or soldiers and you will cause any of them who may be guilty of committing depredations upon Loyal citizens or their property to be arrested and you will not yourself or suffer those under your command to commit any trespass, or do any damage to persons or property except those specified in this order.

#### EIGHTH

You will burn the houses of the following named persons, take any of the articles named above that they may have, together with all forage and grains belonging to them that you can bring away which may be useful to the US Govt for military purposes or otherwise and will give no receipt of any kind whatsoever.

#### NINTH

The following persons will be shot in addition to suffering in the manner prescribed in paragraph #8.

#### TENTH

The following persons have committed murder and if caught will be hung to the first tree in front of their door and be allowed to hang there for an indefinite period. You will satisfy yourself that they are dead before leaving them. Also, their residences will be stripped of everything as per the above instructions and then burned.<sup>21</sup>

Paragraphs 8, 9, and 10 had blank space following them in which the

local Provost could insert the names of those who were to be robbed, burned, and killed. An examination of the UPM shows women were frequently ordered to be killed as were children as young as 14.

The carrying out of these orders often resulted in the women and girls who lived in the houses being *outraged*. Outraged is the 19th-Century word for raped.

Civilian residents of the area informed Forrest the garrison of Fort Pillow had been engaging in these sorts of actions. This is not intended to be a "they deserved what they got" argument. This is an attempt to give the background for the attack on Fort Pillow, a background omitted by all the writers who assert a massacre took place.

In 1864 a US Congressional Committee held a hearing on Fort Pillow and received testimony from several survivors, all of whom swore a massacre had taken place. These witnesses stated they had seen men who had surrendered fall to their knees and beg for their lives, only to be ordered to stand up and then be shot. None of these witnesses gave the name of any person they saw so killed; the dead were always anonymous. None of these witnesses ever said how many people they saw so killed. Did twenty witnesses see several men each killed? Did all the witnesses describe the same event in which only one or two men were so killed? No writer who argues a massacre took place ever answers these sorts of questions. Instead, the total number of dead from the daylong fight is presented as if they were all killed after having surrendered.

The Congressional Committee, which held its hearings long after sensational stories about Fort Pillow had been widely circulated, published 40,000 copies of its report, about four times the usual print run of such reports. This rather suggests the Committee was trying to create

a sensation over Fort Pillow in order to help boost the sagging Union war effort.

No doubt some defender of Fort Pillow did try to surrender but was killed instead. When a position is carried by direct assault, this is an unfortunate but frequent occurrence. In the fervor of combat the rules are not always followed. It is not the occurrence of such breaches of the rules which constitutes a massacre but the attitude of the officers in command, which, in turn, sets the standard of behavior for the men under their command. The troops who fought under Forrest at Fort Pillow fought Southern Unionists and USCT on many more occasions. On those occasions positions were not carried by direct assault and on none of those occasions was there, or is there, any allegations of massacre. This argues strongly the events at Fort Pillow were not merely the result of racial or sectional hatred, but were the result of the nature of the battle itself. At any rate, it is clear Forrest did not train or order his men to murder prisoners. But despite these facts, the charge of overseeing a massacre remains part of the Forrest legend.

The negative attitude toward Forrest, arising from his being an antebellum slave trader and reinforced by a shallow interpretation of the Fort Pillow event, makes it easier for poorly informed and/or closed-minded people to accept the unsupported and unproven charge Forrest organized and led the KKK. A careful examination of the facts, and a fair-minded attitude toward the past, should erase much of this feeling. Nathan Bedford Forrest should not be viewed as anything more or less than he was — a man of the 19th Century who held the views, attitudes, and values of his time; a man who became a fierce warrior during the conflict of the War for Southern Independence; and a man



Forrest's raid into Memphis and attack on the Irwin Prison. — (Sketched by George H. Ellsbury.)

who stood for what was widely considered to be fair and reasonable treatment following the end of the fighting. Forrest was not a perfect man, nor was any other character of that era (or of this), but he deserves to be judged fairly, not with preconceived and prejudiced ideas.

#### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> *Fox News*, November 10, 2009.  
*ABC News*, February 10, 2011  
*Christian Science Monitor*, February 11, 2011  
*CBS News*, February 16, 2011  
*New York Times*, August 24, 2012  
*Yahoo! News*, February 5, 2013  
James W. Loewen, *Lies Across America: What Our History Sites Get Wrong*, p. 239.
- <sup>2</sup> Robert Selph Henry, *First with the Most Forrest*, p. 20.
- <sup>3</sup> John Allan Wyeth, *That Devil Forrest*, p. 550.
- <sup>4</sup> Brian Steele Wills, *A Battle From the Start: the Life of Nathan Bedford Forrest*, p. 337.
- <sup>5</sup> Wyn Craig Wade, *The Fiery Cross*, pp. 40-41.
- <sup>6</sup> Libby, George W. *A Genuine Ku-*

*Klux, Confederate Veteran*, Vol. 38, pp. 416-17.

- <sup>7</sup> Chester L. Quarles, *The KKK and Related American Racialists and Antisemitic Organizations*. p. 28. Quarles cites the manuscript. The original manuscript is in the Pink Palace Museum, Memphis, TN.
- <sup>8</sup> Stanley F. Horn, *The Invisible Empire*, p. 312.
- <sup>9</sup> Jack Hurst, *Nathan Bedford Forrest: A Biography*, p. 289 ff.
- <sup>10</sup> "The Fourteenth Amendment," Website.
- <sup>11</sup> J.G. Randall and David Donald, *The Civil War and Reconstruction*, p. 595, ff.  
James M. McPherson, *Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction*, p. 396, ff.
- <sup>12</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, p. 17.
- <sup>13</sup> Allen Trelease, *White Terror*, pp. 19-20.
- <sup>14</sup> Ben H. Severance, *Tennessee's Radical Army*, p. 140, 179.
- <sup>15</sup> Trelease, *White Terror*, p. 433.
- <sup>16</sup> Severance, *Tennessee's Radical Army*, pp. 232-33.  
John H. Thweatt, *DeWitt Clinton*

*Senter, Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, pp 831-31. C. Van West, Editor.

- <sup>17</sup> *Cincinnati Commercial*, August 28, 1868. Cited in Hurst, *Forrest*, pp. 312 ff.
- <sup>18</sup> Randall, *Civil War and Reconstruction*, p. 682 ff.  
McPherson, *Ordeal by Fire*, pp 566-67.
- <sup>19</sup> All the major biographies of Forrest discuss the Fort Pillow attack. There is not complete agreement as to the number of dead. The figure of 182 is the mid-point of the range of deaths given by a variety of authors.
- <sup>20</sup> Copy of diary in possession of the author.
- <sup>21</sup> "Union Provost Marshal Records," RG 416, microfilm roll 50. These records are in the National Archives, Washington, DC. They are not a part of *The Official Records of the War of the Rebellion*. The Provost Records have never been transcribed or printed. Microfilm copies of the Provost Records are available in various libraries, including the Tennessee State Library and Archives. ❌