

NATHAN BEDFORD FORREST

&

THE KU KLUX KLAN

“Bedford Forrest founded the Ku Klux Klan!” “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.[1] These statements have been repeated so often that 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 that 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 that 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.

History is based on “Primary sources”, something written at the time an event took place. People writing later produce “Secondary sources.” If secondary sources are well written they cite primary sources as proof of what they say. A “Tertiary source” is something like an encyclopedia, or Wikipedia.

No serious historian argues that 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 that 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.*[2] An even earlier historian, John Allan Wyeth, considered the matter of the Klan carefully before writing his biography of Forrest in 1899. Wyeth concluded that 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 that 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.[3]

Rather than deal with all the books which assert that 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 *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 that 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.”^[4]

This is a reasonably fair statement since Wills makes no assertion that Forrest was definitely the head of the Klan, although Wills fails to comment on the obvious fact that Forrest was a life-long “commander” by nature and by habit. Forrest always acted like a commander. Wills draws the assumption that 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 book, *The Artillery of Nathan Bedford Forrest*, and this book does indeed state that 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 and was not written by Morton. 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. 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?

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 that Forrest was a member of the

Klan but he goes on to assert without reservation that 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. Wills depends on Wade's work and so is on shaky ground also. [5]

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.[6] 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.

It will be argued that many people can remember events which happened to them much earlier in their lives, that most people have memories of events dating back to their childhood. When psychiatrists examine memories it is not unusual to find that 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?”

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*. 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 that 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 that 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.[7]

Stanley Horn sums up the dilemma 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. [8]* 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 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.

Jack Hurst, in his biography of Forrest, is more tentative in identifying Forrest as leader of the Klan. He points out that there are several versions of stories of how Forrest is said to have an involvement with the organization and that all these stories lack documentation. Hurst also points out that 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 U.S. Constitution which granted citizenship to African Americans.[9] The votes of the southern states were needed to ratify this amendment because so many northern states had rejected the amendment. 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.[10] 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 that 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.[11]

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.”[12]

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 that 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.*” [13]

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.[14] In addition, there were a number of regional groups which functioned as night-riders 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.”

Trelease continues to destroy his own case linking Forrest to the office of Grand Wizard by pointing out an error in Morton's account. In a footnote Trelease observes that *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.*[15] Trelease has based his case for Forrest being the Grand Wizard on Morton's book but he then admits that 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. [16]

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 over 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 that 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 that the target of the Klan was Radicals and not Negroes. [17 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.

During the summer of 1871 Forrest was summoned to Washington, D.C., 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 that it was no longer an effective force by 1872.[18] 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 that 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 that Forrest knew men who were active in the Klan

and that he got his information from them without himself being personally involved. It is also asserted that 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.

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?

Beginning in the decade of the 1970's, 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 Civil War changed. Instead of seeing many causes for the conflict many academic historians came to advocate the view that there was only one cause for the war, namely, slavery. This led to the idea that 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 interpretation Forrest was damned without a

hearing. The “evidence” against him was so overwhelming that 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 that this is the case; to paraphrase Admiral David Farragut of the U.S. 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 U.S.C.T. 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 that 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 child-bearing 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 1850's 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 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 that 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 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 outside the realm 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.

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.

Forrest was a plantation owner and that means in the minds of some, that 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 that 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 (that is still the official name of the state).

Forrest is condemned by many people today as having planned and carried out a “massacre” at Fort Pillow during the Civil War. 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 day-long fight the Southern troops captured the position, inflicting 182 deaths on members of the garrison.[19] This event would become the most controversial fight in the career of Forrest and is a subject of heated debate even today. Many historians refer to the battle as a “massacre” without questioning what that 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 that 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 U.S. 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 U.S. 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 U.S. 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, U.S., 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.*[20] 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 that 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 day break and the Confederates stormed the fort at about 4:00 P.M. Firing ceased by 4:30. Three hundred ninety eight U.S. 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 U.S. 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 that 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 that 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 U.S. 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 that they did not intend to take any Confederates 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 U.S. 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 that the commander of Fort Pillow had planned to make a fighting withdrawal to the river. There were U.S. gunboats present to provide both 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 that Forrest was at an observation post on a hill some 800 yards from Fort Pillow when the final attack was made and no U.S. account places him in the attacking party. Indeed, it

would have been a violation of all principles of command for Forrest to have been in the assault, his place was where he could coordinate the movements of all his men. No historian disputes that the garrison, as a whole, did not surrender nor even attempt to surrender. The U.S. flag was flying from the fort's flag pole when the final attack was made, it continued to fly until a Confederate cut the halliards 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 that 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 that 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 U.S. 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, D.C., show the truth about the U.S. 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, have their houses looted, and killed. The form to be followed consists 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 U.S. 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 U.S. 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, Bushwhackers & 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 U.S. 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.[21]

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 that 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 that 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 that a massacre took place.

In 1864 a U.S. Congressional Committee held a hearing on Fort Pillow and received testimony from several survivors, all of whom swore that 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 that a massacre took place ever answers these sorts of questions. Instead, the total number of dead from the day-long 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 that 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

that 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 that 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 that 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.

FOOTNOTES

FORREST & THE KKK

- 1, 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.
2. Robert Selph Henry, “*First with the Most*” *Forrest*, p. 20.
3. John Allan Wyeth, *That Devil Forrest*, p. 550.
4. Brian Steele Wills, *A Battle From the Start: the Life of Nathan Bedford Forrest*, p. 337.
5. Wyn Craig Wade, *The Fiery Cross*, pp. 40-41.
- 6 Libby, George W. A Genuine Ku-Klux, *The Confederate Veteran*, Vol. 38, pp. 416-17.

7. 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, in Memphis, Tennessee.
8. Stanley F. Horn, *The Invisible Empire*, p. 312.
9. Jack Hurst, *Nathan Bedford Forrest: A Biography*, p. 289 ff.
10. "The Fourteenth Amendment," Website.
11. 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.
12. C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, p. 17
13. Allen Trelease, *White Terror*, pp. 19-20.
14. Ben H. Severance, *Tennessee's Radical Army*, p. 140, 179.
15. Trelease, *White Terror*, p. 433.
16. 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.
17. Cincinnati *Commercial*, August 28, 1868. Cited in Hurst, *Forrest*, pp 312ff.
18. Randall, *Civil War and Reconstruction*, p. 682ff.
McPherson, *Ordeal by Fire*, pp 566-67.
19. 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.
20. Copy of diary in possession of the author.
21. Union Provost Marshal Records, RG 416, microfilm roll 50.
These records are in the National Archives, Washington, D.C. 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.