

FORREST AND THE KLAN---

WHAT IS THE TRUTH?

History, whether pursued as an academic discipline by a student or followed as a topic of interest by an individual, depends on sources for evidence to support the claims made by historians. These sources must be subjected to examination to demonstrate their reliability and veracity. To allow readers to examine the reliability and veracity of their claims historians add footnotes/endnotes to their works. The process of examination, substantiation, and verification is crucial for reading, writing, and teaching history which reveals the truth about the past as opposed the proliferation of mere propaganda. Propaganda makes claims which cannot be verified or substantiated. The same is true of legend, folklore, and tradition for these too make claims not subject to verification, even though these claims may be widely believed and accepted.

Today a book written by a living author about the Civil War would properly be designated as a “secondary source.” A secondary source is any source about an event, period, or issue in history that was produced after that event, period, or issue has passed. Secondary sources produced by those recognized as an expert in the area come with a certain built-in “credibility.” But it is a serious mistake to believe that a secondary source is reliable merely because of the pedigree of its author. The author of a reliable secondary source must rely on, and must cite, primary sources.

A primary source is any original source that comments on, testifies, or bears witness to the time period of its own production. Primary sources are the raw material of history, they are what historians must rely on as they try to learn what happened in the past and what an event meant in the context of its times.

An argument often used to discredit his memory is that Nathan Bedford Forrest was the head of the Ku Klux Klan. From 1865 to the present time no historian has ever produced a single piece of evidence which can be subjected to the process of investigation, verification and documentation

described above which proves that Forrest was ever the head of the Ku Klux Klan. Many such allegations have been made, and are still being made, but no reliable documentation, subject to verification, has ever been produced to establish the veracity of these claims. Secondary sources abound which accuse Forrest of Klan involvement but no primary source has ever been produced. Of course, all reputable historians reject out of hand the assertion that “Forrest founded the Klan.” The names of the founders of the Klan are well known to historians and Forrest is not among them.

One often cited piece of evidence that Forrest was involved with the Klan is the Appendix to the book *The Artillery of Nathan Bedford Forrest*, written by John Morton in 1909. Morton commanded Forrest's artillery during the war. The Appendix to this book recounts a story in which Morton is said to have inducted Forrest into the Klan and then sent Forrest to a meeting at the Maxwell House Hotel in Nashville. At best this account can be considered anecdotal evidence concerning Forrest. The account is not from the pen of John Morton but was written by the Reverend Thomas Dixon of Boston, Massachusetts. Dixon was a novelist whose most famous work is *The Clansman*, a book which became the basis for the movie, “The Birth of a Nation.” In short, the account was produced by an admirer of the Klan who was dealing second-hand with an event more than forty years old. The Morton material does not qualify as a primary source. [1]

Andrew Nelson Lytle, in his *Bedford Forrest and His Critter Company*, is among the first writers to popularize the legend of Forrest as head of the Klan. Lytle tells the story of a meeting which was said to have taken place at the Maxwell House Hotel at which Forrest was chosen as Grand Wizard, but Lytle provides no documentation as to who was present, who selected Forrest, and does not even provide a date at which this was supposed to have happened. Lytle also recounts a story that the leadership of the Klan was first offered to Robert E. Lee, a story equally unsupported by a shred of historical evidence and one not believed by any reputable historian. [2]

Stanley F. Horn, in his *Invisible Empire: The Story of the Ku Klux Klan, 1866-1871*, follows

the same interpretation used by Lytle. But Horn consistently uses such phrases as “There is a story to the effect”, “It has always been understood”, and “The story has always been told”, which means Horn is recounting anecdotes, not citing primary sources. The discrediting of Horn's claim concerning Forrest is made complete when Horn himself says that while he believes Forrest was the head of the Klan “there is no documentary evidence” to support his claim. [3]

Allen W. Trelease deals with the Klan in a much more scholarly fashion than either Lytle or Horn. In his *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction*, Trelease writes “There has never been any serious doubt that the first and only Grand Wizard was General Nathan Bedford Forrest.” Trelease cites Horn as one of his sources, thus damaging his argument, and the author then wrecks his argument by admitting “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 clearly fictitious.” [4]

The two most recent scholarly biographies of Nathan Bedford Forrest are *A Battle From the Start* by Brian Steel Wills and *Nathan Bedford Forrest: A Biography* by Jack Hurst. Both these works claim that Forrest was the leader of the Klan but neither offers more than circumstantial evidence, and they offer nothing which meets the standard professional criteria of documentation and investigation.

Wills, after labeling Forrest as the Grand Wizard, then admits “There is some question as to whether he was actually the Grand Wizard” and points out that the family of George W. Gordon claims their ancestor was the head of the organization. Wills also uses as evidence of involvement with the Klan “evasive answers” Forrest gave to a Congressional Investigating Committee in 1872 [5]. Wills fails to report that the conclusion reached by the committee. This investigation will be dealt with later in this paper.

Hurst also connects Forrest to the leadership of the Klan but cites Andrew Lytle as his major

source. [6] Lytle, as we have seen, provides no viable proof on which Hurst can rest his case.

Despite his assertion that Forrest was head of the Klan, Hurst concludes his evaluation of Forrest's racial attitudes by saying “over the length of his lifetime Nathan Bedford Forrest's racial attitudes probably developed more, and more in the direction of liberal enlightenment, than those of most other Americans in the nation's history.” [7]

While older scholarship alleges, but cannot prove, that Forrest was involved with the Klan the most recent scholarship supports the position that Forrest cannot reliably be linked to the leadership of the Klan. Elaine Frantz Parsons, in her *Ku-Klux: The Birth of the Klan During Reconstruction*, severely criticizes Trelease and others for their unsubstantiated claims concerning Forrest and she concludes “There is also no compelling contemporary evidence to establish that Forrest ever exercised any leadership function . . . “ [8] Parsons received her Ph.D. from The Johns Hopkins University and is a professor at Duquesne University where she not only teaches courses in U.S. History but also serves as Director of the Women's and Gender Studies Center.

Eric Foner is contemporarily among the most highly acclaimed and recognized scholars of the Civil War and Reconstruction period. His book, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution*, is the standard text in most university courses on the Reconstruction period. Foner discusses the KuKluxKlan at length but he does not mention Forrest at all. Foner does say *One should not think of the Klan, even in its heyday, as possessing a well-organized structure or clearly defined regional leadership. Acts of violence were generally committed by local groups on their own initiative.*[9] If there was no South-wide organization requiring “clearly defined regional leadership” the concept of Forrest as an all-powerful leader of a monolithic organization is folklore, not a fact of history.

There is one primary source of evidence dealing with Forrest and the Klan. It is the hearings conducted by a joint committee of the United States Congress in 1871. A federal law had just been

passed making any association with the Klan a serious offense and vigorous efforts were being made to suppress the Klan. Forrest was called to testify before this committee on June 27, 1871. Although some historians have characterized his responses to the committee as “evasive” and, although it is obvious that Forrest knew many things about the Klan, the conclusion of the body was that Forrest could not be connected to the Klan. The Committee even complimented Forrest for using his influence to suppress the Klan.[10]

This committee was formed for the purpose of wiping out the Klan, they were not friends and supporters of Forrest, but they exonerated him of Klan involvement. Historians must let the record speak for itself. Why do contemporary critics of Forrest ignore this clear finding?

Despite all the claims that Forrest was the head of the KuKluxKlan no historian, from the end of the Civil War to the present day, has produced evidence which can withstand the scrutiny normally applied by academic historians. One may hold suspicions about Forrest, one may point to anecdotal or circumstantial evidence concerning him, but history requires verifiable proof, documentary evidence. Where is the evidence that Forrest was head of the Klan? It does not exist. No historian has produced such evidence, a Congressional Investigating Committee cleared Forrest of involvement, contemporary scholarship exonerates Forrest; only myth, legend, and folklore persist in making what is clearly an unsubstantiated claim.

A society has a moral obligation to uphold the highest standards in evaluating its past. The usual standards of historical proof should be applied to the claim that Forrest led the Klan. At the present time, no historian has produced proof that meets those standards. Media outlets have the same moral obligation to tell the truth, not repeat popular assumptions.

Throughout time, in the absence of facts, people have tried to explain the past by utilizing legends. The ancient Egyptians, the Greeks and Romans, the Native Americans all did this; we of the 21st Century do the same. But legends are not history. In the case of Bedford Forrest, as in all

cases, let us speak the truth and state the facts. Myths are not a substitute for history.

ENDNOTES

1. John Morton, *The Artillery of Nathan Bedford Forrest*, pp 344-45.
2. Andrew Nelson Lytle, *Bedford Forrest and His Critter Company*, p. 383.
3. Stanley F. Horn, *Invisible Empire: The Story of the Ku Klux Klan 1866-1871*, pp 312-316.
4. Allen W. Trelease, *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction*, p. 20. See also footnote 28, p. 433.
5. Brian Steel Wills, *A Battle From the Start: The Life of Nathan Bedford Forrest*, p. 336, pp 363-65.
The results of Forrest's appearance before the Congressional Investigating Committee be found in *Reports of Committees, House of Representatives, Second Session, Forty-Second Congress*, pp. 7-449.
6. Jack Hurst, *Nathan Bedford Forrest: A Biography*, pp 284-87.
7. Hurst, *Forrest*, p. 385.
8. Elaline Frantz Parsons, *Ku-Klux: The Birth of the Klan During Reconstruction*, p. 50.
9. Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution*, p. 425.

10. *Report of the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States*, Report 41, Part I, pp. 6-14.

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APPENDIX

Many stories told today about Forrest do not stand up to examination either. For example, there is a story that Forrest and his brother beat to death an enslaved African American. Those who retell this story never give a date on which this happened. The fact is, this story appeared in a Northern newspaper during the Civil War at a time when Forrest was establishing his reputation as a military commander. The reporter who wrote this story got his information by asking for things which would make Forrest look bad. Unknown persons gave him the account of the beating but provided no details as to when or where. The brother who was said to have helped Forrest beat the enslaved man was a cripple who could not walk without crutches and had been a cripple for his adult life. In short, this story is a piece of war-time propaganda which is supported by no facts.

In discussing Fort Pillow, it should be remembered that the Union casualties were inflicted during a fight which lasted for almost twelve hours. The number of dead is not the result of a large number of people being killed deliberately in a short span of time. The Union force never surrendered, although individuals no doubt did put up their hands, but as any combat veteran of any war will tell you, an enemy who fights until his gun is empty and then throws up his hands is likely to get killed just because the attack force is concentrating on their own survival, not on rules of war which might be followed under less hectic conditions.