

I. Thanks to Committee

I thank the Committee for hearing me. History is a passion as well as a profession for me.

II. Objective:

My objective is to encourage you to apply the standard, professional principles and practices of history to the issue at hand.

History depends on evidence, on proof. An historian behaves somewhat like an attorney preparing to go to court.

Looking at a past event, one gathers as many accounts of what happened as possible, one evaluates the accounts for reliability, and then one presents their findings. Anecdotes, second-hand information, and obviously biased accounts are rejected if one wishes to make a sound case. The fullest possible account must be given to avoid creating a false narrative about the past. Also, it is not necessary to prove innocence, guilt must be established. These are the principles I ask you to apply to the current issue.

III. FORREST WAS A SLAVE TRADER

This is absolutely true. There is sound evidence of this---ads placed by Forrest in newspapers, tax records, testimony of many eye-witnesses---these kinds of evidence are called “primary sources.”

To us, in the 21st Century, this is an abhorrent activity; an historian must ask, “How was this viewed in the 19th Century?” It was legal and acceptable.

We have changed our moral standards over the last 150 plus years but an historian does not expect the people of the past to be like us. An historian recognizes that the practices of a person must be judged by the standards of their time, not ours.

IV. FORREST ABUSED SLAVES

Recently a petition was presented to the Capitol Commission asking for the removal of the bust of Forrest. That presentation included a story from a Civil War Era newspaper dealing claiming Forrest brutally abused enslaved people. An historian would ask if the story as presented to was complete.

Here is the fuller story. In mid-April 1864 Secretary of State Edwin Stanton contacted the editors of several newspapers friendly to the Lincoln Administration and strong supporters of the war. Stanton asked these editors to “set fire to the heart of America” because support for the war was declining and opposition to Lincoln was growing even in the Republican Party.

A week after this contact was made the New York *Daily Tribune*, edited by Horace Greeley, printed the story of abuse. On May 4, 1864, the same article was published in the *Chicago Tribune* edited by Joseph Medill. The reporter gave no sources for his story saying Forrest abused slaves, he cites no names of people interviewed, he gives no evidence which can be checked.

The reporter makes some serious historical errors. Dr. Calvin Schermerhorn, *The Business of Slavery and the Rise of American Capitalism* (Yale University Press, 2015) points out that slaves traders avoided using corporal punishment because scar marks from whippings sent a signal to buyers of stubbornness and difficulty of control, thus lowering the price offered.

Second, the story says that John Forrest participated in the torture of the victims. John Forrest suffered injuries from an accident in 1845 which left him a cripple, unable to rise from a chair without help and unable to walk without the use of two crutches. He was a cripple nine years before Bedford became a slave trader.

An historian, looking at the whole story, would ask “Is this a truthful account or is it a piece of war-time propaganda?”

The late Dr. William Hesseltine, professor at the University of Wisconsin—Madison, a

respected Civil War scholars, points out in *The Institute for Historical Review* that Civil War era newspapers, North and South, are filled with propaganda and must be treated with caution as historical sources.

Further information about the Lincoln Administration and Civil War Era newspapers is easily accessed at “The John Siginthaler Center for the First Amendment” at Vanderbilt University.

FORREST ORDERED THE MASSACRE OF HUNDREDS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN SOLDIERS AT FORT PILLOW AFTER THEY HAD SURRENDERED.

No reputable historian denies that some people were killed in violation of the rules of war at Fort Pillow when an attack was made on the position in April 1864. The common statements that “hundreds” were massacred are an exaggeration which equates “casualties” with “killed in action.”

The Union general in command of the Western Area, General William Sherman, ordered Fort Pillow abandoned in January 1864 because it served no military purpose. General Steven Hurlbut, commander in the Memphis area, disobeyed orders and kept a garrison there because he was confiscating land and gathering Freedmen men to grow cotton. The Freedmen were fed by the U.S. Army but Hurlbut kept all the cotton they grew and sent it north to be sold for his personal gain. This activity is described in Philip Leigh, *Trading With the Enemy*, (2014).

While figures offered by historians vary, the mid-point of the number killed at Fort Pillow is 182. This number of dead was amassed during a battle which lasted from about 5:00 A.M. until 4:30 P.M., which involved taking a position by frontal assault, and during which the defending force never surrendered.

Dr. John Cimprich, St. Thomas College, is a leading authority of Fort Pillow and is the author of the modern book which includes an examination of the massacre concept. Dr. Cimprich says

that “no unlawful deaths took place until the garrison had reached the banks of the river.” The fighting there lasted about five minutes.

A Congressional Investigating Committee took testimony from forty survivors of the battle who said they saw people killed after those people had surrendered. None of these forty give any names of those they saw killed, despite the fact the fact they had been serving together for two years. So we do not know if these witnesses each saw the same person killed after surrendering, or if they each of them saw multiple people killed in violation of the rules of war. We do not know how many deaths are being called a “massacre.” Please remember that the Fort Pillow battle took place at the same time the Lincoln Administration asked friendly editors to “set fire to the heart of America.”

We do know that several members of President Lincoln's Cabinet called for retribution but that President Lincoln replied “he had more urgent issues to attend to.” We also know that U.S. military authorities brought no charges against Forrest then or later.

No excuses should be made for violations of the rules of war in any conflict, but an historian must look at the context in which these things happened and make sure the whole body of facts is considered.

VI. FORREST WAS HEAD OF THE KKK

This statement seems to be made every time the name of Forrest is mentioned. Yet, no person, from 1866, when the Klan was founded, until 2020 had ever presented any evidence that this is the case. Remember, in history, as in a court of law, accusation does not mean guilt, proof must be offered.

I can cite for you numerous second-hand sources which SAY Forrest was head of the Klan, neither I nor anyone else can cite a primary source which PROVES this is true.

The name of Forrest did not begin to be widely associated with the Klan until the end of the

Nineteenth and the beginning of the Twentieth Centuries. At that time a point-of-view called “scientific racism” swept North America and Europe. This point-of-view cited so-called “scientific” evidence to “prove” that Anglo-Saxons were superior to all other people. We would call that attitude “white supremacy.” This movement caused the Reconstruction Era Klan to be viewed in a romantic and positive light.

One of the people spreading this point of view was the Reverend Thomas Dixon, pastor of the largest Baptist Church in Boston, Massachusetts (I emphasize Boston so you will keep in mind this was a NATIONAL and INTERNATIONAL view). His novel *The Clansman* was the basis for the movie “Birth of a Nation.” Dixon who claimed Forrest had been head of the Klan and Dixon helped popularize this view. But Dixon wrote novels, not history!

The leading scholar working today in the study of the Reconstruction period is Dr. Eric Foner of Columbia University. His book, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, (2014)* is a standard text in graduate level courses on Reconstruction. Dr. Foner has chapter after chapter on the Klan and similar night-riding groups but the name of Bedford Forrest is never mentioned---not once. The leading contemporary scholar on Reconstruction makes no mention of Forrest in connection with the Klan. That silence speaks loudly!

The most recent book on the Klan, *KuKlux: The Birth of the Klan During Reconstruction (2015)*, by Dr. Elaine Frantz Parsons of Duquesne University, says “there is also no compelling contemporary evidence that Forrest ever exercised any leadership function” in the Klan (p.50).

There is one piece of primary evidence about Forrest and the Klan, the hearings conducted by a Joint Committee of the United States Congress in 1871. Congress had just passed a law intended to crush the Klan and the Joint Committee was actively enforcing the law; it indicted over 9,000 people. On June 27, 1871, Forrest appeared before that committee for two days of sworn testimony. At the conclusion of their hearings the Joint Committee not only ruled that Forrest had

no connection at all with the Klan, they congratulated him on using his influence to oppose it
(*Report of the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States*,
Report 41, Part 1, pp. 6-14).

There is no proof that Forrest was the leader of the Klan, or even a member; there is documented evidence that he was not. An historian listens to evidence, not folklore.

Members of the Committee, you have a moral obligation to uphold the highest standards in evaluating the past and preserving its record. I ask that you apply the established standards of the study of history to the matter before you.

Myths and folklore are no substitute for history.