

Remembering Nathan Bedford Forrest:
White Supremacy and the Memphis Monument

by

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Introduction

On May 7, 2007 United States Representative Ted Poe, a Republican from Texas, quoted Nathan Bedford Forrest on the floor of the United States House of Representatives. While urging Congress to authorize funds for the war in Iraq, Poe contended "Congress needs to quit talking about supporting the troops and put money where our mouths seem to be. Nathan Bedford Forrest, successful Confederate general, said it best about winning and victory and the means to do so. He said, 'Get there firstest with the mostest.'"¹ At this same time, six African American teenagers, charged with attempted second-degree murder, were awaiting trial in Jena, Louisiana after racial tensions in the town escalated following the appearance of nooses in a tree at the town's high school. Since the nooses were discovered at the Jena school, there have been over seventy confirmed "noose incidents" in the United States.² Though seemingly unrelated, the continued worship of Nathan Bedford Forrest cannot be separated from the increasingly hostile atmosphere surrounding race relations in this country. He was a slave trader, a Civil War general responsible for the massacre of black Union troops at Fort Pillow, and he was the first Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. Not long after Forrest's death in 1877, his friends and followers began to talk of

¹ Ted Poe, Get There Firstest with the Mostest, 7 May 2007, available from <http://poe.house.gov/News/DocumentSingle.aspx?DocumentID=64639>; Internet; accessed 8 April 2008.

² DiversityInc, Diversityinc Noose Watch, 10 October 2007, available from <http://www.diversityinc.com/public/2588.cfm>; Internet; accessed 8 April 2008. Also see "The Geography of Hate," *New York Times*, 25 November 2007 available from <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/25/opinion/25potok.html>.

erecting a monument in his honor in Memphis, Tennessee. This idea finally gained momentum and in 1891 the Forrest Monument Association was formed to raise funds for the monument that currently stands in Memphis, a monument that honors the white supremacist ideals that Forrest spent most of his life fighting to impose in the South.

Nathan Bedford Forrest overcame childhood poverty to eventually become a successful, wealthy, and prominent citizen of Memphis, Tennessee. He left his mother's home in 1841 and moved to Hernando, Mississippi to join his uncle's already established mercantile business where he eventually entered the slave trade. Ten years later, Forrest moved his slave trading business to Memphis and by the beginning of the Civil War, was one of the nation's most successful slave traders.

Forrest achieved much of his fame during the Civil War, where he rose from private to brigadier general, and led numerous successful campaigns against Union forces. On June 14, 1861 Forrest enlisted as a private with Captain Josiah White's Tennessee Mounted Rifles Company. Shortly after he enlisted, influential citizens of Memphis petitioned the governor of Tennessee, Isham Harris, to give Forrest his own command. Harris agreed and authorized Forrest to raise his own cavalry unit. While Southerners were thrilled with Forrest's battlefield victories, the massacre at the battle of Fort Pillow in April 1864 earned Forrest nationwide notoriety and the nickname "Fort Pillow Forrest" in the North. During this battle, Forrest's troops were responsible for one of the most brutal massacres of the war. Reports quickly surfaced that Confederates under Forrest's command shot and killed black

Union troops after they surrendered and that some who survived the battle were buried alive.

Following the war, former Confederate officers who were opposed to the Reconstruction efforts to grant ex-slaves political power and the right to vote formed the Ku Klux Klan as a vehicle for restoring the order of white supremacy in the South. With the election of Nathan Bedford Forrest as the Klan's first Grand Wizard in 1867, the organization gained in strength and in numbers. The details surrounding Forrest's introduction to the Klan vary, but most accounts agree that Forrest was chosen to be the Klan's leader during a meeting in Nashville, Tennessee. This decision, according to Michael Martinez, "brought prestige and legitimacy to the organization, at least in the eyes of many white Southerners."³ Under Forrest's leadership, the Klan fought to end Reconstruction and restore white supremacy in the South.

This study explores the continuing legacy of Nathan Bedford Forrest. This legacy is still celebrated today, and is symbolized by the monument to him in Memphis, Tennessee. Forrest Park, site of the monument, is also the current resting place of Forrest's remains, which were moved from Elmwood cemetery in 1904. The first chapter examines the dedication of Forrest's monument within the context of the changing race relations in Memphis in the early 1900s. As white Southerners reacted to the advances made by African Americans after emancipation, Forrest's reputation grew due to his success as a Civil War general and Ku Klux Klan leader. By the time Forrest's

³ J. Michael Martinez, *Carpetbaggers, Cavalry, and the Ku Klux Klan : Exposing the Invisible Empire During Reconstruction* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 18.

monument was dedicated, white supremacy had been restored to the South following the end of Reconstruction and establishment of Jim Crow laws. In this atmosphere, it becomes clear that the dedication of Forrest's monument was intended to reflect white supremacist beliefs and to shape the future of Memphis as much, or more, than it was intended to honor General Forrest's military career.

The second chapter explores the rationalizations used by Forrest's apologists who continue to defend Forrest and his lifelong dedication to white supremacy by distorting or misrepresenting the facts of his life. Most of Forrest's supporters are associated with neo-Confederate organizations that began to form in the 1970s as a reaction to the civil rights movement. These groups include the League of the South and the Council of Conservative Citizens. Previously existing groups, such as the Sons of Confederate Veterans (SCV), are also strongly influenced by the neo-Confederate movement.⁴ The explanations of Forrest's actions given by his modern apologists are intended to deflect criticism of the Confederate general. The most common of these present Forrest as a "humane" slave trader, dispute the accepted facts surrounding the massacre at Fort Pillow, and downplay his role as the Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. Some of Forrest's apologists go beyond simply defending these ideas to asserting that Forrest became a supporter of African American equality late in his life, even declaring him the first white civil rights leader in Memphis. The second chapter addresses each

⁴ Southern Poverty Law Center, *Rebels with a Cause*, available from <http://www.splcenter.org/intel/intelreport/article.jsp?aid=249>; Internet; accessed 19 March 2008.

of the main arguments made by Forrest's advocates, and reveals that the rationalizations made to support Forrest are based on misrepresentations and distortions instead of historical facts.

The final chapter argues that the current neo-Confederate movement's defense of Forrest and the continued presence of his monument in Memphis are responses to the first victories of the civil rights movement that altered the racial landscape of the South. The neo-Confederate groups that defend Forrest have been associated with radical white nationalist organizations and have a history of racist beliefs. Examination of these groups and their agendas exposes the white supremacist ideals at the core of their admiration of Forrest.

I devote most of my attention to Forrest's apologists and their arguments in defense of Forrest and the continued presence of his monument in Memphis. Throughout this paper, the inaccuracies and false assumptions behind these arguments are addressed in order to show that white supremacy has been, and still is, the primary motivation for honoring Forrest. On the other side of this debate are the men and women who have battled for decades to reveal Forrest's true nature and to have the Forrest Park monument removed. While their efforts have yet to be successful, they are an important part of the story.

Memphis and the Monument

In May 1905, the Forrest Monument Association unveiled a monument to Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest in Memphis, Tennessee. The fact that Forrest's monument was erected at this time was no accident of history. In the forty years that had passed since the end of the Civil War, the city of Memphis, with the rest of the South, had emerged from Reconstruction and reestablished a doctrine of white supremacy through the violent repression and disenfranchisement of the South's black population. Many African Americans in Memphis, freed from the bonds of slavery, had found success as businessmen and politicians, and then seen these accomplishments reversed as conservative whites forcibly reclaimed political and economic power. As the mayor of Memphis accepted the Forrest monument on behalf of the city, it was clear that this monument was intended to be more than a celebration of Forrest's military accomplishments. It also celebrated the restoration of white supremacy, in which Forrest had played no small part; as well, it stood as a reminder to all future generations of Memphians, both white and black, that the city was, and should always be, controlled by white men.

Memphis After the Civil War

Following the Civil War, freed men and women in Memphis quickly took advantage of their new political and economic power. Within eighteen months of the war's end, African Americans in Memphis owned their own churches, stores, saloons, and lunchrooms. They had also formed cooperative organizations such as the Memphis Colored Barber's Association. Census data from 1865 also indicates

that while 300 blacks had property and money valued from \$100 to \$500, eighteen blacks held property valued at \$500 to \$1000; four blacks, \$2000 or more; and three blacks \$5000 or more.⁵ These numbers indicate the success that some had achieved so quickly following the war, even though they represent only a small portion of the almost eleven thousand African Americans in Memphis at the time.⁶ Race relations in the city were always strained, but there was evidence that the black citizens of Memphis were beginning to benefit from a fairly successful African American business class. During the 1880s blacks and whites were still working together in businesses, serving together on the police force, the school board, and in other roles. Also at this time, city buses and neighborhoods were integrated, leading to more interracial interactions.⁷ But even though signs of cooperation were still present in the 1880s, the success of African Americans in Memphis had been a source of racial strife for two decades.

While Memphis may have appeared racially progressive on the surface, racial tensions were always present. Evidence of discontent and racial antagonism in and around Memphis from the end of the Civil War through the end of Reconstruction and beyond is abundant. In May of 1866, a three-day riot in the city required the intervention of federal troops to end the violence. The violence began as a street fight between a few Irish policemen and a group of African American men, recently discharged from the Union Army. This initial spark escalated into full-scale rioting

⁵ Kwando Mbiassi Kinshasa, *Black Resistance to the Ku Klux Klan in the Wake of the Civil War* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2006), 36.

⁶ According to the 1865 Memphis census, the total African American population in Memphis was 10,995 and the city's total, black and white, was 27,703. Census data available from Shelby County Register of Deeds, <http://register.shelby.tn.us/>

⁷ John E. Harkins and Charles Wann Crawford, *Metropolis of the American Nile: An Illustrated History of Memphis and Shelby County*, (Woodland Hills, Calif.: Windsor Publications, 1982), 109.

within the city by the next morning as a white mob attacked the city's African American community.⁸ Altina Waller's detailed analysis of the riot reveals that during the three days of violence "only two whites were killed in the riot -one, self-inflicted, and one, accidentally by another white", while "46 blacks were dead and 285 had been victimized in one way or another. However, no arrests were ever made for murder, rape, theft, or arson, although many of the rioters were well-known to the victims who later identified them to a congressional committee."⁹ An August 1874 incident in nearby Gibson County was cause for concern in the city of Memphis and exemplifies the ongoing conflict. Here, "a large body of disguised men forcibly took sixteen Negroes from the Trenton Jail, and shot them down on a public road. The ostensible cause of this unspeakable act was an allegation that an armed band of thirty or forty Negroes had fired upon two mounted white men" just two days earlier.¹⁰ According to John Preston Young, the people of Memphis held a meeting to denounce this incident. Speakers at this event included ex-Governor Isham Harris, Jefferson Davis, and Nathan Bedford Forrest. In his view, the return to Democratic control was leading to an improvement in racial conditions in Tennessee and throughout the South.¹¹ Young's account of the meeting seems to indicate that the people of Memphis denounced the entire affair, but in reality the outrage resulted from fact that black men were armed and may have attacked white men, not from the actions of the disguised men who murdered the sixteen

⁸ Altina L. Waller, "Community, Class and Race in the Memphis Riot of 1866," *Journal of Social History* 18, no. 2 (Winter 1984): 243.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Alrutheus Ambush Taylor, *The Negro in Tennessee, 1865-1880* (Washington, D.C.: The Associated Publishers, Inc., 1941), 103.

¹¹ John Preston Young and A. R. James, *Standard History of Memphis, Tennessee, from a Study of the Original Sources* (Knoxville, Tenn.: H. W. Crew, 1912), 160.

black prisoners. J.P. Young, who apparently found nothing wrong with the murder of these sixteen black men, would later serve as a member of the Forrest Monument Association.

As the South became swept up in the mythology of the Lost Cause and the celebration of the Confederacy, the progress made by freedpeople was increasingly threatened. Memphis' population dropped rapidly in the 1870s as the city suffered from yellow fever epidemics in 1873, 1878 and 1879. During this time, more than seven thousand people died of the disease and more than thirty one thousand people fled the city.¹² By the 1880s, the epidemics had ended and as many as sixty thousand migrants, both black and white, escaped the rural poverty in search of new opportunities in Memphis.¹³ This population rebound did not include most of the wealthy population who decided not to return, leaving rural, white migrants to dominate the city.¹⁴ "The white migrants reinforced the city's devotion to the 'lost cause'...In seeking to keep alive the 'noble traditions of bygone days,' white Southerners embraced a complex credo, which included...an insistence on black inferiority...White Memphians generally adhered religiously to this cult."¹⁵ As this new generation of whites assumed power in Memphis, they took measures to control the African American population and to ensure white supremacy. By 1905, blacks were segregated on the city's streetcars and were not allowed to visit the

¹² Leonard Gill, Ghost Town, 1 November 2006, available from <http://www.memphismagazine.com/gyrobase/Magazine/Content?oid=oid%3A21911>; Internet; accessed 9 April 2008.

¹³ Harkins and Crawford, *Metropolis of the American Nile*, 104.

¹⁴ G. Wayne Dowdy, "The White Rose Mammy: Racial Culture and Politics in World War II Memphis," *The Journal of Negro History* 85, no.4 (Autumn 2000): 308.

¹⁵ Harkins and Crawford, *Metropolis of the American Nile*, 104.

city's parks.¹⁶ At the turn of the twentieth century "Memphis presented a strange paradox - a city modern in physical aspect but rural in prejudice, and rural in habit."¹⁷

The Lost Cause, Reconciliation, and Confederate Monuments

The Lost Cause mythology grew out of a perceived need to retain a common white Southern identity, to provide justification for the Confederate defeat, and to celebrate the antebellum way of life. This mythology would become a powerful tool in the defeat of Reconstruction and the restoration of white supremacy. "Fearing that crushing defeat might eradicate the identity forged in war, Southerners reasserted that identity with a vengeance. In *The Lost Cause* (1866), Edward A. Pollard "called for a 'war of ideas' to retain the Southern identity."¹⁸ By the 1880s, Southerners were forging a new public memory that would take shape in the Lost Cause mythology. One aspect of the Lost Cause myth is the notion that the Southern cause was noble and that there was no reason to feel ashamed of defeat.¹⁹ According to David Goldfield, the Lost Cause provided white southerners with a purpose. It "offered a balm for defeat, established a sense of order by restoring the necessity and, eventually, the reality of white supremacy and patriarchy, and helped forge a community that cut across class boundaries."²⁰ Memphis' devotion to the Lost Cause was exhibited as the city hosted the 1901

¹⁶ Ibid., 110-111.

¹⁷ Roger Biles, "Cotton Fields or Skyscrapers? The Case of Memphis, Tennessee," *Historian* 50, no. 2 (1988): 216.

¹⁸ Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865-1920* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980), 7.

¹⁹ John E. Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 31.

²⁰ David R. Goldfield, *Still Fighting the Civil War: The American South and Southern History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 6-7.

United Confederate Veterans reunion. The city decorated streets and celebrated the elaborate event with parades, fireworks, concerts and speeches and its citizens raised \$50,000 for the celebration.²¹

In addition to the Lost Cause, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed a movement of reconciliation between the North and the South that had a significant impact on the way in which Confederate veterans, such as Forrest, were viewed by later generations. During this period, the Civil War and its participants, both North and South, were celebrated while the war's causes and outcomes were conspicuously put aside. While this movement "served to justify the [Southern] cause and therefore its veterans, the Confederate celebration did not so much sacralize the memory of the war as it sanitized and trivialized it."²²

The Lost Cause mythology, combined with the reconciliation of Northern and Southern white Americans, prevented any serious discussion of race relations in the New South. The celebration of the antebellum South and the refusal to acknowledge any sense of defeat based on the outcome of the war allowed white Southerners to ignore any obligations they had to assist the freedmen and made the process of healing much more difficult by drawing attention away from the true causes of the pressing social and economic issues.²³ "The Southern position partly reflected the nationwide growth of Anglo-Saxon racism in this era. The extreme racists of the South believed that the Negro was a beast, and that he had sunk to a morally degenerate condition when the discipline of slavery had been removed.

²¹ Harkins and Crawford, *Metropolis of the American Nile*, 104.

²² Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy : Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South, 1865 to 1913* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 198.

²³ Michael G. Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture*, (New York: Knopf, 1991), 121.

They advocated rigid repression and control, which meant strict public segregation at the least, and which sometimes even extended to the justification of lynching."²⁴

This new outlook, validated by the Lost Cause and reconciliation movements, assisted in the propagation of Nathan Bedford Forrest's image in the late nineteenth century as a heroic Southern figure. While Forrest's image immediately after the war had been tarnished in the North by the massacre at Fort Pillow,

the rise of Jim Crow in the South and "scientific racism" in the North allowed a revisionist image of the general to flourish-one that whites, both South and North, could embrace. Racism's increasing national respectability in the 1890s breathed new life into the Forrest legend. This transformation of Forrest's image began in his adopted hometown of Memphis, where the social turmoil of the city during the latter decades of the nineteenth century served as a catalyst for much of the change in the Forrest image.²⁵

Yet, as Court Carney points out, "around the turn of the twentieth century, a trend toward national reconciliation began to modify Forrest's image" and as "he gained more widespread legitimacy as an honorable soldier in service to his nation, his image became increasingly polarized in racial terms."²⁶

If the Lost Cause mythology eased the pain of military defeat for white Southerners on ideological grounds, the erection of monuments to the Confederate dead worked to forge complementary memories in the public sphere. Until the surge in Confederate monument building after the war, there were very few monuments of any type in the United States. In fact, until this time, most Americans gave little thought to the past at all. Frederick von Raumer, a Prussian

²⁴ Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, 100.

²⁵ *Ibid.*: 608.

²⁶ Court Carney, "The Contested Image of Nathan Bedford Forrest," *The Journal of Southern History* LXVII (August 2001): 602.

historian, noted in 1845 that "America has no monuments, it is true; but she has a nature which joins all the venerableness of age to the elastic vigor of youth...The poetry of the Americans lies not in the past but in the future."²⁷ The Confederate monument movement began as a way to remember those soldiers who were killed in battle. Following the end of the Civil War, Southerners looked for a way to mourn their dead soldiers as well as the passing of the pre-war South. The Confederate memorial movement, through soldiers' cemeteries, monuments, and memorial-day celebrations, allowed Southerners to do just this.²⁸ But the monuments soon took on additional functionality as mourning evolved into full-scale celebration.

The end of Reconstruction saw the erection of monuments that were more public and more elaborate than those built in the years immediately following the war. Public parks and town centers were frequently chosen as the site for new monuments in an effort to show civic pride in the memorial. "The increasing number of monuments placed in town testified to the growing importance of the Confederate tradition. The memory of the war was no longer relegated to the city of the dead. Rather, the Confederate monument now occupied a more public place within the daily patterns of life of the citizens, where all would see it and profit by it."²⁹ Additionally, the obelisk design of the earliest monuments was replaced by more distinctive sculpture.³⁰ An analysis of Confederate monuments erected between 1865 and 1912 reveals the changing character of these monuments,

²⁷ Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, 57.

²⁸ Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy*, 37.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 128.

³⁰ Stephen Davis, "Empty Eyes, Marble Hand: The Confederate Monument and the South," *Journal of Popular Culture* 16, no. 3 (Winter 1982): 4.

especially after 1900. According to one study, between 1865 and 1899, 194 Confederate monuments were erected in the South, only 41 of which were located in towns and featured a soldier. After 1900, 306 monuments were erected and 192 of them featured a soldier and were located in towns.³¹ This shift in the location and design of Confederate monuments sent a clear message to Southerners, both black and white, that Southern society's values were reflected in the white Confederate war heroes these monuments honored.

The Forrest Monument Association

The Forrest Monument Association was incorporated on November 20, 1891 and included ex-Confederates as well as other prominent Memphis business leaders among its membership. Notable among these were the organization's president, Sam Carnes, its vice-president, General George W. Gordon, and secretary, John P. Young. While many of the earlier Confederate monuments across the South were funded through efforts of organizations like the United Daughters of the Confederacy, the Forrest monument was primarily a project of Memphis' white, male elite. Court Carney's analysis of the association's membership found that

roughly one-half of the \$33,000 needed to complete the monument came from individual citizens. Ninety-five percent of the contributors who can be located in the census records worked in white-collar professions, and the General Committee of the Forrest Monument Association (FMA), which served as the catalyst for fundraising for the statue, was comprised of seventeen men drawn from this group. The committee included lawyers, insurance executives, a former U.S. senator, a justice of the peace, and a bank president.³²

³¹ J. Michael Martinez, William D. Richardson, and Ron McNinch-Su, *Confederate Symbols in the Contemporary South* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2000), 157.

³² Carney, "The Contested Image of Nathan Bedford Forrest," 613.

Sam Carnes, the association's president, was a prominent businessman who was the first vice-president of Memphis Consolidated Gas and Electric Company. He entered business for himself in 1878 after working in several Memphis businesses. In this year, he organized the Memphis Telephone Company after obtaining the rights for an exchange from the Bell Telephone Company.³³

John P. Young, the secretary, was a Memphis judge who wrote a history of Memphis in 1912, titled *Standard History of Memphis, Tennessee, from a Study of the Original Sources*. This history clearly reflected a vision of Southern history influenced by Lost Cause ideology. Keeping with the Lost Cause influenced myth of contented slaves, his history notes that in 1874, "confidence between the white people and negroes was gaining ground and the latter had learned to a great extent that their former owners were not enemies, though many of them had never thought so."³⁴ Young's optimistic evaluation of the situation reflects the outlook of Southern whites as Reconstruction neared an end and conservative Democrats were gaining political power.

George W. Gordon, an ex-Confederate general who was also one of the early leaders of the Ku Klux Klan in Pulaski, Tennessee embodies the white supremacist implications of the Forrest monument. Before directing much of the fundraising for the Forrest Monument Association, Gordon had served as the Memphis school superintendent. Following the completion of the Forrest monument, Gordon was

³³ William D. Miller, *Memphis During the Progressive Era, 1900-1917* (Memphis,: Memphis State University Press, 1957).

³⁴ Young and James, *Standard History of Memphis, Tennessee*, 159.

elected to Congress in 1906, and was known as “an honored and highly respected member of the community.”³⁵

General Gordon’s prominent roles, first in the early Ku Klux Klan and, later, as a leader in erecting a monument to Forrest support the conclusion that this monument was designed to shape the future of Memphis as much, or more, than it was intended to honor General Forrest’s military career. Michael Martinez argues that Gordon’s role was critical to the growth and survival of the early Klan.

George Gordon was an even more important figure in Klan history than [John C.] Brown...Brown helped to develop the Prescript, but Gordon actually wrote the document. Gordon’s intuition that the KKK must adopt the style, organization, and tactics of a paramilitary group did more than anything else in that early period to ensure the continuation and longevity of the club. Without his skill and guidance behind the scenes before the April 1867 meeting, the Klan might have died within a few years, remembered as little more than a curious footnote in Southern history.³⁶

Stanley Horn also credits Gordon with the creation of the Prescript. It is his contention that “the principal order of business at the Nashville [Ku Klux Klan] meeting was the adoption of an official constitution or, as the Ku Klux called it, ‘Prescript.’ The drafting of this formal statement of the purposes and basic laws of the order was entrusted to General George W. Gordon, an ex-Confederate officer then practicing law in Pulaski, who had been one of the first initiates into the original Den.”³⁷ This makes Gordon’s role in the Klan, while not as visible as Forrest’s, just as crucial to its success.

³⁵ Miller, *Memphis During the Progressive Era*, 121.

³⁶ Martinez, *Carpetbaggers, Cavalry, and the Ku Klux Klan*, 15.

³⁷ Stanley Fitzgerald Horn, *Invisible Empire; the Story of the Ku Klux Klan, 1866-1871*, (Montclair, N.J.: Patterson Smith, 1969), 33.

Gordon's Prescript reflects the white supremacist views of the Klan and the majority of Southern whites at this time. It contains a list of "Interrogatories to be Asked" of new recruits who desired Klan membership. The fifth question is: "Are you opposed to negro equality, both social and political?" and the sixth question asks "Are you in favor of a white man's government in this country?"³⁸ These questions reveal not only the Klan's vision of the New South, but also contribute to the vision of the South reflected in the Forrest monument.

According to one account, it was General Gordon who originally recruited Forrest to join the Ku Klux Klan. As an early member of the Klan, Gordon "immediately recognizing its great possibilities as a regulatory body, went immediately to Memphis and told about it to General Forrest, who declared emphatically: 'That's a good thing; that's a damn good thing. We can use that to keep the niggers in their place.'"³⁹ Other reports of Forrest's introduction as Grand Wizard contradict this claim and place him in Nashville at the 1867 meeting of Klan organizers. Either way, Gordon and Forrest were at the forefront of the Klan's organization and supported its racial ideology designed to control the African American population of Tennessee during Reconstruction.

The Monument's Dedication

As Memphis entered the year 1905 the city openly proclaimed its devotion to white supremacy by dedicating a monument to Forrest as well as celebrating his leadership of the Ku Klux Klan. While the fact that Forrest called Memphis home

³⁸ Ibid., 406.

³⁹ Ibid., 314.

surely influenced the decision to erect a monument there in his honor, Forrest's role in maintaining white supremacy was the primary motivation.

By 1905, the year of the Forrest statue's dedication, increasing racial brutality—as well as the new racial and class composition of the city—had helped to unite white Memphians and in turn transform the city's image of Forrest. As race relations worsened in Memphis, Forrest's name became increasingly connected with the Ku Klux Klan for the first time since the early 1870s.⁴⁰

Forrest's role as leader of the Ku Klux Klan was celebrated in the April 30, 1905 edition of the *Memphis News-Scimitar* in an editorial entitled "Forrest Again in White Shroud." The editorial was accompanied by an artist's image of the monument wrapped in a white shroud in preparation for its unveiling. Behind the shrouded monument, nine ghostly riders appear on horseback, wearing the white robes of the Ku Klux Klan. The editorial proclaims, "Forrest has come to [sic] his own again. Stalwart, strong and invincible...turning his eagle eye toward the south, just as he was wont to do forty years ago when the chaotic conditions of life required the organizing of the Ku-Klux Klan." Forrest is envisioned "Clad in his old Ku-Klux garb, a pall of white that covered horse and rider, the great leader of this secret clan rides once more," and praised as "that leader whose iron hand held the reins of safety over the South when Northern dominion apotheosized the negro and set misrule and devastation to humiliate a proud race."⁴¹

The dedication ceremonies for the Forrest Monument took place on May 16, 1905 and included speeches and prayers from prominent Memphians and members of the Forrest Monument Association. The program began with an invocation from

⁴⁰ Carney, "The Contested Image of Nathan Bedford Forrest," 610.

⁴¹ "Forrest Again in White Shroud," *Memphis News-Scimitar*, 30 April 1905.

the Right Reverend Thomas F. Gailor, who was followed by General S.T. Carnes, General George W. Gordon and Senator T.B. Turley. Finally, Mayor J.J. Williams accepted the monument on behalf of the city of Memphis.⁴²

The inscriptions on the newly revealed monument honor Forrest's life and military career. The inscription on the west front of the monument reads:

ERECTED BY HIS COUNTRYMEN IN HONOR
OF THE MILITARY GENIUS OF
LIEUTENANT-GENERAL NATHAN BEDFORD FORREST
CONFEDERATE STATES ARMY
1861-1865.

The inscription on the east facing front features a poem from Mrs. Virginia Frazer Boyle:

Those hoof beats die not upon fame's crimsoned sod,
But will ring through her song and her story;
He fought like a Titan and struck like a god,
And his dust is our ashes of glory.⁴³

While the dedication speeches honored Forrest's military accomplishments, they also envisioned a future in which Forrest's accomplishments would forever remind Memphians that Forrest believed in, and fought for, the white South. General Carnes stated that he was "honored to announce the completion of this monument...for the purpose of perpetuating the name and fame of Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest, that incomparable soldier and military genius."⁴⁴ General Gordon delivered the dedication address and proclaimed:

We are also here to attest in verbal, visible and
permanent form the eminent esteem and increasing

⁴² Forrest Monument Association, *The Forrest Monument; Its History and Dedication; a Memorial in Art, Oratory and Literature* (Memphis, Tennessee: 1905).

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 23.

appreciation in which the noble and heroic services of this anomalous man in the greatest crisis of his country's history, are held by his countrymen, nearly half a century after the passing of the dramatic epoch in which he lived, thought and acted. And although we may appear to be late in making this durable testimonial, so imposing, so impressive and so expressive of the character and career of the man, to be the permanent proclamation of our veneration for this memory, our gratitude for his services and sacrifices, and our admiration for his valor and genius.⁴⁵

As Gordon continued and recounted Forrest's life, he either failed to address, or made excuses for, different aspects of Forrest's racist past. Gordon explained how Forrest moved to Memphis in 1852 and "successfully established himself as a dealer in live stock and real estate, and continued in this vocation until 1859."⁴⁶ In fact, during this period Forrest became the most successful slave trader in Memphis, a fact surely known by Forrest's supporters in 1905. As Gordon continued to detail Forrest's extraordinary exploits, he tried to dispel any possible doubts regarding the events at Fort Pillow. According to Gordon: "It has been charged that after the garrison, which refused to surrender on Gen. Forrest's demand, had been taken, the troops therein [sic], composed largely of negroes, were given no quarter. But upon investigation of the facts, the charge cannot be sustained."⁴⁷ Gordon included very few details of Forrest's post Civil War life in his speech. His recollection of this time in Forrest's life was limited to a few words regarding Forrest's business ventures, while his leadership role in the Ku Klux Klan was entirely omitted, even though it was no secret that Gordon and Forrest were both leaders of the Ku Klux Klan in Tennessee. And, as is clear from the Memphis newspaper article published

⁴⁵ Ibid., 28-29.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 31.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

shortly before the monument's dedication, this fact was celebrated openly in the city. While Gordon did not address Forrest's Klan involvement directly, there can be no doubt that this was a celebration of Forrest's role in ending Reconstruction and returning white supremacy through his efforts with the Klan. The next speaker, Senator Turley summed up these sentiments when he claimed, "the principles of the cause for which Forrest fought are not dead, and they will live as long as there is a drop of Anglo-Saxon blood on the face of the earth."⁴⁸

For more than one hundred years, the monument of Nathan Bedford Forrest has stood in Memphis' Forrest Park as a constant reminder of the South's belief in white supremacy. The men who dedicated this monument in 1905 and those who support its continued existence share a common admiration for the man who now stands in Memphis as a bronze specter representing the South's past. But the Nathan Bedford Forrest that General Gordon honored in his speech at the monument's dedication, and who is honored by neo-Confederates today, is more myth than he is reality. In order to tell the real story of Nathan Bedford Forrest, his life as a slave trader, his role as the general in command during the Fort Pillow massacre, and his leadership of the Ku Klux Klan need to be examined in greater detail.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 66.

The Contentious Nathan Bedford Forrest

The Forrest monument in Memphis honors Forrest for his success as a Confederate cavalry commander in the Civil War. But Forrest played a significant role in Memphis both before the war, primarily as a slave trader, and after the war, as a leader of the Ku Klux Klan. In order to understand the true significance of the monument, these aspects of Forrest's life must be examined along with his role as a military leader. Examined in this manner, it becomes clear that Forrest repeatedly positioned himself as a leader in the cause for white supremacy in each stage of his life. He was the most successful slave trader in Memphis in the years prior to the Civil War.⁴⁹ During the war, he led the Confederate troops at the battle of Fort Pillow where hundreds of Union troops, primarily black troops, were massacred. And, after the war, Forrest was a leader of the Ku Klux Klan whose goals included the suppression of African American political power and the restoration of white supremacy. But despite Forrest's investment in maintaining white domination of the South, his apologists have formulated a narrative of his life that either elides or defends his racist actions and promotes the continued celebration of Forrest's legacy.

The Slave Trader

There is no doubt that Forrest's pre-war wealth came from the slave trade, but his supporters offer a number of arguments designed to diminish the

⁴⁹ Steven Deyle, *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 105. Bolton, Dickens & Co. was the leading slave trading company in Memphis until its decline in the mid-1850s allowed Forrest to become the city's leading slave trader.

significance of his involvement in the trade. They argue that it cannot be seen as evidence of any personal racist beliefs. One explanation frequently resorted to excuses Forrest's involvement on the grounds that slave trading was an accepted part of the antebellum culture. Forrest, thus, should not be judged a racist and his role in the slave trade should be excused. John Wyeth, for example, makes this argument in defense of Forrest. The South's booming cotton business, he writes, "led to the introduction of negro labor in order to work profitably at cotton-raising, and brought about a great demand for slaves. Traffic in the selling and buying of negroes was as common in the cotton-belt of the South at this period as the buying and selling of horses or cattle, or any other merchantable live product."⁵⁰ While Wyeth's statement is true, the fact that slave trading was profitable and common cannot necessarily excuse or justify participation in the trade. A belief in the inferiority of blacks was integral to slavery in the United States, so participation in the trade was more than a mere economic venture.

But the argument most often used to minimize Forrest's participation in the slave trade is that he was a kind and humane slave trader. Many accounts of Forrest's trading, from the nineteenth century to the present day, employ this reasoning despite the flawed conclusion that humane slave trading was even possible. In *Life of General Nathan Bedford Forrest* (1899), Wyeth relies in part on the view of Colonel George W. Adair, one of Forrest's associates before the Civil War to make this argument: "Forrest was kind, humane, and extremely considerate of his slaves. He was overwhelmed with applications from a great many of this

⁵⁰ John A. Wyeth, *Life of General Nathan Bedford Forrest* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1899), 20.

class, who begged him to purchase them. He seemed to exercise the same influence over these creatures that in greater degree he exercised over the soldiers who in later years served him as devotedly as if there was between them strong personal attachment."⁵¹ This view can be found today in a short biography of Forrest published by the Tennessee Sons of Confederate Veterans which contends that "Forrest was kind to his negroes; that he never separated members of a family, and that he always told his slaves to go out in the city and choose their own masters." It also insists that "there were some men in the town to whom he would never sell a slave, because they had the reputation of being cruel masters."⁵² In addition, a pamphlet published by The Tennessee Sons of Confederate Veterans, *An Informative Guide to Confederate Heritage in the State of Tennessee* (2006), only briefly mentions Forrest's slave trading business despite dedicating an entire page to his biography. One learns from the guide that after Forrest moved to Memphis, "his hard work and natural intelligence earned him a place as a wealthy businessman and prominent citizen. He owned several farms and plantations, dealt in land and horses, and for a couple of years was a slave trader, though noted as a very humane one."⁵³ In reality, Forrest was active in the slave trade for at least ten years and, by the late 1850s, had become a millionaire and one of the most successful slave traders in the country.⁵⁴ Most accounts of Forrest's slave trading fail to mention these facts, and instead stress his humanity toward his slaves. But

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Tennessee Sons of Confederate Veterans, *Forrest and the Slave Trade*, available from http://www.tennessee-scv.org/ForrestHistSociety/slave_trade.html; Internet; accessed 16 March 2008.

⁵³ David C. Daniels and Lee Millar, *An Informative Guide to Confederate Heritage in the State of Tennessee*, (Tennessee Division, Sons of Confederate Veterans, 2006).

⁵⁴ Carney, "The Contested Image of Nathan Bedford Forrest," 604.

what these accounts attribute to compassionate and humane behavior was nothing more than the standard practice of some slave traders who, in their own self-interest, made sure their slaves went to the market appearing healthy and well cared for.

Despite such claims by his apologists, first hand accounts from ex-slaves dispute Forrest's reputed kindness. Samuel Hall recounted his memories of Forrest's slave yards in Memphis. After three slaves were captured following an escape attempt, Hall stated, "their masters went up and got them and brought them back and put them in old Ed Forrest's trader yard and their masters would go in and whip them three times a day. How cruel! They were kept there two weeks, or until they found some one to buy them, and one of them was whipped nearly to death."⁵⁵ While Hall does not attribute this violence directly to Forrest, this did take place in Forrest's slave pens, and most likely with his knowledge. Also, if Forrest truly avoided selling slaves to cruel masters, he surely would not have allowed this behavior to take place in his slave yard. Hall also relays additional personal knowledge of Forrest and links Forrest's participation in the slave trade to his later role as a Confederate general.

Old Ed Forrest was the General Forrest who was in the southern army. He kept a slave trader yard in Memphis and I knew him well. I saw him often when I was in Memphis for my master. He would buy up slaves and keep them in this yard and sell them like people sell hogs today. He did a big business and was known all over the south. His trader yard was always filled full of slaves for sale or trade, and the danger of the freeing of the slaves made old Ed fear that his business was going to be knocked out. That was the reason he fought so hard for the south. He didn't want his "nigger pen" put out of business.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Samuel Hall, *Samuel Hall, 47 Years a Slave; a Brief Story of His Life before and after Freedom Came to Him*, (Washington, Iowa: Journal Print, 1912), 35.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 35-36.

Hall's description of slaves being sold like hogs in a full yard surely does not indicate humane treatment on the part of Forrest and is evidence of the fact that the slave trade was not a humane business, despite opinions to the contrary from Forrest's apologists. Lewis Hughes, another ex-slave, tells how Forrest split a slave family through sale, contradicting the declarations of the Tennessee SCV and other Forrest's apologists. As Hughes recalls:

a couple of "nigger traders," were collecting a "drove" of slaves for Memphis, about this time, and, when they were ready to start, all the family were sent off with the gang; and, when they arrived in Memphis, they were put in the traders' yard of Nathan Bedford Forrest. This Forrest afterward became a general in the rebel army, and commanded at the capture of Fort Pillow; and, in harmony with the debasing influences of his early business, he was responsible for the fiendish massacre of negroes after the capture of the fort - an act which will make his name forever infamous. None of this family were sold to the same person except my wife and one sister. All the rest were sold to different persons. The elder daughter was sold seven times in one day. The reason of this was that the parties that bought her, finding that she was not legally a slave, and that they could get no written guarantee that she was, got rid of her as soon as possible. It seems that those who bought the other members of the family were not so particular, and were willing to run the risk. They knew that such things - such outrages upon law and justice - were common.⁵⁷

These accounts not only refute the arguments that Forrest was a humane slave trader who never separated families, but they also reveal that Forrest's role in the slave trade and his actions as a Confederate soldier, including the Fort Pillow massacre, were seen as inseparable in the eyes of former slaves. From this perspective, his actions form a continuous narrative of personal behavior based in white supremacy.

⁵⁷ Lewis Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, (Milwaukee: South Side Printing Company, 1897), 92-93.

Fort Pillow Forrest

It is now an accepted fact of Civil War history that a massacre at the hands of Forrest's troops occurred at Fort Pillow, despite the continued denial of Confederate supporters. In the 1950s, studies of Fort Pillow began to conclude that a massacre did take place. And since the early 1970s this conclusion has been generally accepted as historic fact.⁵⁸ Paul Ashdown and Edward Caudill write that "in the aftermath of the battle a variety of witnesses - including Confederates - describe atrocities: men, some of whom had surrendered or were wounded, nailed to a floor, burned alive, buried alive, bayoneted through the eyes, hacked apart with swords, bludgeoned to death, or shot a close range; women and children in or near the fort killed; [Union Major William] Bradford captured and reportedly murdered." They also note that Forrest himself reported after the battle "many Union soldiers had jumped in the Mississippi River, where they were shot and drowned. 'The river,' he said, 'was dyed with the blood of the slaughtered for 200 yards.'"⁵⁹ By the end of the day the Confederate troops had stormed the fort and won a complete victory, sustaining only light casualties. The Union troops were not as fortunate and the total number of deaths has been estimated at between 237 and 297.⁶⁰ But the total number of dead Union troops does not tell the story of Fort Pillow. If these casualty numbers are put into another context, they "reveal that 40 percent of the garrison was killed. The overall ratio of dead to wounded in the Civil War was 1 to 6. At Fort Pillow that ratio was almost inverted: 4.4 to 1. Moreover,

⁵⁸ John Cimprich, *Fort Pillow, a Civil War Massacre, and Public Memory, Conflicting Worlds* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 833.

⁵⁹ Paul Ashdown and Edward Caudill, *The Myth of Nathan Bedford Forrest*, (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 33-34.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

there was a striking discrepancy by race: among whites at Fort Pillow the ratio of dead to wounded was high, 2 1/4 to 1, but among blacks it was an astounding 6 1/2 to 1. In all, 64 percent of the black defenders and 33 percent of the whites died."⁶¹ These statistics, along with the first-hand accounts of the battle support the argument that a massacre did take place at Fort Pillow. Despite this, some neo-Confederates argue that the historical evidence is inconclusive while others insist that no massacre took place at all.

The neo-Confederate position on the Fort Pillow massacre is partly based on pro-Southern histories of the battle written shortly after the Civil War. Like Forrest's involvement in the slave trade, the massacre at Fort Pillow needs to be explained away by Forrest's supporters in order to justify the continued celebration of his accomplishments. In *The Lost Cause* (1867), Edward Pollard makes two contentions that are still used to justify the massacre. First, he says, "the explanation of the unusual proportion of carnage is simple. After the Confederates got into the fort, the Federal flag was not hauled down; there was no surrender; relying upon his gunboats in the rivers, the enemy evidently expected to annihilate Forrest's forces after they had entered the works; and so the fighting went on to the last extremity." He continues on to his next point that blames the unusually high casualty rate on the Union troops themselves. "Some of the negro troops, in their cowardice, feigned death, falling to the ground, and were either pricked up by the bayonet, or rolled into the trenches to excite their alarm - to which circumstance is reduced the whole story of 'burying negroes alive.'"⁶²

⁶¹ James W. Loewen, *Lies across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong* (New York: New Press : Distributed by W.W. Norton, 1999), 250-251.

⁶² Edward Alfred Pollard, *The Lost Cause; a New Southern History of the War of the*

Despite the denial of a massacre, eyewitness accounts of the battle support the conclusion that Union troops, especially African Americans, were slaughtered.

After the battle a Union soldier wrote in a letter home,

As soon as the rebels got to the top of the bank there commenced the most horrible slaughter that could possibly be conceived. Our boys when they saw they were overpowered threw down their arms and held up, some their handkerchiefs and some their hands in token of surrender, but no sooner were they seen than they were shot down, and if one shot failed to kill them, the bayonet or revolver did not.⁶³

And a few days later, a Confederate sergeant wrote,

The slaughter was awful - words cannot describe the scene. The poor deluded Negroes would run up to our men, fall upon their knees, and with uplifted hands scream for mercy, but they were ordered to their feet and then shot down. The white men fared but little better. Their fort turned out to be a great slaughter pen - blood, human blood stood about in pools and brains could have been gathered up in any quantity. I with several others tried to stop the butchery and at one time had partially succeeded, but Gen. Forrest ordered them shot down like dogs and the carnage continued.⁶⁴

The Southern fear of slave rebellion played some role in the massacre, so understanding these fears can help to explain why it took place. Ashdown and Caudill conclude that "the prospect of either confronting armed blacks or fighting beside them horrified most Southerners, rekindling images of the slave insurrections they had always feared."⁶⁵ The belief that the Confederate reaction to black Union troops was fueled by the fear of insurrection is echoed by John Cimprich and Robert Mainfort who claim "Confederates despised both [runaway

Confederates. Comprising a Full and Authentic Account of the Rise and Progress of the Late Southern Confederacy--the Campaigns, Battles, Incidents, and Adventures of the Most Gigantic Struggle of the World's History. Drawn from Official Sources, and Approved by the Most Distinguished Confederate Leaders (New York, Baltimore, Md.: E. B. Treat; L. T. Palmer; [etc.,etc.], 1867), 499.

⁶³ As quoted in Loewen, 251.

⁶⁴ As quoted in Loewen, 251.

⁶⁵ Ashdown and Caudill, *The Myth of Nathan Bedford Forrest*, 32.

slaves and white Unionists], but the blacks especially disturbed them because these soldiers raised the specters of slave rebellion, race war, and white subordination.”⁶⁶

Cimprich also states that “Confederates inevitably viewed the federal decision to enlist blacks as a provocation for slave rebellion. The Confederate government never officially acknowledged black Federals as soldiers but allowed them to be treated either as property to be restored to owners or as insurrectionaries to be executed.”⁶⁷ It is easy to understand how Confederate soldiers, who simultaneously feared black soldiers and viewed them as mere property, could commit atrocities like those that took place at Fort Pillow. These fears of an empowered African American population became even more profound after the war as the black population asserted political and economic power in the South. Of course, white Southerners resisted these changes, and it is no surprise that Forrest was again leading the charge.

Grand Wizard Forrest

Countless volumes have been written documenting the Ku Klux Klan’s activities in Tennessee and in the South in the years following the Civil War. Many have insisted that the Ku Klux Klan was formed as a social club that quickly escaped the control of its original leaders and needed to be disbanded due to a surge of violence. The truth is that the Klan’s goals, from the very beginning, were to restore white supremacy throughout the South by way of intimidation and violence. More recent accounts of the Klan’s formation completely dismiss the long

⁶⁶ John Cimprich and Robert C. Mainfort, Jr., “The Fort Pillow Massacre: A Statistical Note,” *The Journal of American History* 76, no. 3 (December 1980): 831.

⁶⁷ John Cimprich, *Slavery’s End in Tennessee, 1861-1865* (University: University of Alabama Press, 1985), 92.

held notion that the Klan evolved from innocent beginnings. Donna Lee Dickerson, for example, writes: "The Ku Klux Klan was founded in 1866 in Pulaski, Tennessee, by a group of young ex-Confederate officers opposed to Reconstruction, in general, and blacks, specifically. Initially, the Klan was a quasi-military band of vigilantes. But it quickly took on the trappings of other popular secret organizations and thereby gained not only a wider audience but also a more broad mission - to be an avenging, yet invisible, angel for the Democratic Party."⁶⁸ Ben Severance similarly writes: "The story of the Klan's terrorism in Tennessee in 1868 is well documented...The Klan whipped, beat, threatened, shot, and lynched black and white Radicals. The Klan burned schools, robbed homes, and disrupted church services. And the Klan attacked the Radical party, crippling it in many counties."⁶⁹ Sharon Wright describes how the Klan "practiced racial intimidation by vandalizing property and harassing individuals throughout the state. Its major objective was to 'wrest control of the state government from the radicals by terrorizing and sometimes killing union men and Negroes and preventing the latter especially from exercising the right to vote. Many Tennesseans viewed the Klan as a 'necessary, political expedient justified by the Radical disfranchisement policy, the high taxes of Brownlow's administration and the threat black voting posed to white supremacy."⁷⁰ None of these accounts of the Klan's origins, in any way, describe the organization as a social club, formed for benign amusement. Instead, the Klan

⁶⁸ Donna Lee Dickerson, *The Reconstruction Era: Primary Documents on Events from 1865 to 1877*, (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2003), 251.

⁶⁹ Ben H. Severance, *Tennessee's Radical Army: The State Guard and Its Role in Reconstruction, 1867-1869*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 176.

⁷⁰ Sharon D. Wright, *Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis* (New York: Garland, 2000), 9.

is seen to have been from the start, an organization based on violence, intimidation, and white supremacy.

But despite such evidence, supporters of Forrest and of the Reconstruction Ku Klux Klan still profess that the Klan that formed in 1866 was not simply a social club, but an innocent one, and credit Forrest with disbanding the organization in order to restore peace in the South. The Tennessee Sons of Confederate Veterans maintains that "the original Ku Klux was formed as a social club and then expanded to fight outlaws, carpetbaggers and what its founders deemed the excesses of Reconstruction. Unlike the groups that resurrected the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) name in the early 20th century, the first Klan didn't have racism as its reason for existence."⁷¹

This argument has changed little from nineteenth century defenses of the Klan. Albert Pike wrote in the Memphis *Daily Appeal* in April 1868 that "We do not suppose that the Ku-Klux Klan, with its masks and devices to scare superstitious negroes, and other extravagances, was any thing more than a local organization, got up for fun and frolic; and we were of course inclined to laugh at it, until it seemed about to be abused for discreditable and lawless purposes."⁷² Pike continued his defense of the early Klan and asserted that it provided protection for white citizens who were victims of the excesses of Reconstruction. "The disfranchised people of the South," he wrote, "robbed of all the guarantees of the Constitution...can find no protection for property, liberty of life, except in secret association. Not in such association to commit follies and outrages; but for mutual,

⁷¹ Daniels, *An Informative Guide to Confederate Heritage in the State of Tennessee*, 9.

⁷² As quoted in Dickerson, *The Reconstruction Era*, 263.

peaceful, lawful, self-defense."⁷³ For many white Southerners, the Klan represented a way to restore the social order that was lost as a result of the war. As the Ku Klux Klan expanded, it was in need of a leader, and it chose Nathan Bedford Forrest. According a Tennessee Sons of Confederate Veterans publication, "Respected civic leader General N. B. Forrest was asked to be the president, and given the title of Grand Wizard. The secretive Klan became even more active, and successful, in opposing [Governor] Brownlow's brigands, in restoring order, and in preventing the South from being financially obliterated. This KuKlux, the first of three in American history, was quite different from the later terrorist klans of the 20th century."⁷⁴ Despite the statements of the Tennessee SCV, the Klan led by Forrest was a terrorist organization intent on removing the Reconstruction government and restoring white supremacy to the South.

Contemporary accounts of Ku Klux Klan activity reveal the extent of the violence at the heart of the Klan's efforts to reclaim the South for white men through the use of violence and intimidation. In April 1868, a *New York Tribune* article exposed the violence of the Klan. According to the author of this article, the Klan wished to "restore the now silent South to its old potency in the national councils; then they could 'reduce the nigger to his normal sphere;' the bugbear of negro voting would vanish under a summary disfranchisement of the entire race, and although absolute slavery might not be restored, the old aristocracy would be able to hedge the negroes and poor whites within such labor regulations as practically to restore the patriarchal institutions in all things except auction sales of

⁷³ Ibid., 263-264.

⁷⁴ Daniels, *An Informative Guide to Confederate Heritage in the State of Tennessee*, 9.

human beings."⁷⁵ Another nineteenth century article noted the violence of the Klan. This time, *Century* magazine joined the condemnation of violence and disputed the Klan's innocent origins. "When we are told that many members of the Ku Klux were originally in search of amusement, and did not premeditate outrage, terrorism, and murder in giving wide-spread organization to the Klan, we cannot help thinking that they might have stilled the evil power they had raised if their hearts had not been fired by a general purpose to subjugate the blacks."⁷⁶

Katherine Du Pre Lumpkin also understood the realities of the Klan. Her autobiography, *The Making of A Southerner* (1946), describes her childhood indoctrination to the Lost Cause through the teachings of her father, William Lumpkin. She understood that the Klan

must go on until the mass of Negroes 'came to their senses,' and their leaders, 'black, white and yellow,' had been ousted; until all and sundry - 'scalawags,' 'carpetbaggers,' and Negroes - learned the lesson this organization said it went out to teach. Thus 'crimes' were punished; 'bad men' were treated according to their deserts; 'restoration of order' was envisaged, and 'putting the darkey in his place.' It would go on thus - so said the aim - until 'white supremacy' was re-established.⁷⁷

When Forrest's apologists acknowledge any relationship between Forrest and the Ku Klux Klan, they focus on a different aspect of its history, insisting that it was Forrest himself who put an end to the Klan's early violence through his 1869 order to disband the Klan. The Tennessee SCV illustrates this point by declaring, "General N. B. Forrest, distressed at the increasing violent elements within the

⁷⁵ as quoted in Dickerson, *The Reconstruction Era*, 255.

⁷⁶ As quoted in Edward John Harcourt, "Who Were the Pale Faces? New Perspectives on the Tennessee Ku Klux," *Civil War History* 51, no. 1 (March 2005): 30.

⁷⁷ Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin, *The Making of a Southerner* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 98.

Klan, and now with the Brownlow administration removed, determined that the KuKlux had served its purpose. In early 1869 he ordered that the Klan be disbanded, and it ceased to exist. The days of the first KKK were at an end."⁷⁸

But while Forrest's apologists point to this action as evidence of Forrest's support for law and order, this action was not intended to disband the Klan, nor was it meant to stop the Klan's terrorist activities. Michael Martinez notes that "Forrest's defenders point to General Order Number One as evidence of his realization that the Ku Klux Klan was a terrorist organization deserving of nothing so much as opprobrium." According to Martinez, however, "Such an interpretation is disingenuous."⁷⁹ Other historians have made this same point, a fact that is ignored by Forrest's modern day supporters, such as the Sons of Confederate Veterans and neo-Confederate organizations. Stetson Kennedy proposes that the order to disband the Klan was nothing more than an attempt to fool the rest of the nation into thinking that the South had surrendered to Reconstruction. The Klan, he says knew this order was not intended to restrict its activities in any way. "Consequently they went about their business as usual, without having to be told by anyone that the only real intent of the edict was to con the nation into believing that the Southern 'troubles' were over, and that a Fifteenth Amendment specifically asserting the political rights of blacks (then being debated in Congress) was not necessary."⁸⁰ The fact remains that the Klan, led by Forrest, was an organization

⁷⁸ Daniels, *An Informative Guide to Confederate Heritage in the State of Tennessee*, 9.

⁷⁹ Martinez, *Carpetbaggers, Cavalry, and the Ku Klux Klan: Exposing the Invisible Empire During Reconstruction*, 21.

⁸⁰ Stetson Kennedy, *After Appomattox: How the South Won the War* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995), 91.

determined to restore white supremacy to the South, despite repeated claims to the contrary.

By 1868, the Ku Klux Klan, under Forrest's leadership, had members throughout the South and was prepared to expand Southern resistance to Reconstruction. On August 28 of that year, an interview with Forrest published in the *Cincinnati Commercial* revealed the extent of the Klan's influence and Forrest's opinions regarding the political situation in the South. Reflecting on Forrest's revelations regarding the Klan, Stetson Kennedy concludes "that the Klan's Invisible Empire...represented the real power in the South" at this time. In his opinion, Forrest "revealed that the Confederate underground was fully prepared to come out into the light of day and wage open warfare against any force that dared to challenge its right to terrorize citizens by night."⁸¹ In the interview, Forrest boasted, "there is such an organization, not just in Tennessee, but all over the South" and went on to reveal the strength of the Klan, stating "in Tennessee there are over 40,000; in all the Southern States they number 550,000 men." Forrest also positioned the Klan as "a protective, political, military organization" originally formed for "protection against Loyal Leaguers and the Grand Army of the Republic, but after it became general it was found that political matters and interests could best be promoted within it, and it was then made a political organization giving its support, of course, to the Democratic Party." As the interview continued, Forrest responded to Tennessee Governor Brownlow's threats to utilize the militia to end Klan violence. He stated, "if they attempt to carry out Brownlow's proclamation, by shooting down Kuklux...there will be war, and a bloodier one than we have ever

⁸¹ Ibid., 84.

witnessed.” While Forrest professed that he opposed war and that he would only fight in self-defense, he also threatened that “if the militia attack us, we will resist to the last, and if necessary, I think we could raise 40,000 men, in five days, ready for the field.”⁸²

Days later, Forrest delivered a speech in Brownsville, Tennessee where he reiterated some of the same sentiments articulated in his newspaper interview, and again stressed that the Klan was prepared to fight if the Tennessee militia were called out. “If the Radical Legislature, with Governor Brownlow, arms the negroes, and tells them to shoot down all Confederate soldiers, on the grounds that they are members of this Ku-Klux Klan,” he stated, “there will be civil war in Tennessee.” According to the newspaper report of the speech, this statement was met by applause from the large audience gathered to hear him speak. He added that he was not inciting violence or war, but “we have already lost all but our honor by the last war, and I must say, that in order to be men we must protect our honor at all hazards, and we must also protect our wives, our homes, and our families.”⁸³

The violence in the Southern states at the hands of the Ku Klux Klan became so problematic that Congress held hearings on the matter in 1871. According to the Congressional report, these hearings were “to inquire into the condition of affairs in the late insurrectionary States, so far as regards the execution of the laws, and the safety of the lives and property of the citizens of the United States.”⁸⁴

⁸² “N.B. Forrest,” *New York Times*, 3 September 1868, p. 8. The *New York Times* reprinted the interview Forrest gave to the *Cincinnati Commercial* on August 28, 1868.

⁸³ “The Issue in Tennessee; Speech of General Forrest at Brownsville,” *Memphis Daily Avalanche*, 12 August 1868.

⁸⁴ United States Congress, Joint Select Committee on the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States., Luke P. Poland, and John Scott, *Report of the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States, So Far as Regards the*

In his testimony before Congress, Forrest provided details regarding the operations of the Klan, although he denied any direct involvement. When asked if he had any knowledge of the existence of the Klan, Forrest responded, "I had, from information from others." As he continued to answer questions, he stated that he thought the Klan existed in 1866 and 1867, but was limited to Middle Tennessee, with possibly some in West Tennessee.⁸⁵ Forrest also asserted that he understood the Klan to be an organization formed for self-protection. According to Forrest,

There was a great deal of insecurity felt by the southern people ... The negroes were holding night meetings; were going about; were becoming very insolent; and the southern people all over the State were very much alarmed. I think many of the organizations did not have any name; parties organized themselves so as to be ready in case they were attacked. Ladies were ravished by some of these negroes, who were tried and put in the penitentiary, but were turned out in a few days afterward. There was a great deal of insecurity in the country, and I think this organization was got up to protect the weak, with no political intention at all.⁸⁶

Despite Forrest's contention that he had no involvement with the Ku Klux Klan, his testimony, along with the assertions he made in the 1868 newspaper interview and speech, clearly indicate a first hand knowledge of the organization and its operations. This point became especially clear when Forrest was questioned about the Klan's constitution. Forrest testified that he received a copy of the Klan's constitution via an anonymous letter and that he could not recall where it was mailed from because he "was getting at that time from fifty to one hundred letters a day... [he] was receiving letters from all the Southern States; men complaining, being dissatisfied, persons whose friends had been killed, or their families insulted,

Execution of the Laws, and Safety of the Lives and Property of the Citizens of the United States and Testimony Taken (Washington,: Govt. Print. Office,1872), 1.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 7.

and they were writing to [him] to know what they ought to do.”⁸⁷ Forrest then referred to the constitution as the prescript, a term which had not been used in the hearing until this point. These two points are important because they implicate Forrest as the leader of the Ku Klux Klan. There must have been some reason for fifty to one hundred Southerners who felt the need for assistance to write to Forrest on a daily basis. This only makes sense if it were general knowledge that he was in a position to help them. According to Forrest’s earlier testimony, the Klan was formed for just this purpose. In addition, it was Forrest himself who first referred to the Klan’s constitution as the prescript, indicating that he must have been familiar with the document as well as the Klan itself.

While Forrest’s supporters manipulated his Congressional testimony to contend that he was not the leader of the Klan, in fact, his testimony was disingenuous at best, and an outright lie at worst. According to Stanley Horn’s analysis of the Congressional report, the investigating committee had “lost no time in calling General Forrest before them to testify. They thought they had a pretty good idea of the identity of the head man of the order and they wanted to look him in the eye and talk with him.” He further states that “the printed record of the investigation shows that General Forrest was a good deal less than entirely frank with the committee, to put the mildest possible construction on his contradictions, evasions and strange lapses of memory. The various members of the committee pursued him relentlessly, but they were never able to pin him down.”⁸⁸ Horn concluded that the “investigating committee’s questioning of General Forrest

⁸⁷ Ibid., 11.

⁸⁸ Horn, *Invisible Empire*, 316.

brought them out the same hole they went in; but there was not a man on the committee who did not believe when Forrest stepped down from the stand that, despite his denials and evasions, they had been talking with the Grand Wizard of the Invisible Empire."⁸⁹

In fact, during testimony Forrest denied being a member of the Ku Klux Klan but did admit to membership in an organization known as the Pale Faces. This organization, according to recent scholarship, and Forrest's own testimony was indistinguishable from the Ku Klux Klan. Forrest responded to questions regarding the name of organizations in Tennessee in 1866 and 1867 by stating, "some called them Pale Faces, some called them Ku-Klux. I believe they were under two names."⁹⁰ Forrest admitted to joining the organization known as Pale Faces in 1867 – the same year that he was named Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan.⁹¹ While Forrest argued that the Pale Faces was a different order from the Klan, this was not the case. According to John Harcourt, this organization was known in Tennessee "to be one of those white power orders that fell under the generic term 'Ku Klux'."⁹² He has also found evidence that "newspapers in Tennessee judged the Pale Faces to be 'an auxiliary' of the Klan, and evidence connecting known Pale Faces with violent acts confirms this suspicion."⁹³ Forrest, even though he denied involvement in the Klan, was a member. The Ku Klux Klan and the Pale Faces, two names for the same organization, both under Forrest's command, were responsible for much of the violence and oppression in the South.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 321.

⁹⁰ United States Congress, Joint Select Committee on the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States, *Report of the Joint Committee*, Poland and Scott, 6.

⁹¹ Ibid., 9.

⁹² Harcourt, "Who Were the Pale Faces?," 35.

⁹³ Ibid.

Forrest as a Civil Rights Leader?

Despite Forrest's slave trading, his involvement in the Fort Pillow massacre, and his leadership of the Ku Klux Klan, Forrest's supporters also argue that he was one of the first white civil rights leaders in Memphis. This claim is primarily based on Forrest's appearance and speech at the July 4, 1875 gathering of the Independent Order of Pole-Bearers in Memphis. After the Civil War, African Americans dominated celebrations of the July 4 holiday in the South since white Southerners, still suffering from the recent defeat in the war, felt no desire to celebrate the holiday. Various African American organizations were involved in planning these celebrations, but by 1874, the Independent Order of Pole-Bearers was the dominant organization in Memphis.⁹⁴ Various accounts of Forrest's appearance at the 1875 parade and celebration seem to indicate that Forrest was ready to reconcile with Memphis' African American population. On July 6, *The New York Times* entitled its coverage of the Memphis celebration "Reconciliation Between Gen. Forrest and the Colored People," but the short article provided few details of the event and none that support the claim of reconciliation.⁹⁵ This article was followed by a longer analysis in the July 9 issue. According to this article: "The celebration of the natal day of the Republic in Memphis, Tenn., was marked by some extraordinary scenes, not the least of which was the gathering of negro societies and clubs who had specially invited Gens. N. B. Forrest and Gideon J. Pillow and other former Confederates to address them."⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Brian D. Page, "Stand by the Flag: Nationalism and African-American Celebrations of the Fourth of July in Memphis, 1866-1887," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 58 (Winter 1999): 289.

⁹⁵ "Reconciliation Between Gen. Forrest and the Colored People," *New York Times*, 6 July 1875, p. 4.

⁹⁶ "Gens. Forrest and Pillow," *New York Times*, 9 July 1875, p. 5.

The speeches that Forrest and Pillow gave reveal that reconciliation, as we understand the term today, with African Americans was not the goal of their presence. Forrest spoke first and, although his words were brief, they make sufficiently clear that he and Pillow were primarily there to enlist African American support in the cause of restoration of white political power through the Democratic party. Forrest, despite the short length of his speech, twice insisted that African Americans should vote for whom they thought was best in the upcoming elections. He said, "You have a right to elect whom you please; vote for the man you think best, and I think, when that is done, that you and I are freemen." A few moments later, he said, "We may differ in color, but not in sentiment. Use your best judgment in selecting men for office, and vote as you think right."⁹⁷ In both of these references to voting Forrest connects the fate of African Americans to his own, thus while he seems to be arguing for true voting rights, he is actually exhorting the crowd to vote for the Democratic candidates that he supports.

General Pillow also addressed the crowd on the topic of politics and voting. He said to them, "The highest duty you owe your country, as citizens in the exercise of the elective franchise, is to vote for none but honest and capable men for any office. My advice would be to discard all partisan views, to disband all colored political organizations." He declared that white Southerners had aided African Americans since the end of slavery and condemned the alliance between them and Northerners. "You arrayed yourselves and your influence against [the white race]. You became active politicians, and sought to rule and oppress the Southern people by your Yankee friends. They have ruled and ruined the country

⁹⁷ Ibid.

since the war, and by your support. You organized your whole race in hostility to the Southern people.” He then urged the crowd to support Southern white men in the future and promised better relations as a reward. “With the assumption of your natural position of friends and allies of the Southern white people, the legislation of the South would become friendly toward your people.” He continued, “If you cease your hostility to the white race of the South and fall into the general policy and intents of the South, and identify yourselves in interest with them, and vote for none but honest and capable men for office, we would correct the abuses which have crept into every department of business.”⁹⁸ A full examination of the speeches by Forrest and Pillow makes clear that their definition of reconciliation between white and black was control of the African American vote for white Southern Democrats and black subservience. While this is the nineteenth century understanding of reconciliation, it is quite different from the modern understanding. Using this term without acknowledging its historical meaning, allows Forrest’s apologists to again misinterpret the past to justify Forrest’s actions.

When Forrest’s appearance and speech to the Pole-Bearers is placed in the political context of the 1870s, it is clear that he was not aiming to promote any sort of civil rights, contrary to what the Tennessee Sons of Confederate Veterans, and many others Forrest apologists argue. At this time in Memphis, elite white leaders were attempting to regain political power in the city and needed the African American vote in order to do so. “In December 1874, various African-American leaders designated their support for the Democratic Party, marking a further political reconciliation,” Brian Page writes, and “the nature of this new alliance

⁹⁸ Ibid.

became apparent in the 1875 Independence Day celebration.⁹⁹ As William Alan Blair notes, the efforts of Forrest and Pillow were not uncommon: "Former Confederates did show a greater willingness to make peace with the North during the mid-1870s, but the literature of reunion, with rare exception, has overlooked the political reasons behind this stand. Ex-Confederates reached across the bloody chasm to protect their hold on regional power, adopting accommodation so authorities would not have reason to intervene in southern affairs and would let the best white men govern."¹⁰⁰

The fact that Forrest promoted voting by African Americans was not out of the ordinary, and should not be mistaken as evidence of support for racial equality. Forrest, and others like him, "promised to allow black voting and even at times encouraged black people to enter their party, yet they did so to solidify regional power by keeping the federal government from interfering further in their affairs."¹⁰¹ Jack Hurst, in his 1993 biography of Forrest, adds that the upcoming presidential elections played a part in Forrest's appearance. According to Hurst, Matthew Gallaway, a member of the state executive committee of the Democratic party, appeared with Forrest and Pillow at the request of the Pole-Bearers. He believes that "the savvily Democratic Gallaway possibly had a hand in eliciting the invitations and roseate sentiments from the Memphis blacks; he had, after all, championed the formation of Democratic clubs by black leaders in 1868. Certainly

⁹⁹ Page, "Stand by the Flag," 295.

¹⁰⁰ William Alan Blair, *Cities of the Dead : Contesting the Memory of the Civil War in the South, 1865-1914*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 107.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

he realized the potential political bonanza offered by the Pole-Bearers' overtures."¹⁰²

According to Joseph Cartwright, by 1880, most whites in Tennessee believed that "many blacks would quickly attain the standards of propriety, education, work habits, and property ownership revered by white conservatives; that black voters would soon divide along economic lines, with many joining the southern white majority in the Democratic party...most whites also believe that blacks would accept token political equality - the right to vote - without pushing for a proportionate influence in the determination of policy and leadership."¹⁰³ All of these beliefs are evident in the speeches by Forrest and Pillow at the July 4, 1875 celebration and explain their repeated references to voting and politics. Placing Forrest's speech in historical perspective then, makes it clearly evident that there is no basis for the assertion that Forrest was a civil rights leader.

Despite all evidence that Forrest's appearance at this celebration was an effort to gain African American votes for the Democratic party, the Tennessee Sons of Confederate Veterans use this event as the basis for describing Forrest as a civil rights advocate. Forrest's supporters repeat this claim in their attempt to justify the continued worship of Forrest despite the fact that historical examinations of these claims discredit their stance. The most elaborate form of this claim can be found on the Tennessee Sons of Confederate Veterans website, where an entire page entitled "Forrest: Memphis' first White Civil Rights Advocate" is dedicated to

¹⁰² Jack Hurst, *Nathan Bedford Forrest: A Biography* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1993), 366.

¹⁰³ Joseph H. Cartwright, *The Triumph of Jim Crow: Tennessee Race Relations in the 1880's* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1976), 255.

this theme.”¹⁰⁴ The SCV claims that “[a]fter the war, Forrest worked tirelessly to build the New South and to promote employment for black Southerners.” While it is true that Forrest worked to build the New South after the war, his vision of the South did not include equality for African Americans, despite the SCV’s claims. A *New York Times* article on March 15, 1869 provides insight into Forrest’s views of African American employment. Forrest believed that areas of the South could be repopulated “with negroes ... they are the best laborers we have ever had in the South.” He also stated that this new population should come directly from Africa. “They’ll improve after they get here,” he said, adding, they “are the most imitative creatures in the world, and if you put them in squads of ten, with one experienced leader in each squad, they will soon revive our country.”¹⁰⁵ This is Forrest’s vision of employment for African Americans in the New South. For Forrest, African Americans remained slaves in all but name and were available to be exploited in order to rebuild the South in support of the white ruling classes.

Forrest’s Legacy

Nathan Bedford Forrest died on October 29, 1877 at the age of fifty-six, just twelve years after the end of the Civil War. By this point, Forrest’s legacy was already being debated and contested as is evident in the obituary notices in various newspapers across the country. The notice of Forrest’s death that appeared in the *New York Times* on October 30, 1877 was not entirely flattering. It was noted that he, unlike the gentleman Robert E. Lee, was from “the Southwest, the rude border

¹⁰⁴ Tennessee Sons of Confederate Veterans, Forrest: Memphis' first White Civil Rights Advocate, available from http://www.tennessee-scv.org/ForrestHistSociety/forrest_speech.html; Internet; accessed 16 March 2008.

¹⁰⁵ “Some Extraordinary Views Respecting the Negroes,” *New York Times*, 15 March 1869, p. 5.

country" which "gave birth to men of reckless ruffianism and cut-throat daring." His method of warfare was also described as "notoriously bloodthirsty and revengeful." His wartime success was also downplayed, the result, the *New York Times* stated, of "as much good fortune as his own talents. He never had a good officer sent against him, and he seldom attacked except where he greatly outnumbered his enemy." The *New York Times* also reminded its readers of Forrest's involvement in the Fort Pillow massacre and stated that "it is in connection with one of the most atrocious and cold-blooded massacres that ever disgraced civilized warfare that his name will for ever be inseparably associated. 'Fort Pillow Forrest' was the title which the deed conferred upon him, and by this he will be remembered by the present generation, and by it he will pass into history."¹⁰⁶ The notice of Forrest's death in the *New Orleans Times*, as would be expected, took a completely different tone. According to this paper, Forrest's death "strikes from an honored roster another of the distinguished *sabreurs* engaged on the Confederate side in the late conflict." The *New Orleans Times* recalled Forrest's military successes, but with the glaring omission of any mention of Fort Pillow. In conclusion, the article declared "that no cavalry officer of the Lost Cause rendered more efficient service, and certainly none struck the then common enemy oftener, or with greater advantage to the flag he supported."¹⁰⁷

The accounts of Forrest's death indicate that the contentious debate regarding his memory are not a phenomenon related to late twentieth century efforts to correct the wrongs of the past. This debate began even before Forrest's

¹⁰⁶ "Death of Gen. Forrest," *New York Times*, 30 Oct 1977, p. 5.

¹⁰⁷ "Nathan Bedford Forrest," *New Orleans Times*, 31 October 1877.

death and continued through the early twentieth century until the erection of his monument in Memphis fixed forever the misrepresentation of Forrest that still stands over the city today. According to Steven Deyle, "hagiographic biographers somehow manage to successfully defend Forrest's lifelong actions against black people. Not only was Forrest the largest slave trader in Memphis prior to the war, but he also led the Fort Pillow Massacre, which killed up to 300 U.S. Colored Troops in cold blood, and he then served as the first grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan after the war. Despite this atrocious record (or perhaps because of it, for some people), Forrest still commands the adoration of many today, and in some circles he has a more devout following than Robert E. Lee."¹⁰⁸ Paul Ashdown and Edward Caudill believe that Forrest's "apologists can hardly deny that he was a racist in a conflict that had much to do with race. Whether he was a compassionate racist, a brutal racist, an inconsistent racist, or even a recovering racist...is an entirely different and probably unanswerable question, but a question the mythmaker must attempt to answer."¹⁰⁹ This is one of the questions that has been examined in this chapter. I have explored the ways in which Forrest's mythmakers have come to terms with his racism through selective accounts and misrepresentations of his past as a slave trader, his role in the massacre of black troops at Fort Pillow, his Ku Klux Klan leadership, and his supposed reconciliation with Memphis' African American population. In the end, Forrest acted in support of white supremacy. No amount of selective history can change this fact. To claim otherwise "is not interpretation, it is distortion; it is a selective forgetting surrounded by a mythical remembering.

¹⁰⁸ Deyle, *Carry Me Back*, 280.

¹⁰⁹ Ashdown and Caudill, *The Myth of Nathan Bedford Forrest*, 18.

Forrest's hagiographers were not rabid Rebels but leading personages and scholars. But readers and listeners understood the subtext and what and whom Forrest really stood for beneath his gilded public persona."¹¹⁰ If these readers and listeners really did understand that Forrest represents a racist vision of the New South, based on white supremacy, then what do modern controversies surrounding Forrest's Memphis monument say about those who still defend Southern heritage, the Confederacy, and Nathan Bedford Forrest?

¹¹⁰ David R. Goldfield, *Southern Histories: Public, Personal, and Sacred* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 15.

The Never-Ending Controversy

Public debate over Forrest's legacy and the continued existence of his monument in Memphis has erupted frequently in the years since the Civil Rights movement. As recently as 2005, the Forrest Park monument was again at the center of controversy. A suggestion to rename the park and to move Forrest's remains to a local cemetery brought out strong opposition from Southern heritage organizations including the Sons of Confederate Veterans, the Citizens to Save Our Parks, and the League of the South.¹¹¹ These groups share a devotion to preserving the Forrest Park monument and Southern heritage despite the historical inaccuracies in their defense of Forrest. The arguments and actions of Forrest's supporters, especially during the 2005 controversy, illustrate the extent to which Forrest's monument remains a symbol of white supremacist ideology in the city of Memphis and across the South.

Forrest's Memphis Legacy

As African Americans fought for and regained their constitutional rights in the 1950s and 1960s, many white Southerners reacted by reasserting Lost Cause ideology. The previous chapter examined Forrest's leading role in the suppression of African American progress during Reconstruction, mainly through his leadership of the Ku Klux Klan. This chapter will focus on the role he still plays in twenty-first century as a symbol of the neo-Confederate backlash to the Civil Rights era

¹¹¹ The Citizens to Save Our Parks was organized by the N.B. Forrest Camp 215 of the Sons of Confederate Veterans to fight the renaming of the Memphis parks. The League of the South is a Southern nationalist organization identified as a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center.

progress of African Americans. This reaction began as early as the 1950s as white Southerners felt threatened by the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision that struck down the "separate but equal" notion that had kept public schools legally segregated since the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling. After white dominance in the South was reestablished in the first two decades of the twentieth century, the celebration of Forrest's legacy was no longer required and his importance diminished for a time. But "as the South's racial hierarchy fell under increasing attack [during the 1950s], the Confederate general and the first leader of the Klan had become, as perhaps never before, a figure around whom white Memphians could defiantly rally. Both the Confederacy and the Klan were combined in the person of Forrest into a powerful symbol of white resistance to court-ordered racial desegregation."¹¹² Celebrations of Forrest's birthday, held at Forrest Park, resumed as Southern whites felt their way of life threatened by African Americans' demands for rights.

For the first time in years, in July 1958, hundreds of white Memphians gathered at different locations in the city, including Forrest Park, to honor their hero's birthday. These celebrations were given prominent notice by the local press, and none other than Mary Forrest Bradley [Forrest's granddaughter] publicly averred that the recent school desegregation crisis helped explain the larger number of celebrants on her grandfather's birthday.¹¹³

The association between Forrest, his monument in Forrest Park, and white supremacy was firmly re-established during the civil rights movement era of the 1950s and 1960s. Mary Forrest Bradley and other white southerners openly acknowledged this link at a time when open resistance to civil rights was common

¹¹² Carney, "The Contested Image of Nathan Bedford Forrest," 621.

¹¹³ Ibid.

in the South. Those who celebrate Forrest's legacy today are careful not to publicly acknowledge this connection, but the sentiment behind their support for Forrest and the Forrest Park monument remains unchanged.

As African Americans fought Jim Crow laws and asserted their rights in the South, the fear of losing a distinct, white identity brought out the defenders of Southern heritage. Edward Pollard wrote about this fear immediately following the Civil War in his book *The Lost Cause* (1867). He warned "that [Southerners] will lose their literature, their former habits of thought, the intellectual self-assertion" unless white supremacy were maintained. He also believed that "it would be immeasurably the worst consequence of defeat in this war that the South should lose its moral and intellectual distinctiveness as a people, and cease to assert its well-known superiority in civilization over the people of the North ... that superiority the war has not conquered or lowered; and the South will do right to claim it and cherish it."¹¹⁴ While Pollard feared the changes facing the South in the aftermath of the Civil War, similar fears existed in the minds of white Southerners as the Civil Rights movement began to gain momentum. In fact, Pollard's conclusion foreshadowed the state of affairs for most of the twentieth century in the South. He asserted that "the war did not decide negro equality; it did not decide negro suffrage; it did not decide States Rights ... it did not decide the right of the people to show dignity in misfortune, and to maintain self-respect in the face of adversity. And these things the war did not decide, the Southern people will still cling to, still claim, and still assert in them their rights and views."¹¹⁵ White Southerners took up

¹¹⁴ Pollard, *The Lost Cause*, 751-752.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 752.

Pollard's charge after the war and instituted a system of laws based on white supremacy that remained in place until the Civil Rights movement began to reverse this trend almost one hundred years later.

As Pollard's South faces the threat of extinction, white Southern resistance has reasserted itself in the neo-Confederate movement. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, this movement began in the 1970s as a reaction to civil rights, school busing, and affirmative action and has been growing stronger ever since.¹¹⁶ Some of the major neo-Confederate organizations include the League of the South, the Council of Conservative Citizens, and the Sons of Confederate Veterans. These groups do not act independently, as many of their members belong to more than one organization. The League of the South and the Sons of Confederate Veterans even share an affiliation policy that links them in non-political matters. Michael Hill, president of the League of the South, commented on the increase in white supremacist views within the Sons of Confederate Veterans in 1998, stating "the old guard [in the SCV] is on its way out, and the organisation appears ready to work with us as a fellow pro-South group. This is good news long overdue."¹¹⁷ In 2002, David Goldfield published *Still Fighting the Civil War*, which, he claims, generated a strong response from white Southerners dedicated to these neo-Confederate causes. In his view, "The battle is the more fierce for the fact that the society that emerged from the wreckage of war, the society predicated on white supremacy and patriarchy, is now slowly but surely dissolving, and some white

¹¹⁶ Southern Poverty Law Center, *Rebels with a Cause*, available from <http://www.splcenter.org/intel/intelreport/article.jsp?aid=249>; Internet; accessed 19 March 2008.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

southerners feel themselves in danger of dissolving with it."¹¹⁸ This fierce battle is symbolized by the resurgence of Forrest's memory in the South.

As this movement has grown, it seems apparent that Forrest has taken his place as its leading hero. Tony Horowitz's *Confederates in the Attic* (1998) provides some evidence of his increasing popularity. Horowitz interviewed Ruffin Flag Company owner Soren Dresch whose best selling shirt features Nathan Bedford Forrest. Horowitz claimed that this was "confirmation to the trend I'd sensed across the South: a hardening, ideological edge to Confederate remembrance. As Dresch put it, 'Southerners are getting tired of taking it on the chin. They're getting more aggressive. Lee's the Southern gentleman who represents reconciliation with the Union. Forrest represents the spirit of going after them with everything you've got.'"¹¹⁹ Geographer Owen Dwyer also notes this cultural shift from Lee to Forrest in 2004. In his view "The shift, registered in terms of new memorials, biographies and, most ubiquitously, T-shirt sales, has been lamented by the older, more established proponents of Confederate memory as a vulgar corruption of their cause. As a result, commemoration of the Confederacy, formerly an elite undertaking, now has a decidedly proletarian, overtly racialized edge to it."¹²⁰ He also found evidence of a direct connection between the resurgence in Forrest's popularity and his white supremacist ideology: "Since the 1950s, working-class whites opposed to integration have claimed the memory of the Confederacy ... as a bulwark against what they interpret to be the threat of racial

¹¹⁸ Goldfield, *Southern Histories: Public, Personal, and Sacred*, 5.

¹¹⁹ Tony Horowitz, *Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from America's Unfinished Civil War*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 294.

¹²⁰ Owen J. Dwyer, "Symbolic Accretion and Commemoration," *Social & Cultural Geography* 5, no. 3 (September 2004): 420.

integration. The shift in the Confederacy's constituency and its new sense of purpose is symbolized by the rising popularity of the Confederate cavalry officer, Nathan Bedford Forrest."¹²¹ Sociologist James Loewen also believes that neo-Confederates support and defend Forrest because they sympathize with Forrest's belief in white supremacy. According to Loewen, Forrest's modern apologists "do know what Forrest did at Fort Pillow and may be choosing his likeness precisely because they like his 'solution' to the 'race problem.'"¹²²

To a large degree, the neo-Confederate defenders of Southern heritage have grown in influence over the past two decades as the movement to remove Confederate symbols from the South continues to gain momentum. For many, especially African Americans, the Confederate flags and monuments are nothing more than reminders of slavery and centuries of oppression. Opponents insist that these are "offensive reminders of the worst aspects of Southern culture: a degrading, paternalistic view of African Americans as a racially inferior people and a belief that slavery was necessary to the economic and cultural interest of the antebellum south." The "continued display of Confederate monuments by government entities ... serve as memorials to white supremacy, bigotry, and a divided America in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries."¹²³ But for the neo-Confederates who honor these symbols, attempts to remove them "are but profane efforts to deny the best qualities of Southern life - namely, an almost

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Loewen, *Lies Across America*, 256.

¹²³ Martinez, et al., *Confederate Symbols in the Contemporary South*, 7.

mystical faith in agrarianism, a fierce love of liberty, a mistrust of obdurate, centralized authority, and an unabashed appreciation of home and family."¹²⁴

The Assaults on Forrest Park Gain Momentum

In Memphis, opposition to Confederate symbols is focused on Forrest's monument, the equestrian statue that honors a man who shares responsibility for some of the worst incidents of violence against African Americans in the nineteenth century and whose legacy continues to support white supremacy in the twenty-first century. The opposition has only been partially successful. The Confederate battle flag was removed from Forrest Park in the late 1960s and the Tennessee state legislature was forced to remove Forrest's birthday from the list of official state holidays.¹²⁵ Despite these important victories, the monument still stands and even though Forrest's birthday is no longer a state holiday it became a day of special observance in 1969.¹²⁶ According to Tennessee Code, Title 15, Chapter 2, it is the governor's duty to proclaim Forrest's birthday as a day of "special observance" and "the governor shall invite the people of this state to observe the days in schools, churches, and other suitable places with appropriate ceremonies expressive of the public sentiment befitting the anniversary of such dates."¹²⁷ That Forrest's birthday is still officially celebrated in Tennessee demonstrates the reverence shown Forrest by many Tennesseans, not just those actively involved in the neo-Confederate movement.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 6.

¹²⁵ Goldfield, *Southern Histories: Public, Personal, and Sacred*, 23-24.

¹²⁶ Tennessee. *Public Acts of the State of Tennessee Passed by the Eighty-Sixth General Assembly*, (Nashville: Curley Printing Company, 1969), 465.

¹²⁷ Tennessee Code, 15-2-101, available from <http://michie.lexisnexis.com/tennessee/lpext.dll?f=templates&fn=main-h.htm&cp=tncode>; Internet; accessed 19 March 2008.

Efforts to completely remove the Forrest Park monument have been underway for at least two decades but due to strong opposition have gained little ground in the battle over Forrest's legacy. Today's Memphis, "with a 62 percent African-American population and home to the highest proportion of metropolitan blacks in the nation,"¹²⁸ has seen almost continuous controversy over its Confederate parks since the 1980s. In addition to Forrest Park, Memphis is home to Confederate Park and Jefferson Davis Park. In 1985, an article in *The Commercial Appeal*, provided historian Shelby Foote an opportunity to proclaim his reverence for Forrest. Foote repeated many of the misleading claims that have been made by Forrest apologists. He stated that Forrest was not the villain that many people see him as and he envisioned a day when Forrest would be universally respected. According to Foote, Forrest was involved in the slave trade, but "had avoided splitting up families or selling to cruel plantation owners." He also repeated the inaccurate claim that the post-Civil War Ku Klux Klan was not a hate group.¹²⁹

In response, the Memphis *Tri-State Defender*, an African American newspaper, questioned the continued existence of the monument and reminded its readers of Forrest's violent past. An article in the paper challenged the notion that Memphis was a progressive city and argued that the city cannot move forward until the evils of the past are "confronted and corrected." Insisting that "nothing great can begin, in Memphis, until we first examine the things that continue to strangle

¹²⁸ D'Army Bailey, *The Confederates of Memphis (and Negroes Who Have More Important Things to Do)*, 20 October 2005, available from http://www.blackcommentator.com/155/155_baily_confederates_memphis.html; Internet; accessed 8 April 2008.

¹²⁹ "Confederate hero Forrest to get salute at ceremony," *The Commercial Appeal*, 13 July 1985, p. B3.

our positive attempts at success," the article asked, "Can we continue to ignore the truth and blindly hope that others outside of our area will never become aware that we honor murderers in Memphis?"¹³⁰

In 1988, the debate regarding Forrest was again renewed in Memphis. The University of Tennessee at Memphis reached an agreement with the city to utilize Forrest Park as a part of its campus and scheduled a ceremony in the park to honor an outgoing president. The Memphis NAACP used this event to bring attention to Forrest's past and to condemn the actions of the university that linked public funds to Forrest's name. Maxine A. Smith, Executive Director of the Memphis NAACP, sent a letter to Dr. James C. Hunt, chancellor of the University of Tennessee at Memphis. In this letter, Smith asked if Hunt had "considered the impact of these actions on your Black faculty, your Black students, your minority recruitment program, and all others who retain a sensitivity to human dignity." She also urged Hunt "to erase some of the racist image that U.T. Memphis holds in the community" by implementing the changes that she requested.¹³¹

This same year, Shelby Foote was again featured in *The Commercial Appeal* and caused some controversy with his claim that, "Forrest deserves the respect and admiration of the whole country," and the more astounding notion that "the day that black people admire Forrest as much as I do is the day when they will be free and equal, for they will have gotten prejudice out of their minds as we whites are trying to get it out of ours."¹³² A commentary in the *Tri-State Defender* pointed out the ignorance in Foote's comments by informing him "Black people are already free

¹³⁰ "Ku Klux Klan 'leader' memorialized," *Tri-State Defender*, 14 August 1985, p. 3.

¹³¹ "NAACP letter on statue," *Tri-State Defender*, 18 May 1988, p. 7A.

¹³² "Troops rally to defense of Forrest," *The Commercial Appeal*, 12 May 1988, sec. B, p.1.

and equal. They did not get that way, however, by admiring Nathan Bedford Forrest.” The author, Harry E. Moore then addressed Foote directly, telling him, “The day you become as sensitive to the feelings of Black people as you are to those of Whites who admire Nathan Bedford Forrest you will be free, for you will have gotten the racist prejudice out of your mind that you want to force your hero on the descendants of his victims.”¹³³

Two weeks after this commentary, the *Tri-State Defender* took up the attack on Forrest again with a pair of articles titled “City must not dignify Forrest...” and “...he’s no more than a murderer.” These articles proclaimed that, “Memphis must make no attempt to memorialize and dignify Forrest. His military genius does not excuse his inhumanity. If he cannot be replaced by a more appropriate symbol that would bring the city together, at least all of us should be aware that his memory is extremely painful for many Memphians.”¹³⁴ They also called on the city to correct the mistake of erecting a monument to Forrest. “Our assertion is that General Forrest should never have been honored in that park nor any other public park; he was no more than a whore-mongering mass murderer ...[his] statue and grave should be removed from the park. ‘To err is human; to forgive divine.’ To correct one’s mistake is commendable!”¹³⁵

For the next few years, the primary opposition to Forrest Park took the form of vandalism. In January 1992, the monument was splashed with paint, which prompted Danny Surwic of the Nathan Bedford Forrest Camp 215 of the Sons of Confederate Veterans to write a letter to *The Commercial Appeal* complaining that

¹³³ “Foote, you put it in your mouth,” *Tri-State Defender*, 1 June 1988, p. 1A.

¹³⁴ “City must not dignify Forrest...,” *Tri-State Defender*, 15 June 1988, p 7A.

¹³⁵ “...he’s no more than a murderer,” *Tri-State Defender*, 15 June 1998, p 7A.

vandals “are damaging some of the finest artwork and historical displays in our city.” “Historical understanding is the first step toward cooperation,” he insisted. “We are all working to bring this city together and move it forward. This action by vandals only tears us apart.”¹³⁶ The monument again fell victim to vandalism in 1994 on the night before the celebration of Forrest’s 173rd birthday. The graffiti made references to Forrest’s slave trading, Klan involvement and the Fort Pillow massacre. The words “racist murderer”, “slave trader,” and “the man on the horse ... head of the KKK” were spray-painted on the statue.¹³⁷

The random vandalism did little to change public opinion, and through these same years Forrest’s supporters continued to proclaim their adherence to white supremacy in honoring the general’s birthday each year. At the 1993 celebration marking the 172nd birthday of Nathan Bedford Forrest, P. Charles Lunsford was invited to speak to the two hundred supporters gathered at Forrest Park. He claimed that the fight to keep symbols of the Confederacy had just begun and used part of his speech to attack opponents in this battle. Addressing threats to Confederate symbols across the South, he claimed that opponents to Confederate symbols were hate groups who were trying to attack their culture and told the crowd: “We mean to be accepted in this country as equals to every other group of people. You can chase a dog all the way home. But when he gets home, he’s gonna turn around and bite you.”¹³⁸ A year later, Lunsford, who coined the term “Heritage, not Hate” was “ousted from his leadership post in the Sons of Confederate Veterans after giving a speech to a hate group, the white supremacist

¹³⁶ “Wrong Statement,” *The Commercial Appeal*, 25 January 1992, p. A13.

¹³⁷ “Forrest statue being cleaned of graffiti,” *The Commercial Appeal*, 12 July 1994, p. B2.

¹³⁸ “Forrest celebrants vow fight for heritage,” *The Commercial Appeal*, 11 July 1993, p. B1.

Council of Conservative Citizens.”¹³⁹ Like Lunsford, many involved in the heritage movement believe that the predominant history of the South is the history of white southerners, and that other groups have a separate, yet inferior, history to celebrate.

These ideas were again evident in 1999 when, just a month before the annual celebration of Forrest’s birthday, members of the Inward Journey, African American Council held a ceremony at Forrest Park and unofficially renamed the park in honor of Nat Turner, leader of an 1831 slave rebellion. While organizers of this event claimed that it was not a protest, the meaning of Forrest’s monument in modern Memphis was questioned. One of the speakers, William Holmes, asked “Where are our leaders, in all their righteous indignation, where a city that is populated with 70 percent black people has a federal monument to people that fought to keep our people in the institution of slavery?”¹⁴⁰ Reactions to this ceremony were mixed among several members of the Sons of Confederate Veterans who gathered to watch. One stated, “From what I’ve heard, they want to know their history like we trace our history.” But another thought the ceremony was offensive and said, “I think it’s intimidating other people not to enjoy their culture. What would happen if we went to Martin Luther King Park and tried to ‘reclaim it’ as they did?”¹⁴¹ These statements echo themes from Lunsford’s speech

¹³⁹ Southern Poverty Law Center, Preserving Racism, Spring 2003, available from <http://www.splcenter.org/intel/intelreport/article.jsp?aid=4>; Internet; accessed 19 March 2008. This event came four years before the increase in white supremacist views within the SCV was noted by League of the South president Michael Hill and was quite possibly an early indication of this shift.

¹⁴⁰ “Journey to Forrest’s statue bold step to wholeness,” *The Commercial Appeal*, 20 June 1999, p. B1.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

six years earlier, including the beliefs that African Americans and whites have a separate history and that the white Southern culture was under attack.

The 2005 Forrest Park Controversy

In 2005, the controversy over Forrest's monument exploded into the most contentious debate in the history of the monument. This controversy is worth close inspection as it exemplifies the extent to which Forrest's monument is a celebration of white supremacy and to which his modern supporters continue to espouse this belief. The events leading up to the 2005 controversy began in 2002 when Shelby County Commission chairman Walter Bailey proposed changing the name of Forrest Park, along with Jefferson Davis Park and Confederate Park, the two other Confederate parks in Memphis. Bailey's proposal to rename the parks stemmed from negative comments from visitors to Memphis who were in town for a nationally televised boxing match in 2001.¹⁴² Almost immediately, there were responses to Bailey's calls for the renaming of Forrest Park. Confederate sympathizers responded in full force by defending the Confederacy and Forrest. Blake Fontenay, *The Commercial Appeal* writer who wrote the initial story covering Bailey's suggestion, said that he received responses to the story from all over the country, most of them opposed to renaming the parks.¹⁴³ Finally, in July 2005, the Center City Commission, formed to study the renaming of the parks, officially recommended that their names be changed. But by this time, the renaming of the parks had become such a sensitive topic in the city that no action was ever taken based on this recommendation.

¹⁴² "Rename Civil War parks? It's time, says Bailey," *The Commercial Appeal*, 17 November 2002, p. A1.

¹⁴³ "Parks renaming is uncharted area," *The Commercial Appeal*, 26 November 2002, p. B5.

Forrest's defenders tried to dismiss the racial implications of his memory in their defense of the monument despite the fact that less than fifty years earlier Forrest's granddaughter acknowledged white supremacist motivations behind the celebrations of his birthday. Jimmy Love, a member of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, defended Forrest by citing pro-Klan sources such as *The Invisible Empire* (1939) and *Authentic History of the Ku Klux Klan* (1924). He believed that the Klan was not deserving of its evil reputation and also placed the blame for Reconstruction violence on the Union League, "the biggest terrorist organization in the South in the years following the Civil War." He also resurrected the argument that Forrest was not an enemy of African American, but was "respected and admired" by his black contemporaries. Of course, the evidence he presented was Forrest's speech at the July 4, 1875 gathering of the Independent Order of Pole Bearers. Despite the fact that this speech was not about true racial reconciliation, Love claimed that it "has been called the most conciliatory speech in the aftermath of the war."¹⁴⁴

Despite all attempts to deny the racist implications attached to veneration of Forrest's memory, the actions of his supporters prove that white supremacy is still a vital part of their worldview. The 2005 Nathan Bedford Forrest birthday celebration coincided with the 100th anniversary of the statue's dedication. This anniversary, coupled with the park renaming controversy, generated an increased interest in the celebration. An email message promoting a performance by the Snowflake's Minstrels, who were scheduled to perform in blackface, was associated

¹⁴⁴ "Slinging mud at Forrest just besmirches Walter Bailey," *The Commercial Appeal*, 15 May 2005, p. V3.

with the 2005 event. The message was entitled "Forrest Celebration, Only 7 days left until the Snowflake's Minstrels show" and urged readers to "See an authentic 1850's minstrel show...at the Forrest Birthday Weekend in Memphis, TN," adding "you'll be rolling in the aisle." The author of the email message, Tom Williams, was undoubtedly aware that the minstrel show would be controversial and stressed, "This is NOT being publicized anywhere outside of selected groups, since there's a good chance that this will offend SOMEBODY. But its [sic] funny, I don't care who you are."¹⁴⁵ This message prompted Sons of Confederate Veterans member Kirk Lyons to scold Williams for posting notice of the minstrel show on the email list. He wrote, "By putting this here, you have broadcast this to the world. Some snitch on this list will pass it on ... I love the minstrel legacy as much as anyone...but you could likely get burned, esp [sic] in Memphis."¹⁴⁶ Lee Millar, whose name was associated with the minstrel show, denied any involvement when questioned by *The Commercial Appeal* reporters. But according to the Southern Poverty Law Center, Millar and another Sons of Confederate Veterans member, Greg Todd, were responsible for recording "The Minstrel Skit" featuring characters named "Mr. Bones" and "Mr. Tamboo."¹⁴⁷ These two men also play together in "The 52nd Regimental String Band" whose website proclaims that their styles are primarily "military songs, parlor songs, and minstrel songs."¹⁴⁸ Additionally, Todd admitted to performing in blackface in the past, but "he did not see that as racist – he had

¹⁴⁵ Email to Southern-Herald mailing list, dated July 1, 2005 obtained from Southern Poverty Law Center.

¹⁴⁶ Southern Poverty Law Center, Neo-Confederates, Fall 2005, available from <http://www.splcenter.org/intel/intelreport/article.jsp?aid=563>; Internet; accessed 19 March 2008.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid. This recording is available from the Southern Poverty Law Center's website at <http://www.splcenter.org/images/static/intel/minstrel.mp3>, accessed 19 March 2008.

¹⁴⁸ 52nd Regimental String Band, Civil War Music, available from http://www.tennessee-scv.org/52nd_band/albums.html; Internet; accessed 19 March 2008.

only tried to please his customers."¹⁴⁹ As a result of the publicity, the minstrel show was cancelled at the last minute, but the fact that the show was scheduled and then defended by some members of the Sons of Confederate Veterans shows that the organization, in defending Forrest's racist past, has not abandoned its own belief in white supremacy. In the minds of these men, the minstrel show represents a better time in the South when whites were dominant and African Americans were happy, second-class citizens, who knew their place.

Reactions from the Memphis Black Community

To support the renaming of the Confederate parks, Rev. L. LaSimba Gray, president of the Memphis Chapter of Rainbow PUSH/Coalition invited Al Sharpton to Memphis in August 2005 to speak at Nathan Bedford Forrest Park. Rev. Gray put the problem this way: "The reason racism keeps emerging is because symbols such as this are still present. You wouldn't place a statue of Hitler in the middle of a Jewish community and there's no validation for having a statue in Memphis of a war criminal and traitor who wanted to enslave an entire race of people."¹⁵⁰ The appearance by Sharpton was not without controversy and was denounced by members of both the black and white communities. Even the Memphis NAACP proclaimed its "resentment" and Memphis Mayor Willie Herenton stated,

The fact that Rev. Al Sharpton has been invited to Memphis serves no useful purpose as far as I'm concerned. All Sharpton can do is come and run his mouth. He has no authority to do anything. As mayor, I don't give a damn about Al Sharpton. Someone needs to ask Al Sharpton if he can go to New York and tell Mayor Bloomberg what to do.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ Southern Poverty Law Center, Neo-Confederates.

¹⁵⁰ "Mayor faces parks feud - Council lacks authority to rename, attorney says," *The Commercial Appeal*, 3 August 2005, p. A1.

¹⁵¹ "Herenton criticizes Sharpton presence - 'No useful purpose,' he says; will seek 5th term,"

While Al Sharpton can be a controversial figure at times, his words in Memphis were right on point regarding the impact of the Forrest monument. He stated:

The thing that offends me more than anything is people trying to act as though it is acceptable that anywhere in this nation that public property can be used to glorify and sanitize people that were a part of a movement that was based on racism and murder. We cannot tell our kids to stop participating in self-degrading stuff and to stop desecrating our community but tell them it's all right for the public park to have statues of people that absolutely was for the desecration of our people.¹⁵²

Sharpton's message was directed, in part, at the African American leaders in Memphis who believed that other issues were more important and deserved more attention.

Mayor Herenton disagreed with other black leaders who called for the removal of Forrest's monument and seemed to be trapped by the legacy of white supremacy. Concerned primarily with his city's image, the mayor said, "In the aftermath of the tragic assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in our city, we do not need another event that portrays Memphis nationally as a city still racially polarized and fighting the Civil War all over again."¹⁵³ This statement came just as an Imperial Klaliff of the Ku Klux Klan threatened "to show up in full KKK Regalia" if the city of Memphis removed the Forrest memorial.¹⁵⁴ Apparently the mayor's concern was not with the racial tensions, but with the negative publicity that would come if the tensions were exposed nationally.

The Commercial Appeal, 12 August 2005. p. A1.

¹⁵² "He'll get not a dime - Sharpton's here today to stand some ground," *The Commercial Appeal*, 13 August 2005, p. A1.

¹⁵³ "Mayor: Divisiveness not on agenda," *Tri-State Defender*, 6-10 August 2005, p. 1A.

¹⁵⁴ "'Confederate' Parks; A point of contention," *Tri-State Defender*, 6-10 August 2005, p. 3A.

Organizations long associated with the civil rights movement have downplayed the issue of Confederate memorials insisting that there are more important issues to deal with. As Dwight Montgomery, president of the Memphis chapter of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, put it, "We do not approve of the names of these parks; however, we recognize we have a higher, greater priority ... We're working toward racial harmony and will not participate in something that will lead to racial divisiveness."¹⁵⁵ It appears that some African American leaders in Memphis either failed to understand how the presence of Forrest's memorial in the city continued to promote white supremacy and led, at least in part, to the racial divisiveness that they hoped to avoid or, they were willing to make compromises that others saw as defeatist. Shelby County Circuit Court Judge D'Army Bailey, for one, criticized such responses from Memphis' black leadership. "If blacks in Memphis can't confront the most elemental insult by stopping this publicly sponsored glorification of the confederacy [sic],," he stated, "they are not likely to have the backbone to eyeball the white man with even more serious challenges."¹⁵⁶

The African American leaders who agreed with Bailey and demanded the removal of the Memphis Confederate parks and monuments were accused of distracting the community from more pressing social problems. An opinion column in *The Commercial Appeal* asked if anyone had called Al Sharpton about some of Memphis' "other, perhaps more pressing but even more perplexing issues." The author, David Waters, pointed out that "Memphis has the highest infant mortality

¹⁵⁵ "Mayor says don't rename parks – But there's another shoe: Hand them off to others," *The Commercial Appeal*, 4 August 2005, p. A1.

¹⁵⁶ Bailey, *The Confederates of Memphis*.

rate among the nation's 60 largest cities," and that "seven of 10 births in Shelby County are to unmarried African-American women – twice the national average. Half of all African-American children in Shelby County live with single parents." Additionally, Reverend Coleman Crawford is quoted as stating, "There are so many pressing issues...that are really hurting our people. This park issue seems minor in comparison."¹⁵⁷ While all of these are important issues to the Memphis black community and need to be addressed, the causes of these problems lie deeply rooted within the ideology of white supremacy represented by the Forrest monument and cannot be satisfactorily resolved outside of this debate.

As usual, the most recent controversy surrounding Nathan Bedford Forrest's monument went unresolved and the monument still stands today. In a city dominated by African Americans, who control the mayor's office as well as many seats on the city council, it would seem to be a foregone conclusion that Forrest's monument, along with its racist undertones, would be removed from display in the city. But instead, it appears that the power of white supremacy is still felt in Memphis. The recent attempt to hold a minstrel show is just one example of this. But even more telling is the refusal of Forrest's supporters to publicly acknowledge the racism behind this event, instead defending it as humorous entertainment even when confronted by more reasonable members of the community.

¹⁵⁷ "Looking for a cause? Many are worth a fight," *The Commercial Appeal*, 7 August 2005, p. V1.

Epilogue

As the 2005 events in Memphis indicate, the controversy over Forrest's monument has not been resolved. But even more importantly, racial issues in the United States, exemplified by the Forrest controversy, also remain unresolved. It would probably be safe to assume that most people in this country, including many in Memphis, do not know who Nathan Bedford Forrest was, nor do they know what the celebration of his memory represents. It may also be true that the neo-Confederates who continue to celebrate Forrest's memory are a small, but vocal, minority. But discounting either Forrest or the neo-Confederates without addressing the racial issues at the heart of this debate would be a mistake.

The neo-Confederates, and their cause, have been positively recognized by a number of this country's leaders in the past two decades. In 2001, John Ashcroft, former attorney general, gave an interview to the neo-Confederate magazine, *Southern Partisan*, and praised the journal for "defending Southern patriots like [Robert E.] Lee, [Stonewall] Jackson and [Jefferson] Davis." Other national leaders have also been associated with the movement's beliefs. In 1984, Trent Lott told *Southern Partisan* "the modern Republican Party reflects many of the values of Jefferson Davis." Even current presidential candidate John McCain has had associations with neo-Confederates. During his 2000 presidential campaign, Richard Quinn, a onetime editor of *Southern Partisan*, was employed on his campaign staff.¹⁵⁸ The association of these national leaders with a magazine that is

¹⁵⁸ Alicia Montgomery, Ashcroft Whistles Dixie, 3 January 2001, available from <http://archive.salon.com/politics/feature/2001/01/03/partisan/>; Internet; accessed 8 April 2008.

known to support and promote the neo-Confederate agenda is an indication of the support this agenda has even from people who are not directly involved with neo-Confederate organizations.

On March 18, 2008, Senator Barack Obama reminded us that we have yet to truly address the problems of racism in the United States. Evoking William Faulkner in a paraphrase of Faulkner famous statement about the past, he said: "The past isn't dead and buried. In fact, it isn't even past."¹⁵⁹ These words, used frequently to describe the mentality of the South, also testify to the hold that Forrest's legacy continues to have in the present. Not everyone recognizes this fact though. During the 2005 Memphis controversy, some people hoped to resolve the immediate issue without addressing the legacy of racism and white supremacy that lay at its core. Some suggestions were made to share Forrest Park with African-American heroes, such as Memphis civil rights leader Ida B. Wells. Others believed that the controversy offered "an opportunity for Memphians to embrace a process that offers respect for different viewpoints."¹⁶⁰ These types of suggestions indicate a desire to avoid the controversy through simplistic solutions and only lead to additional problems in the long term. While they may relieve the immediate controversy, they do not change the fact that Forrest's monument celebrates his racist past and promotes notions of white supremacy in the present. This is the past that is not "dead and buried."

Senator Obama also called attention to the fact that many of the current disparities in African American communities "can be directly traced to inequities

¹⁵⁹ Barack Obama, A More Perfect Union, 18 March 2008, available from <http://my.barackobama.com/page/content/hisownwords/>; Internet; accessed 9 April 2008.

¹⁶⁰ "Lowrey seeking 'dialog' on parks – Says bickering is divisive, harmful to Memphis's image," *The Commercial Appeal*, 7 August 2005, p. B3.

passed on from an earlier generation that suffered under the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow.”¹⁶¹ These disparities can certainly be found in Memphis. Obama challenged the white community to acknowledge and to address the legacy of discrimination in the African American community, “Not just with words, but with deeds.” The first deed that the white and black communities in Memphis might take to meet this challenge is to remove the Forrest monument. There would be opposition but it might go far in helping the city eliminate the legacy of white supremacy and begin the process of working together to solve the city’s problems.

¹⁶¹ Obama, *A More Perfect Union*.

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