

FORREST & THE KLAN:

WHAT ARE THE FACTS?

“Bedford Forrest founded the Ku Klux Klan!” “Forrest was the Grand Wizard of the KKK.” Whenever a controversy concerning Confederate cavalry general Nathan Bedford Forrest arises these statements are sure to appear in print, in electronic media, and on broadcast news.[1]

History, whether pursued as an academic discipline by a student or followed as a topic of interest by an individual, depends on sources for evidence to support the claims made by historians. These sources must be subjected to examination to demonstrate their reliability and veracity. To allow readers to examine the reliability and veracity of their claims historians add footnotes/endnotes to their works. The process of examination, substantiation, and verification is crucial for reading, writing, and teaching history which

reveals the truth about the past as opposed the proliferation of mere propaganda. Propaganda makes claims which cannot be verified or substantiated. The same is true of legend, folklore, and tradition for these too make claims not subject to verification, even though these claims may be widely believed and accepted.

Today a book written by a living author about the Civil War would properly be designated as a “secondary source.” A secondary source is any source about an event, period, or issue in history that was produced after that event, period, or issue has passed.

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

context of its times.

No serious historian argues that Forrest organized the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan was begun by six men, whose names are known, in Pulaski, Tennessee. Intended to be a social club, the Klan quickly adopted political goals and began to oppose the Radical Republican plan for Reconstruction.

One prominent historian, Robert Selph Henry says of Forrest : *His second public career, in the days after the war, however, rests entirely on tradition and legend, for most of what he did in those desperate days of struggle was never written down and some of it, no doubt, never told.* [2] No evidence of involvement with the Klan.

An even earlier historian, John Allan Wyeth, concluded that Forrest was not intimately involved in the Klan for a very simple reason: he was too obvious a candidate for the position of leader. Forrest felt it was inevitable that

suspicion would focus on the Klan as it began to make an effective resistance to the policies of Reconstruction.

Forrest was too good a strategist to occupy such an obvious position. [3]

However, contemporary historians ignore these points.

Brian S. Wills says of Forrest, “if he did not command the Ku Klux Klan, Bedford Forrest certainly acted like a

commander.”[4] This is a reasonably fair statement since

Wills makes no assertion that Forrest was definitely the head of the Klan, although Wills fails to comment on the obvious fact that Forrest always acted like a commander.

Wills cites Robert Selph Henry's biography of Forrest, but references two pages on which Henry says that the

connection of Forrest with the Klan is a matter of tradition and folk belief. No proof of KKK activity there. Wills also

cites John Morton's book, *The Artillery of Nathan Bedford*

***Forrest*, and this book does indeed state that he inducted Forrest into the Klan. Morton wrote his book in 1909, more than forty years after the incident was supposed to have occurred, and at a time when the Klan had a positive reputation in white folk memory.**

Actually, the account of Forrest joining the Klan is in an appendix to Morton's book and was not written by Morton. The material first appeared in a magazine article written by Rev. Thomas Dixon, Jr., a Baptist preacher who also wrote novels. The best known of Dixon's books is *The Clansman*. So, a question must be raised here. The movie *Birth of a Nation* was based on his novel *The Clansman* and the movie was a smash hit across the nation. Did Dixon's enthusiasm for the Klan influence Morton so that Morton overplayed the involvement of Forrest with the Klan? In short, did Morton “remember” inducting Forrest into the organization because

such an association would make Forrest look good in the eyes of the public in the early Twentieth Century?

Another piece of “evidence” cited by Wills is an account in Stanley F. Horn's *Invisible Empire* in which a former Klansman, George W. Libby, said Forrest was the Grand Wizard and claimed to have heard Forrest speak to a gathering of the Klan in Memphis. The account given by Libby was printed in an article in the *Confederate Veteran* for November 1930.[6] This means the account depends on the memory of an aged man who could produce no documentary evidence to support his account. The article was also written at a time when a second version of the Klan had emerged and had gained national acceptance and prominence.

It will be argued that many people can remember events which happened to them much earlier in their lives, that most people have memories of events dating back to their

childhood. When psychiatrists examine memories it is not unusual to find that the “memory” consists of things held in memory from the time of the event but which have been mixed with information acquired later. People “remember” what happened to them but mix with that information things they learned or heard later. The greater the amount of time which has passed between the event and the recalling of the “memory” the greater the amount of “learned” material will be mixed with the original material. In the case of the 1930 article in *The Confederate Veteran* it should be asked, “How much of this account happened as the author remembered it; how much of the account reflects what the author had heard over the last sixty years?”

The evidence provided by Morton and Libby that Forrest was the Grand Wizard of the Klan is properly identified by historians as “anecdotal evidence.” The *Oxford English*

***Dictionary* defines “anecdote” as *the narrative of a detached incident that is interesting or striking.* the accuracy of the evidence. Anecdotal evidence must be open to testing from other sources; in history, anecdotal evidence would ideally be open to verification by reference to documents. Since the anecdotal evidence of Morton and Libby cannot be verified it must be considered weak and their testimony does not prove an association between Forrest and the Klan..**

Jack Hurst, in his biography of Forrest, is more tentative in identifying Forrest as leader of the Klan. He points out that there are several versions of stories of how Forrest is said to have an involvement with the organization and that all these stories lack documentation. Hurst also points out that the Klan did not gain significant numbers of adherents until Congress passed a Reconstruction Act on March 2, 1867.

This act divided ten of the former Confederate states into

five military districts and stated they would be kept under martial law until they ratified the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution which granted citizenship to African Americans.[9] The votes of the southern states were needed to ratify this amendment because so many northern states had rejected the amendment. Among the northern states which rejected the 14th Amendment were Delaware, California, Oregon, New Jersey, and Ohio. California ratified the Amendment in 1959, Oregon in 1973, New Jersey and Ohio finally did so in 2003.[10] In 1867 Arkansas, Florida, North Carolina, and South Carolina ratified the 14th Amendment but their action presents a very bizarre situation; they could not qualify as members of the Union until they performed a function which only members of the Union can perform, namely, ratify a Constitutional amendment! How these “states” could act as states when they were not legally

states was, and is, a conundrum.

This imposition of military occupation and forced agreement to an amendment which was widely rejected in the north infuriated the ex-Confederates and fueled the recruiting efforts of the Klan. Also fueling the fire of Klan activity were the often-expressed goals of the Radical members of Congress. This faction called for the long-term disenfranchisement of former Confederates so that the Freedmen and Southern Unionists could take charge of southern state governments; private property would be confiscated and given to the Freedmen so they could become self-sufficient (“forty acres and a mule” was the popular slogan which described this plan); and federally supported schools would be established for the education of the Freedmen.[11]

Racial views certainly intensified the political struggle.

The Southern Unionists depended on the political support of the Freedmen but neither did they believe in the concept of racial equality. Even a staunch Confederate-hater such as “Parson” Brownlow had contempt for African Americans. An equal share of racial antipathy was found in the north. C. Vann Woodward, in his seminal work *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, points out that “the system (of Jim Crow) was born in the North and reached an advanced age before moving South in force.”[12]

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

Popular conceptions about the Klan picture it as a vast, well-organized, paramilitary force which followed a plan of action conceived and administered by leaders acting from the

top down. Such a concept is totally wrong. The Klan existed in pockets across the South and each local organization, or “Den,” was relatively small. In Obion County it is estimated that there were sixty Klan members; about fifty Klansmen participated in a riot in Bedford County, in Shelby County the presence of Federal troops and State Militia provided a damper on Klan activity. The area around the Middle Tennessee towns of Columbia and Pulaski seems to have been the center of Ku Klux strength.[14] In addition, there were a number of regional groups which functioned as night-riders who used terror tactics to intimidate Republican voters. These groups included the Palefaces, the Knights of the White Camellia, and the Redshirts. Popular imagination has lumped all these into a single group which it has labeled “KKK.”

What did Forrest himself have to say about the Klan? In

1868 a reporter for the Cincinnati *Commercial* interviewed Forrest about the organization. Forrest replied: *Well, sir, there is such an organization, not only in Tennessee but all over the South and its numbers have not been exaggerated.*

Forrest then said the Klan had forty thousand members in Tennessee and over half a million in the South. Forrest said he understood the original purpose of the Klan had been to protect former Confederates from the Union League and the Grand Army of the Republic but that it had taken on political motives, including the support of the Democratic party. The Klan was well organized throughout the South, Forrest told the reporter, down to the local level with a person in each voting precinct who kept lists of who belonged to which party. Forrest also said that the target of the Klan was Radicals and not Negroes. [17 For some writers this has provided proof that Forrest was a high ranking officer in the

Klan; more likely, this is a good example of Forrest “pulling the leg” of a man who was ready to believe anything the fabled former cavalryman told him.

During the summer of 1871 Forrest was summoned to Washington, D.C., to testify before a congressional committee which was investigating the activities of the Klan. The testimony took place on June 27. By 1871 Tennessee had been under the control of conservative Democrats for two years and several other Southern states had also ended the rule of Radical Republicans. A bill passed by congress had made membership in the Klan a crime and this law had been firmly enforced in those states where Radical rule remained in place. This Federal intervention brought the Klan to its knees so that it was no longer an effective force by 1872.[18]

Thus, when Forrest appeared before the Congressional committee he had to be very careful in answering their

questions. Popular opinion identified him with the Klan, even made him its leader, and although no legal evidence could be brought as proof against him, Forrest knew that the committee would be quite willing to place the worst possible interpretation on anything he said.

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

Although stated as facts these are merely assumptions and assertions. It is also possible that Forrest knew men who were active in the Klan and that he got his information from them without himself being personally involved. It is also asserted that Forrest could not have helped bring an end

to the Klan unless he was a member, and probably the head, of the Klan. Such assertions ignore the influence Forrest had on many former Confederates; many men admired Forrest and would have been willing to follow his advice even if he was not the titular head of the organization.

Most telling of all, this Reconstruction-era Republican Investigating Committee exonerated Forrest of all involvement with the Klan and commended him on using his influence to counter it! This is Primary Source evidence. Why is it ignored?

Beginning in the decade of the 1970's, following the height of the Civil Rights Movement and during the rise of the woman's movement, the history of the United States began to be viewed from the perspective of race and gender. During this time the way historians interpreted the causes of the Civil War changed. Instead of seeing many causes for the

conflict many academic historians came to advocate the view that there was only one cause for the war, namely, slavery.

This led to the idea that the entire Confederate effort was based on an attempt to perpetuate the institution of slavery. The actions of Confederate leaders came to be evaluated primarily in terms of how those actions affected people of color. Of all Confederate leaders whose actions were thought to affect people of color Bedford Forrest rose to the head of the list. His supposed association with the Klan was seen as the continuation of his views and attitudes which had led him to be a slave trader before the war and to order a massacre of black soldiers at Fort Pillow in April 1864. Because race was the perspective which determined historical interpretation Forrest was damned without a hearing. The “evidence” against him was so overwhelming that it did not require examination. Forrest was to be condemned because

the Confederacy was to be condemned. In short, Forrest was the Confederate most easily associated with race and he was easiest to dislike and to damn.

Thus, Forrest is portrayed as the founder and head of the Klan because so many people seem to want to believe that this is the case; to paraphrase Admiral David Farragut of the U.S. Navy, “Damn the facts, full speed ahead!”

While older scholarship alleges, but cannot prove, that Forrest was involved with the Klan the most recent scholarship supports the position that Forrest cannot reliably be linked to the leadership of the Klan. Elaine Frantz Parsons, in her *Ku-Klux: The Birth of the Klan During Reconstruction*, severely criticizes Trelease and others for their unsubstantiated claims concerning Forrest and she concludes “There is also no compelling contemporary evidence to establish that Forrest ever exercised any

leadership function . . . “ [8] Parsons received her Ph.D. from The Johns Hopkins University and is a professor at Duquesne University where she not only teaches courses in U.S. History but also serves as Director of the Women's and Gender Studies Center.

Eric Foner is contemporarily the most highly acclaimed and recognized scholar of the Civil War and Reconstruction period. His book, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution*, is the standard text in most university courses on the Reconstruction period. Foner discusses the KuKluxKlan at length but he does not mention Forrest at all. Foner does say :

One should not think of the Klan, even in its heyday, as possessing a well-organized structure or clearly defined regional leadership. Acts of violence were generally committed by local groups on their own initiative.[9]

If there was no South-wide organization requiring “clearly defined regional leadership” the concept of Forrest as an all-powerful leader of a monolithic organization is folklore, not a fact of history.

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

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

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

IT IS TIME TO ABANDON THE MYTH OF FORREST AND THE KLAN.