Nathan Bedford Forrest: The Confederacy's Self-Made Cavalry Hero

Brian Arner

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NATHAN BEDFORD FORREST:
THE CONFEDERACY’S SELF-MADE CAVALRY HERO

RESEARCH METHODS IN HISTORY
DR. BENJAMIN MCARTHUR
8-DECEMBER-1994

BRIAN ARNER
Anxiously, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton opened William Tecumseh Sherman’s letter. Somewhat troubled, he read of Sherman’s intention to order two subordinates to tail Nathan Bedford Forrest. The urgency of the letter was obvious. These officers were to "follow Forrest to the death, if it cost 10,000 lives and breaks the Treasury," since "there will never be peace in Tennessee till Forrest is dead." ¹

So Sherman regarded Nathan Bedford Forrest, one of the most revered and colorful officers of the Civil War. He classified Forrest as a leader of "the most dangerous set of men that this war has turned loose upon the world," adding that "these men must all be killed or employed by us before we can hope for peace." ² Later, he described Forrest as "the most remarkable man the civil war produced on either side . . . . He had a genius for strategy which was original and to me incomprehensible." ³ At one time, Sherman even offered to promote Brigadier General Joseph R. Mower "to the rank of major general" merely for obeying the command to "pursue and kill Forrest." ⁴


³F. Norton Boothe, Great Generals of the Civil War and Their Battles (New York: Gallery, 1986), 133.

Yet Sherman was not alone in his respect for Forrest. Other leaders had similar praises for the cavalry leader. General Joseph E. Johnston unhesitatingly identified Forrest as "the greatest soldier in the war." A friend of Ulysses Grant once related that Forrest "was the only Confederate cavalryman of whom Grant stood in much dread." If Grant learned Forrest was "on the prowl," "he at once became apprehensive, because the latter [Forrest] was amenable to no known rules of procedure, was a law unto himself for all military acts, and was constantly doing the unexpected at all times and places."

Forrest gained his reputation through extraordinary accomplishments, some examples of which are impressive. During one expedition through northern Alabama and south central Tennessee (Sept. 21-Oct. 6, 1864), Forrest reported capturing "86 commissioned officers, 1274 non-commissioned officers and privates, 67 government employees, [and] 933 negroes" while killing and wounding "about 1000 more," totaling "an average of one to each man I had in the engagements." Additionally, he captured "800 horses, seven pieces of artillery, 2000 strands of small arms, seven hundred saddles, fifty wagons and ambulances." He also destroyed one railroad while only having 47 of his men killed and 293 wounded during the raid.

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5 Boothe, 133.
7 Horn, 271.
The following month Forrest conducted his similarly successful Johnsonville expedition. He reported capturing and destroying "four gunboats, fourteen transports, twenty barges, twenty-six pieces of artillery, and $6,700,000 worth of property" while capturing 150 prisoners, obtaining 9000 pairs of shoes, and seizing 1000 blankets. He suffered only 2 men killed and nine wounded. 8

Forrest's bravery and tenacity matched his accomplishments. During the war, he was wounded 4 times and had 29 horses shot from under him. On one particular occasion, Forrest's horse was shot in the neck while he was chasing the Federals. Undaunted, Forrest remedied the problem by sticking his finger in the wound to stop the bleeding until he reached his destination. 9 Such determination helps explain how he was able to kill 30 enemy soldiers during the war. 10 His willingness to personally lead out on the front line caused General Richard Taylor to "doubt if any commander since the days of the lion-hearted Richard killed as many enemies with his own hand as Forrest." 11

Despite the high praise he received, his incredible accomplishments, and his valiant courage, Forrest seems to have

8Ibid, 277.
9Foote, 2:759.
10Steven E. Woodworth, Jefferson Davis and His Generals: The Failure of Confederate Command in the West (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1990), 132.
been delegated to a minor role in the Confederate strategy. At the height of his command, he led but ten thousand inexperienced troops, most of whom he himself recruited. He was isolated within Union territory where he waged guerilla-type warfare against superior forces while receiving little support from the Confederate government. Why was Forrest not given a more significant role in the defense of the Confederacy? To fully answer this one must examine Forrest's background. His education, personality, and desire for independence all helped cast him into the part he played.

I

Unlike many of the Confederacy's generals, Bedford Forrest— as he was called—came from a very modest background. He was raised in the backwoods of Bedford County, Tennessee. Bedford's father, William, was a respectable blacksmith and the Forrest family did reasonably well while Bedford was a child. In 1837, however, when Bedford was not yet sixteen, William Forrest died, leaving Bedford, his oldest son, to care for his mother and his eight younger siblings.

Being the "man" of the family was a tough responsibility for young Forrest. He spent most of his time either out in the field working the family farm, tending to the livestock, or by the fireplace making clothes for his younger brothers. What little free time he did find he usually spent out in the woods hunting.

When Forrest was twenty-one, he felt his younger brothers
were old enough to care for the household without him, so he ventured out on his own. He joined his uncle in an operation Bedford seemed naturally suited for: livestock trading. Blessed with an uncommon knack for business, Forrest prospered and soon expanded his operations to include real estate and slave trade. His success became apparent in 1845 when he married Mary Ann Montgomery, a member of a high-class family.

In 1849 Forrest moved to Memphis, where he became very influential. Although he spent much of his time on business trips, he remained in Memphis enough to actively serve as an alderman. By this time he had grabbed a large share of the regional slave-trade market and was investing his profits in real estate. By 1860 he had amassed a fortune: he owned over 2300 acres, owned 36 slaves, had a personal estate worth $90,000, and a yearly income of $30,000 from his cotton plantation.12

Although Forrest’s wealth gained him membership into the upper class, his background made him an ill-equipped member. Forrest was undoubtedly hampered throughout his life by his lack of education. Uneducated past the third grade—though he did learn mathematical and speaking skills in his business dealings—he often appeared rough-hewn and unsophisticated.13 He spelled

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13Boothe, 123.
atrociously throughout his life.¹⁴ His strong accent also
gained a reputation. His "idiosyncrasies" of speech "were
repeated and exaggerated" until many thought he was "more awkward
and boorish in his speech as well as manner than he really
was."¹⁵

Forrest was quite aware of his shortcomings. Although he
had gleaned "an excellent idea of the use of words and the
construction of phrases" in his business dealings, he often felt
uncultured. "No one knows the embarrassment I labor under when
thrown in the company of educated persons," he once remarked.¹⁶
On another occasion he voiced his disdain for writing by
muttering: "I never see a pen but what I think of a snake."¹⁷
Forrest's uneasiness and educational defects would be noticed by
his more-polished superiors during the war and adversely effected
his advancement.

II

Forrest had no military training when he entered the war; he
enlisted, in fact, as a private. Being wealthy, however, he was
able to recruit and supply a whole unit and became commander of
it. His subsequent promotions, though, were based on his

¹⁴Major Anderson, one of his colleagues, noted that his
spelling was "governed by sound, and his spelling, like his
fighting, was the shortest way to the end" (Wyeth, Devil, 554).

¹⁵Ibid., 555.

¹⁶Ibid., 554, 555.

¹⁷Ibid.
battlefield performance.

Forrest's capabilities were noted very early in the war. In a letter written to General Sidney Johnston in November, 1861, Samuel Tate describes Forrest's regiment as being as "fine a body of men as ever went to the field. . . . Give Forrest a chance," he adds, "and he will distinguish himself."18 Two months later, General Charles Clark seconded that opinion, raving about Forrest's performance in "one of the most brilliant and successful cavalry engagements which the present war has witnessed." He noted Forrest's "skill, courage, and energy" and took great "pleasure in calling to the attention of the general commanding and of the Government to his services."19

Forrest's leadership in two significant engagements attracted attention. He gained fame at Fort Donelson by guiding a small group of Southerners on a bold escape from the Union siege just before the fort surrendered. At Shiloh, Forrest demonstrated his flexibility by leading a regiment of infantry when the use of the cavalry proved ineffective. Such skills were not taught in military academies.

In one respect Forrest's lack of traditional military training was actually an asset on the battlefield. His unorthodox tactics often gave him an advantage when facing a superior force. One favorite stratagem was to exaggerate the size of his force, implementing, as he called it, "the skeer."

19O.R., ser. 1, vol. 7, p. 64.
Once while pursuing General Jeremiah Sullivan, he had his men beat kettledrums "at widely scattered points" to create this illusion. Later, he had a group of captured Union soldiers overhear "bogus dispatches" before they were paroled "to spread bizarre reports of his strength." 20

On another occasion, while communicating with a Union officer, Forrest tried a similar ploy. When the officer declared that he would not surrender until Forrest proved he had superior forces, Forrest had his men haul the same two guns over a visible stretch of road repeatedly. At last, feeling overwhelmed, the Union officer declared: "'Name of God! How many guns have you got? That's fifteen I've counted already.' Forrest coolly responded, saying, "I reckon that's all that has kept up." The officer subsequently surrendered. 21

Forrest's creativity was revealed even when he was under pressure. In late 1862 he once found his regiment caught between Union forces on both sides. Pressed by his officers for orders, he unexpectedly commanded them to "charge both ways." 22

These strategies did not come from any textbook, because Forrest had never studied any. Yet he possessed personal qualities which made up for this deficiency. As one British historian put it: "What he lacked in book-lore was to a large extent compensated for by the soundness of his judgement upon all

20 Foote 2: 66, 67.
21 Ibid., 185.
22 Ibid., 68.
great occasions, and by his power of thinking and reasoning with
great rapidity under fire."\(^{23}\)

In at least one respect Forrest actually anticipated
military thought. He was one of the first to identify the
changing role of the cavalry. His men often "fought dragoon-
style, riding to battle and dismounting to fight. This idea of
[a] highly mobile striking power was to bear fruit from that
point on in warfare."\(^{24}\)

Despite Forrest's unique style, his lack of training could
be a liability, a drawback most noticeable early in the war when
he lacked an accomplished reputation. His inexperience was
especially noticeable in the eyes of General Bragg, who viewed
Forrest as "primarily a raider, not only a nonprofessional but an
'irregular.'"\(^{25}\) On another occasion, Bragg refused to send any
supplies to Forrest's men, whom he considered "only partisan
guerrillas."\(^{26}\) In November 1862, when Bragg was selecting a
chief of cavalry for the Army of Tennessee, he selected the West
Point-trained Wheeler over Forrest. Bragg "considered the non-
professional Forrest a mere partisan, with few capabilities for
high command." Wheeler, on the other hand, "possessed a suavity,
love of drill, and a vocabulary that outshone the rough-hewn

\(^{23}\) F. Norton Boothe, *Great Generals of the Civil War and Their
Battles* (New York: Gallery, 1986), 133.

\(^{24}\) Ibid., 122.

\(^{25}\) Ibid., 2: 813.

\(^{26}\) Hurst, 108.
Forrest."

Forrest would have experienced difficulties in his rise to the top even without Bragg’s bias. He lacked two qualities that training may have given him, namely "discipline and organization" that would have allowed him to fit into the war effort more easily. General Joseph E. Johnston speculated that had Forrest received proper training, he would have become "the great central figure of the war."  

III

Forrest had a particularly difficult time disciplining his temper. He became easily enraged and displayed his wrath to both subordinates and superiors. On one occasion, a green soldier Forrest caught running away from the front line of a battle experienced this temper first-hand. A witness recalled Forrest grabbing the man and administering "one of the worst thrashing I have ever seen a human being get." Shoving the soldier back to the front, Forrest yelled: "Now, God damn you, go back to the front and fight," adding that he "might as well be killed there as here, for if you ever run away again you’ll not get off so

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29 Ibid., 653.
This type of reaction was not singular. A scout once brought a report that Forrest knew to be false. Forrest immediately leapt from his horse, grabbed the man, and administered a severe beating. After ramming the scout's head into a tree several times, Forrest released him, warning, "Now damn you, if you ever come to me again with a pack of lies you won't get off so easy!"

Forrest's officers were not immune to similar treatment. Forrest, a man who believed an officer should lead by example, once became angered when he saw an officer idly watching his men struggling to get a caisson across a flooded creek. When Forrest asked the man why he wasn't helping out, he tersely replied that he was an officer. "I'll officer you!" Forrest angrily responded as he leveled the man with one blow of his fist.

Another officer had a more fatal run-in with Forrest. Forrest, unhappy with the officer's performance, had asked that he be transferred. The disgruntled officer soon confronted Forrest and their conversation abruptly halted when the man shot Forrest in the hip. Enraged, Forrest grabbed the man and stabbed him in the abdomen. Forrest then went to have his own wound

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30Foote 2: 931.


examined, and, when hearing the doctor's negative prognosis, became enraged and again chased after his advisory proclaiming that no one would kill him and live. Forrest's statement turned out to be half true when the officer died from his wound a few days later.\footnote{Woodworth 224,225.}

Forrest often had problems in getting along with his superiors as well. These disagreements often arose over strategic decisions that Forrest disagreed with. His reactions periodically included outright insubordination.

John Morton, Forrest's chief of artillery, relates one example of this. On one occasion General Hood ordered Forrest to send him some mules. Forrest refused, saying, "None of my mules will be sent in on that order." The next day, when another officer came asking about the mules, Forrest went into a rage, declaring that:

The order will not be obeyed; and, moreover, if Major Ewing bothers me any further about this matter, I'll come down to his office, tie his long legs into a double bowknot around his neck, and choke him to death with his own shins. It's a fools order anyway.\footnote{Henry, Forrest, 273.}

General Wheeler was the target of another such incident. On several occasions Forrest had been unhappy with the commander's leadership. After one argument Forrest immediately alerted his officers of the dispute because he felt if he was killed during...
the ensuing battle he did not want "to be held responsible for any disaster that may result."\textsuperscript{35}

At last the tension reached the breaking point. Major Charles W. Anderson, one of Forrest's leading officers, reports that after the Confederate's "disastrous" attack on Federal entrenchments at Dover, TN in 1863, Generals Wheeler and Wharton met with Forrest. After Forrest angrily remarked that he had "no fault to find with my men," Wheeler assured him that his report would do "ample justice" to Forrest and his men. Unsatisfied, Forrest responded:

General Wheeler, I advised you against this attack, and said all a subordinate officer should have said against it, and nothing you can now say or do will bring back my brave men laying dead or wounded and freezing around that fort tonight, I mean no disrespect to you; you know my feelings of personal friendship for you; you can have my sword if you demand it; but there is one thing I do want you to put in that report to General Bragg--tell him that I will be in my coffin before I again fight under your command.\textsuperscript{36}

Forrest's disagreements with Wheeler were on a professional level; the two parted and remained friends until death. A more personal dispute once arose between Forrest and General Van Dorn. Van Dorn confronted Forrest because he didn't appreciate the way

\textsuperscript{35}Hurst, 113.

\textsuperscript{36}Wyeth, Devil, 131, 132.
he had been portrayed in reports issued by Forrest's aides. Tempers increased until the two actually drew swords and were about to duel. Forrest, however, in a rare pacifying gesture, ended the confrontation by noting that a fight "would be a bad example to the men, and there was, after all, the cause to think about."37

A much more bitter dispute arose between Forrest and Bragg. As noted earlier, Bragg was slow in recognizing Forrest's leadership abilities. At one point he reportedly remarked to an officer that he didn't have "a single general officer fit for command--look at Forrest . . . . The man is ignorant, and does not know anything of cooperation. He is nothing more than a good raider."38 Conversely, Forrest often questioned Bragg's leadership.

Hostilities between the two heightened in September, 1863, when Forrest was serving directly under Bragg in the Chattanooga area. At one point, Forrest got the upper hand in a fight with a Union force and was driving them from Chickamauga towards Chattanooga. Seeing his opportunity to sustain a major victory and capture the Union force, Forrest requested that additional troops immediately be sent to his aid. After receiving no reply for some time, Forrest personally went to see Bragg and found him


38James Lee McDonough, Chattanooga--A Death Grip on the Confederacy (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984), 32; cited in Willis, 143.
asleep. Bragg refused to send troops, claiming they lacked sufficient supplies. Forrest promptly responded by pointing out that supplies were available in Chattanooga, but to no avail.\(^{39}\) On his departure, Forrest exasperatedly asked bystanders, "What does he fight battles for?"\(^ {40}\)

The conflict between the two intensified when Bragg temporarily ordered Forrest’s men to join those serving under General Wheeler. Forrest reacted by sending a "fiery" letter to Bragg, proclaiming "'Bragg never got such a letter as that before from a brigader.'"\(^ {41}\)

The situation reached a climax the next day when Forrest personally visited Bragg. Ignoring all official formalities of respect, Forrest stormed into the general’s tent and boldly confronted him saying:

I have stood your meanness as long as I intend to. You have played the part of a damned scoundrel, and are a coward, and if you were any part of a man I would slap your jaws and force you to resent it. You may as well not issue any more orders to me, for I will not obey them . . . and I say to you that if you ever again try to interfere with me or cross my path it will be at the peril of your life.\(^ {42}\)

\(^{39}\) Wyeth, Devil, 244, 245.

\(^{40}\) Foote, 2: 760.

\(^{41}\) Ibid., 812.

\(^{42}\) Ibid., 813.
His anger vented, Forrest left the tent as boldly as he had entered. The two did not put their differences behind them as Forrest and Wheeler had done. Friendly relations were never re-established between them. As Forrest traveled to visit Jefferson Davis shortly after the incident, he told Colonel R. B. Kyle that "he would not serve longer under Bragg" because "he was not competent to command any army."\footnote{Wyeth, Devil, 244,245.}

IV

Such blatant insubordination would have gotten a lesser officer court martialed. Forrest, however, was too valuable for the Confederacy to discard. Yet something had to be done with him, for he could not continue to serve under Bragg. Where would Forrest be placed? What kind of responsibilities would he be given? By this time, Southern leaders had had adequate time to evaluate Forrest's strengths. How would they use them?

The answer came, in part, from Forrest himself. Forrest had earlier submitted a request to the Adjutant and Inspector General's office on Aug 9, 1863, asking to be transferred with 400 men and artillery to Western Tennessee and Northern Mississippi. There, he intended to "obstruct the navigation of the Mississippi River," and "procure a large force . . . inside the enemy lines." He desired this transfer because of "repeated solicitations of numerous friends and acquaintances resident in West Tennessee and Northern Mississippi." He also desired the
move "to serve my country to the best of my ability, and wherever those services can be rendered most available and most effective. . . ." He added that his knowledge of the geography, the "prominent planters" of the region, the Mississippi River, and his men's familiarity of the region made this an ideal transfer for him.

Yet the Confederate leadership did not readily agree, even after Forrest's confrontation with Bragg. Bragg, though quick to point out Forrest's shortcomings, realized his contribution to the fighting around Chattanooga. He was, consequently, hesitant to let Forrest go. Jefferson Davis, oversensitive to Bragg's wishes, delayed the request despite Forrest's personal appeal made during a meeting with Davis. Davis did, however, reassure Forrest "of the full appreciation by the Southern people and by himself" for the "services he had rendered, and of his desire to conform to Forrest's wishes for an independent command in Mississippi and West Tennessee." Tennessee Governor Isham G. Harris also lobbied for Forrest's promotion, causing Davis to respond that Forrest's "services have heretofore attracted my favorable notice."

Early in October, Bragg, noting a change in "public interest," removed his objections and asked "that the transfer be

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45 Wyeth, Devil, 245.

made." Shortly, Forrest embarked for Western Tennessee with 310 men. His artillery, however, was "wholly inadequate" to obstruct navigation on the Mississippi. This oversight was against the better judgement of James A. Seddan, Confederate Secretary of War. Upon viewing Forrest's initial request for transfer, Seddan noted that his proposal to halt Union traffic on the Mississippi River would strip "the North of most of the fruits of their late success in Mississippi, and satisfy the Northwest of the impossibility of ever enjoying the Mississippi as an avenue of trade without peace and amity with the Confederate states." He added that the cavalry might effectively cut off trade on the Mississippi, the Union's only practical supply route to Mississippi and Louisiana. Davis, however, hesitated on the idea and "lost the untold benefits which might have accrued had this genius in war been turned, loose and untrammelled, to employ his never-ending resources in this important work."49

Although Forrest was restricted in his ability to strike Union shipping, he was to a large extent "turned loose" in the West. Here he had more control over his own operations. This control was bolstered in early December, 1863, when Forrest was promoted to the rank of major general. Davis telegraphed General J. E. Johnston informing him that Forrest "was promoted to meet

48 Ibid., 645; cited in Hurst 142.
49 Wyeth, Devil, 247.
your wants, and the suggestion as to his position was made because of his local knowledge."\textsuperscript{50}

Forrest performed admirably on his home soil. Starting with a small contingent of men, his ranks swelled rapidly as he went through the countryside recruiting. He took responsibility for supplying his men, which he often did at his own expense. During one expedition, for example, Forrest spent $20,000 of his own money on supplies.\textsuperscript{51}

General Viscount Wolsey, a chief officer in the British army, visited Forrest's command in 1864. His observations, later recorded in an article, are a tribute to Forrest's success in the West. He recalled watching Forrest's men file by one morning. They numbered about 10,000 men suitably provided with blankets and equipment mostly stamped with "U.S." stamped on them because of their origin. They utilized 16 artillery pieces, 250 wagons, and 50 four-horse ambulances. Forrest "himself had enlisted, equipped, armed, fed, and supplied with ammunition all this force, without any help from his own government." During the last few years, he had "obtained nothing from the Quartermasters' or the Commissariat Department of the Confederate States." All weapons, "clothing, equipment, ammunition, and other supplies then with his command, he had taken from the Northern armies

\textsuperscript{50}Rowland 6: 130.

\textsuperscript{51}Wyeth, Devil, 563.
opposed to him."\textsuperscript{52}

Yet Forrest did more than just arm his men with Union supplies. His raids slowed Sherman’s southeast push into Georgia. This strategy was part of a calculated plan approved by Jefferson Davis. In a telegram to General Richard Taylor, Davis argues Taylor would do "well" to employ Forrest "in operations on the enemy lines of communication, as well as to interfere with the transportation of supplies as reinforcement to General Sherman’s Army."\textsuperscript{53} Concerned about the security of his supply and communication lines, Sherman was forced to move cautiously southward. Forrest’s affect on Sherman’s advance was confirmed by Georgia Governor Joseph Brown who argued in July, 1864, that Atlanta would be safe "if ten thousand good calvary under Forrest were thrown in his [Sherman’s] rear side of Chattanooga and his supplies cut off." Otherwise, he speculates, Atlanta could be lost, an eventuality "fatal to our cause."\textsuperscript{54}

Consequently, Sherman was forced to divert a substantial force to capturing or at least controlling Forrest. But the mobile Forrest was not easy to capture or control. His elusive force roamed largely at will through the region. They even made a bold raid into Memphis, a city tightly held by Union forces.

Forrest’s newfound content with his command by 1864 is


\textsuperscript{53}Rowland, 6: 332-333.

\textsuperscript{54}Ibid., 6: 280.
reflected in his reports to Confederate headquarters. Writing from Jackson, Tennessee, in April, 1864, he expressed confidence that he could "whip any cavalry they can send against me." He declared his intent to remain in the area unless he was ordered elsewhere or "until driven out by the enemy." He did, however, "wish to have" his artillery and to "operate his rifle battery effectively" on the rivers. He stated his belief that he could "hold West Tennessee against three times" his number whereby supplying the Confederacy with "all conscripts and deserters for service in the infantry from the region." He added that if enough money were sent he would be able to supply his command with all the small arms and ammunition required. 55

Undoubtedly, one factor contributing to Forrest's satisfaction was the degree of independence he now enjoyed. While serving under Bragg, he had been restricted in his operations. At one point his men were even removed from his command and reassigned to Wheeler. Now, however, he served under Generals Stephen D. Lee and Dabney Maury who let him exercise control "as he saw fit." 56 Maury, upon assuming his command, made it a point to reassure Forrest that he was aware of Forrest's past success and did not intend to "interfere with your plan[s] for conducting these operations." 57

This arrangement suited Forrest much better. His career


56Willis, 237.

demonstrated that "when acting as part of a team," he abandoned his intuition, and "reverted to the strict obedience of orders." He "simply worked better on his own," flourishing when "he could act in a relatively independent manner, exercising control over his affairs" without "interference from his superiors."^58

John W. Morton, Forrest’s commander of artillery, speculates that Forrest’s personal history contributed to his desire for freedom. He notes that his early hardships, such as having to assume responsibility for nine family members at age 16, forced him "to think and act for himself, and thus, amid toil, privations, and hardships, he began development of that complete self-reliance which characterized his whole military career."^59

The potential of Forrest’s self-reliance was perhaps best seen in northeastern Mississippi at the Battle of Brice’s Crossroads, arguably his best campaign. In a post-victory address made to his troops on June 28, 1864, Forrest claimed to have captured 17 guns, 250 wagons, 300 strands of arms, 2,000 prisoners, and killed or wounded 2,000 more. This his 3,000 men achieved against 10,000 of "one of the best-appointed forces ever equipped by the Yankee nation."^60

Despite such success, however, it was soon apparent that

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^58Ibid., 294-295.


Forrest was fighting for a losing cause. Although Forrest's 5,000 men valiantly "tied down" over 200,000 Union troops, the Union's grip on the South continued to tightened and conditions deteriorated. Forrest had access to a diminishing base of resources and became more isolated from the Confederate command. By March, 1865, Jefferson Davis wrote General Robert E. Lee admitting he did "not know where and how Genl. Forrest is now employed." Forrest faithfully continued his efforts into April. Upon hearing of Lee's surrender in Virginia and Johnston's in North Carolina, he accepted the inevitable and decided it was time to end the fighting. He bluntly told some of his troops that they might do as they please, but he was "a-going home." When Governor Harris prompted him to continue fighting, Forrest flatly responded that "any man who is in favor of a further prosecution of this war is a fit subject for a lunatic asylum, and ought to be sent there immediately."

Forrest returned home after the war. In several ways he had given his all to the South. Besides risking his life continually, he had also lost his financial fortune supplying his own troops. Though he tried to regain his wealth in a railroad venture, he was never successful. His most notable post-war

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61Pittman, 53.
62Rowland, 6: 520.
"achievement" was his serving as the first Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan.

Ten years after the war, Forrest’s health began to deteriorate rapidly. As he sensed the end was near, he aptly summarized the theme of his life to John T. Morgan, his legal advisor:

My life has been a battle from the start. It was a fight to achieve a livelihood for those dependent upon me in my younger days, and independence for myself when I grew up to manhood, as well as in the terrible turmoil of the Civil War.

Historian Brian Willis argues these words "suggested the grip that the desire for control had on him throughout his life." 64

A large gathering assembled at Forrest’s funeral in 1877. Among them was Jefferson Davis, who explained why he had not used Forrest more effectively:

The trouble was that the generals commanding in the Southwest never appreciated him until it was too late. Their judgement was that he was a bold and enterprising raider and rider. I was mislead by them, and never knew how to measure him until I read the reports of his campaign across the Tennessee River in 1864. This induced a study of his earlier reports, and after that I was prepared to adopt what you are pleased to name as the judgement of history. . . . I saw it all after it

64 Wyeth, Life, 622-623; cited in Willis, 377-378; Willis, 378.
the judgement of history. . . . I saw it all after it was too late.\textsuperscript{65}

\textsuperscript{65} Foote 3: 1052-1053.
Bibliographical Essay

(Sources listed below not necessarily used in this paper)

Because of Forrest's colorful personality and outstanding military accomplishments, he has been the subject of many books. Three of the most authoritative books were written by men who fought with him after the war. *The Campaigns of Lieutenant Gen. N. B. Forrest and of Forrest's Cavalry*, General Thomas Jordan and J. P. Pryor (New Orleans and New York, 1868) was the first. Since this is the only book about Forrest which he personally helped write, it is considered to be the official autobiography. It is the most complete study of Forrest's military operations during the war. After years of study and hundreds of personal interviews, John Wyeth completed the second: *Life of General Nathan Bedford Forrest* (New York, 1899) [reprinted as *That Devil Forrest* (New York, 1959)] is frequently regarded as the standard biography. *The Artillery of Nathan Bedford Forrest's Cavalry, "The Wizard of the Saddle*, John Watson Morton (Nashville, 1909), was the last major work written by one of Forrest's officers.

Three additional notable books were published earlier this century: *Bedford Forrest and His Critter Company*, Andrew Nelson Lytle (New York, 1931); *"First With the Most" Forrest*, Robert Selph Henry (Indianapolis, 1944); and *As They Saw Forrest: Some Recollections and Comments of Contemporaries* (Jackson, TN, 1956). The last of these provides many useful first-hand accounts of Forrest.
Recently, two more biographies on Forrest have appeared. *Battle From the Start*, Brian Steel Willis (New York, 1992) provides a descriptive portrayal of Forrest and an outstanding bibliography. *Nathan Bedford Forrest*, Jack Hurst (New York, 1993) is a very objective, well-researched work.

My research on this project was conducted at the McKee Library (Southern College) and the John C. Hodges Library (University of Tennessee, Knoxville). Other than the *Official Records*, I was unable to locate any significant primary-source material at either of these locations. For those able to engage in more ambitious research, collections of pertinent manuscripts are found in the following places: Chicago Historical Society, Chicago, IL; Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, CA; Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, N.C.; William R. Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, N. C.; Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University Of Georgia, Athens, GA; and the Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, TN. Probably the single best city to research Forrest in is Memphis, which has a large file on Forrest in its public library and a significant collection of manuscripts in the West Tennessee Historical Society located at the University of Memphis.