

The Massacre at Fort Pillow:
Holding Nathan Bedford Forrest Accountable

Title of paper.

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Although Northern newspapers of the time no doubt exaggerated some of the Confederate atrocities at Fort Pillow, most modern sources agree that a massacre of Union troops took place there on 12 April 1864. It seems clear that Union soldiers, particularly black soldiers, were killed after they had stopped fighting or had surrendered or were being held prisoner. Less clear is the role played by Major General Nathan Bedford Forrest in leading his troops. Although we will never know whether Forrest directly ordered the massacre, evidence suggests that he was responsible for it.

Thesis asserts writer's main point.

What happened at Fort Pillow?

Headings help readers follow the organization.

Fort Pillow, Tennessee, which sat on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi River, had been held by the Union for two years. It was garrisoned by 580 men, 292 of them from the Sixth United States Colored Heavy and Light Cavalry, 285 from the white Thirteenth Tennessee Cavalry. Nathan Bedford Forrest's troops numbered about 1,500 men.¹

Statistics cited with endnote.

The Confederates attacked Fort Pillow on 12 April 1864 and had virtually surrounded the fort by the time Forrest arrived on the battlefield. At 3:30 P. M., Forrest displayed a flag of truce and sent in a demand for unconditional surrender of the sort he had used before: "The conduct of the officers and men garrisoning Fort Pillow has been such as to entitle them to being treated as prisoners of war. . . . Should my demand be refused, I cannot be responsible for the fate of your command."² Union Major William Bradford, who had replaced Major Booth, killed earlier by sharpshooters, asked for an hour to consult. Forrest, worried that vessels in the river were bringing in more troops, shortened the time to twenty minutes.

Quotation cited with endnote.

Bradford refused to surrender, and Forrest quickly ordered the attack.

The Confederates charged across the short distance between their lines and the fort, helping one another scale the parapet, from which they fired into the fort. Victory came quickly, with the Union forces running toward the river or surrendering. Shelby Foote describes the scene like this:

Some kept going, right into the river, where a number drowned and the swimmers became targets for marksmen on the bluff. Others, dropping their guns in terror, ran back toward the Confederates with their hands up, and of these some were spared as prisoners, while others were shot down in the act of surrender.³

In his own official report, Forrest makes no mention of the massacre. He does make much of the fact that the Union flag was not taken down, saying that if his own men had not taken down the flag, "few if any, would have survived unhurt another volley."⁴ However, as Hurst points out and Forrest must have known, in this twenty-minute battle, "Federal's running for their lives had little time to concern themselves with a flag."⁵

The federal congressional report on Fort Pillow, which charged the Confederates with appalling atrocities, drew much criticism from Southern writers, and even respected writer Shelby Foote, who does not deny a massacre occurred, says it was largely a "tissue of lies."⁶ In an important article, John Crimprich and Robert C. Mainfort Jr. argue that the most trustworthy evidence is that written before congressional hearings began (22 April) and before the Confederates became

Long quotation set off from text with extra space above and below.

Quotations introduced with signal phrases.

The writer draws attention to an important article containing primary sources.

aware of Northern allegations (about 25 April). The article reprints a group of letters and newspaper sources within these dates, including letters by soldiers Achilles Clark and Samuel Caldwell, cited later in this paper. Cimprich and Mainfort conclude that these sources "support the case for the occurrence of a massacre" but that Forrest's role remains "clouded" because of inconsistencies in testimony.⁷

Did Forrest order the massacre?

We will never really know whether Forrest directly ordered the massacre, but it seems unlikely. True, Confederate soldier Achilles Clark, who had no reason to lie, wrote to his wife that "I with several others tried to stop the butchery. . . , but Gen. Forrest ordered them [Negro and white Union troops] shot down like dogs, and the carnage continued."⁸ But it is not clear whether Clark heard Forrest giving the orders or was just reporting hearsay. Many Confederates had been shouting "No quarter! No quarter!" and as Shelby Foote points out, these shouts were "thought by some to be at Forrest's command."⁹ A Union soldier, Jacob Thompson, claimed to have seen Forrest order the killing, but when asked to describe the six-foot-two general, he called him "a little bit of a man."¹⁰

Perhaps the most convincing evidence that Forrest did not order the massacre is that he tried to stop it once it had begun. Historian Albert Castel quotes several eyewitnesses on both the Union and Confederate sides as saying that Forrest ordered his men to stop firing.¹¹ In a letter to his wife three days after the battle, Confederate soldier Samuel Caldwell wrote that "if General Forrest had not run between our men & the Yanks with his pistol and sabre drawn not a man would have been spared."¹²

Topic sentence states main idea for this section.

Writer presents a balanced view of the evidence.

In a respected biography of Nathan Bedford Forrest, Jack Hurst suggests that the temperamental Forrest "may have ragingly ordered a massacre and even intended to carry it out--until he rode inside the fort and viewed the horrifying result" and ordered it stopped.¹³ While this is an intriguing interpretation of events, even Hurst would probably admit that it is merely speculation.

Can Forrest be held responsible
for the massacre?

Even assuming that Forrest did not order the massacre, he can still be held accountable for it. That is because he created an atmosphere ripe for the possibility of butchery and did nothing to ensure that it wouldn't happen. Throughout his career Forrest repeatedly threatened "no quarter," particularly with respect to black soldiers, so Confederate troops had good reason to think that in massacring the enemy they were carrying out his orders. As Jack Hurst writes, "About all he had to do to produce a massacre was issue no order against one."¹⁴ Dudley Taylor Cornish agrees:

It has been asserted again and again that Forrest did not order a massacre. He did not need to. He had sought to terrify the Fort Pillow garrison by a threat of no quarter, as he had done at Union City and at Paducah in the days just before he turned on Pillow. If his men did enter the fort shouting "Give them no quarter; kill them; kill them; it is General Forrest's orders," he should not have been surprised.¹⁵

Topic sentence
for this section
echoes the
thesis.

The slaughter at Fort Pillow was no doubt driven in large part by racial hatred. Numbers alone suggest this: Of 295 white troops, 168 were marched to prison camps, but of 262 black troops, only 58 were taken into custody, with the rest either dead or too badly wounded to walk.¹⁶ A Southern reporter traveling with Forrest makes clear that the discrimination was deliberate: "Our troops, maddened by the excitement, shot down the retreating Yankees, and not until they had attained the water's edge and turned to beg for mercy, did any prisoners fall into our hands--Thus the whites received quarter, but the Negroes were shown no mercy."¹⁷ Union surgeon Dr. Charles Fitch, who was taken prisoner by General Forrest, testified that after he was in custody he saw Confederate soldiers "kill every Negro who made his appearance in Federal uniform."¹⁸

Writer uses primary sources as well as secondary sources.

Transition sentence links new material to old.

Fort Pillow is not the only instance of a massacre or threatened massacre of black soldiers by troops under Forrest's command. Biographer Brian Steel Wills points out that at Brice's Cross Roads in June 1864, "black soldiers suffered inordinately" as Forrest looked the other way and Confederate soldiers deliberately sought out those they termed "the damned negroes."¹⁹ Just a day after Fort Pillow, on 13 April 1864, one of Forrest's generals, Abraham Buford, after consulting with Forrest, demanded that the federal garrison in Columbus, Kentucky, surrender. The demand stated that if an attack became necessary, "no quarter will be shown to the negro troops whatever; the white troops will be treated as prisoners of war."²⁰

Nathan Bedford Forrest, a crude man who had made his fortune as a slave trader, was noted for both his violence and his hatred of blacks. In the words of historian James McPherson, Forrest "possessed a killer instinct toward . . . blacks in any capacity other than slave."²¹ Forrest's battle successes were largely due to his brazen tactics--tactics that Jack Hurst says would not have occurred to the "aristocratic, well-educated Confederate military hierarchy."²² Some Southerners, in fact, found Forrest's leadership style distasteful. As one Mississippi aristocrat put it, "Forrest may be, and no doubt is, the best cavalry officer in the West, but I object to a tyrannical, hot-headed vulgarian's commanding me."²³

Because he was so crudely racist, Forrest surely understood the rage that his troops felt toward the very idea of blacks as soldiers. Further, he must have known that his standard threats of "No quarter" would fuel the Confederate soldiers' rage. Although Forrest may have tried to prevent the massacre once it was under way, he can still be held accountable for it. That is because he created the conditions that led to the massacre (especially of black troops) and with full knowledge of those conditions took no steps to prevent what was a nearly inevitable bloodbath.

Ellipsis mark indicates that words have been omitted.

Conclusion echoes writer's central argument.

Notes

First line of each note is indented 1/2" (or 5 spaces).

Note number is not raised and is followed by period.

Authors' names are not inverted.

Last name refers to an earlier note by same author.

Entries single-spaced; double-spacing between entries.

1. John Cimprich and Robert C. Mainfort Jr., "Fort Pillow Revisited: New Evidence about an Old Controversy," Civil War History 28 (1982): 293-94.
2. Brian Steel Wills, A Battle from the Start: The Life of Nathan Bedford Forrest (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 182.
3. Shelby Foote, The Civil War, a Narrative: Red River to Appomattox (New York: Vintage, 1986), 110.
4. Nathan Bedford Forrest, Report of Maj. Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest, C. S. Army, commanding Cavalry Battle of Fort Pillow, 26 April 1864, <<http://www.civilwarhome.com/forrest.htm>> (23 April 1999), 2.
5. Jack Hurst, Nathan Bedford Forrest: A Biography (New York: Knopf, 1993), 174.
6. Foote, 111.
7. Cimprich and Mainfort, 305.
8. Cimprich and Mainfort, 299.
9. Foote, 110.
10. Wills, 187.
11. Albert Castel, "The Fort Pillow Massacre: A Fresh Examination of the Evidence," Civil War History 4 (1958): 44-45.
12. Cimprich and Mainfort, 300.
13. Hurst, 177.
14. Hurst, 177.
15. Dudley Taylor Cornish, The Sable Arm: Black Troops in the Union Army, 1861-1865 (Lawrence, Kans.: University Press of Kansas, 1987), 175.
16. Foote, 111.
17. Cimprich and Mainfort, 304.
18. Wills, 189.
19. Wills, 215.
20. Hurst, 177.

21. James M. McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 402.
22. Hurst, 74.
23. Foote, 106.

Bibliography

Entries are
alphabetized by
authors' last
names.

First line of
entry at left
margin;
additional lines
indented ½" (or
5 spaces).

Entries single-
spaced; double-
spacing
between entries.

- Castel, Albert. "The Fort Pillow Massacre: A Fresh Examination of the Evidence." Civil War History 4 (1958): 37-50.
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