



Nathan Bedford Forrest: A Biography

By Jack Hurst

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Amid the aristocratic ranks of the Confederate cavalry, Nathan Bedford Forrest was untutored, all but unlettered, and regarded as no more than a guerrilla. His tactic was the headlong charge, mounted with such swiftness and ferocity that General Sherman called him a "devil" who should "be hunted down and killed if it costs 10,000 lives and bankrupts the treasury." And in a war in which officers prided themselves on their decorum, Forrest habitually issued surrender-or-die ultimatums to the enemy and often intimidated his own superiors. After being in command at the notorious Fort Pillow Massacre, he went on to haunt the South as the first grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan.

Now this epic figure is restored to human dimensions in an exemplary biography that puts both Forrest's genius and his savagery into the context of his time, chronicling his rise from frontiersman to slave trader, private to lieutenant general, Klansman to—eventually—New South businessman and racial moderate. Unflinching in its analysis and with extensive new research, Nathan Bedford Forrest is an invaluable and immensely readable addition to the literature of the Civil War.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Nathan Bedford Forrest was the only soldier to rise from the rank of private to general during the U.S. Civil War. At once "a soft-spoken gentleman of marked placidity and an overbearing bully of homicidal wrath," Forrest is best remembered for the combination of brilliant military leadership and flamboyant bravery that drove his Confederate cavalry troops from victory to victory on the battlefield. His subordinates feared him (he shot those who turned tail), as did his enemies (he rarely lost a fight). General Sherman once said that Forrest must be "hunted down and killed if it costs 10,000 lives and bankrupts the [national] treasury." Detractors point out that Forrest never has been exonerated from the Fort Pillow massacre, in which many Union soldiers, most of them black, were slaughtered after attempting to surrender. Following the war, he went on to found the Ku Klux Klan. Late in life, however, Forrest disavowed racial hatred and called for black political advancement. Author Jack Hurst has written the essential biography of a complex and compelling man who was arguably the Civil War's most remarkable soldier. (Movie trivia: Forrest Gump's mother named her son after this general.)

From Library Journal

Hurst presents a balanced, well-documented study of Nathan Bedford Forrest, whom many consider to be the most brilliant general of the Civil War. Hurst, a columnist for the Chicago Tribune, explores Forrest's entire career more thoroughly than other writers, devoting the first part of the book to Forrest's prewar occupation as a slave trader and the last to Forrest's involvements with the Ku Klux Klan and state politics as well as his attempts to regain the fortune he lost during the war. The author presents a detailed study of Forrest's wartime campaigns, from his brilliant exploits in battle to his controversies with his commanding officers and the debacle at Fort Pillow. With his guerrilla tactics Forrest revolutionized the way armies fought, but he was never fully accepted by his fellow generals because of his lack of military education. Overall, this is an outstanding study of one of the Civil War's more controversial generals. Essential.

- *W. Walter Wicker, Louisiana Tech Univ., Ruston*

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From Kirkus Reviews

The Confederate cavalry commander, as conspicuous for his racism as for his military prowess, receives a biography that emphasizes his reprehensible exploits as slave trader and founding father of the Ku Klux Klan. Robert E. Lee supposedly called Forrest "the most extraordinary man the Civil War produced." But Chicago Tribune newsman Hurst offers the first recent portrait that pays as much attention to Forrest's distasteful activities before and after the war as to his undeniable martial genius. Better written than Brian Steel Wills's *A Battle from the Start* (1992), this new book spends less time on Forrest's extraordinary career as a soldier--he was the only man on either side who went from private to lieutenant general--and gives equal weight to his rise from raw frontier poverty to self-made wealth in land and slaves, his prewar civic activities as a Memphis alderman, and his postwar career as an icon of the unreconstructed South. But the good news about Hurst's work--his reluctance to substitute speculation for fact in the name of psychobiography--is also the bad news: The reader is left wondering about the sources of Forrest's undeniable penchant for personal violence. What other general was even reported to have killed 30 enemy soldiers in hand-to-hand combat, in addition to shooting his own men caught running from battle? Hurst's hands-off attitude also results in an absence of strong conclusions about Forrest's conduct when the evidence is conflicting (did Forrest encourage or prevent the notorious massacre of Union, particularly black, soldiers at Fort Pillow? Hurst thinks he may have done both). Readers wanting military history should pass over both recent biographies for Edwin Bearss's *Forrest at Brice's Cross Roads* (1991). Hurst's is the best all-around recent life of Forrest, but we still await a truly insightful study of this complex man. Since Richard Ellmann is dead and Walter Jackson Bate is retired, how about it, Stephen Sears? -- *Copyright ©1993, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights*

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Users Review

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