

### The River Was Dyed With Blood

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## Review

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**Wills, Brian Steel** *The River Was Dyed With Blood*. University of Oklahoma Press, \$29.95 ISBN 9780806144535

### The Culpability of Nathan Bedford Forrest at Fort Pillow

In *A Battle from the Start: The Life of Nathan Bedford Forrest* (1992), a work that many consider the best biography of the slave trader turned “wizard of the saddle” turned Klansman, Brian Steel Wills summarized his interpretation of the Rebel attack on Fort Pillow, Tennessee, on April 12, 1864: “For a variety of reasons, Fort Pillow became a collective release of pent-up anger and hatred. It became, in clinical terms, a group catharsis. And as the overall commander of the troops on the scene, some of whom carried out these acts, Nathan Bedford Forrest was responsible” (*A Battle from the Start*, p. 196). Twenty-two years later, responding to an unnamed “subsequent author” who alleged that Wills remained uncertain “about the general’s culpability in the massacre,” he decided to revisit the topic (p. xii). The present volume both narrows Wills’ focus and interprets the Fort Pillow massacre more broadly than in his earlier work within the scholarship on race, war, politics, and memory.

Unquestionably, Wills strives for objectivity and balance in assessing the much-traversed Fort Pillow massacre and the military operations of the man General Ulysses S. Grant dubbed “that devil Forrest.” Fort Pillow has been the subject of monographs by Richard L. Fuchs (1994), John Cimprich (2005) (a book that Wills inexplicably omits from his sources), Andrew Ward (2005), and important articles by Albert Castel (1958), Ronald K. Huch (1973), Cimprich and Robert C. Mainfort Jr. (1982, 1985, 1989), Court Carney (2001), and Fergus M. Bordewich (2014).

In *The River Was Dyed with Blood: Nathan Bedford Forrest and Fort Pillow* Wills essentially harkens back to his earlier evaluation of Forrest, neither exculpating him for responsibility for the brutal murder of surrendering Union troops at Fort Pillow or blaming him. Instead Wills “holds the Southern

commander accountable for events that moved beyond his control—an offense that would have disturbed Forrest more fully than anyone else" (p. xi). In other words, Wills considers Forrest "neither evil incarnate . . . nor somehow innocent of excesses that happened within his command" (p. 4).

In nine well-written chapters Wills interprets Forrest as an enigmatic figure who lived at a complex and transitional period in American military history, a period when demands for "no quarter" and "retribution" increasingly became part of modern war. "The fact that the Union and the Confederacy were experiencing these transition also blurred the lines along which critiques could be made of what or was not acceptable [in battle], especially by those who still clung to the comforts of the old, familiar structure" (p. 208). In fact, Wills credits Forrest with possessing "a finely tuned sense of what should or should not happen in war, all of his bluff, bluster, and intimidation to the contrary. There was right and wrong. He felt clearly that he . . . recognized and understood the difference and adhered to the proper side of the line" (p. 67).

Wills also credits Forrest with consistently demonstrating two traits: "his common-sense approach to warfare and his dogged determination to see an engagement to a successful conclusion" (p. 309). Wills praises Forrest as a brilliant and effective cavalry commander who ingeniously fanned his forces across an area, thereby maximizing results and magnifying his force's presence. He convinced the enemy "that he was again everywhere at the same time" (p. 88).

Assessing Forrest and Fort Pillow, Wills maintains that the general may have won the battle but lost the war of public opinion and he remained defensive about it for the rest of his life. Forrest "seemed not to have ever understood precisely why that was the case, but he was well aware of it, and he troubled himself enormously to counteract these negative assessments both during and after the war" (p. 162). Forrest repeatedly denied that he had ordered his men to treat the black troops, Tennessee Unionists, and civilians at Fort Pillow savagely. He professed to have no intention to annihilate black soldiers and insisted that he treated all who surrendered humanely and sought to preserve and protect them. "If such a viewpoint contained self-serving delusion or exaggeration," Wills explains, "it also reflected the paternalistic framework in which Bedford Forrest lived and operated" (p. 168).

*In The River Was Dyed with Blood* Wills goes to great lengths to view Forrest's role at Fort Pillow from the general's perspective, not from the vantage point of biased contemporaries or modern historians. Forrest "was obviously no saint," he insists, "but his commonsense approach and the priorities of a battlefield offered no imperative for mass murder. Defeating former slaves would be sufficient to demonstrate their inferiority. To the man who made his living in the slave trade, such recaptured individuals would be better returned to their masters. . . . Furthermore, ongoing military operations should not be compromised by expending valuable time on sadistic practices when there were enough practical matters left to be accomplished" (p. 156).

Insisting that in his present book not be judged "'Confederist' apology," Wills notes that Forrest genuinely hoped to negotiate Fort Pillow's surrender with its commander in order to avoid the bloodshed resulting from a final assault. In doing so Forrest exhibited "a tone that was uncharacteristically conservative and laudatory" (pp. 154, 98). Trying to explain the charred remains of Union troops following the battle, Wills writes, "There were ample opportunities for bodies to be burned in whole or in part through the legitimate activities of war. . . . Others may have been the victims of carelessness or indifference" (pp. 155-56). Wills also places the Fort Pillow massacre in broad context, repeatedly citing comparative massacres during the American Revolution, the Texas Revolution, the Mexican War, the Civil War, and in later American wars. He observes "that when tactical disintegration occurs, the opportunities for excess accelerate." In each comparative case "Vicious personal combat and the chaos and confusion defined the fighting as resistance ebbed and flowed and combatants exhibited every form of reaction to the events unfolding around them" (p. 108).

Wills attributes the Fort Pillow massacre to Forrest's physical distance from his command during the battle (he stayed in the rear during the assault) and then his preoccupation after the garrison fell with the Federal gunboat *New Era* on the Mississippi River. These, he explains, created a "vacuum of authority" allowing individuals "to seek their own opportunities for retribution on any enemy they despised. Forrest, by virtue of his own circumstances, became powerless to stop them for a time, even if he had wished to do so" (p. 215). "The chaotic nature of [the Federal troops] retreat and resistance, and the disintegration that occurred as the defense broke down, blurred the distinction between a battle that had ended and one that was continuing on an ad-hoc basis" (p. 216).

In the end, Wills condemns the unnecessary deaths at Fort Pillow and insists that contextualizing the engagement “is not the same as condoning those actions or asserting apologetic explanations or defenses for them. Bedford Forrest was not innocent of the blood shed at Fort Pillow any more than he was responsible for designing or executing a deliberate massacre there” (p. 216).

Notwithstanding Wills’ contextualization and interpretation of the atrocities committed by Confederates at Fort Pillow, *The River Was Dyed with Blood* adds to but in no way seriously revises his earlier interpretation. Forrest remains culpable for failing to retain control over his command, whether or not the massacre was deliberate or the result of “the chaos, heat of battle, and accompanying racial and sectional hostility” (p. 216).

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