



## **The Character of Nathan Bedford Forrest**

**By Michael Bradley, Ph.D.**

Prejudiced, White Supremacist, slave trader, rough, profane, known for violence---all these terms are often applied to Nathan Bedford Forrest. What about Christian, prayerful, respectful of religion, church member? Have you ever heard these terms applied to Forrest? I suspect that you have heard them used seldom, if at all. Yet, both sets of terms are true and both can be used to describe Nathan Bedford Forrest. Like all of us, he was a man of many parts, a man whose parts often contradicted each other.

Let us examine the first set of terms. By the definitions current in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century society there are very few white people of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century who cannot be described as “prejudiced” or who would not be called a “white supremacist.” In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century the idea that Anglo Saxon people were superior to all peoples of the world was a belief held universally in Western Europe and in North America. So, to say that Nathan Bedford Forrest was a “white supremacist” is to say that he was a typical white man who lived in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. He was no worse, and no better, than 99 per-cent of the rest of the people who lived during his era.

Jack Hurst, in his biography of Forrest, says that the racial views of Forrest changed more than those of any other major character who fought in the War Between the States. During the Reconstruction period Forrest advocated that African Americans be given every opportunity to advance themselves economically and politically, Forrest appeared at public meetings and espoused these goals in political speeches. There is no documented evidence that Forrest led the KKK and it is a well-established fact that he was not one of the founders of that group. Despite the historical facts that Forrest advocated economic and political rights for African Americans the baseless lies about his racism continue to be cited.

Bedford Forrest was a man of many parts---quick tempered, coarse of language, prone to violence when provoked; but he was also a man who possessed a sense of the spiritual and who respected the Christian religion, a respect which ripened into belief and commitment. We cannot omit recognition of this latter fact if we wish to have an accurate view of this important, controversial historical figure.