

TO THE FORREST HALL COMMITTEE (MTSU):

I am just barely old enough to remember when the small black-and-white television screen was filled with the witch hunts of the Joe McCarthy era...a time when the word "communism" triggered public condemnation. Many reputations were unfairly slandered. Much of the tolerance and teamwork that made us Americans was sacrificed. Recovery was slow. Today the "trigger words" are "racism" and "slavery" and the victim is history...our shared history as one people.

A hundred years ago the Rutherford community worked, lobbied, schemed and invested to bring the MTSU predecessor to this site. In all likelihood this would not have happened as it did if not for Nathan Bedford Forrest. The initial property where MTSU sits today was donated for this purpose by a direct descendant of one scheduled to die on July 13, 1862. Know your own history...the name Joseph Black is on a marker at the University gate on East Main Street.

It is easily understood why the school in its early years would adopt as its symbol and mascot the heroic image of Forrest, whose courage, sacrifice and skill had saved and freed the ancestors of the community. In the early 1940's the State Teachers College at Murfreesboro, predecessor of MTSU, seriously considered renaming the school Forrest College. The popular name may have been adopted except for the departure of over half the student body for service in World War II.

For as long as any of us can remember, this community and the university have enjoyed and promoted a mutually supportive relationship. Local fans have cheered and suffered with the changing fortunes of our athletic programs. The business community has welcomed student commerce and provided jobs, internships and charitable funding. Major donors have subsidized both program and facility expansion. Government and non-profit entities currently offer research and internship opportunities. History students, for example, have unique opportunity for internships and research at antebellum sites like Oaklands and the Sam Davis Home.

Today it is obvious that this relationship has been damaged...not destroyed but clearly damaged by campus based conduct that has from the outset been misdirected, offensive, threatening and disrespectful. It appears to most of us that the student conduct has been allowed, if not encouraged, by some of the faculty and administration. An early demonstration was attended by the University President who seemed not at all concerned that his apparent endorsement and attendance turned out only 30 students (according to estimation by sympathetic media) on a campus of approximately 24,000. At the first public forum, the most profane and inflammatory rhetoric came from a faculty-affiliated individual.

The community certainly learned from these forums. We learned that those who are claiming to be offended by the historic name have no reluctance to offend others with their coarse and disrespectful language and conduct. We also learned that the term "diversity" for these few does not mean tolerance for a wide range of beliefs and backgrounds. As used by these immature and

undisciplined students, the term is heavy with racial animus and demands “only what we want.” (An argument that has to be presented profanely and loudly is a weak argument.)

Never before in modern times has this community been burdened by racial controversy and conflict such as is now seen. During the difficult 1960's, when others struggled, this community quietly and peacefully desegregated. Thanks to the local leadership, black and white, it was accomplished through mutual respect and cooperation. When a busload of “freedom riders” stopped in front of a segregated restaurant on SE Broad, they were met as they unloaded by a black businessman and community leader, owner of Scales & Sons Funeral Home. He advised that there were no race problems in this town, and if there ever were, they would be resolved without outside help. In blunt terms he told the group to get back on the bus and head out of town. They boarded and left.

When all black Holloway High School was closed and the students enrolled at Central, a pretty good Holloway football team was merged with a pretty good Central team. That year they were state champions. There was no team “diversity,” just colorblind teamwork.

“Racism” was explained to me by Dr. Martin Luther King during a personal conversation in 1966. I asked him about the “black power” advocates who were then disavowing his peaceful methods and calling him an “uncle Tom.” He observed that anyone who wears a button or waves a banner saying “I am black!” or “I am white!” is telling us that they view and react to everything based upon color. “That’s racism,” he concluded. Dr. King urged us to treat all as brothers and equals regardless of color. What was said and displayed at the forum last month would have saddened Dr. King.

We are all in this together. The slave economy began with the African chiefs who were constantly warring and taking hostages from rival tribes. These “spoils of war” were sold to the European and Mediterranean brokers who transported and sold to New World buyers. (The news media tell us that even today on the African continent there are warring factions that take hostages and sell them into slavery.) The responsibility for slavery rests with both our black and white ancestors.

Forrest in the 1850's was a prosperous Mississippi plantation owner relying largely on slave labor. He was also part of a family-owned cotton brokerage in Memphis where he bought and sold cotton, cotton implements and cotton labor. One of many such businesses in that time and place. This activity was legal, supported by the judiciary, and accepted by the clergy. If Forrest is to be condemned and dishonored on this basis, how do we treat Washington, Jefferson, Adams, Madison, Jackson, Hardy Murfree, William Lytle and our African ancestors.?

So where do we go from here? The University President should take no further action that will put the matter in debate before the state historical commission. In due time, the University President should initiate dialogue with community leaders regarding the inevitable obsolescence of a campus structure.

Perhaps we could agree that the ROTC program is in need of a new facility. Perhaps the university and the community could work together and succeed in finding state and private funding for a new facility. Perhaps the current building could be “decommissioned” with appropriate ceremony and historic documentation. Perhaps new buildings are named for major private donors. Perhaps the project could be completed without disrespect to the memory and history of a local/regional hero and without confrontation. Perhaps...

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March 2016