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April 28, 2016

Dr. Derek Frisby, Chair
Forrest Hall Task Force
Middle Tennessee State University
Peck Hall, Room 0260
Murfreesboro, TN 37132

Dear Dr. Frisby,

I deeply appreciate the service by the members of the task force, and you as the chair, in facilitating the discussion on the Forrest Hall name associated with the building that houses our Department of Military Science.

As you know, I appointed the task force and asked it consider whether the name of the military science building should be changed, retained or augmented with historical context. I am writing to confirm receipt of your letter reporting the task force's strong consensus, with duly noted objections of some, in support of changing the name.

It is clear that there are many wide-ranging and contradicting views about the life and legacy of Confederate Lt. Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest. I do not feel it is my role to discern the appropriateness or relevance of his actions prior, during or after the Civil War. It was appropriate, however, for me to assess whether the decision made in the middle of the 20th Century to name the building for General Forrest remains in our best interest in the second decade of the 21st Century.

And, in my view, the values and goals we share in 2016 as a comprehensive university with international reach are not best reflected by retaining a name affixed in 1958 when we were a small local college that rarely extended beyond our region. As such, I accept the task force's consensus recommendation and will forward it to TBR for consideration. If the Regents concur, it will go to the Tennessee Historical Commission or appropriate state agency for further review and consideration.

We now live in a time and circumstance that our predecessors perhaps could have never imagined. When Forrest Hall was dedicated in 1958, we were still Middle Tennessee State College and boasted an enrollment of just 2,539 students. We were decades away from the far-reaching and inclusive

opportunities that would become our hallmark. And, as was common of that time, images and references of General Forrest were used routinely throughout the University and its activities.

As our university grew in size and stature, so did our awareness of the controversial connotation that our use of General Forrest and other Confederate symbols had upon our goal to mature into an institution with broader reach and scope. We began to discourage such iconography in the years that followed and sought other ways for the University community to express its identity.

Our institution today is the largest in the Tennessee Board of Regents system with an enrollment of almost 23,000 students. We recruit students and faculty from across the nation and world and many of our academic programs and industry partnerships attract global attention. We have 39 international partnerships in 18 countries. We must acknowledge our past but we must remain focused on our future.

I believe the names we affix to campus buildings should ideally add value, or at least be neutral, to our overriding responsibility to recruit and retain exceptional students and faculty. Further, when buildings and other elements are named for individuals, current TBR policy calls for a clear connection to the university by the person or persons.

However, it is important to note that MTSU understands history should never be erased. We have supported research, programs and projects that tell the stories of how the Civil War transformed Tennessee. MTSU's Center for Excellence in Historic Preservation has helped place more than 400 interpretive Civil War markers across the state. In Murfreesboro, the university has assisted in developing displays that stand at the Rutherford County Courthouse and Oaklands Mansion, informing residents and visitors of General Forrest's actions.

The best place for commemorating heritage is on the hallowed ground where it occurred, and that is what MTSU has done. We remain committed to supporting fully these, and many other, important efforts on behalf of Tennessee's Civil War past.

In my examination of the military science building, I can find no reference to the general beyond his last name in the letters above the front door and on a small plaque in the yard that just reads, "Forrest Hall." If our intent in naming Forrest Hall was to educate our students about his historical impact and military contributions, we have most certainly failed in that regard.

Therefore, I have asked Dr. Carroll Van West, who serves as the Tennessee state historian as well as a distinguished member of our faculty, to develop a historical timeline, with primary source set, to be housed in the Albert Gore Research Center. This timeline will encapsulate the life, legacy and impact that General Forrest had upon our state, region and nation. I also have asked Dr. West that this timeline also explore the use and role of General Forrest's image by our University. By doing these things, we are putting history in a place and manner that better educates our students.

Finally, when I delivered the charge to the task force, I stressed it was most appropriate for me not to attend your meetings, since your duty was to hear diverse viewpoints of stakeholders and members of our university and local communities and deliver to me a recommendation for my consideration. However, I did view the proceedings by video and closely followed news and social media reports that emanated from the sessions.

While watching the video footage and reading the reports, I was reminded of the oft-cited observation that while our Freedom of Speech, guaranteed in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, can be messy, restricting it can be messier. I was disappointed by the lack of civility in parts of the forum and that certain moments were unruly and disrespectful. This does not represent who we are as a University. But I also know that our freedom allows for such discourse. Free speech covers views that you find disagreeable as much as it does for those views you embrace.

Please accept, and convey to your fellow task force members, my thanks for this valuable service to the University. This was a difficult, yet extremely valuable, process for our community.

Sincerely,

Sidney A. McPhee
President

C: David Gregory, Acting Chancellor
Task Force Members