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MIDDLE TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY

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Dear President McPhee:

The Department of History wishes to add its support to recent calls for the renaming of Forrest Hall. First, we would like to offer our full agreement with the "Statement" presented in the recent memo from the Department of Political Science regarding the racial divisiveness of associating Forrest with our University (please see below).

In the aftermath of the recent tragedy in Charleston, SC, we believe it both wise and morally imperative to change the name of Forrest Hall. Nathan Bedford Forrest may have been a brilliant general for the Confederacy, but he was also one of the most deservedly notorious figures associated with that rebellion. A slave trader before the Civil War, he was responsible during the war for a massacre of black Union soldiers, and after the war went on to found the Ku Klux Klan as an ongoing terrorist enterprise to intimidate and kill freed blacks and their white allies. Although many military installations were given the names of confederates after the war in the name of reconciliation, the history of Forrest Hall is more recent and suspicious. Named in 1954, the same year as Brown v. Board of Education, Forrest Hall took its name during a time when many southern states used confederate names and iconography to signal opposition to the federal government's push for civil rights for all Americans, black or white.

MTSU is a large, diverse university that serves a wide variety of students, faculty, and staff. We are justifiably proud of the job our university does in training men and women of all races and ethnicities for service in the United States Armed Forces. Given recent events and longstanding history, it is inappropriate to train those service members in a building whose name is synonymous to so many with slavery, treason, and terrorism.

We would also like to add the following thoughts of our own:

MTSU has a long record of associating itself with Nathan Bedford Forrest, including naming the first men's dormitory after him in 1911, and designing the school's logo around his image in the late 1940s. Aligning itself with one of the most extreme exemplars of a provincial, exclusionary, hostile regional identity soon began to limit our school's growth and success, though. Like all too many southern institutions, MTSU did not greet the *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* (1954) school desegregation decision and the subsequent movement for African-American civil rights warmly. This reaction included doubling-down on attempts to link an already segregated school to Confederate and white supremacist symbols and identity. MTSU adopted "Dixie" as the school-fight song, encouraged confederate flag waving at football games and other campus

MTSU is an equal opporlunity, non·racially identifiable, educational institution that does not discriminate against individuals with disabitnias.

events, and made Forrest into the school mascot. These regrettable moves included the naming of the newly-completed campus ROTC building after Forrest in 1954.

These unfortunate decisions helped solidify MTSU's image as a limited, unambitious institution that served only one race of people within a small region of a single southern state. This identity slowed the integration of our student body, alienated many of our early African-American students and alumni, and by the 1980s left us as one ofthe main targets ofthe *Geier v. University ofTennessee* decision, which, while promoting long-overdue diversification on our campus, also did so very much to limit the ability of the MTSU community to build the kind of high-quality academic programs that befitted the kind of school we hoped to be: comprehensive, progressive, rigorous, and with a global vision for the kind of education we offered and the intellectual and professional horizons of our students.

Many of MTSU's students, faculty, administration, and alumni have recognized the damage the Confederate-Forrest association has done to our school, and have established a long and commendable history of struggle to undo it. As early as 1968, student Jim Leonard was correctly observing in *The Sidelines* that the school needed to "examine the old symbols, asking if they [were] truly appropriate and relevant for a new university in the new South." IfMTSU were to become "a striving, young, multi-racial university," Leonard and Associate Student Body President Sylvester Brooks argued, we needed "new democratic symbols of unity." During that same year, students and faculty letters and petitions were successful in convincing President Scarlett and the administration to abandon the Forrest mascot and end the playing of "Dixie" at MTSU sporting events. In 1989, President Ingram faced down opposition and had the large Forrest plaque removed from the front of the Keathley Center. As recently as 2006, students and faculty organized petition movements arguing for a change to the name of Forrest Hall, albeit without success.

But even today, our continued, lamentable efforts to identify ourselves with the symbols of the Confederacy and the archaic, but still poisonous campaign for white supremacy hinders MTSU's attempts to build a diverse, successful faculty and student body. One small but telling example: Just a few years ago, the History Department brought a candidate for a tenure-track faculty position onto campus for an interview. During the campus tour, the candidate expressed shock that we still had a building named for Forrest, and repeated that astonishment twice more while here in Murfreesboro. Otherwise taken with this person's impressive talents and credentials, the History Department offered her the job. She refused, however, explaining in part that she did not believe she would "fit in well at MTSU."

It is well past time MTSU threw off our ill-assumed association with Nathan Bedford Forrest and the Confederacy. This identity manages to be both timid and belligerent in the impression we present to the diverse peoples of Tennessee, the United States, and the rapidly growing numbers of international students who are joining us in Murfreesboro. Why are we still reaching to link our school with a man who had no connections to MTSU, or naming our ROTC building after a

man who never served in the United States military? MTSU has been here for more than a century, our ROTC program for more than a half-century. We have our own proud history to call on for objects ofhonor, examples of character, and symbols of identity. We would therefore recommend that the building be renamed in honor of the past graduates of our Army and Air Force ROTC programs, their academic and military accomplishments, and their service to our country.

It will, of course, be claimed by some elements that removing Forrest's name from the ROTC building would constitute "erasing history." As this university's Department ofHistory, we would insist that real history requires careful study and an understanding of context, ambiguity, and contradiction. Placing someone's name on a campus building invites our community to view that person as an exemplar for their own conduct. It makes them an object of honor - not a lesson in history. This is a point those members of the MTSU community who have fought against the Forrest and white supremacist associations have long recognized. As MTSU parent Margaret Hibbet wrote to *The Sidelines* all the way back during the "Dixie" and Forrest mascot controversies of the late 1960s, "My daughter will soon enter the university. Why should she find the Confederate flag outside of textbooks and museums?" Textbooks, museums, and classrooms. These are the places where the history of the Confederacy and Nathan Bedford Forrest can truly be found, the objects of critical study, not of blind, divisive, self-defeating celebration. To anyone who says this name change would remove history, be assured, the Department of History here at MTSU will continue to study and teach the history of this state, the Confederacy and the Civil War, as well as the life and activities ofNathan Bedford Forrest.

Respectfully submitted.

Faculty ofthe Department of History