5-31-2000

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Racial Hatred Among Confederate Soldiers During the American Civil War: Murder and Atrocities Committed by the Soldiers as a Tactic of Intimidation

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31 May, 2000 – Spring Term
Western Oregon University
Senior Seminar – History 499
The civil war battle that took place at Fort Pillow, Tennessee in April 1864 was a small event militarily and strategically when compared to the rest of the American Civil War. Immediately after the conflict occurred, however, it made the headlines of Union newspapers like the New York Times for weeks, as Northern journalists proclaimed it to be one of the most barbaric atrocities in the war to that point. Hundreds of Union soldiers, mostly black freedmen, had been overwhelmed after a few hours of heavy assaults by Confederates under the command of General Nathan Bedford Forrest and had surrendered only to be shot where they stood.

While this could have been a unique case where the influence of the Confederate leadership swayed the better judgment of the soldiers, evidence from another very similar battle fought by a different unit only days later, indicates that a comparable massacre took place in which the same crimes were committed. At the battle of Poison Spring, Arkansas, in April of 1864, the black soldiers were slaughtered just as at Fort Pillow, during and after the battle, with little record of any provocation or supervision by the Confederate officers. In each case, the black soldiers, who were fighting alongside white union soldiers, were singled out and killed by Confederate troops. The massacres at Fort Pillow and Poison Springs demonstrate, through the eyewitness accounts of soldiers and observers from both sides, how the use of black soldiers by the Union Army inflamed the racial hatred of many Confederate soldiers to the point that they began to use murders and atrocities as a tactic against black soldiers and against the nearby black population to limit their abilities through fear and intimidation.

Neither the racist influence of General Forrest nor a predisposition in Southern society toward murdering out of racial hatred can totally account for the actions of the
soldiers. General Forrest attracted mass amounts of attention and subsequent blame for the atrocities from the Northern newspapers of the period, which despised his actions as a militarily successful Confederate cavalry officer, and from historians who were interested in his infamous association with the KKK after the war. The racial atrocities that were committed, however, cannot simply be passed off as actions taken while under orders. Individual confederate soldiers consciously made the choice to murder black soldiers during and after the battles. Southern society, on the other hand, was no more racist prior to the war than their Northern counterparts. Newspapers reported the atrocities at Fort Pillow, not because they were especially appalled at the murder of black soldiers, but because they were trying to demonize the actions of the Confederate soldiers, especially the leadership.

Many historians from Northern Colleges and Universities prior to the 1960s such as Joel Tyler Headly, who wrote just after the Civil War, took the case of Fort Pillow as evidence of a general barbaric nature among the Confederate forces throughout the war. Historians who opposed to this viewpoint, on the other hand, denied that any evidence indicated that a massacre even took place. Changing viewpoints of historians writing since the Civil War, however, demonstrate how drastically ideas and theories on black soldiers have changed over time. In the period from the end of the war to WWII, historians like W.E.B. Du Bois and William Elliot Woodward often took a strong stance that either tried to downplay or glorify the contributions of black soldiers in the war. Historians who wrote after that period such as Albert Castel, and especially those writing in the last two decades of the 20th century such as Bruce Tap and Gregory Urwin, have reevaluated past theses and examined the influence of racial hatred among Confederate
soldiers in how they dealt with and treated the increasing numbers of black soldiers against whom they fought.

Just after the Civil War, there were not yet any established schools of thought on the relevance of racially motivated massacres committed during the war and the views of historians was heavily influenced by the thesis they were trying to support. One example of this is Joel Headly, a historian and author of *The Great Rebellion*, written in 1866. Headly does note the evidence of brutality and atrocities that occurred at Fort Pillow; however, he supplies this information in an effort to convince his readers that the Confederates were, in general, bloodthirsty savages. In his summation of the battle he writes: "Neither sex, nor age, nor color was spared—everything went down before that bloody onslaught."¹ He never addresses whether or not race hatred might have driven the Confederate troops to kill the black soldiers.

Several decades after the war, two schools of thought began to emerge tended to support views that were both extreme and directly contradictory to the other group. On one extreme, *The Black Phalanx*, written by Joseph. T. Wilson in 1890, makes the claim that there was never one case of bad conduct among all the black soldiers that served in the Union army.² Other historians prior to the turn of the century simply ignored the questions about the history of black soldiers altogether. Books like *A Critical History of the Late American War*, written by Asa Mahan in 1877, and *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, edited by Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence C. Buel in 1884, both focus on the officers that were in charge of specific units and did little research into the experiences of the soldiers themselves.³ Neither author goes into any great detail on the
battles of Fort Pillow or Poison Spring either as examples of Confederate brutality or racial hatred.

From the turn of the century on through the Great Depression, the history of black soldiers was virtually ignored until just after World War Two, when the scholarly debate really picked up. Early 20th Century historians either centered on the merits of deploying black soldiers, or tried to glorify or vilify their role just as many writers had done in the 19th Century. One early 20th Century historian that tried to downplay the role of black soldiers was William Elliot Woodword was writing in a period of American history when racism and the KKK were supported by segments of the general population and even some scholars. He wrote in 1928 that:

...the American negroes are the only people... that ever became free without any effort of their own... They had not started the war nor ended it... They twanged banjos around the railroad stations, sang melodious spirituals, and believed that some Yankee would soon come along and give them forty acres and a mule.4

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, author of Black Reconstruction which he wrote in 1935, used his influence as a historian to counter the arguments of historians who were letting racist bias influence their work. His ideas, however, were fairly extreme in that he argued that black soldiers overcame the hatred of the Confederates and extreme racism within their own army but were still the most influential factor in a Union victory.5 His research on the Fort Pillow case centers on the massacres of the black soldiers, but doesn’t even mention the fact that white Union soldiers were killed at the same time.

In the late 1950’s and 1960’s, though, a large change occurred in black history as many historians began to make more of an effort to keep their own bias and the ideas of others from affecting their work. Most historians writing during this time were less
preconditioned towards either side of the previous debate and instead began to take a look at the history of the individual soldiers. In 1958, Albert Castel, a historian who researched Fort Pillow, wrote an article critiquing historians and writers from both the “Northern” and “Southern” views, especially the biographers of Forrest, arguing they allowed “prejudice and errors” to affect their work, making neither side completely wrong or right.6 The article attempted to establish that there was in fact a massacre at Fort Pillow that included many atrocities, some of which were racially motivated. Castel’s work on Fort Pillow was aimed primarily at dispelling a multitude of myths. Other historians argued for example that the battle was more than just a lopsided victory, and kept focusing on this idea rather than the issue of racial hatred.

John Cimprich and Robert C. Mainfort, were two historians that re-examined the Fort Pillow controversy in the early 1980s and published an article challenging a school of interpretation they labeled “Southern writers” including those who defended the actions of General Forrest. Cimprich and Mainfort concluded, “the Confederate’s racial antagonisms, possibly inflamed by the black troops behavior [they were vocally taunting the Confederates], greatly affected the incidents.”7 Their analysis, however, didn’t really add anything beyond Castel’s. Their work did include, however, several pages of letters that soldiers from both sides of the battle wrote between several days and a few weeks after the massacre.

The historiography debate shifted during the 1990s, from discussions of how the battles took place and whether or not they were massacres to discussions of how the massacres fit into the history of the Civil War. Cimprich and Mainfort contributed a
second article in 1989 that provided significant statistical evidence to support the massacre thesis, with a focus on the racist atrocities and motives of those actions.8

Historians of the 1990s and the early 20th century have worked hard to establish that there was indeed a massacre of Union soldiers, most of whom were black, at Fort Pillow and at Poison Spring, and have argued that racial hatred was a influence. Few, however, have that racially motivated killings were a tactic of Confederate soldiers who were trying to intimidate both the black union troops and the Freedmen. Historians such as Bruce Tap and Gregory Urwin, however, did make arguments that supported this idea and also further examined the motives behind the actions of the Confederate soldiers and officers involved in the massacres and the agendas behind the reactions, or the lack of, by politicians and reporters of the period. Tap and Urwin published two articles within the last four years (both in 1996) that went beyond the latest research by Cimprich and Mainfort. Tap examined Union critiques of Southern society and the Fort Pillow controversy in relation to the War Crimes Committee, a group formed by the Federal Government in response to the Fort Pillow massacre that was given the duty of investigating war crimes throughout the rest of the war9. Urwin focused his work on examining the Poison Springs massacre in relation to aspects of racism in the Confederacy.

Fort Pillow is a well-documented example of a racially motivated massacre that historians have scrutinized more closely than Poison Spring, but the battle started out like many others. The crudely built fort was a federal garrison that was positioned on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi River. It consisted mainly of a large ditch in the shape of a half moon backed up against the river, 125 meters in diameter, surrounding an earthen
parapet about eight feet high and the troops inside were protected by large ditches and mounds of dirt. The New York Times described the report as “an isolated outpost, of no value whatsoever to the defense of Columbus, and utterly untenable by the rebels.”

Stationed inside were 292 troops from the 6th Colored Heavy Artillery and 285 white troops from the 13th Tennessee Cavalry under the command of Major L. F. Booth.

The attacking Confederates, under the command of General Nathan Bedford Forrest, numbered over 1500 soldiers who had never faced black troops in combat. Forrest had already gained a reputation with Northern newspaper writers who closely followed his movements in order to find information that would build up his image as a notorious Confederate Cavalry officer. The main mission of Forrest’s troops was to conduct hit and run attacks and raids against small Union units and supply trains in the area. According to a January 12th summation of Forrest’s raids in The New York Times, the Confederates had already conducted successful raids throughout Tennessee with the 1st Brigade Cavalry and Sixteenth Army Corps in hot pursuit. The Times reported that “Forrest, with less than 4000 men, has moved right through the Sixteenth army corps- has passed within miles of Memphis- carried off over 100 wagons, 200 beef cattle, 3,000 conscripts and innumerable stores.”

By the time the Confederate Army arrived at Fort Pillow in April, Forrest’s unit had been fighting the Union Army in Tennessee for several months and was well known to Northern reporters and the public.

When the Confederate forces arrived at Fort Pillow, Forrest approached the Fort under a flag of truce and asked the Union commander to surrender his forces. At the same time, the Confederate soldiers began to prepare for an assault and when the discussion between the Generals failed to produce results, the Confederate forces attacked and
quickly overwhelmed the fort. The New York Times reported on the story several times in the weeks after the battle, posting the battle to the front page three times. The April 20 edition described the engagement from the viewpoints of “authentic sources:”

The rebels, under Forrest, appeared and drove in the pickets about sunrise on Tuesday morning...The garrison in the two outer forts were at length overpowered by superior numbers, and about noon evacuated them and retired to the fort on the river. Here the fight was maintained with great obstinacy, and continued till about 4 p.m...Here the rebels organized for a final charge upon the fort, after sending a flag of truce, with a demand for surrender, which was refused.13

The start of the battle is similar to that of many other lopsided victories that took place during the war. After the Union troops began to surrender and flee the scene, however, the actions that followed distinguished the attack from most others. The Confederates quickly began to round up and kill as many of the Union soldiers as they could find. Most were killed while trying to surrender or flee the battlefield. The April 20th New York Times continued to describe the chaotic situation and massacres that ensued:

[The union soldiers] did not falter nor flinch until at the last charge, when it was evident they would be overpowered, they broke and fled towards the river, and here commenced the most barbarous and cruel outrages that ever the fiendishness of rebels have perpetrated during the war...The colored soldiers threw down there guns and raised their arms in token of surrender, but not the least attention was paid to it. They continued to shoot down all they found. A number of them finding no quarter was given, ran over the bluff to the river, and tried to conceal themselves...were pursued by the rebel savages...they were all shot down in cold blood and in full sight of the gunboat, chased and shot them down as they would dogs. One had crawled into a hollow log and was killed in it...Several had tried to hide in crevices made by the falling bank...but they were singled out and killed.14

The log of the Union gunboat stationed in the river that the New York Times refers to, the No. 7, also provided a description of the scene. The officer in charge reported that they “got underway and while standing over towards the Fort [. The] colors were lowered
and an indiscriminate massacre was commenced on our troops, the enemy firing volley after volley into them while unable to resist at the same time turning their fire on us."\textsuperscript{15}

The Confederate soldiers themselves, however, provide some of the strongest evidence supporting the theory that a massacre took place. They were often very candid and emotional when describing the event to family and friends in letters and in diaries. "The poor deluded negroes would run up to our men fall upon their knees and with uplifted arms scream for mercy but were ordered to their feet and then shot down," Sgt. Achilles V. Clark, wrote, "Their fort turned out to be a great slaughter pen,"\textsuperscript{16} The most descriptive and bloody account, however, comes from an unidentified soldier writing a family member a few days after the battle:

Then the work of slaughter and death commenced. The sight of Negro soldiers stirred the bosoms of our soldiers with courageous madness...The sight was terrific, the slaughter was sickening. Wearied with the slow process of shooting our guns, our troops commenced with our repeaters, and every fire brought down a foe, and so close was the fight, that the dead would frequently fall upon the soldier that killed....hundreds were killed in the water endeavoring to escape. The number in the water was so great that they resembled a drove of hogs swimming across the stream...The Mississippi River was crimsoned with the red blood of the flying foe. Our soldiers grew sick and weary in the work of the slaughter, and were glad when the work was done.\textsuperscript{17}

The most unique feature of this battle was not the large number of casualties or even that a massacre had taken place, it was the fact that black soldiers were intentionally targeted by the Confederate soldiers during and after the battle. Even though the Union forces were almost equally divided between white and black soldiers, Black troops suffered a casualty rate double that of the white troops, 66 percent as opposed to 33 percent.\textsuperscript{18} They were not, however, at any more of a disadvantage, strategically, than any of the white troops beside whom they fought. They were in the same fort and were using the same weapons as the other union troops. The difference was simply that many
Confederate troops refused to take black Union soldiers prisoner, and instead, shot them as they tried or surrender or run.

The official report of Brigadier-General Augustus L. Chetlain, the officer in charge of the headquarters of Black units in Tennessee, is one of many sources that described the massacre and murder of the black soldiers. It states that, "After the capture our colored men were literally butchered. Chalmers [Brigadier General James R. Chalmers, the Confederate General who was second in command] was present and saw it all. Out of over 300 colored men, not 25 were taken prisoners, and they may have been killed long ago."19

The April 18 edition of the New York Times also reported the overtones of the racial atrocities, observing, "Three other negroes were buried alive by the rebels at Fort Pillow, making five in all. All were wounded but one. He was forced to help dig the pits, and was then thrown in and covered up."20 Many of the people who had been part of the burial detail after the battle also reported seeing evidence of Union soldiers who had been nailed to the floor of the hospital before it was set ablaze by the rebels.21 Lieutenant William Clary later testified that he saw, "five Negroes burning...It seemed to me as if the fire could not have been set more than a half an hour before. Their flesh frying off them, and their clothes were burning."22

Union solders who survived the battle recalled that, not only were the black soldiers killed because of their race, but the white soldiers who fought alongside them were also killed simply because they had been supporting black soldiers. One white Union soldier of the 13th Tennessee recalled hearing a Confederate soldier exclaim, "God damn you, you fight with the niggers, and we will kill every last one of you."23 Another
remembered hearing, “I have nothing for you fellows; you Tennesseans pretend to be men, and you fight side by side with niggers; I have nothing for you.”

The evidence suggests that the Confederates were especially enraged about Union soldiers using black troops who they perceived as an unfair advantage that southerners themselves couldn’t risk using. The atrocities were not only crimes of murder; they were also racially motivated crimes of hatred towards black soldiers who supported the Union. The racially motivated murders, however, were not limited to soldiers and the congressional committee that was sent to report on the war crimes concluded that several black women and children were also killed at Fort Pillow or in the vicinity just after the attack.

In the weeks that followed the battle at Fort Pillow, many Confederate soldiers involved in the massacre continued to write about the event and talked about it openly in the streets. The only newspaper reporters on the scene were those from Southern cities who had been following General Forrest but even they were willing to report that, “Thus the whites received quarter, but the Negroes were shown no mercy.” Instead of reporting the event as an atrocity committed during war, however, Southern newspapers used it as an example to gain support for the war effort. The Richmond Examiner argued: “Repeat Fort Pillow… and we shall bring the Yankees to their senses, and, what is even better, our government will rise to a proper sense of its position as an organ of a nation.” The massacres were not only justifiable the editors argued, they were the kind of tactics that they thought would win the war.

By mid May, however, the tone of the Southern media had shifted to denial as Union outrage began to build support for the ongoing critique of Southern society and
supported calls for "retaliation." Some Republicans had began to call for retribution of some sort, and the Indianapolis Daily Journal even stated, "Let the fate of the Fort Pillow prisoners overtake a like number of Rebel prisoners in our hands, and their blood be upon the heads of the Fort Pillow butchers." The Chicago Tribune added, "Retaliation in kind is the only medicine to soothe the fearful memories of Fort of Pillow." Afterward, Lincoln stated: "If there has been a massacre...and so proven, retribution shall as surely come." Senator Howard of Michigan even drafted a resolution directing the Committee on the Conduct of the War to do an on-site investigation. "Without this protection we know full well what will be the fate of black troops whom we call into our service." Northern Newspaper reporters began using Fort Pillow as a critique of the Confederate Army, especially its leadership.

Forrest wrote a report soon after the battle claiming that the high casualty rate at Fort Pillow was caused only by the Union soldiers’ refusal to lay down arms. In public, he denied any claims that a massacre, racially motivated or otherwise, had even taken place at Fort Pillow. After union reports re-defined the engagement as a massacre, a word that suggested outrage and fed the fires of larger debates, the Confederacy’s attitudes toward the battle quickly changed, and they began to refute the evidence of a massacre. Some historians later continued the strategy of denial for decades to come.

The atrocities at Fort Pillow could possibly be explained as a case of honor of honor-bound Confederate soldiers carrying out the orders of General Forrest, as some Confederate soldiers claimed, but there is little evidence of any official orders of "no quarter." Cimprich and Mainfort also observe, for example, that, "any Confederate soldier could have used Forrest’s name without authorization in the heat of the
moment. Several soldiers reportedly used the phase "give no quarter" as a rallying cry during the assault on the fort, but it is still unclear whether or not Forrest ever gave such an order. There might well have been some leaders in the Confederacy who espoused killing black soldiers rather than taking them captive. However, this could only have acted as a spark that initiated the killings. It was still up to individual soldiers to decide what actions they would take during battle. Since Forrest was the commander in charge of the Confederate soldiers, he is still responsible for all of their actions and will always carry the blame for the murders that took place. The individual soldiers also share the blame, however, and any defense that they were simply following orders cannot take at least partial responsibility for the murders off of their shoulders.

The battle at Poison Spring is an example of a similar event where Confederate troops massacred black soldiers without any evidence of orders to do so from Confederate leadership. The battle took place on April 18, 1864 shortly after Fort Pillow, and involved twice as many soldiers, but it was not nearly so well known or well covered in Northern newspapers of the time. The Confederate troops at Poison Spring were not under the command of a well known Confederate General, such as Forrest, and the story simply didn’t carry the weight among the Northern reporters as Fort Pillow did. As a consequence, the massacre of Poison Spring only received a slight mention in the New York Times.

The 1,170 Union troops involved at Poison Springs came from the 14,000 soldiers of the Union Army Seventh Corps who started out of Little Rock and Fort Smith several days earlier under the command of Major General Frederick Steel on orders to link up with Union Gunboats in Louisiana. Steel sent out 438 soldiers from the 1st Kansas
Colored Infantry, 383 from the 18th Iowa, 291 from the 2nd, 6th, and 14th Cavalry, and 58 soldiers from the artillery on an expedition to gather corn from a nearby storage point. The Union troops, loaded with supplies from raids they had conducted in the Arkansas countryside, eventually met with 3,600 Confederate Cavalrymen under the command of General John S. Marmaduke who had maneuvered to position his troops for battle at Poison Springs.

The Confederate forces consisted of 1,500 Misourians, 1,500 soldiers from Arkansas, 655 Texans, and 680 Choctaw Indians. Unlike Forrest, Marmaduke had not yet established any notorious image for his military campaigning nor did he later have any significant association with the KKK after the war that later drew the attention of historians looking to draw conclusions between the Klan and the previous actions of high ranking Confederate leaders.

The Union troops at Poison Spring fell back into a hasty defense around the head of the supply train upon encountering the Confederate soldiers, but they were quickly surrounded on three sides by Confederate infantry, dismounted cavalry, and 12 artillery pieces. The Confederates broke the Union lines after the third assault on their position, and the Union soldiers fought a running battle while retreating back through their own supply wagons. The killing, however, didn’t stop after all the Union soldiers who could retreat had done so. Many of the Union soldiers who were left were put to death by the Confederates immediately as they tried to surrender.

The officer in charge of one of the Union units later stated, “Many wounded men of the 1st Kansas Colored Volunteers fell into the hands of the enemy, and I have the most positive assurances from eyewitnesses that they were murdered on the spot.”
as at Fort Pillow, the Confederate soldiers also spoke very openly at first about the massacres. When the Commander of the Trans-Mississippian Department of the Confederacy, General Edmund Kirby Smith, reached the nearby city of Camden, Confederate troops there informed him that the Union soldiers who died at Poison Spring were, "primarily Negroes who neither gave or rec'[eived] quarter."38

Even wounded black soldiers lying on the ground were vulnerable to the racial hatred of the rebels. Confederate soldiers tasked with taking away the captured wagons and supplies held competitions to see who could crush more wounded black soldiers beneath the wheels of their wagons.39 Wounded soldiers on the battlefield reported hearing Confederate soldiers bayoneting the wounded blacks and chanting, "Where is the First Kansas Nigger now?" The other Confederates replied, "All cut to pieces and gone to hell by bad management."40 These last two examples show that the actions of the Confederate soldiers went beyond simply following orders and could hardly be explained by the influence of the Confederate leadership. The individual soldiers made the choice to deliberately kill the black soldiers after the fighting had ceased.

The Confederates were extremely prejudicial in deciding which soldiers to kill at Poison Spring. According to historian Gregory Urwin, the carnage that followed revealed "the essence of a savage conflict whose central issue was race."41 The 1st Kansas, the unit composed of black soldiers, lost 117 soldiers but came away with only 65 wounded; a ratio of killed to wounded that was unusual and the inverse of typical ratios for most other Civil War battles.42 One explanation for this point comes from the 2nd Cavalry soldiers who escaped. According to one soldier,

It will be seen that the number of our killed exceeds the number of our wounded in this engagement, an unusual occurrence in warfare of the present day, as it is
generally found from the reports of the many battles being daily fought in our land, to be just the contrary. This can be accounted for when it is known... the inhuman and blood thirsty enemy...was engaged in killing the wounded wherever found.\textsuperscript{43}

While the confederate soldiers might simply have been enraged by the sight of Union troops plundering their territory, the fact that the black troops were almost exclusively singled out for revenge suggests that there was much more involved. The black soldiers of the 1\textsuperscript{st} and 2\textsuperscript{nd} Kansas were a fairly small part of the units taking part in the foraging raids and southern civilians actually commended them for their behavior and actions during this period. One black regiment was even spotted protecting a southern doctor’s home from white looters who had been following the path of the Army.\textsuperscript{44}

These battles were just two examples of many instances of racial atrocities committed during the Civil War. Only five days after the massacre at Poison Springs, General Steel sent another supply expedition on a similar mission to a place called Mark’s Mills. Again, the Confederates attacked the 1,200 Union soldiers and annihilated the column, taking over one thousand prisoners. A Confederate Major admitted after the war that “The battle field was sickening to behold...No orders, threats, or commands could restrain the men from vengeance on the negroes, and they were piled in great heaps about the wagons, in the tangled brushwood, and upon the muddy and trampled road.”\textsuperscript{45} While the Union army gathering supplies through the countryside might well have enraged the Confederate soldiers, they once again singled out black soldiers and civilians to annihilate.

Primary evidence from witnesses and the Committee on the Conduct on the Conduct of the War suggests that the Confederate troops at Fort Pillow and Poison
Springs were also guilty of murdering black civilians who were near the Union Army. A Union officer later walked the battlefield at Poison Spring and stated, "The number of Negroes I could not get... I saw perhaps near 30, and the Rebs pointed out to me a point of woods where they told me they had killed eighty odd negroes men women and children."46 One soldier from the 36th Iowa reported: "There was not an armed negro with us [at Mark's Mills] and they shot down our Colored servants and teamsters and others what were following us..."47 These women, children, and servants, had little, if any, military value to the Union Army. Yet they were murdered in cold blood; possibly simply for the intimidation value that the Confederate soldiers thought it had on the black soldiers fighting for the Union Army.

Fort Pillow was not simply a garrison with black soldiers; it was also a major center for recruiting freedmen into the Union Army.48 The black soldiers at Poison Spring were not simply riding through the countryside raiding southern stores and supplies; they were also recruiting black freedmen from plantations that had been overtaken. Many Confederate soldiers began to use murders of blacks, including women and children, who tried to support the Union as a method of intimidation. By reducing the ability of the Union Army to have those people and use them, it limited the support that blacks could or were willing to give the Union army. The other benefit for the Confederacy, however, would be for the Black soldiers to become convinced that risking the lives of themselves and their family by fighting the Union was simply not worth it. Thus, the Confederates would reduce the number of soldiers that the Union had.

The use of freedmen as soldiers in the Union Army not only inflamed the racist attitudes of many Confederates; it was also a major advantage (over 180,000 black men..."
joined the Union Army by the war's end) that Southerners could not repeat without fundamental changes in their society. Many believed that if slaves were given their freedom [such as an Army of Black men] and "if ever those bonds should slip, he would revert to his animal nature and attempt to kill every white person he came across." John Eaton declared, "the crime of Lincoln in seducing our slaves into the ranks of his army" ranks "amongst those stupendous wrongs against humanity, shocking to the moral sense of the world, like Herod's massacre of the Innocents, or the eve of St. Bartholomew." The head of the Confederate Bureau of War declared, "The enlistment of our slaves is a barbarity. No people...could tolerate...the use of savages [against them]." At a time when the Confederacy was desperately short on manpower, the Union was drawing from a resource that the Confederacy had, but still couldn't fully use as soldiers.

While many of the officers of the Confederate Army such as General B. A. Hichcock talked openly of not allowing black soldiers or white officers of black soldiers to be taken prisoner, the atrocities at Poison Spring and Fort Pillow cannot simply be attributed to the orders handed down by the leadership. Hichcock, wrote a letter to the New York Times in 1864 stating that, "The Yankees are not going to send the Negro troops in the field- they know as well as we do that no reliance can be placed on them...Should they be sent to the field, and be sent in battle, none will be taken prisoner—our troops understand what to do in such cases. If any Negroes have been captured during the war, as soldiers in the enemy's ranks, we have not heard of them."

There never actually was any official policy of the Confederacy's Congress stating that all black soldiers were to be killed rather than taken prisoner. The closest mention on the subject was a joint resolution stipulating, "that white commissioned
officers of colored troops when captured should be put to death or other-wise punished at the discretion of the military court before which they are tried.”53 The Confederate Congress, prior to 1864, had little to say on the issue of what to do with black prisoners. That year, however, the Congress authorized capture of black prisoners simply because they could then be resold as slaves to help the war effort.54 One controversy that was never resolved, however, was the exchange of prisoners. The Confederacy refused to allow a black soldier to be traded for a white soldier because they claimed it degraded their soldiers.55

Hichcock’s soldiers, however, had already decided what course to take, as he claimed in his letter to the New York Times in which he states that, “our troops understand what to do in such cases.” He is essentially arguing that there was never actually any need for the Confederacy to tell its soldiers to kill the blacks; it was something that the soldiers themselves had already known and decided for themselves. It is interesting to note, however, that by 1864, the Confederacy was, arguably, loosing the war and the thought of shifting blame may have crossed Hichcock’s mind.

While historians scrutinizing Fort Pillow because of General Forrest’s role, the same outcome may well have resulted if any other Confederate General had been leading the attack on that day. Historians have found little evidence pinning the blame for the massacre of black soldiers specifically on Forrest. Any one of his subordinates could have issued the order, or the soldiers may have reached a common understanding ahead of time, or they may simply have released their anger that built up, transformed into racial hatred, and emerged in a murderous rage directed against the black soldiers. The
point being, it did not take the persuasion of a great orator. The massacre was an action
carried out by the individuals who participated.

On the other hand, Northern society was just as racist during the nineteenth
century as most of the southerners were. Southern society and its soldiers, prior to the
war, were not simply predisposed towards murdering out of racial hatred, any more than
their northern counterparts. The fact that most Northern states prohibited slavery, and
some Northerners wanted it abolished, did not, in any way, mean that Northerners did not
harbor just as much hatred as Southerners towards blacks. Historian Don Fehrenbacher
argues that, “the North and South, while bitterly at odds on the issue of slavery, were
relatively close to one another in their attitudes towards race.”56 Another historian,
Ronald Takaki, explains that,

The North was not the promised land for blacks. Racism was both virulent and
violent in the states above the Mason and Dixon Line during the years before the
Civil War…. For many Northern whites, the black seemed unable to develop
beyond childhood-the period before adult responsibilities and work…Whites
believed his ‘understanding’ was ‘weak,’ and were inclined to look upon him as
‘a being intermediate between man and the brutes.’57

Prominent and influential Northern leaders were very open about their racist
views. Many Northerners stuck to the idea that blacks were a “child/savage” race
incapable of performing all but the simplest tasks. One Indiana Senator even declared in
1850 that: “The same power that has given him a black skin, with less weight or volume
of brain has given us a white skin, with greater volume of brain and intellect.”58 Many
Northern Republicans were against the spread of slavery, not because they viewed it as
injustice to the blacks, but because they supported racial separation and feared racial
intermarriage or even working alongside blacks.59
Even President Lincoln, called the "great Emancipator by historians and writers up to this day, exhibited prejudice. Historian Roy P. Basler included a speech in volume III of *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln (1953-55)* in which Lincoln stated that he had

ever been in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races...there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will for ever forbid the two races living together...and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race.\(^{60}\)

Many medical doctors and biologists of the period also seemed to support this way of thinking. The book *Crania Americana*, published in 1839, stated that the cranial capacities of blacks were much smaller than that of whites and they were thus mentally inferior.\(^{61}\) In the book *Nojoque: A Question for a Continent*, authored by Hinton R. Helper in 1867, the author summed up a Northern viewpoint of blacks: "See the night-born ogre, low receding forehead; his broad depressed nose; his stammering speech."\(^{62}\)

The attack and atrocities at Fort Pillow made headlines in northern newspapers because it became useful to many leaders of the Union, not because it was a great strategic loss or because they were concerned for the loss of black soldiers. A letter to the editor in the April 18, 1864 edition of the *New York Times* is a good example of this. The reader wrote in, in response to an article that described the circumstances around the release of an officer, who had been in command of a black unit (Corps d’ Afrique), from the Libby prison in Richmond. The letter pointed out that while the paper rejoiced at the release of the white officer, it only hinted at the fact that the black soldiers who served under him were all hanged at the prison, and the Federal Army had done little to try and retrieve them.\(^{63}\)
Fort Pillow was the type of example many Radical Republicans had sought as a mechanism for dismantling and reconstructing Southern society. While the war wasn’t started with the purpose of reforming the south, by 1864, Union leaders were already trying to decide how to reconstruct the region after the war was over. Many Union leaders, especially Radical Republicans like Thaddeus Stevens, saw southern society as an inefficient, backwards, anti-bourgeois system that was in need of reform. Acts of massacres and atrocities, especially those that could be linked to well-known leaders of the Confederacy, such as Nathan Bedford Forrest, could be used to attack the southern leadership, slavery, and the society itself. According to historian Bruce Tap, many in the Union believed that the South was “indeed a backward, impoverished society in need of fundamental reconstruction,” and the massacre at Fort Pillow confirmed their beliefs. After the massacre at Fort Pillow, the Chicago Tribune printed the statement “in no respects does the act misrepresent the nature and precedents of Slavery.” The Christian Advocate believed, “the atrocities were ‘unparalleled in the history of warfare.’ But, the paper added, it was slavery that prompted such atrocities; it not for it, the Confederates ‘would act like Gentlemen instead of tigers’.

Many within the Union actively constructed the notion of Southern resentment and the need for violent “purification” of a society that had descended into “barbarism”. Abolitionists and Radical Republicans were still a minority within the Republican Party, and many Northern moderates were more interested in linking their region to the economic possibilities of the West. The Northerners who were strong critics of Southern society, however, were already a powerful influence in establishing the future agenda for reconstruction. George Julian remarked in 1864 that, “We are summoned by
every consideration of patriotism, humanity, and Republicanism to lay the foundation of empire upon the enduring foundation of justice and equal rights." Julian, and others like him, were looking for a way to further their hope of redesigning Southern society in their own image, and the Massacres at Fort Pillow helped them gather support.

The purpose of the Committee on the Conduct of the War's investigation, just after Fort Pillow, was more than simply investigating racial atrocities. Historian Bruce Tap concludes: "Since the atrocities revealed in these investigations were viewed by many in the North as a logical outcome of a hierarchic, slave society, the committee [on the Conduct of the War] hoped that the exposure of Rebel barbarities would help lay the foundation for a comprehensive reconstruction program."68

The Confederate leadership stressed the idea that the very foundation of their society was being attacked. Even though a majority of southerners didn't own slaves, they were still willing to fight in order to hold their position or class status in society and rallied around this noble cause. Prior to the war, the average southerner had just as much, or more, contact, be it positive or negative, with blacks as their northern counterparts. Many parts of American society during the nineteenth century were racist, but racism was not elevated to the point were most Confederate soldiers at the beginning of the war were ready to commit horrible atrocities against blacks. A Richmond newspaper stated in 1864, "It is a deadly stab which they are driving at our institutions themselves, because they know that if we were to yield on this point, to treat black men as the equals of white, and insurgent slaves as equivalent to our brave soldiers, the very foundation of slavery would be fatally wounded."69
Slavery southerners argued, was actually a “positive good” in the South. John C. Calhoun had even claimed in 1838, “Many in the South once believed that slavery was a moral and political evil. That folly and delusion are gone. We see it now in its true light, and regard it as the most safe and stable basis for free institutions in the world.” The Confederates saw themselves as defending their society against the power and corruption and encroachment of the a system of “wage slavery” where, “Tender women, aged men, delicate, children, toil and labor from early dawn until after candle light, from one year to another, for a miserable pittance, scarcely above starvation point and without hope of amelioration.” Many people were willing to do whatever it took, including massacres of a class of people they already had decided was lower than themselves, as long as they thought they were defending their states against a corrupt system of wage slavery like the one they believed existed in the industrial North.

The debate on the events at Fort Pillow and Poison Springs has changed dramatically since the Civil War. Historians writing at the end of the 20th century such as John Cimprich and Robert Mainfort, have focused on the issues of racial hatred at Fort Pillow rather than simply using the battle to either debase Southern Society or the black soldiers in the Union Army as many historians prior to WWII had attempted to do. Using the evidence of a massacre for the purpose of supporting another agenda, however, was even more common among Northern Republicans and the Press than it ever was with historians. Reporters and politicians closely followed Fort Pillow not because they were concerned for the fate of the black soldiers, but because of the added political value that the already notorious General Forrest gave to the battle. The atrocities that were committed, however, cannot simply be attributed to the power and influence that that
leaders like Forrest had, nor can it be said that the Confederate soldiers were simply following orders. The massacres at Fort Pillow and Poison Spring are examples of the emergence of racially and politically motivated murders that were more than killings that occurred in the heat of battle; they were instead intentionally carried out and calculated murders designed to intimidate the black union soldiers and the civilians that supported them. Prior to the war, southern society was no more racist or predisposition than the North toward murdering out of racial hatred.
Endnotes

3 Lake, 9.
9 Tap, “ ‘These Devils Are Not Fit to Live on God’s Earth’: War Crimes and the Committee on the Conduct of the War, 1864-1865,” Civil War History, 42 (June, 1996), 118.
10 Castel, 39.
16 Ibid., 299.
17 Ibid., 301.
21 Tap, 123.
22 Castel, 49.
23 Tap, 122.
24 Ibid., 123.
25 Castel, 49.
26 Tap, 296. See also, Cimprich and Mainfort, “The Fort Pillow Massacre,” 836.
28 Tap, 118.
30 Ibid., 837.
31 Tap, 119.
33 Ibid., 305. See Also, Castel, 49.
34 Cimprich and Mainfort, “Fort Pillow Revisited,” 305.
35 Ibid., 305.
Gregory J. W. Urwin, "'We Cannot Treat Negroes...As Prisoners of War': Racial Atrocities and Reprisals in Civil War Arkansas," Civil War History 42 (September, 1996): 196. The rest of this paragraph is drawn form Ibid., 196-200.

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Cimprich and Mainfort, "The Fort Pillow Massacre," 832.

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"Ibid. 203.


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