A Threat to Identity: An Examination of the Multiple Narratives Surrounding the Nathan Bedford Forrest Statue in Memphis

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Introduction

In 1905, a statue of Nathan Bedford Forrest was erected in the heart of Memphis, placed atop the graves of General Forrest and his wife. This statue was a frequent subject of controversy, particularly after its 100th anniversary in 2005. The statue was officially removed on December 20, 2017, prompting conversation about the alteration and erasure of history. This study examines the narratives of history held by each side of the debate in order to determine how history will be impacted in the aftermath of its removal.

Research Process

For this project, I examined excerpts of articles from the Commercial Appeal and the Memphis Flyer from 1996-2018. The frequency of articles from the Commercial Appeal concerning Forrest shows the major periods of controversy, as can be seen in the graph below. From these, I compiled 72 articles which actively constructed a narrative of Forrest. These articles were analyzed for the presence of 15 codes, which were major components to the construction of the official narrative. The total usage of each code can be seen in the second graph below. From these codes and broader historical narratives, I analyzed the root of each side’s argument to determine what was at risk of mnemonicide by the removal of the statue.

Data

Findings

• The Anti-Forrest argument heavily relied on the official narrative that had been constructed by the media: that Forrest was a Confederate general who had been a slave-trader prior to the war, responsible for the Ft. Pillow massacre during the war, and an early leader of the Ku Klux Klan following the war.
• The Pro-Forrest narrative used two key arguments: emphasizing the complexities behind the official narrative and claiming that the statue represented their heritage.
• The backing behind the heritage narrative relied on the Great If, the concept that if Forrest had been provided sufficient resources, he would have led the Confederacy to victory.

Conclusion

• The loss of the Memphis Forrest statue is a more critical hit to pro-Confederate ideology than other Confederate statues because it eliminates the reminder inherent in the Lost Cause narrative.

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