

STEVE COHEN
9TH DISTRICT, TENNESSEE

2404 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20515

TELEPHONE: (202) 225-3265
FAX: (202) 225-5663

CLIFFORD DAVIS/ODELL HORTON
FEDERAL BUILDING
167 NORTH MAIN STREET
SUITE 369
MEMPHIS, TN 38103

TELEPHONE: (901) 544-4131
FAX: (901) 544-4329

www.cohen.house.gov

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
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February 22, 2019

Governor Bill Lee
State Capitol, 1st Floor
600 Dr. Martin L. King Jr. Blvd.
Nashville, TN 37243

Dear Governor Lee,

I am writing to follow up on my letter of January 4, 2019 regarding the bust of Nathan Bedford Forrest displayed in the Tennessee State Capitol, as I don't believe I've yet received a response. Also, I read with interest your stated regret that, while a student at Auburn University, you participated in Kappa Alpha Fraternity's "Old South" activities which glorified the Confederacy, including your wearing of a Confederate uniform. However, I also read you are still not in favor of removing Forrest's bust from the State Capitol as you don't want to "whitewash" history. I appreciate your expressions of regret regarding the insensitivity of the KA's glorification of the Confederacy and hope that you will consider the Forrest bust in the same light.

Most Civil War statues were erected in the early 20th Century during the Jim Crow era, when states were working to disenfranchise African Americans, and in the 1950's and 60's as a reaction to the Civil Rights Movement. They were displayed to show white supremacy. The bust of Forrest was placed in the Capitol more than 100 years after the Civil War by my friend and colleague, Senator Douglas Henry, Jr. Senator Henry was an honorable gentleman whose reverence for the old South and the Confederacy was misplaced as it didn't take into consideration the African American citizens of Tennessee whose ancestors were enslaved and who were eventually freed only because Forrest and his confederates lost the Civil War.

The State Capitol has traditionally been a place where statues and busts of persons held in high esteem are displayed. Nathan Bedford Forrest, the first Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, was a slave trader and responsible for the Fort Pillow massacre, where both blacks and whites, mostly from East Tennessee, were brutally killed. African Americans, including legislators who have served and who now serve in the Tennessee General Assembly, are met with a bust of the first Grand Wizard of the KKK in in a place of pride in our most revered public building. Some of their ancestors may have even been bought or sold by Forrest himself. There is no "context" which can account for the Forrest bust to be displayed in the State Capitol. It is an affront to all Tennesseans, particularly African Americans.

The Forrest bust could be moved to the new State Museum, with appropriate historical captioning. The niche in the Capitol could then be used to honor a true Tennessee hero, such as Sequoia. Sequoia, a native Tennessean, was the father of the Cherokee syllabary which made reading and writing in the Cherokee language possible. A bust of Sequoia is already displayed in the Senate Library in the Capitol where it was brought from the State Museum, at my request, to honor the Native American whose outstanding achievements are an inspiration for all Tennesseans. Another possibility would be to have a statue of Ida B. Wells created to display in the niche. Ida B. Wells was a great African American woman who crusaded against lynching while co-owner of the Memphis Free Speech and Headlight newspaper. Because of her investigative reporting, a white mob destroyed her office and she was subjected to continuing threats, forcing her to flee to Chicago. Ida B. Wells is a hero whose life is highlighted in the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. In the museum, engraved in stone, are Well's words, most appropriate to the subject of this letter: "The way to right wrongs is to turn the light of truth upon them."

I hope you will give due consideration to the message that continuing to display the Forrest bust sends to Tennesseans and the rest of the nation. In 2019, honoring Nathan Bedford Forrest in the State Capitol, which belongs to all our citizens, is just plain wrong. The Forrest bust needs to go. You could lead Tennessee into a new era by translating your stated regrets into action and making the Tennessee Capitol welcoming to all Tennesseans, not by whitewashing history but by highlighting those Tennesseans who should be revered and whose contributions inspire rather than divide us.

As always, I remain,
Most sincerely,



Steve Cohen
Member of Congress