“What are your feelings toward the Federal Government, General?”

“I loved the old government in 1861, I love the old constitution yet. I think it is the best government in the world, if administered as it was before the war. I do not hate it; I am opposing now only the Radical revolutionists who are trying to destroy it. I believe that party to be composed, as I know it is in Tennessee, of the worst men on God’s earth—men who would hesitate at no crime, and who have only one object in view—to enrich themselves.”

“In the event of Governor Brownlow’s calling out the militia, do you think there will be any resistance offered to their acts?” I asked.

“That will depend upon circumstances. If the militia are simply called out, and do not interfere with or molest any one, I do not think there will be any fight. If, on the contrary, they do what I believe they will do, commit outrages, or even one outrage, upon the people, they and Mr. Brownlow’s government will be swept out of existence, not a radical will be left alive. If the militia are called out, we cannot but look upon it as a declaration of war, because Mr. Brownlow has already issued his proclamation directing them to shoot down the Ku-Klux wherever they find them, and he calls all Southern men Ku-Klux.”

“Why, General, we people up North have regarded the Ku-Klux-Klan as an organization which existed only in the frightened imaginations of a few politicians.”

“Well, sir, there is such an organization, not only in Tennessee, but all over the South, and its numbers have not been exaggerated.”

“What are its numbers, General?”

“In Tennessee there are over 40,000; in all the Southern States they number about 550,000 men.”

“What is the character of the organization, may I inquire?”

“Yes, sir. It is a protective, political, military organization. I am willing to show any man the constitution of the society. The members are sworn to recognize the Government of the United States. It does not say anything at all about the Government of the State of Tennessee. Its objects originally were protection against Loyal Teagers and the Grand Army of the Republic, but after it became general it was found that political matters and interests could best be promoted within it, and it was then made a political organization, giving its support, of course, to the Democratic party.”

Interview with Brig. Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest from The Charleston [SC] Daily News, September 8, 1868 [Note: this interview first appeared in the Cincinnati Commercial, August 28, 1868.]

Radical Republicans were in favor of harsher terms for the former Confederate states’ reentry into the Union, and opposed giving the vote back to men who had fought for the Confederacy.

William “Parson” Brownlow was the military governor of Tennessee during Reconstruction (1865-1869). He called out the militia in 1868 in direct response to reports of marauding activities of the Klan.

The Union Leagues (also called Loyal Leagues) were supporters of the Republican party (both northerners and southerners) who tried to register new African American voters (and get them to vote Republican). The Grand Army of the Republic was a veterans organization for former Union soldiers.
Forrest joined the KKK in 1867, so he actually was a member at this time. His denial hints at the secrecy practiced by the Klan.

Enfranchise: give voting rights to [Ex-Confederates still couldn’t vote at this time.]
Disfranchisement: loss of voting rights

Scalawag: white southerner who voted for the Republican party
Carpet-bagger: white northerner who moved to the South during Reconstruction, usually to make a profit or to agitate in local politics.