

An essay for the Kit Kat Club of Columbus—November 19, 2013

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12.24

The late 1960's represented a challenging time for America as the country addressed long overdue civil rights issues and opposition to a lengthy war in Vietnam. Struggles for equality and justice rocked the existing social order and the gap between the generations over lifestyles and beliefs grew wider. One of the lowest points was in 1968 when in a two month period both Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy were assassinated leading to demonstrations across the country.

Richard Nixon was elected president in 1968 on a platform to end the war but on April 30, 1970 he announced that American forces would invade Cambodia for "the purpose of ending the war in Vietnam and winning the just peace we all desire."

The reaction on college and university campuses turned into impassioned and sometimes violent protests and, by some reports, was the most extensive student protest movement the country had experienced to date.

On Friday, May 1 in Kent Ohio students at Kent State University participated in a protest but, unlike protests on some campuses that were violent, the rally was impassioned but peaceful. This was not unusual as students often described Kent State as "Apathy U."

Like other campuses Kent State had student activist groups such as Black United Students (BUS) and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) but these groups were less aggressive.

When asked about his values a leader of the SDS chapter said "Brotherhood of peoples, brotherhood of nations, working at a job which reaches you as a human being. I believe in love between people." He also stated, "I do not believe in the military, or the Republican Party, or the First National Bank or football games at Ohio State."

At noon on May 1 approximately 500 students (out of 21,000) gathered at the Commons, a grassy green in the center of the campus. A group called WHORE (World Historians Opposed to Racism and Exploitation) ceremonially buried a copy of the Constitution because, as they stated, President Nixon had disregarded the limits of his office as imposed by the Constitution and thus the Constitution was dead, murdered by the president.

Later that afternoon Black United Students held a rally to hear a speaker from Ohio State University talk about violence by law enforcement officials during demonstrations on their campus. The leaders of BUS advised their peers to stay away from campus activities that weekend.

Across the campus, upon hearing of the two peaceful protests, university president Robert I. White left for Iowa for a board meeting scheduled for Sunday. Dr. White had been in office since 1963, held three degrees from the University of Chicago, was a gentleman and a scholar, respected by the community, was very shy and didn't mingle much with students. He was described by author James Michener as belonging to the Dwight D. Eisenhower School of oratory: long sentences, hopelessly complicated, with subjects and predicates refusing to acknowledge each other.

That evening, as was the norm, the bars and clubs in downtown Kent were filled with people from across the state and the local area. Between 10 and 11 p.m. motorcycle gangs were riding up and down Water Street performing tricks on their bikes, firecrackers were set off and a trash can was dumped in the street and set on fire. Some members of the crowd hit passing police cars with bottles and windows were broken in nearby buildings. The mayor of Kent declared a state of emergency and ordered the bars closed which brought hundreds more onto the streets and into the middle of the protestors. A call was placed to Gov. James Rhodes office stating, erroneously, that Students for a Democratic Society had taken over a part of the city and a liaison officer of the Ohio National Guard was sent to Kent. The police cleared the streets by 2 a.m. and 15 had been arrested. A later report noted that this was "not an unusual number of arrests for a weekend event in Kent."

On Saturday morning, May 2, several students assisted shop owners in cleaning up the glass from windows broken in the stores the evening before. City officials met throughout the day, a civil emergency was declared banning all sales of alcohol and firearms, various curfews were established for the city and campus and city officials were informed that if they wanted the services of the Ohio National Guard the request must be made by 5 p.m. With rumors of involvement of radical SDS members from outside the area and reports by shop owners of threats, city officials called up the National Guard.

Saturday evening crowds began to gather on campus forming near the ROTC building, a symbol to some students of U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia.

Chants began, "Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh," "One, two, three, four, we don't want your f***ing war." Some shouted, "Get it," "Burn it." "ROTC has to go."

By 8.30 p.m. the ROTC building was on fire. When the Fire Department arrived they were met with resistance from an estimated 1000 student and non-student demonstrators. Rocks were thrown. Fire hoses were cut and pulled on in a tug of war. The fire went out and the firemen left campus. The fire restarted at 9.45 p.m. and the firemen returned to campus accompanied this time by the National Guard.

On Sunday morning, May 3, 850 Guardsmen were now on campus making it appear like a military zone. Who were these Guardsmen? In normal times they trained one weekend a month and two weeks in the summer. But these were not normal times. Because of demonstrations and riots on campuses and in cities over the past several years Guardsmen were often called out for up to a week at a time leaving their jobs and families. The Guardsmen on the Kent State campus had been on duty for the past week because of a teamsters strike and had been guarding overpasses on freeways and highways across the state. They arrived on campus armed with M1 rifles with an effective killing range of up to 400 yards, bayonets, tear gas and gas masks which limited peripheral vision.

At 9 a.m. Governor Rhodes arrived in Kent and met with city, county, university officials and representatives of the State Highway Patrol and the Portage County Sheriff's Office. He then opened the meeting to the media and proclaimed that Kent State was just one of many Ohio universities being taken over by those trying to attack authority and use the universities as sanctuaries, and said that

officials would use any means necessary to control them. He talked for 15 minutes and many, including university officials, interpreted the governor's statements to mean that Kent State was now under martial law but that was not the case.

Back on campus the atmosphere was much different. Many of the students, disturbed by the rioting of the two preceding nights and gratified that the troubles had apparently ended, went to church where clergy preached against violence and deplored its consequences. By mid-morning the sun was shining, the charred skeleton of the ROTC building was roped off and placed under heavy guard and visitors filed past it continuously.

Students talked with guardsman and one, Allison Krause, put a flower in the barrel of a gun and said, "flowers are better than bullets."

But then came evening and crowds began to gather again. At 9.15 p.m. an order was given to disperse and after being tear-gassed the crowd moved around the campus. One group conducted a sit-in at two streets leading into downtown. At 10.10 p.m. a group of demonstrators began reading a list of demands for the Mayor and for President White. These included: abolition of the ROTC program; removal of the National Guard from campus by Monday night; lifting of the curfew; full amnesty for those arrested Saturday night; consideration of the demands of Black United Students and reduction in tuition for all students.

The crowd began to disperse but on the way back to campus more obscenities were yelled, rocks thrown at the Guardsmen and tear gas was thrown in response.

On Monday, May 4 attendance at morning classes had a high degree of absenteeism. There were several fake bomb threats and Guardsmen in full gear and bayoneted weapons guarded the entrances to campus and the buildings. Leaflets were distributed across the campus noting that demonstrations were prohibited but, unfortunately, the message did not reach all students.

At 11 a.m. students started to gather on the Commons. The crowd around the victory bell grew to 500 and another 1000 were "cheerleaders" behind them on the hill. Another group of 500 were spectators standing behind and around the Guardsmen. I was in that group. I was a graduate student, a staff member of the KSU foundation and had recently served in a separate company of the National Guard Regiment that was on the campus.

At 11.45 a.m. 113 Guardsmen took position, guns locked and loaded, bayonets affixed with gas masks in place. To the outsider seeing a guardsman in a gas mask evoked a sense of the unreal and this was an advantage for it often frightened the observer. To the person inside the mask there was a sense of remoteness and detachment and that was a disadvantage for it cut a soldier off from his fellow Guardsmen.

Several orders were given to the students to disperse, but because of the noise and the crowd being 500 feet away many probably did not hear the order or if they did they did not disperse. There were shouts of “Pigs off our campus” and “Power to the People.”

At 12.05 the troops were ordered to advance on the demonstrators firing tear gas as they moved. The Guardsmen moved up and down various areas around the hill and then began moving back in the direction from which they had come.

At 12.24 a group of Guardsmen turned 180 degrees to face the students and 28 Guardsmen fired 67 rounds in 13 seconds. Many fired into the air or into the ground but a small portion fired directly into the crowd. Officers shouted “Cease Fire,” “Cease Fire” and hit several men on their helmets to stop their firing.

Nine students were wounded. One, Dean Kahler, would be permanently paralyzed from the waist down. Four students were killed: William Schroeder, a psychology major and a member of ROTC was 130 yards away; Sandra Scheuer, a speech pathology major was walking to class and was also 130 yards away; Jeffrey Miller, a psychology major was 97 yards away and Allison Krause, an Honors College art major who the day before had put the flower in the barrel of the gun saying “flowers are better than bullets” was 115 yards away.

The Guardsmen returned to the location from which they had started. Students began to approach them and faculty marshals pleaded with the crowd to disperse. Professor Glenn Frank said, “I don’t care if you have never listened to anyone before in your lives. I am begging you right now. If you don’t disperse they’re going to move in and it can only be a slaughter.” His plea succeeded and by 1.30 the area was cleared. The president, who had returned to campus late Sunday night, ordered the university closed for the rest of the week and an injunction from the county prosecutor closed the university until “conditions merit the reopening.”

Thirty minutes after the shooting 25 staff members were assigned to phone banks as media were calling from across the country. The rules were clear: Have an open policy to all media. Be specific in your responses: Yes, No, I don't know, I'll find out and above all --- Do not lie.

Most of the students were without transportation so 36 university buses were used to transport them to Columbus and Cleveland and they made their way home as best they could. All traffic in and out of the city was stopped and a dusk to dawn curfew was imposed with helicopters circling the city throughout the night.

Public opinion was much in support of the National Guard. The student protests had finally gnawed through the cord of public tolerance worn thin by over a decade of clashes with authority. Over the next few days signs were posted across the state reading "The Kent Four should have studied more" and "The score is four, next time more."

But most disturbing was the reaction some students received when they arrived home. Several, including a current faculty member at Kent State, reported that their parents said "The guard should have shot all of you."

On campuses across the nation the feeling was the opposite. One study concluded that over four million students on more than half of the campuses across the country demonstrated with hundreds of colleges and universities closing.

Among the colleges protesting the war and the Kent State shootings was Jackson State in Mississippi. Ten days after the Kent State shootings authorities fired at unarmed and unwarned student demonstrators. In 28 seconds, 75 state police shot 150 rounds, primarily at a women's dormitory, wounding 12 students and killing two.

Because the spring quarter at Kent State was not over, many faculty members corresponded with students by mail or held courses in their homes or at off-campus sites so students could complete the academic year. On June 13, 1250 seniors and graduate students returned to campus to take part in commencement. On June 15 the court injunction was lifted and the university re-opened.

Across the nation the shootings at Kent State contributed to changing Americans' consciousness about the Vietnam War. It was the first war to reach into American

homes daily via television and in the decades to follow May 4, 1970 would be seen as the day the war came home.

There were several trials and the legal aftermath ended in 1979 with an out-of-court settlement involving a statement signed by 28 defendants as well as a monetary settlement of \$675,000 to the wounded students and the parents of the students who had been killed. The families of those killed each received \$15,000. This amount was paid by the State of Ohio and not by any Guardsmen.

The statement signed by members of the Ohio National Guard was viewed by them to be a declaration of regret and not an admission of wrongdoing.

The statement read: "In retrospect, the tragedy of May 4, 1970 should not have occurred. The students may have believed that they were right in continuing their mass protest in response to the Cambodian invasion, even though this protest followed the posting and reading by the university of an order to ban rallies and an order to disperse.

Some of the Guardsmen, fearful and anxious from prior events, may have believed in their own minds that their lives were in danger. Hindsight suggests that another method would have resolved the confrontation. Better ways must be found to deal with such a confrontation.

We devoutly wish that a means had been found to avoid the May 4th events culminating in the Guard shootings and the irreversible deaths and injuries. We deeply regret those events and are profoundly saddened by the deaths of four students and the wounding of nine others which resulted. We hope that the agreement to end the litigation will help to assuage the tragic memories regarding that sad day."

What is the meaning of May 4, 1970 for today?

The shootings at Kent State:

*spurred the largest national student strike in U.S. history;

*encouraged Congress to respond to the concerns of young people, including lowering the voting age to 18 and beginning to withdraw funding for the war;

*changed Ohio National Guard regulations so that nonlethal weapons were carried for campus disturbances;

*set a precedent in the U.S. Supreme Court allowing public officials acting in the capacity of their office to be brought to trial for their actions;

*remind us of the need to communicate effectively and respect differences, and the importance of protecting the rights of the First Amendment. As the father of one of the slain students said, "Dissent is not a crime."

To help students understand the meaning of May 4, Kent State has responded in many ways including establishing a Center for Applied Conflict Management which enrolls more than 1000 students each year in courses and requiring all freshmen to see a film entitled, "Fire in the heartland."

In February 2010 the National Register of Historic Places added the site of the May 4 shootings to the list.

In October 2012 the university established the May 4 Visitors Center which uses images and artifacts to tell the story of the days leading up to May 4, 1970, the events of that day and the aftermath and lasting impact of those events as they continue to resonate today.

The President's Commission on Campus Unrest prepared an extensive report on the events surrounding May 4 and concluded, "The very motto of our nation calls for both unity and diversity: from many, one. Out of our divisions, we must now recreate understanding and respect for those different from ourselves."

Now, four decades later seemingly unresolvable conflicts continue between individuals, politicians, organizations and countries with often too little progress.

Perhaps the editors of the Kent State yearbook for 1970, those who had witnessed the events, had the best direct simple suggestion aimed at the minds and hearts of all who have differences. The yearbook dedicated 70 pages to pictures of the events surrounding May 4. The only text is in the expanding front flap of the

yearbook. It reads: Come together—Communicate together. (Repeat) Come together---Communicate together.