

An Assessment of Blame for the Kent State Shootings

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When Richard Nixon began his presidency in 1968, he promised to end the war in Vietnam. Throughout the 1960s United States involvement in the war had grown with an escalating death toll of American servicemen and a growing opposition among the American people. The Vietnam War gained even wider public disapproval in November, 1969, when reports of the deaths of both American troops and hundreds of Vietnamese villagers in the My Lai Massacre received widespread news coverage. A month later, President Nixon called for a draft lottery requiring thousands of young men to enlist in military service. The first draft since World War II, this measure eliminated educational deferments, and thus many college students and professors were to be drafted into military service potentially facing combat in Vietnam as a result. This initiated a wave of protests on a number of college campuses comprised of radical activists and students who opposed the war and were angered over the possibility of having to go to war themselves.

In the spring of 1970 protests expanded from the more liberal campuses on the two coasts to a much broader cross section of American universities. On April 29, 1970, President Nixon further fueled these protests when he announced a plan to invade Cambodia to attack North Vietnamese forces who had established operating bases in eastern Cambodia. Many anti-war protestors viewed this decision as evidence that the Nixon administration was taking action that would serve to prolong the war, and this set off a new wave of protests, some of which resulted in rioting, looting and violent confrontations with local police.

This paper was written for Dr. Charles Hanson's Advanced Placement U.S. History class in the spring of 2015.

Kent State University, a mid-sized public university located in a small town south of Cleveland, Ohio, was one such location. The university had prior, though relatively modest, anti-war activity, but on Friday, May 1, 1970, a larger protest was organized involving about 500 demonstrators. Following this Friday campus demonstration, the protesters spilled over into the town of Kent, and later that night clashes with police and looting occurred. Much of it did not involve Kent State students, but instead was the result of rowdy bar patrons who trashed stores and fought with the police. Kent town Mayor, Letroy Satrom, concerned that the local police force was incapable of handling the upcoming weekend protests, decided to call in the Ohio National Guard. The next day, Saturday, May 2, before the Guard members arrived in Kent, another on-campus antiwar protest led to the burning of the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) building. The next evening, the now tense situation worsened when the Guard used tear gas to disperse a crowd of unruly demonstrators. Criticism of the protesters by Jim Rhodes, Governor of Ohio, and the Guards' presence on campus served to increase the resolve of the demonstrators and add to the size of their protest group. A larger protest was planned for Monday, May 4. On this day, the Guardsmen opened fire on the crowd, killing four Kent State students and wounding nine others. A terrible tragedy with major national consequences had occurred on this previously peaceful, Midwestern campus.

What exactly happened on that day to cause the National Guardsmen to shoot is still under considerable debate. Much has been written about Kent State, not just at the time, but in the 45 years since then as well. Documentaries, books, and even songs recount the events of that weekend.¹ However, many questions about the shooting still remain unanswered. The question most debated today by historians is: who was to blame for the shootings, the National Guardsmen who shot at the unarmed students, or the Kent State demonstrators whose protests provoked this tragic incident? Having reviewed considerable materials about the events of those four days, my conclusion is that the National Guard bore the primary responsibility for the deaths of the Kent State students.

Violence Begets Violence

Mentioned in verse 26:52 of the Gospel of Matthew and repeated by Dr. Martin Luther King in his speeches for peaceful resistance to racial inequality during the Civil Rights Movement, the phrase “violence begets violence” asserts that violent behavior will only lead to more violent behavior. This very phrase was used by Dr. Robert White, President of Kent State University, in his press conference on the day after the shootings when he offered his view of the incident.² He suggested that the demonstrators acted violently, forcing the National Guardsmen, in fear of their lives, to retaliate with force.³ This assertion, that the demonstrators were threatening the lives of the Guardsmen, is the core rationale that has been used to justify the National Guardsmen’s firing upon the demonstrators. In White’s view, the students had put the National Guardsmen in a position where the Guardsmen believed that their lives were in danger, and thus the Guardsmen needed to respond with force sufficient to protect themselves.

Before May 4, 1970, some members of the Kent State community had in fact been protesting the United States military’s actions in Vietnam, and these protests had led to violence on the campus. On April 8, 1969, a year prior to the Kent State shootings, Robert E. Matson, Vice President for Student Affairs at Kent State University, issued a letter to Kent State’s leaders of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) informing them of their suspension from campus due to several violations including battery and assault on university police officers, violent and forceful attempted entry into administration buildings, and breach of the peace.⁴ This radical group of Kent State students clearly had a history of attacking law enforcement officials before the National Guardsmen set foot on campus. It is quite possible that the Guardsmen were aware of the SDS members’ prior record of violent protests and threatening behavior to authorities like them. They also definitely knew of the looting and fighting with the Kent police that had occurred on the previous Friday night, of the possible involvement of outside “agitators” and activists, and of the burning of the ROTC center on Saturday. These prior events could have influenced the National Guardsmen’s attitude towards the

student demonstrators, for if they knew that law enforcement officials on the campus had been assaulted and injured in the past, it is conceivable that the National Guardsmen would have feared for their safety earlier in the rioting and felt that there was a likelihood that the rioters would take physically harmful actions against them. Thus, once the demonstration felt to the Guardsmen to be getting out of their control, they conceivably feared for their personal safety, particularly given that they were greatly outnumbered by the demonstrators.

Subsequent to the shootings, some observers, historians and the general public initially concluded that the National Guardsmen were not to blame for the shootings and had just cause to fire on the crowd of students. One historian, Christopher J. Broadhurst, summarized this view when he asserted that the students instigated the violence by previously burning the ROTC building, throwing rocks at the National Guardsmen, and dispensing tear gas canisters at the Guardsmen.⁵ He believed that the National Guardsmen fired into the crowd of student protestors solely in order to protect their own lives, and he pointed the finger at the Kent State students themselves for causing the deaths of four young individuals.

National Guardsmen leaders themselves later expressed this same view. One National Guard leader, Ron Snyder, stated that “the Guardsmen were provoked beyond reason. I believe that we used every conceivable effort to get the people to disperse and to move, long before the formation moved up to the hill.”⁵ Essentially, the National Guardsmen were said to have done everything that they could to calm and control the crowd, but in the end their only choice was to use lethal force.

Distance Makes All the Difference

At the core of the argument absolving the National Guardsmen from blame in the Kent State shootings is that they were put in a position that endangered their lives, and thus they had just cause to fire upon the crowd of Kent State students. The main basis of this argument is that the students were physically violent during the demonstration. They had surrounded and thrown rocks at the Guardsmen and had

thrown back the tear gas canisters that the Guardsmen had used to try to disperse the crowd. However, there is no concrete evidence to prove that the National Guardsmen's lives were in danger at the point at which they decided to turn and fire into the crowd of Kent State students. Instead, I believe that the National Guardsmen panicked and fired into the crowd without just cause, and that there are a number of reasons why this places the blame for the shootings of 13 people fully on them.

The Guardsmen fired more than sixty rounds before ceasing fire, and thirteen students were shot. Four were killed, two paralyzed for life, and seven were severely wounded.⁷ This seems well beyond the necessary force to repel the crowd even if there were justification to do so. Jeffery Glen Miller stood ninety yards from the National Guardsmen when they opened fire, and he died from a shot to the mouth.⁸ William K. Schroeder stood one hundred and thirty yards from the Guardsmen and he died from a shot in the back.⁹ Sandra Lee Scheuer was one hundred and thirty yards from the Guardsmen, and she was killed by a shot through the side of the neck.¹⁰ Allison B. Krause stood one hundred and ten yards from the Guardsmen, and she died from a shot to her left side.¹¹ The average distance of the students who were killed from where the National Guardsmen were shooting was one hundred and fifteen yards. Of the thirteen students wounded, two were shot in the front, seven from the side, and four from the rear.¹² This pattern suggests that they were randomly fired upon victims.

These statistics also indicated that those who were wounded appeared to pose no immediate threat to the Guardsmen. At an average of one hundred and fifteen yards, it is hard to fathom how the students could pose a physical danger to the Guardsmen as they were well beyond distances for possible physical contact. Also, these students were clearly too far to pose a threat in terms of rock throwing.¹³ Further, while there was considerable confusion and chaos in the midst of the protest, there was no subsequent evidence to suggest that the thirteen students who were shot were putting the National Guardsmen's lives in danger, nor had any of them had personal history of violent behavior. A subsequent FBI investigation included the finding that of the thirteen, none

were associated with the disruption and protest three nights prior on May 1, or with the burning of the ROTC building on May 2. Thus, what possible justification would the National Guardsmen have to fire on these particular thirteen people?

Nearly two thousand Kent State students and others gathered on May 4 to protest the Cambodian Incursion and calling in of the National Guard to the campus; however, no photographs from the day show any protestor close enough to physically attack or harm the National Guardsmen.¹⁴ The majority of the photographs taken that day portray the Kent State demonstrators as vocal and maybe confrontational, but also clearly unarmed. John Filo's Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph of Mary Ann Vecchio kneeling over the body of Jeffrey Miller minutes after he was shot, shows both Vecchio, Miller, and the students surrounding them to be essentially in a state of shock (see Appendix). In other photos, many of the students appeared to be observing rather than protesting, and many of those who were protesting were retreating away from the Guardsmen, not advancing to attack them.

As historian John Fitzgerald explains, the National Guardsmen "suddenly fired into a crowd of innocent protestors without just cause."¹⁵ Overall, the distances at which the crowd was located and the distances from the National Guardsmen that the students who were killed stood, provided overwhelming evidence that the students' actions were not life threatening to the Guardsmen.

Incorrect Testimonies Lead to Doubt

In subsequent investigations of the events at Kent State, representatives of the Guardsmen were asked to explain and justify their actions. The rationale for the killings that they put forth, that their lives were in danger, was clearly central to their defense. However, the National Guardsmen's inaccuracies, discrepancies and contradictions in their testimonies and accounts of the situation following the shootings raised many questions about the validity of this rationale. Their inconsistencies instead suggested that the various Guardsmen may have changed or fabricated their testimonies in order to cover up what really occurred in an attempt to justify their use of lethal force.

General Canterbury, for example, who was in charge of the National Guardsmen that day, testified that the students were at times as close as four or five yards from the guards during the protest.¹⁶ However, photographs show no student was within twenty yards at any time when the Guardsmen were at the football field.¹⁷ In fact, the main body of demonstrators was at least sixty to seventy five yards away.

Also, some Guard officers said they shot in response to shots fired by an unidentifiable sniper. The FBI conducted extensive investigations around the sniper assertions, including a search with a metal detector of the area at which the protest occurred in an attempt to find nonmilitary bullets. However, no evidence was found that suggested anyone other than the National Guardsmen fired a weapon that day.¹⁸

These apparent inaccuracies in the National Guardsmen's recounting of the events, and particularly those of General Canterbury, the commanding officer, raises the possibility that they may have deliberately fabricated the circumstances describing how their lives were in danger in order to offer the "just cause" for deciding to discharge their rifles into the crowd.

Unprepared And Inexperienced

It is also evident that the National Guardsmen lacked the appropriate leadership, were inexperienced and unprepared to handle a situation of this nature, and that they clearly did not follow their own rules of engagement that were designed to avoid violence in the case of protesting. The National Guardsmen basically did not fulfill the duties that they were there to perform.

In General Canterbury, the National Guardsmen had a leader who was inexperienced in how to handle a highly volatile situation like this. At a minimum, he should have closely monitored the actions of his troops in the midst of the protest. The troop of Guardsmen were not previously trained to handle a protest setting, nor were they briefed on how to behave should the crowd become unruly. Without a command from their leader, they should not have fired into a crowd of protestors. However, "no command to fire was given, either by word or by gesture"

by General Canterbury.¹⁹ Instead, each National Guardsmen acted on his own, and those that fired did so at their own discretion, thus not following the chain of command.

Shortly after the shootings General Canterbury gave permission to Professor Glenn W. Frank to attempt to get the crowd of protestors to leave without further disruption.²⁰ Frank persuaded the students to sit down instead of milling around and warned the students that they might be shot if they approached the Guardsmen again.²¹ “They’re scared to death. They’re a bunch of summertime soldiers,” he said of the Guardsmen. “They’re not professionals.”²² Frank’s comments reflect the fragile state of mind and inexperience of the young group of Guardsmen. To require a professor of the university to step in and do the job that the National Guardsmen should have done, was essentially an admission of failure by the general and his troops to perform the duties expected of them.

Lastly, the National Guardsmen did not follow their own “Rules of Engagement.”²³ One rule plainly stated in their guidelines is “Indiscriminate firing of weapons is forbidden. Only single aimed shots at confirmed targets will be employed.”²⁴ Nor did they use “the minimum force necessary” to disperse the protestors.²⁵ As discussed earlier, the students were shot at substantial distances from the Guardsmen, so it is clear that the Guardsmen did not fire at one confirmed target and instead were guilty of indiscriminate firing of their weapons randomly at the crowd. Finally, the Guards also did not follow the protocol for the sequence of measures that they were supposed to take in a riotous situation. Instead, they fired their weapons well before it was warranted to do so.

Following the events of May 4 at Kent State there were numerous investigations to determine what had happened. The Guardsmen were indicted by a grand jury, but in 1974 the charges were subsequently dismissed. The Scranton Commission, a group that was formed by President Nixon to investigate the protests that were occurring on college campuses throughout the U.S., issued a report in September of 1970 that concluded that “Even if the guardsmen faced danger, it was not a

danger that called for lethal force. The 61 shots by 28 guardsmen certainly cannot be justified. Apparently, no order to fire was given, and there was inadequate fire control discipline on Blanket Hill. The Kent State tragedy must mark the last time that, as a matter of course, loaded rifles are issued to guardsmen confronting student demonstrators.”²⁶

History Repeats Itself

The shootings at Kent State share an eerie similarity to the Boston Massacre over two hundred years earlier. On March 5, 1770, British Army soldiers fired their muskets into a crowd of unarmed Boston citizens, who were throwing rocks and shards of ice at the soldiers in protest of a tax that had been ordered by the British authorities on tea. About the same number of protestors were killed or wounded in Boston as at Kent State, and the event was hugely consequential to garnering broader support throughout the colonies for an end to British rule.

Both Kent State and the Boston Massacre incidents occurred during a period at which a substantial portion of the national population shared a common disapproval of government policies and a frustration with the government’s unwillingness to deal with their disapproval. Frustration led to protest and rioting, and ultimately violence towards the representatives of the government. The decision of armed troops to fire at the unarmed protestors in both events is still argued today by historians as to whether the soldiers were indeed in a position in which lethal force was the correct response. In any case, the outcomes were tragic “massacres,” and they ultimately had major consequences in terms of gaining public support for the protestors’ causes. Patriots across America used the Boston Massacre as a rally cry against the British, and news authorities doctored the details of the massacre so it would act as propaganda in America’s fight against British rule, citing the situation as British soldiers shooting into a crowd of innocent and unarmed Bostonians as an act of cruelty.²⁷ While Americans in 1970 on average initially looked at the Kent State shootings as an unfortunate situation where violence got out of hand, the subsequent increase in protests on college campuses throughout the U.S. was instrumental in shaping public opinion and bringing the Vietnam war to a conclusion.²⁸

National Tragedy

In the forty five years since the Kent State shootings there has been much controversy and disagreement surrounding who was to blame for the shootings. Historians around the world have their opinions and arguments for one side or the other between the National Guardsmen and Kent State students. Regardless of the uncertainty of who was responsible for the deaths at Kent State, there was no uncertainty about the lasting political and social consequences that this event had on our country. Five days after the shootings, 100,000 people marched in Washington to express their anger at the killings and their support for ending the war. In the month following the shootings, protests escalated and widened at college campuses around the country, and over 400 universities were shut down for the remainder of the school year and their students were sent home.

On February 23, 2010, the “Kent State Shootings Site” was added by the U. S. National Park Service to the National Register of Historic Places. In listing the site, the Park Service stated that the site “is considered nationally significant given its broad effects in causing the largest student strike in United States history, affecting public opinion about the Vietnam War, creating a legal precedent established by the trials subsequent to the shootings, and for the symbolic status the event has attained as a result of a government confronting protesting citizens with unreasonable deadly force.”²⁹ ●

Appendix



John Paul Filo, “Kent State,” *Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Online Catalog*, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/>.

Notes

1. The song “Ohio” by Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young was a reaction to the Kent State shootings and became a hit in 1977 when it was released.
2. Robert I. White, “Tuesday Afternoon of Dr. Robert White.” Press Conference, May 5, 1970. Ohio Memory Collection.
3. It is also possible he is being intentionally ambiguous to remain unbiased.
4. Robert E. Matson, *Robert E. Matson to Students for a Democratic Society*, April 8, 1969. Ohio Memory Collection.

5. Christopher J. Broadhurst, "We Didn't Fire a Shot. We Didn't Burn a Building': The Student Reaction at North Carolina State University to the Kent State Shootings." *The North Carolina Historical Review*, no. 3 (July 2010): 288. JSTOR.
6. *1970 Year in Review*, "Kent State Shootings," United Press International, May 6, 1970, accessed March 4, 2015, <http://www.upi.com/Archives/Audio/Events-of-1970/Kent-State-Shootings/>.
7. William W. Scranton, *The Report of the President's Commission on Campus Unrest* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health, Education & Welfare, 1970), 273.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 274.
13. With the average Major League Baseball pitcher today throwing the baseball a maximum of around the same distance as where the students stood upon being shot, it is to say the least, unlikely, those students were threatening the National Guardsmen with rocks.
14. Ibid., 269.
15. John Fitzgerald O'Hara, "Kent State: May 4 and Postwar Memory," *American Quarterly*, no. 2 (June 2006): 314. JSTOR.
16. Scranton, *The Report of the President's Commission on Campus Unrest*, 270.
17. Ibid., 271.

18. Ibid., 279.

19. Ibid., 275.

20. Ibid., 278.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid., 282-283.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. *Boston Gazette and Country Journal* (Boston, MA), March 17, 1770, 71.

28. John Kifner, "4 Kent Students Killed By Troops," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), May 5, 1970, 2.

29. "Kent State Shootings Site," National Register of Historic Places, last modified February 26, 2010, http://www.nps.gov/nr/feature/weekly_features/10_02_26_KentStateShootingSite.htm.

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