

**PLATTSBURGH STATE COLLEGE KENT STATE SHOOTINGS PROTEST AT THE FEDERAL BUILDING
MAY 4-5, 1970**

I attended college at the State University of New York at Plattsburgh between 1967 and 1971, graduating with a BS Degree in Physics in 1971. On May 4, 1970 I was 20 years old, in my junior year of college and living off campus. I was present at a protest conducted by students of Plattsburgh State in support of the students killed at Kent State and against the U.S. presence in the Viet Nam War. The protest was not held on the campus of Plattsburgh State. It was held at the Federal Building in downtown Plattsburgh. Although I was present at the protest, I need to state upfront that I was not in support of the anti-war movement nor in support of the students killed at Kent State. This does not mean that I wasn't saddened by their deaths. It simply means that I was not in support of a protest held on their behalf at that time. I wasn't at Kent State when the shootings occurred. I didn't see the shootings occur. I didn't have enough information at that time to even form any kind of preliminary judgment of the events which occurred. And I don't think anyone else outside of Kent State did either.

I'll now explain about what I mean about me not being "anti-war". It does not mean being "pro-war". It simply means that I did not support the anti-war movement during the Viet Nam War. My father was career Air Force who entered the military before World War II and retired in 1959. He performed honorable service for the country during World War II, the Korean War, and the Cold War. Most of my uncles and cousins served in the military. I had a first cousin who was killed-in-action in the Korean War. Most of my relations served honorably in the military and all received honorable discharges. I myself served in the Air Force after college and received an honorable discharge. Prior to college I had seen most of my family serving in the military at one time or another and I supported them and all others performing military service. This does not mean I supported every action of the government or the military. It means I supported military service members then and I continue to support them today. I would never do anything on my part then or today to either dishonor them or contribute to putting them in danger in any way.

When the Viet Nam War first started, I believed it to be a necessary war to protect the world from the spread of communism. I also believed it would be over quickly with minimal American involvement. But as time went on and I began to read on a daily basis the Americans being killed and wounded in Viet Nam, I began to struggle with whether or not the war was right to continue. I could never come to a firm conclusion either way whether or not the war was right to continue. But I did come to the conclusion that if I supported the anti-war effort I would be dishonoring those who served in the military and more importantly providing "aid-and-comfort" to the enemy. This was the moral conclusion I came to for myself. This does not mean that I thought those in the anti-war movement were wrong. If they came to the conclusion that the anti-war movement was morally right for them, then I did not believe them to be wrong. I did draw the line however at certain points. I considered anyone who burned the flag of the United States to be wrong. The American flag has nothing whatsoever to do with the actions of the government or the military. I also consider Jane Fonda to have committed treason. I don't consider those in the anti-war movement in the United States to have committed treason. These are simply the moral conclusions I had come to myself. Others may have come to different conclusions. And as said previously, if others thought the anti-war movement was morally right, then I believe they had the moral obligation to pursue that route and I would not fault them in any way whatsoever.

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I will document the events which I witnessed during the Plattsburgh State protest as well as my personal feelings on what occurred. I will try and recall these events exactly as they occurred without bias. That being said, my account of the events are as follows:

Around mid-afternoon on May 4, 1970, I headed from my off campus apartment over to MacDonough Hall on the Plattsburgh State campus. MacDonough Hall was the largest dormitory on campus and also served as a student center. I'm not sure why I went there but it wasn't because of the shootings at Kent State. I didn't know these had occurred at that time. Before I entered the building I heard people talking about the shootings at Kent State and that protests were erupting on campuses all over the nation. My first reaction was why was this occurring? Americans were being killed on a daily basis in Viet Nam yet protests weren't erupting all over the nation for them. Was the life of a college student supposed to be more important than the life of an American soldier dying in Viet Nam? I then came to the personal conclusion that the shootings formed a catalyst for the anti-war sentiment which already existed.

I know that a power failure had occurred on campus when I arrived at MacDonough Hall and this prompted a large number of students to come out of the building into the front lawn of the building. Later someone speculated that protesters may have deliberately somehow caused this power outage to get students to come out of the building where they presumably could inform them of the Kent State shootings and hand out protest instructions. But to the best of my knowledge this has never been proven or at least not made known to the public. In any case, a large number of students were outside the building and a girl was informing them of the Kent State shootings and handing out protest instructions. I was handed one of these. An electronic copy of the original has been provided to the Kent State Library. Text from the protest instructions is as follows:

"Today at 6:45 there is going to be a demonstration to show our feelings about the fifteen persons shot at Kent State. Four were killed, two of them girls. We are also demonstrating to show that we do not agree with the war in Asia, especially the recent escalation. The time for action is now. All over the country students are demonstrating for a change in the militaristic attitude of the leaders of our country. The demonstration is to be a peaceful one. Solidarity is important. Show your feelings. Support this effort. A march will begin from in front of MacDonough Hall. Assemble at 6:45. We will then march to the Federal Building where people have been keeping vigil all night. We will not allow people to enter the building until 9:00 AM. At that time, we will march back to the campus and assemble at the Administration Building. Please give us your full cooperation and support."

As can be seen, the instructions were really written for what was to happen the following day although it did mention an overnight vigil to be held. The girl who was handing out the instructions then told everyone to come into a foyer in the building where the protest was to be discussed in further detail. I didn't know the girl but I assumed that she was the protest leader because she was the one doing most of the talking. Only about ten of us went into the building and I was one of them. I went there entirely out of curiosity because in no way did I support the anti-war effort and the protest itself. Inside the building, it was basically a free-for-all with some venting about the shootings and the war, some rationally evaluating the protest plan, and two guys who got into a shouting and then shoving match. One was saying not to do the protest because you might get killed and the other disagreeing with him. I

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remember some of the girls looking at these two guys with disgust. It was like we were all supposed to be anti-war and here we have two of us going at war with each other. In any case, it ended with no fist fight and everyone eventually cooled down.

After this ended, I went back to my apartment and had supper. I don't know what time that day some of the protestors had arrived at the Federal Building to begin the overnight vigil, but it must have been relatively early. I had a friend who had been down there at that time. He said he saw someone taking pictures with a camera from an upstairs apartment across the street from the Federal Building. He went up the stairs and knocked on the door. A man with a suit answered the door. He also saw another man with a suit holding a camera. My friend asked them why they were taking pictures. He said they were polite but that they couldn't tell him why they were taking pictures. No doubt they were federal agents, possibly FBI, taking pictures of the protestors. After supper around 6:00 PM, I went down to the Federal Building to see what was going on because I knew from the protest instructions that some would be maintaining an overnight vigil. I assumed the reason for this was to prevent anyone from entering the building until the main protest group arrived the next morning. I believe there were about ten present at that time but increased to about 20 before dawn. I decided to join the overnight vigil and stay until the protest ended at 9:00 AM the next day. I was not anti-war nor did I support the protest. I was strictly there out of curiosity as well as to check out the girls. I had some irrational notion that I might be able to do something to impress them. I was not planning on participating in the protest. I was there strictly as an observer. But I didn't tell anyone this. The protestors thought I was one of them.

I didn't know anyone there. I had seen a few around campus but didn't know anyone personally. I didn't really want to talk to any of the protestors because I was afraid they might have asked me about my involvement in the anti-war movement, for which there was none. I do remember talking to a friend on the street, but he was not one of the protestors. I kind of just milled around all night. I believe there were a greater number of girls than guys. As the night went on and into early morning, I began to feel a sense of camaraderie with the others. But I don't know why since I was not one of the protestors. I remember someone going out and bringing in hot chocolate for all of us. The Federal Building was surrounded by a chain link fence. We were "inside the wire", so to speak. There was a large main opening in the front of the building and a small opening on the right back corner facing a side street. But both of these were visible from the street and would not be good escape routes if things got out of hand. However, on the left back side of the building a portion of the fence had been torn down due to some construction. This opening could not be seen from the street and I was planning on using it as an escape route if necessary. I would also tell the others if and when the time came. So I can say that I was thinking ahead to some degree.

Sometime after midnight the Plattsburgh Chief of Police showed up. He was wearing civilian clothes. He walked around the building speaking to everyone and the exact words he said when he came to me was "Gentlemen, just don't go inside the building." I interpreted this as him knowing the details of the planned protest and that there would be no confrontation with the police as long as none of the protestors physically entered the building. He then went and sat in his car on the side street and looked like he was half asleep but trying to stay awake, presumably to keep an eye on the protestors. I actually felt some empathy for him in that he had to go through this hassle but it was his job and he had to do it.

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Shortly before dawn he left in his car. I couldn't understand why he would sit there all night and then leave before the protest was over. But it wasn't to be very long before I found out why.

Around first light, a custodian showed up for work. He had no idea whatsoever why we were there. When he went to the front door of the building he was blocked by the protestors and one of the girls said he couldn't enter the building. He then got belligerent and said he would force his way into the building if need be. He told us that he was coming to work and he wasn't going to get paid unless he got inside the building and did his work. Again, he had no idea why we were blocking the door. The protestors then moved and let him into the building but everyone had to laugh a little bit over the circumstances. Later in the morning the protestors let someone else from the outside (I believe another Federal Building employee) go inside the building to explain to the custodian what was going on. They both came out and the custodian was apologetic that he had got belligerent but he didn't know what was going on at the time. He said he didn't care if he was prevented from entering the building as long as he got paid. Now that he knew he was going to get paid without having to do work until the protest ended, it was of no concern to him. So even though the intent of the protest was to prevent anyone from entering the Federal Building until 9:00 AM, two people actually did. But it was under unique circumstances.

Shortly after dawn, people began to gather outside the fence. I believe most were townspeople going to work and curious about what was going on. Some were people coming to work at the Federal Building. Some may have been college students. One I do remember distinctly was the Monsignor from the Roman Catholic Church which was nearby. I had heard before the protest that he was a member of the local John Birch Society, which was a fiercely anti-communist organization. I could see him talking to someone and shaking his head in disgust as to what he was seeing. He was definitely visibly upset about the protest.

Shortly later a police van pulled up to the side street of the Federal Building. Out came the Chief of Police and maybe ten police officers. The Chief of Police was wearing a white uniform, had on a white helmet with a face shield, and carried a police baton. The other police officers were wearing black uniforms, had on white helmets with face shields, and were also carrying batons. I believe they also carried side arms as usual. The Chief of Police assembled the police officers in a single file two abreast and called them to attention. Then he shouted some orders and they all started to march up the side street with face shields in place and their batons held out in front of them. It was definitely military precision and they had apparently well-practiced these maneuvers. Now things began to get very tense because no one knew what was going to happen. I sensed that the police officers were as scared as we were. This may have been the first time they were ever assembled for actual riot control.

Immediately upon this happening, the girl leader of the protest told everyone to form lines directly facing the police who were marching up the street. There were about twenty of us I believe. If I had been a reasonable distance away from the girls, I would not have got in line with them. But I was standing right next to them when the police pulled up. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. I got into their protest line spontaneously without even thinking. The protestors then began to chant loudly over and over "One, two, three, four, the hell with Nixon's war". Again without thinking, I spontaneously

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joined in with them. Everything was happening so fast I had no time to think. But then it dawned on me that what they were saying wasn't entirely accurate. It wasn't really Nixon's war. He simply inherited it from Johnson who in turn inherited it from Kennedy. So why should Nixon take the entire rap for it? You would need to equally blame Kennedy and Johnson. Now I do understand that Nixon did escalate the war into Cambodia. But at least for me, it was wrong for me to continue the chant and I stopped. But after that much more serious reservations began to set in. The first was that I now felt that I was crossing the line from not being an anti-war supporter to being an anti-war supporter, even if by appearance only. It's one thing to hang out with protestors prior to the protest taking place but another thing to be in the middle of the protest once it took place. I felt I was now going too far and it was morally wrong for me to do this. Secondly, it occurred to me that if I was arrested I might be blacklisted from ever getting a security clearance and/or employment in the defense industry. With a physics degree, I knew that my most probable employment prospects would be in the defense industry. My immediate inclination was to leave the protestors before getting arrested. But now I had a serious problem. If I left now when it looked like there would be a confrontation, I would be thought of as a coward. I knew I couldn't let this happen and lose face in front of the girls and all the people who were standing outside the fence. I wanted to tell the girls right on the spot that I did not support the anti-war movement and the protest, but I would do anything they said just to prove to them I was not running away from the police. I would have done anything they said, with the exception of throwing objects at the police, fighting the police, trying to resist arrest, entering the Federal Building, or destroying property. I was now even willing to block the entrance to the Federal Building with them and get arrested, something I had never planned on doing previously. If arrested, I would not allow myself to be dragged out. I would let them put the handcuffs on me with no resistance on my part and I would voluntarily walk out standing upright. But under the circumstances there was no time to tell this to the girls. I really felt now that my being there had been a serious mistake and now I was trapped between the proverbial rock and a hard spot. But I made the decision that if the girls didn't cut and run neither would I. I can't even begin to tell you how screwed up I felt at the time. All kinds of things were going through my mind, but mostly feelings of guilt and stupidity. Guilt because I had given the appearance of supporting the anti-war movement. Stupidity for allowing myself to get into that situation in the first place. If only I had not been standing next to the girls when the police pulled up none of this would have happened. I thought I was going to be arrested and had resolved myself to it. I even had my speech ready for what I would tell the police after being arrested. I would tell them that I was not anti-war and the only reason I was there was to try and impress some girls. I would also admit to them that I now realized that this was a stupid reason for being there but once in the middle of it I couldn't leave the girls and be thought of as a coward. I would also tell them that I knew that I had broken the law and was willing to accept any consequences for my actions, whatever they may be. But I would emphasize in no uncertain terms that I did not support the anti-war movement.

I don't remember exactly what happened after that but the police did not enter within the fence, everyone calmed down, no one got arrested, and the protest ended peacefully at 9:00 AM. I also don't remember when the protest group arrived from the campus. I don't know if it was before or after the possible police confrontation. At 9:00 AM when the protest ended and everyone dispersed, it all now

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seemed anti-climatic and almost like a letdown to me. But in reality, I probably dodged a bullet by not getting arrested and had I got arrested it would have been for no good reason.

There is no doubt in my mind that photos were taken by federal agents of all of the protestors and that we were all investigated. However, there was never any negative effect on me as a result of this. I had no problem in later years when I was in the military and working in the defense industry obtaining security clearances, including a top secret clearance with a background investigation. Never once did the subject of this protest come up. They most likely found out no evidence of any other protest activities on my part and came to the conclusion that I was just a stupid kid on a one time fling. If they did come to that conclusion, they would have been 100% right. It also probably didn't hurt that I had short hair. Outside of college back then, short hair got you a long way. People looked at you much differently if you had short hair than if you had long hair. Sometimes, it was a night and day difference. I had nothing against long hair. I even tried it myself. But when it got to a certain length I decided it simply didn't look good on me.

That evening both college students and the general public were invited to an open forum in the college gymnasium and allowed to express their views on the war, whether for or against. A microphone was set up on a stage where anyone could come up to speak their mind. There was a college student moderator there to keep everything going smooth and civil. I believe this forum was intended to let everyone blow off steam. Plattsburgh is located in Clinton County, which is one of the most conservative counties in the state. During the Viet Nam War, Clinton County had the highest per capita of population enlistments in the Marine Corps than any other county in New York. So this should tell you a little something about the local area.

I didn't do any speaking at the forum. Like what was I going to say? I didn't support the anti-war movement but was still one of the protestors? I recall a few who spoke. I remember being tired from staying up all night. One college student got up there and apparently had so much stage fright you couldn't even understand what he was saying. One woman from the town got into a lively discussion with others about the Viet Cong. The woman said that the US had to be in Viet Nam. Otherwise, the Viet Cong would attack America. Someone asked how would the Viet Cong get to America? The woman said by a boat or a plane. All totally ludicrous of course, but this was some of the serious discussion that went on. One woman from the town got up and said that she didn't go to college, had to work long hours and didn't have the time to fully understand the war to develop a firm opinion. She seemed to be apologetic on this. But she was a naturally good speaker and was voicing her opinion honestly. The moderator then said that the woman showed you didn't have to go to college to be an eloquent speaker. The woman got loud applause from everyone when she left the stage. Another I also remember was the president of the local John Birch Society. He was wearing a black suit and looked like a Nazi storm trooper when he marched up to the stage. I thought he was going to get booed out of the gymnasium by the college students, but he didn't. I don't remember what he said. The forum turned out to be extremely civil, regardless of what views you expressed. I sensed that everyone from the college, including the protestors, wanted to make sure this would happen in order to provide an atmosphere of fairness and make a positive impression on the local townspeople who were there. And I believe this did happen. I

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would consider this open forum a success story. But I do have the gut feeling that if only college students were there it would have been a whole different story.

As an aside to the aftermath of the protest, a few months after the Kent State shootings a novelty T-shirt came out (electronic photo provided to Kent State Library). I purchased one of these shirts. The shirt had the words "STUDENT" above a circular target. This shirt was obviously a satirical response to the Kent State shootings, although some might consider it to be in bad taste. I received various reactions when wearing this shirt. Most on the college campus laughed at it. But I wore it once into an office supply store in Plattsburgh. I knew the owner of the store was the president of the local John Birch Society, who has been previously mentioned. I went there to obtain some literature about the John Birch Society because I wanted to learn about it. I was still not anti-war and was open to anything. He said he really liked the shirt and from his reaction I know he seriously believed the intent of the shirt was to promote the shooting of anti-war college students. I asked him some questions about the John Birch Society because I was curious about it. He invited me to attend one of the meetings but I respectfully declined. He seemed too radical to me. I had been at the protest a few months earlier and had a bad feeling about going to the meeting.

The following is an overall summary of the events which occurred as I see them:

- (1) The protest was well planned, no one got injured, no one got arrested, and no property was destroyed.
- (2) The actions of the Plattsburgh Police Department were professional and successful in preventing an unnecessary confrontation.
- (3) The protest showed visible support for the anti-war effort and raised awareness, whether anti-war or pro-war, in the local community as well as the college. This raising of awareness was probably the greatest benefit that the protest accomplished.
- (4) The open forum helped promote good relations with the townspeople and also raised awareness.

As a closing statement, I will say that a peaceful protest was held at Plattsburgh State in support of the students killed at Kent State and in opposition to the Viet Nam War. Although I had opposite views, I have respect for the protestors. I believe that they believed that what they were doing was morally right for America. And had they known what my views were, I would hope that they would have had the same respect for me as well.

TODAY AT 6:45 A.M. THERE IS GOING TO BE A DEMONSTRATION TO SHOW OUR FEELINGS ABOUT THE FIFTEEN PERSONS SHOT AT KENT STATE. FOUR WERE KILLED, TWO OF THEM GIRLS. WE ARE ALSO DEMONSTRATING TO SHOW THAT WE DO NOT AGREE WITH THE WAR IN ASIA, ESPECIALLY THE RECENT ESCALATION. THE TIME FOR ACTION IS NOW! ALL OVER THE COUNTRY STUDENTS ARE DEMONSTRATING FOR A CHANGE IN THE MILITARISTIC ATTITUDE OF THE LEADERS OF OUR COUNTRY.

THE DEMONSTRATION IS TO BE A PEACEFUL ONE. SOLIDARITY IS IMPORTANT. SHOW YOUR FEELINGS. SUPPORT THIS EFFORT.

A MARCH WILL BEGIN FROM IN FRONT OF MACDONOUGH HALL. ASSEMBLE AT 6:45. WE WILL BEGIN THEN MARCH TO THE FEDERAL BUILDING WHERE PEOPLE HAVE BEEN KEEPING VIGIL ALL NIGHT. WE WILL NOT ALLOW PEOPLE TO ENTER THE BUILDING UNTIL 9:00 A.M. AT THAT TIME WE WILL MARCH BACK TO THE CAMPUS AND ASSEMBLE AT THE ADMINISTRATION BUILDING. PLEASE GIVE US YOUR FULL COOPERATION AND SUPPORT.

