

Kent State May 4th, 1970 – Contemporary Law Enforcement – 54 Years Later

By Dr. Ronald Harris Parker

As an industrial psychologist I was always taught that if you take care of the means, the end would take care of itself. But as Albert Einstein once stated, “Perfection of means and confusion of ends seems to characterize our age.”

An illustration. On May 4th 1970, while crossing the Kent State University campus to eat lunch, I witnessed twenty-eight National Guard soldiers fire approximately 67 rounds of M-1 ammunition into a crowd of unarmed students over a period of 13 seconds. The students were protesting the invasion of Cambodia and an escalation of the Vietnam War. The end result was the killing of four students and wounding of nine others

A subsequent FBI investigation concluded that the Guard was not under fire and that the guardsmen fired the first shots. *Time* magazine stated “triggers were not pulled accidentally at Kent State.” In the aftermath, the President’s Commission on Campus Unrest found that “the indiscriminate firing of rifles into a crowd of students and the deaths that followed were “unnecessary, unwarranted and inexcusable.”

Despite this overwhelming consensus, no one in the Guard was held accountable for their actions.

In 1970, and prior to the tragic event at Kent State, most people viewed the military’s most essential service as providing protection to the citizenry. The military, in theory, protected us against “harm’s way.” After Kent State, many perceived the military themselves as creating the element of danger and representing “harm’s way.” The event in and of itself gave a whole new operational definition to the term excessive force. As Neil Young’s “Ohio” lyrics suggested, “Tin soldiers and Nixon’s coming,.. soldiers are gunning us down.”

In my mind this phenomenon is analogous to today’s perception of law enforcement. Although police departments emphasize their commitment to protect, preserve and safeguard the constitutional and civil rights of all citizens through impartial law enforcement, many communities and people don’t get that message. While some portions of a community sleep well at night knowing the police are awake and protecting their families from “harm’s way,” others feel that it is the police that create the element of danger and represent “harm’s way.” By implication, they feel safer when the police are not around.

Personally, I don’t doubt that the preponderance of people in law enforcement are there to protect and serve, but we’ve all met at least one dysfunctional police officer who, for whatever reason, treated us unfairly. Whether we were actually treated unfairly or due to our agitated state when interacting with law enforcement, we perceived the treatment as unfair. It’s really tricky. I think that the power exchange between law enforcement personnel and the people they serve causes paranoia. When you want the police around, say when you call them or they assist you on the side of the road, you’re relieved because there isn’t a punitive aspect to that interaction. You leave with a positive feeling about police and they treat you differently because you needed their assistance. However many people’s interaction with law enforcement is with traffic stops where they are interacting with you on a punitive level. In that case, you’re “in trouble” and they’re disciplining you. So you’re on guard and they’re on guard and it makes for a

less than ideal interaction. I've had police who were very kind and decent on traffic stops, but some who were openly hostile. I think situations like the latter tend to cause people to not be able to speak in a totally unbiased way about police. Or based on that one experience, people will perceive any future experiences with the police will result in the same.

Having been a law enforcement officer I know that policing is not a science and requires the ability to combine hard data, questionable data and intuitive guesses to arrive at a conclusion that events prove to be correct. One reason why simple answers haven't emerged from research to resolve this "harms way" issue is that there aren't any simple answers, only complicated answers hedged by conditions and exceptions. But there are principles that should govern our behavior:

- The means to an end is more important than the end justifying the means;
- Force is not the first law;
- The exercise of power should be held firmly within the constraints of law;
- "I hear you" should be the goal of one's discussions;
- Be sure you want the consequences of what you advocate.

Had Guardsmen adhered to these principles nearly 54 years ago, Neil Young would have never written his song "Ohio."

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