

FOUR DAYS IN MAY—Harold Schroeder

On May 4, 1970, on a warm sunny Monday afternoon, the Ohio National Guard killed four Kent State students and wounded nine more. Guardsmen fired 67 rounds of 30 caliber bullets from M-1 rifles over a period of 13 seconds.

The immediate cause of the confrontation was the announcement on April 30, on national TV, by President Nixon of a “Cambodian incursion” designed to disrupt the supply system of the Viet Cong. However it was quickly interpreted by the anti-war movement as an escalation of the conflict. Richard Nixon had been elected to the presidency in 1968, partly on a promise to end the Vietnam conflict. The nation itself was divided on the need for this war. The tension was not restricted to college campuses.

These tensions, however, were present long before Nixon’s announcement. It was impossible to escape the war. It was on the news every night. It was certainly on the minds of students and other men between the ages of 18 and 25 who had drawn a low number in the recent draft lottery and faced the prospect of killing or being killed halfway around the world. Reform movements such as the peaceful Freedom Riders which worked for civil rights for Blacks in the south in the early Sixties had given way to militant, violent anti-war groups. As the war continued, the hymn-singing peace marches were replaced by groups advocating revolution through riots and violence.

Prominent among these groups was a radical off-shoot of the SDS (Students for a Democratic Society), known as the “Weathermen” which was dedicated to the defeat of capitalism. Mark Rudd, previously an undergraduate at Columbia but now the leader of the Weathermen, held several rallies on the Kent campus during the weeks prior to May 4. He distributed literature and advocated nothing less than the violent overthrow of the U.S. government. He was a persuasive and arousing speaker who argued that the war must be experienced by people at home in order to change the Nixon policies. Kent State was an unlikely target since it was a peaceful, relatively non-activist campus. Rudd chose it precisely for this reason in order to make his point more dramatically.

Tensions were not restricted to the Kent campus. Anti-war sentiment was high at many universities. Guardsmen were called to numerous campuses across

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the nation, including Ohio State during the last week in April. The guard left OSU without any violent incidents after a couple days. More tension was created by a Teamsters strike aimed at stopping all truck traffic in Ohio. Attention by the Guard was necessary because vigilantes perched on bridges over the interstates to shoot or throw rocks at any truckers still driving. Some of the missiles were aimed at cars too. The Ohio Guard was busy.

The Midwestern Psychological Association held its annual meeting in Cincinnati in 1970. With several other faculty from Kent, I drove to the meeting early on Friday, May 1. It was a tense drive since we saw numerous men watching traffic from the bridges. We assumed they were armed. We returned on Sunday to learn of the tragic events in Kent that followed Nixon’s TV appearance on Thursday.

A rally had been held on Friday on the Commons, a large grassy area near the center of campus where students often gathered to celebrate an athletic victory by ringing the Victory Bell. It was a brief

rally but featured one student burning his draft card and a burning of a copy of the Constitution. A decision was made to meet again on Monday. Around midnight, violence broke out in downtown Kent, a short distance from campus, in the bar district. A bonfire was set on Water Street, store windows were broken, beer bottles were thrown at the police when they arrived. The crowd included students, non-students out for a party, and bikers—not an unusual mix since the Kent bars were a popular gathering place for young adults on weekends. The violence escalated and the entire Kent police force was called in plus police from neighboring towns. The mayor ordered the bars to close and the police eventually drove the angry crowd back to the campus with tear gas. The mayor declared a state of emergency and called Governor Rhodes for help.

Saturday was marked by threats to businesses and to the city that radicals would burn the town and the campus. The mayor feared the local police would be unable to maintain order and asked the governor to send the National Guard to Kent. The Guard did not arrive until after the ROTC building on campus had been set on fire. As firemen attempted to put out the fire, their water hoses were

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slashed. A crowd of about 1000 cheered as the blaze destroyed the building. Although a few rocks were thrown at firemen, no significant injuries were reported. Again, the crowd was dispersed with tear gas.

Governor Rhodes arrived in Kent on Sunday morning in an angry and provocative mood. At a press conference, he shouted, pounded his fists on the desk, compared the students to Nazi brownshirts, communists, the Ku Klux Klan, the worst type of people in America, and vowed to use every law enforcement tool available to eradicate them. Needless to say, this did little to calm the waters. Upon my return from Cincinnati, I ventured on campus to see the remains of the ROTC building, now in ashes. The campus seemed calm and now was occupied by the National Guard. I observed students amicably speaking and joking with Guardsmen. One coed playfully placed a flower in the barrel of a soldier's rifle. I was unaware that another rally on the Commons would convene that night. This confrontation was marked by shouting, rock throwing, tear gas, and arrests, but no injuries.

On Monday morning, as usual, I drove our eight year old daughter to the University School. Across the street, the entrance to campus was ominously blocked by a tank, demonstrating that the Guard was now in command of the campus. After showing identification, I was allowed on campus and taught my graduate seminar on psychotherapy. I dismissed the class at about 11:00 with the prescient comment that we would meet next week "if the university is open." Walking outside, I became uneasy with the tension as students began to gather for the rally on the Commons planned earlier. I took my daughter out of school, drove her home, and returned before noon to the Commons. Shortly, the crowd grew to about 3000 although only about 500 seemed to be demonstrators, gathered at the Victory Bell. Perhaps an additional 1000 were not active but cheered the demonstrators. I was among about 1500 spectators on the edge of the Commons. Demonstrations had evolved away from Vietnam to anger at the takeover of the campus by the military. No speeches or literature about the war were presented during this rally; it was all about the unwanted presence of the Guard.

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Brig. General Canterbury, the highest ranking officer on campus, ordered the demonstrators to disperse because all rallies were prohibited. The announcement was made with a bullhorn by a police officer riding in a jeep. It was met with angry shouts and stones were thrown at the officer and he retreated. The Guard consisted of about 75-100 men and was lined up on one edge of the Commons. It was ordered to don gas masks and began to shoot tear gas at the demonstrators gathered near the Victory Bell. But the wind was not in their favor and students picked up the canisters and threw them back at the soldiers. It looked almost like a game. After about 10 minutes of this activity, with rifles aimed at the students, the Guard advanced and forced the students to retreat up Blanket Hill, a rather steep incline next to Taylor Hall, the Journalism building. The soldiers followed and for a time they remained out of my sight. Most of the students also remained out my sight, behind the building. Apparently, in following the students, the Guard found itself trapped by a fence around a practice field which partly restricted their moves. Retreating, the Guard passed behind Taylor and reappeared on a rise on the other side of the building. Abruptly the Guardsmen turned toward the students, some knelt, aiming their rifles at students. The 67 rounds were fired by 28 of the more than 70 soldiers. Some fired into the air or the ground; others found human targets.

I was unable to see the students at this point but quickly learned that students had been shot as ambulances arrived. Up to that point, most of us did not believe the rifles contained live ammunition. Faculty marshals, who had actively worked toward restraint during the earlier confrontations, avoided greater tragedy as they desperately argued and pleaded with the students to disperse. Kent State president, Robert White, declared the university closed and asked students to gather their belongings and leave the campus as soon as possible. This order was reinforced by a judge. I returned to the Psychology building to help any remaining students to evacuate. Since rumors claimed that a sniper was present in the area of the Commons, I advised an alternate escape route. No sniper was ever identified.

The entire city was fearful and tense. I watched at home as school buses delivered students with armed guards, bayonets fixed, riding in jeeps before and behind the buses. That evening, Rhoda and I walked across the street to share information and concerns with a neighbor. As we stood in the street, searchlights

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from a helicopter focused on us. A loudspeaker informed us that we were under martial law and must remain in our houses after dark.

It was not easy to close a campus before the end of a term. Some professors videotaped lectures or lectured in churches or even homes in Kent and other communities, others assigned papers, still others provided readings on which exams would be based. Students made arrangements for their final exams to be proctored, often by faculty at other colleges, at various locations. Eventually, all students were enabled to complete the semester. Special permission was given to a small number of lab personnel who needed to care for the animals in our labs. My lab rats were cared for by others. Oberlin College offered space and opportunity for faculty meetings. Kent State would not open again for six weeks until the first summer semester in June.

These four days in May at Kent State became the exemplar of student activism that characterized the 1970's even though most of student protest at Kent evolved to be against having the Guard controlling the campus, not the war. Many questions remain unresolved and opinions are still divided about who was

to blame for the tragedy. The guardsmen claimed they fired in self-defense, feeling their lives were in danger. However, most of the victims were in a parking lot, over 100 yards from the soldiers. Only two of the wounded students were within 100 feet and some were shot in the back, making this position implausible. All criminal charges against the guardsmen were dismissed and the civil cases were settled out of court. The State of Ohio paid \$675,000 to the 13 shooting victims or their families, less than \$52,000 each. This amount was apparently based on the amount the state calculated a new trial would cost. Although the guardsmen declared their regret, they never admitted wrongdoing or apologized.

The long term effects of these four days are also evident. The name of the university became synonymous with the shootings and enrollment dropped as many perceived Kent State to be a dangerous place. Relations between town and gown in university towns are frequently strained, but at Kent State they became angry and punitive. Letters to the editor of the Record-Courier often said "They should have shot more of them." Governor Rhodes took irrational, vindictive

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action against the university. Its budget was cut drastically for years. Faculty were denied raises, even after achieving tenure or promotion. (I was one of these.) To justify these actions, he promoted two city universities (Akron and Youngstown) within 10 and 30 miles of Kent to state university status. Prior to 1970, the State master plan designated Kent State as the primary graduate and research university for northern Ohio and faculty trained in research and for doctoral level instruction were hired in significant numbers. I was among them. After the shootings, Kent was forced to divide its State funding with the two new competitors, jeopardizing its very existence.

POSTSCRIPT: Remarkably, Kent State survived. After a couple decades of avoiding the history of 1970, it has recovered enrollment (over 28,000 students on the main campus with an additional 17,000 at branch campuses). It has maintained and expanded its pre-eminence in research and doctoral level training for northern Ohio public universities (although the master plan was largely ignored). Several mayors and university presidents later, town and gown are working together on mutually beneficial projects. It is yet unknown whether the faculty resolution following the events of 1970 --to learn from this tragedy and identify effective peaceful means of protest and conflict resolution--will be achieved.