

50 Years Ago at Kent State: An Eye-Witness Account of May 4, 1970

Kalyan Singhal

The Kent State shooting, triggered by protests against the Vietnam War, was a microcosm of the war itself. President Johnson's Secretary of Defense called the war "wrong, terribly wrong," just as President Nixon's investigative commission called the shooting "unnecessary, unwarranted, and inexcusable."

I arrived in Kent, Ohio from India in mid-September 1969 to join the MBA program at the 866-acre campus of Kent State University. I soon fell in love with Kent's mesmerizing beauty, magnificent trees, and alluring tranquility.

At the time, people in the United States were deeply divided over whether it was necessary to continue the Vietnam War. While most people on campus opposed the war, the local Kent community supported it.

In 1964, President Johnson had used unsubstantiated reports of the Gulf of Tonkin incident as reason to escalate the Vietnam War because he was running for reelection against Barry Goldwater, a hawk on Vietnam, and because a few columnists with no relevant expertise claimed that he was not doing enough to stop the expansion of communism through Vietnam.

By 1968, US Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, who had served since January 1961, concluded that only some sort of genocide could actually win the war. When he left office on February 29, 1968, he said that the Americans had "dropped more bombs than on all of Europe in all of World War II and it hasn't done a fucking thing!" McNamara broke down in tears, imploring President Johnson to accept that the war just could not be won.

My new life at Kent moved from the romance of colorful leaves and the first snowfall I ever saw, to the depressing gray skies of winter and then, by late April, to the invigorating fragrance of spring. On Thursday, April 30, President Nixon announced that a massive American-South Vietnamese offensive into Cambodia was underway. The invasion touched off demonstrations on campuses across the US.

Friday, May 1st, was the first warm evening of the season. I went with friends to the bars on North Water Street where students hung out on weekends. A spontaneous demonstration broke out, and as it intensified, students broke the windows of nearby businesses.

The next day some students, though not necessarily those who caused the damage, helped to clean up the downtown. Kent Mayor Satrom requested that Governor Rhodes send the Ohio National Guard to keep the peace, and the governor agreed. National Guard troops with guns and tear gas arrived on campus around 7:00 PM. I walked past them on my way to the library. A few minutes after I arrived, we were ordered to evacuate the building. We emerged to find more than a dozen soldiers pointing their guns at us. When they told us to disperse, a frightened sophomore asked me to walk her home. I returned to campus around 9:00 PM to find the ROTC building in flames and a large shocked crowd gathered around.

Sunday was an idyllic spring day. Students affixed flowers to the barrels of several guardsmen's guns. A group of the guardsmen chatted amiably with me and some other students. An effervescent tall young woman standing nearby asked if, being from India, I could tell her more about Mahatma Gandhi's approach to nonviolence. We agreed to meet at the same place the next afternoon to talk it over.

Governor Rhodes, who was running for the US Senate, arrived in Kent that day. In an apparent effort to inflame pro-war voters in the community, he publicly described the student radicals as "worse than the Brownshirts and Communist elements and also the Night Riders and Vigilantes."

On Monday, May 4, around noon, about two thousand people gathered near the commons to protest the war in Indochina and the presence of the National Guardsmen on campus. I stood at a distance with some friends. Although I had strong views about the senseless war, I felt that, as a foreign student, I shouldn't say anything about the internal affairs of my host country.

The guardsmen ordered the protesters to disperse, but they refused to back down. Finding their tear gas ineffective in the freshening spring breeze and the crowd increasingly restive, the guardsmen retreated a short way. The next moment, 28 of them turned and began shooting toward the protesters. They fired between 61 and 67 rounds in 13 seconds, injuring nine students and killing four. Dean Kahler, 19, was permanently paralyzed by his injury. Allison Krause, 19, Jeffery Miller, 20, William Schroeder, 20, and Sandra Scheuer, 21 were killed.

Within hours, the media reported that on Sunday, Allison Krause had put a flower into a guardsman's rifle barrel, telling him, "Flowers are better than bullets." It was Allison who I was supposed to meet that afternoon to talk about Mahatma Gandhi and nonviolence.

Afterward, no one wanted to assume responsibility for the killing. President Nixon said that the needless deaths “should remind us all once again that when dissent turns to violence, it invites tragedy.” Although he had a law degree and had taken an oath to defend the constitution, the president was essentially claiming that the state could kill innocent bystanders just because someone *like them* had destroyed property.

The FBI's investigation found that the “shooting was not necessary and was not in order.” Faced with an appalled public, President Nixon appointed an investigative commission on May 14th, headed by William Scranton, former Republican governor of Pennsylvania. The commission concluded that the shooting at Kent State “was unnecessary, unwarranted, and inexcusable.”

Nonetheless, several people wrote to WEWS-TV in Cleveland to say that the country needed a few more of these killings. A local prosecutor said that the guards should have shot all the troublemakers, while many others in the community said they should have shot all the students.

A year later, on the anniversary of the shooting, George Wald, the Nobel laureate who discovered Vitamin A in the retina, came to Kent State. Facing a crowd still confused about the need for continuing the war, Wald told us he had no reason to treat North Vietnam as his enemy. With Dean Kahler sitting next to him in a wheelchair, he thundered, “Mr. Nixon does not choose my friends, and he does not choose my enemies.”

I have now lived in the US for half a century, and my perspective as a US citizen has broadened. The soldiers at Kent did not have adequate training. They were armed only with tear-gas canisters and M-1 rifles, killing weapons with tremendous range and velocity. To this day, inadequate training and equipment remain the primary reason that the police kill so many innocent people in the US. A comparatively small investment in both could save many innocent lives and make our civilization far more civilized.

The US withdrew from Vietnam in 1975. North Vietnamese General Võ Nguyên Giáp, who had also defeated the French in 1954, paid tribute to the American soldiers, saying that they were as great as any in the world, but they did not have a cause. Every war must have a cause.

While World War II saw human civilization descend to new depths of savagery, it served some common purpose for the concerned people. It liberated Europe from Hitler and the rest of the world from Europe. The Vietnam War served no common purpose.

Most countries fight wars to serve their own interests. We now fight wars that serve neither our interests nor anyone else's. In 1995, former Defense Secretary McNamara acknowledged that the Vietnam War was "wrong, terribly wrong." Yet, in 2003 we launched the Iraq War over reports of weapons of mass destruction which were no more substantiated than those of the Gulf of Tonkin incident. We had clearly learnt nothing from history, and again, we did not win.

Although the Vietnam War has been described as a byproduct of the Cold War, it was anything but cold. Twice as many Vietnamese died in that war as Americans in all previous US wars since 1776 combined.

Allison, Jeffery, Sandra, and William: We will always remember you. May 4th, 1970 will, to borrow a phrase from Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore, forever remain "a tear drop on the cheek of time."

Kalyan Singhal is the McCurdy Professor of Business at the University of Baltimore. Since 1992, he has edited Production and Operations Management, one of the top 20 business journals on the Business-Week list. Copyright © Kalyan Singhal. Ksinghal@ubalt.edu

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