

**Some thoughts and reflections, then and now, of a May 4<sup>th</sup> survivor and observer...**

*submitted by David Wolfson for the KSU May 4 Archives*

For me, two overriding reflections about May 4<sup>th</sup> prevail. I feel both are underreported yet telling about society then and now.

In the aftermath of the shootings, an FBI agent came to my house to interview me. I thought it was the result of a newspaper story I'd written detailing my experience, but he said my name was given by a friend who had also been interviewed. Karen took no part in the protests but had stayed in and worked to give aid and comfort to students, I think in her dorm, who had been teargassed or suffered in some other way over those days. She gave the FBI my name, knowing I would have been there. (We'd been friends in junior high, but she had moved away, to Ohio, and then we ran into each other on campus as incoming freshmen and reconnected.) The agent was not there to interrogate, but to interview. He was working for the Scranton Commission. He made no judgements and did not try to cross-examine. He merely took down my answers, his questions only pressing for more factual details.

Point one is this: The Scranton Commission's thorough research concluded that the shootings at Kent State were unjustified. Gentle semantics, but the shootings were fatal, meaning homicides. Homicide can be justified or unjustified; the latter means murder; manslaughter at the very least, and given that at least one of the guardsmen admitted to taking aim at a student, that only six of them were responsible for the bloodshed, maybe second degree murder—or worse—only the guardsmen know if it was premeditated. If anyone doesn't believe the many eyewitnesses who declared it murder, they need only review the Scranton Commission's report.

Point two: Ten days later, two students were murdered at Jackson State. What happened at Kent was somehow obfuscated by the fact that the protestors were "unruly" and the guardsmen were in "fear," but what happened at Jackson was white law enforcement shooting black students, even shooting into a dormitory. One of those killed was on the opposite side of the street, walking by on his way home. Sound familiar? If that had happened on a white campus, the country would have been outraged, even then. "Somehow," Jackson State got swept

under the rug. Failed lawsuit, no charges, no commission. As bad as Kent State was, Jackson was far worse. And far less known. It must not be forgotten.

Often in tv shows or movies about the era, there is a montage depicting the craziness and the turbulent energies in fleeting, sometimes iconic clips. Hippies, long hair, sit-ins, flowers. Suddenly guardsmen appear and students on the grassy knoll below Taylor Hall. Before the clip has given way to a different scene, my brain has identified it: Kent May 4<sup>th</sup>, or maybe May 4<sup>th</sup> Kent, just that quick. But even before that, my subconscious has already reacted, and I find that my arms and all inside my chest, I am tensed up. I guess that happens because I know the outcome. Curious, because at the time, when I was standing in the crowd, watching the detached unit of the Guard stop and turn and suddenly shooting, I saw rifles pointed up in the air or in the ground. I was not afraid or tense, and I wouldn't have even run, but if I had stayed I might have been trampled, everyone was running, and screaming and shouting and gasping. But I was not tense then. I know now that if I had stayed in place, I might be number 14. I was not that far from the line of fire of the bullet that pierced the sculpture. Only when I later saw one of my fellow students bleeding and writhing in pain did I feel—not tense, but intense anger. And helplessness. So helpless.

The crowd became one in its sullen, numbed defiance. We would not be moved. If Dr. Baron and Dr Frank had not ridden out to us and implored us all to go home, passionately and, and wisely, I don't know what would have happened next. Communication from folks in authority. That was all we wanted sometimes. In all the university, they were the only two, but they were enough. School was closed. Go home, stay safe. We left, reluctantly, almost one by one.

Friends will ask me about the experience. I remind them of Jackson State first, and then I tell them May 4<sup>th</sup> was life changing. Not necessarily what happened that day, but the aftermath. I believed the country would see what the government was doing, but instead we were posited as the villains. The reaction, the ensuing coverup, the total denial by the school administration, that and more changed my world view.

I come from Pittsburgh. My favorite bar (sadly extinct) was upslope from a memorial plaque for the Homestead Steel strike, along the Monongahela River, an event historians mark as the start of the American labor movement. Some of the strikers were murdered. Were they the villains? Would any of those blue collar Love it or Leave it patriots think them villains? I was naïve, thinking we had come a long way from those history book tales of horror. Clearly, I was so wrong. So I can view events going on these days with little surprise. Only disappointment, and perhaps untempered cynicism.

I am now in Los Angeles, where in early June (2020), BLM protests (actually, the anarchists' vandalism) resulted in the calling out of the National Guard. The news showed them and those familiar military vehicles, parked in front of the Dolby Theatre, heart of Hollywood—my workplace! I was a bartender at Dolby events, till the pandemic. It was hard enough seeing it on the news, but if I had been going to work that night, I would have come out of the subway and walked into that scene. I can't imagine the range of wild emotions I would have gone through.

I am submitting this in addition to the newspaper account I wrote. I have not re-read the story in years. I know there are details in it I have forgotten. There are many other details and visions both included in the account and left out, that are burned in my memory.

---David Wolfson BA, '72