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History and Uses of the Past

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Kent State Revisited
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Observers recorded the time as 12:24. Under a bright sky, but thick with the haze of tear gas from an uneven battle not yet a half-hour old, several units of veteran Ohio National Guardsmen, responding to hand signals and verbal orders suddenly turned in unison. The helmeted group unleashed a fusillade that cut through the near-deafening roar of thousands of voices. In less than thirteen seconds, a burst of fire from three types of weaponry brought down thirteen students. “‘Crack, crack.’ Two shots. And then a volley of between 61 and 67 shots fired by a contingent of 28 Ohio National Guardsmen.”

reported Al Thompson on assignment for the Cleveland Press. Thompson later recalled the day. “I remember the sight of one of the casualties, probably Joseph Lewis or Thomas Grace, pirouetting violently in the air and falling to the ground.” On the thirtieth anniversary of the killings, Thompson asked, “Why Kent? Why …this middling middle-of-the-road state school in the middle of America…?”

There will be more on these questions in a moment. Many of my own answers are different than those supplied by journalists who authored the first draft of history. The initial press and broadcast treatments of the slayings contributed to certain myths that continue to have currency. On location for the New York Times, Andrew Malcolm reported the day after the killings that the weekend uproar at Kent State over the Cambodian invasion had marked the first campus disturbance since a panty-raid in 1958. In addition to the Times, other papers as well as national circulation magazines, including the Washington Post, Newsweek and even the youth culture bi-weekly, Rolling Stone, managed to airbrush a decade of activism at Kent State, misrepresenting the students as placid, apathetic and “mostly middle class.” As the Washington Post editorialized “It’s
almost beyond belief that the ultimate tragedy in the opposition…to the war came in the heartland of America….Kent State cannot be brushed aside. It is in the great center of the country where…the great mass of silent students dwell.” Sympathetic editorial writers reasoned that events at Kent State proved that the nation’s center had turned against the Southeast Asian conflict thereby demonstrating beyond doubt that the political heart of America had turned against the war. Conversely, while much of the nation was presented with a picture of Kent State as tranquil campus without an activist tradition, townspeople in Kent, in disbelief that a reputable Ohio community could produce such antiwar ferment, perceived the unrest as the end product of outsider influence.

Even after the passage of four decades and numerous books on the shootings, the view of Kent State before 1970 remained that of an activist backwater. Pulitzer-prize winning author David Halberstam represents the dominant thinking about how the killings figure in the Vietnam era of American history. Halberstam, who spoke at Kent State as part of a program marking the 30th anniversary of the shootings, asserted that Kent, Ohio was “among the least likely places to find a shrine commemorating civilian victims of a bad war…. What happened at Kent State…still seems inconceivable to me. First that it happened at all, second that it happened on a campus like this—so distanced physically and emotionally from the center of the antiwar movement.”

To figure out what Kent State was and wasn’t, we’ll return now to the question posed by Cleveland Press reporter, Al Thompson “Why Kent? Why …this middling middle-of-the-road state school in the middle of America…?” To his questions, I ask my own. What about Kent’s students? Where did they come from? What do we know about their origins and what shaped their formative politics? Who were the activists? Was there
a movement on the campus from the late 1950s onward or did it amount to no more than a panty-raid in 1958, as the accomplished reporter Andrew Malcolm suggested. What about the Ohio National Guard sent to the campus to quell the antiwar disturbances in May 1970? Were they as often portrayed and as historian Richard Hofstadter surmised in June 1970 “a bunch of confused young National Guardsmen, probably just as confused as the kids they shot at.” And were they as historian Mark Hamilton Lytle later insisted, “By social background…not so very different from the students they had come to police.” Lastly, did the killings silence dissent at Kent State and elsewhere as so many historians believe?

Focusing on both industrial northeast Ohio from where most of the students originated in the early sixties, and small-town Kent and rural Portage County where they went to school, the story of Kent’s protest movement can best be understood through the strains of class and racial tensions and concomitant urban-small-town strains that influenced the growth and development of the campus struggle. So, we start with the students. While the small city of Kent grew along with the university in the 1960s, at the beginning of the decade the community of some 10,000 people was surrounded by some of the most industrialized cities in America. To the east lay the huge steel mills of Youngstown (hometown of slain student Sandy Scheuer) and Warren. To the south, the blue-collar communities of Canton, Massillon (home towns of causalities Dean Kahler and Joe Lewis, respectively), and Alliance. To the west lay the Rubber City of Akron and the machine shops of Barberton (where Alan Canfora, one of the best known casualties, continues to reside). And, thirty miles to the north, lay the urban metropolis of Cleveland with that city flanked by the steel mills of Elyria and Lorain (hometown of slain student,
Bill Schroeder) and the industries of Parma on the west and factories and shops of East Cleveland and Euclid on the east. In 1960, every one of these cities had at least 40 percent of its workforce engaged in manufacturing. Barberton had a whopping 63 percent of its workers employed in industrial production.

While Ohio itself because of its innumerable farms and many small towns has a conservative tradition, fifty years ago its northeastern cities were home to black and white southern migrants and Catholic ethnics, all mainstays of the Democratic New Deal coalition. The children of the urbanized working class who attended Kent State came from the cities just cataloged and made up approximately half of all students at the university in 1960. Even as the overall percentage of urbanized youth at the university declined during the 1960s, in raw numbers there were more working class students at Kent in the late sixties than there had been ten years earlier.

One of the few historians who has written about Kent State, author and Professor Ken Heineman, did much to unearth the early history of dissent at the northeast Ohio school. Yet he, too, puzzled as to the why of “Kent State,” writing in his comparative study that the campus “seemed to be an unlikely place to have a student movement in the early 1960s.” Glancing thirty miles north, we have our answer, for Cleveland’s political culture had an enormous affect on the student movement at Kent State. The city’s labor, civil rights, peace and later antiwar organizations and the attendant presence of Old Left groups significantly influenced the emergence of a student movement on the Kent campus, as did Cleveland’s music scene. The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame is located in Cleveland for good reason. Additionally, Kent’s geographic position and the
development of the nation’s interstate highway system also affected the campus movement, especially after 1965 when out-of-state students began to make up an increasingly larger percentage of the student body and an even greater percentage of its activist cohort. This statistical reality is rather different from the impressionistic recollection that esteemed historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., recorded in his journal days after the May 1970 killings. “I know Kent; I have often lectured at Kent State,” Schlesinger wrote as he tried to imagine the scene where four had just died in an antiwar protest. “It is the essence of an Ohio small town; the students are all from other small towns or off the farm; nothing could be more square, unradical and Midwest American.”

Professor Schlesinger, Halberstam, the New York Times, and the national news magazines all of whom or which I admire can be forgiven for their mistaken mental images and superficial impressions. Still, first drafts, like first impressions, are often lasting ones. Subsequent scholarly work on Kent State that might have corrected some of these erroneous notions did not gain a wide audience and, until now, nobody other than casualty Alan Canfora has spent the majority of the last forty years studying this history. In summary, the working-class Ohioans and out-of-staters, chiefly students from Pittsburgh and greater New York City, who attended the university in the 1960s were often a breed apart and had an uneasy relationship with Kent’s small-town, Protestant and Republican culture.

Early activists at Kent State included Gabriel Kolko and Carl Oglesby; the former of whom became one of the country’s best known revisionist historians of the Cold War, while Oglesby went on to serve as the president of the Students for a Democratic Society
in the mid 1960s. While these men are well known to students of the 1960s, the rest of Kent’s activists were and remain little known. Of the obscure activists, those who challenged the patterns of Kent’s racial segregation in 1960 and 1961 came from families of liberal and supportive parents. The few who didn’t tended to be older and free from parental restraint. From the outset of what can rightfully be called Kent’s decade of dissent, military service veterans played a role in the student protests. This was especially true at the beginning as well as at the end of the long sixties when increasing numbers of Vietnam veterans returned to protest a war that had just fought.

The growth of Kent State’s student movement tended to parallel that occurring on other campuses, albeit without much national attention. Early protests focused on supporting southern sit-ins, integrating local public accommodations and eliminating racial segregation in housing for KSU students. While most focused their activism on the campus, a few went South, including one who joined the Freedom Riders in 1961. As students needed to carve out political space for their right to protest, the campus was witness to Free Speech battles over speaker choice as well as for freedom of assembly and organization. The right to form student chapters of the Congress of Racial Equality and the Young Socialist Alliance became subjects of bitter campus debate as did the first protests of the Vietnam War in 1964 and especially in February 1965. Antiwar activism grew steadily, but slowly at Kent State. Most of the pioneering antiwar cohort came from socialist or Old Left families with a smattering from households where fathers or uncles were Henry Wallace Progressives or Irish Republican soldiers. Still, these were the exceptions. The vast majority of Kent’s working-class cohort were from families that had embraced Cold War liberalism; a belief system involving varying degrees of support for
racial tolerance, a strong dedication to labor rights and a positive image of government along with a commitment to containment of communism. Only after the convulsions that rocked the Democratic National convention in August 1968 and that deepened the divide in the party, did significant numbers of Kent students embrace antiwar activism and SDS.

A confrontational Kent SDS, the ephemeral alliance it formed with the Black United Students at the university in 1968 and the struggle that ensued between activists and the administration, culminated, in the spring of 1969, with arrests and suspensions of eighty activists, the banning of the SDS chapter and the investigation of the radical student group by the US House of Representatives Internal Security Committee. Even with the destruction of SDS, as many as 5,000 students demonstrated against the methods used by the university to assail the radical students. When school resumed in the fall of 1969 after the summer of the Woodstock Festival, Kent was a different campus. Where hundreds had once demonstrated against the war, thousands did so. Members of Greek fraternities and sororities who had condemned protest, reversed course and embraced antiwar activism as did a growing number of athletes.

By the late winter and early spring of 1970 antiwar clashes in Cleveland in which Kent students participated proved to be something of a dress rehearsal for the wave of demonstrations off on a close, yet still unseen horizon.

Just as the events of May 4 eclipsed much of the vital prelude at Kent State, the years of campus protest that followed has been not so much overlooked as it has been ignored. In an essay written for *Vietnam Generation*, historian Scott Bills, who did his graduate work at Kent State, insisted: “The collective judgment of ex-activists,
journalists, government officials, and historians has been remarkably consistent; the deaths at Kent State marked the end of the mass youth protest...” Author and former SDS member James Miller was equally firm: “[T]he Movement that the young radicals had worked so hard to build fell apart in the wake of the killings at Kent State...” Berkeley’s historian, W. J. Rorabaugh, concurs. Remembering the sight of four crosses in May 1970 near the Berkeley campus, each bearing the name of a Kent State fatality, Rorabaugh concluded that “The sixties, I then knew, were over.” Even Milton Viorst, who devoted an entire chapter of his deservedly well received book, Fire in the Streets to Alan Canfora and Kent State, confidently asserts “the 1960s...ended [at Kent State] with a thirteen-second fusillade in a small Ohio town.” Such opinions, widely shared, may or may not have been true of the nation at large, but, at Kent State, they are directly contradicted by what historians most value, evidence.

Rather than an end to protest, some of the biggest demonstrations at Kent came months and years after the fatal shootings. The campus had yet to witness the largest mass arrests in its history, those in 1972 and again in 1977. In the long aftermath following the killings, the antiwar left struggled with grand jury indictments, faced barrages of rubber bullets that left lifelong scars on some protestors and were beset by undercover agents and paid provocateurs. Despite it all, a sizable antiwar movement at Kent State persisted as long as did the Vietnam War.

Finally, I’ll conclude with a few comments on the Ohio National Guard. No state deployed its Guard troops more often than Ohio. While typical duties often involve assistance with natural disasters, most deployments in Ohio during the 1960s involved
civil disturbances—an astonishing thirty-two mobilizations between 1965 and 1970. Of the two units involved in the shootings, the 107th Armored Cavalry and the 145th Infantry, most of its members had been deployed on numerous occasions. Often portrayed as kids no older than the students they shot, their top officers had experienced long military careers, as did Colonel Charles Fassinger, and Tennessee native, Major Harry Jones. All were forty or older. The sergeant who almost certainly triggered the shootings was forty-two. Company officers were mostly in their thirties. Among the shooters, the average enlisted man was in his twenty-fifth year; the youngest was twenty, the oldest forty-nine. Some of the youngest guardsmen joined to avoid Vietnam as most enlisted after the summer of 1965. Others signed-up to supplement pay from their day jobs, as their enlistment dates were well before the escalation of the war. The most common career field in the cohort of shooters was law enforcement as no less than seven of the seventy-six men were police or sheriff deputies. After law enforcement, farming and agriculturally related occupations were the most customary.

Immediately after the shootings guardsmen were required to prepare after-action reports. In his, Sgt. William Case explained why he had fired in the air: “Only God can take lives and…I didn’t get the order from him to aim at any human, no matter how hard they threw the rocks. I just couldn’t shoot them.” However admirable his convictions, Case did not have much company. James Pierce, a member of Case’s 107th Armored Cavalry, was more typical, writing in his report, “After the firing I felt no remorse because it seemed to be the only way to defend myself.” An anonymous guardsman from the unit complained about the stream of profanity they had endured and told a reporter that “it’s about time we showed the bastards who’s in charge.” Another guardsman put it
crudely, suggesting the mission involved sanitizing a dirty place: “I felt like I’d just had an order to clean up a latrine.”

On May 4, Haynes Johnson and Richard Harwood of the Washington Post also questioned men from Company A of the 145th Infantry, the other unit on the hill. “Of the guardsmen interviewed,” they wrote, “none showed any remorse over the casualties inflicted.” The reporters observed further of the incident that these rural guardsmen “accepted it, as one of them said, as something ‘that had to happen sometime.’” Identified only as a dairy farmer, one mentioned “these hippies and longhairs…if they want to use force, they will receive force.” A more sympathetic account of the same unit appeared the following month, but even when the author of the article supportively questioned men who did not discharge their weapons, his findings were much the same as those of the Washington Post. One guardsman imagined the students having taken their arms. Another, neglecting the fact that guardsmen had also thrown rocks at students, recalled the death of the biblical Goliath from a stone. A third insisted on deconstructing the language of the fatal scene, telling the reporter, “I don’t feel it was a killing. It was a shooting with death involved.”

The other unit engaged that day, Company C, 145th Infantry, had but two members on the hill. Their officer, Capt. James R. Snyder, said flatly, “My men were not remorseful …. [N]ot one has ever expressed to me any regrets for what happened.” The Post was the first paper to interview guardsmen from the units that fired. Although some of the information given to the press was wrong or confused by one reporter, the journalist was astute enough. “The differences between those students and guardsmen…go beyond the tragedy at Kent,” wrote Haynes Johnson. “They are divided by differences in outlook…in
background and behavior,” he averred. An officer, who talked with Johnson, described
the ferocity as being “like a Civil War.”

So, in summary what will a new look at Kent State reveal? A campus populated not
with well born students or those from the suburban middle class, but with the sons and
daughters of the industrial working class and, by 1970, increasingly of Vietnam veterans,
dozens of whom were fired upon by the Ohio National Guard. We find at Kent State a
campus neither a hot bed of activism nor one where dissent was unknown. Kent State is
best understood as a place where the children of blue collar workers challenged racial
discrimination, struggled for free speech, organization, and assembly, and slowly rose
against a foreign war that claimed the lives of thousands of Ohioans, most of them
working class. We know as well that the fatal shootings did not silence dissent; rather the
killings provoked more of it and caused those who survived it to labor for decades to
ensure that the dead were properly remembered. Finally, we understand that the
guardsmen were trained, experienced, older than those they killed, in some cases
considerably older, and in most cases lacking in remorse. Like the American Civil War,
the sesquicentennial of which is now being observed, the historical memory of the 1960s
remains contested and often bitter.