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## Do National Tragedies Create Change? Kent State Shooting and the Actions Taken After.

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Do National Tragedies Create Change? Kent State Shooting and the Actions Taken After.

May 4, 1970 was a nice sunny day that started just like any other, but it took a turn for the worst when students began protesting. Days prior to this date there had been protests across the nation on college campuses in response to Nixon announcing an incursion into Cambodia. For days students at Kent State had been protesting this announcement. The governor deployed the Ohio National Guard to the Kent State in order to keep violence from happening. On May 4, 1970 the Ohio National Guard fired 67 shots in 13 seconds which resulted in the death of four students and nine others injured.<sup>1</sup> Let's back up to what happened to get this result from a protest.

Students at Kent State had been protesting a few days before the Ohio National Guard was called up. The governor deployed the National Guard after a ROTC building had been burned down a few days prior to the shooting. Which was the final straw for the governor. Along with setting fire to a building, the students had also been cutting water lines to prevent the fire from being put out. After this night the governor enacted a curfew to prevent any further violence and he also called up the National Guard. On May 3, 1970, the day before, campus was open as normal but there were no gatherings of more than four people allowed.<sup>2</sup> The same day the governor then made a speech about the events that transpired.<sup>3</sup> In Governor Rhodes speech he condemns the actions of the students the previous day.<sup>4</sup> There were 700 National Guards men on campus to prevent the protests from getting out of hand like they had on the day before.

The students wanted to participate in democracy and let their opinions on the policies in Vietnam be expressed and to express how they felt about the National Guard being on campus.

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<sup>1</sup> Bristow Nancy, "The Kent State Shootings, the Long 1960s, and the Contest over Memory," 518.

<sup>2</sup> ProjectCensored, *Kent State 50<sup>th</sup> #TeachIn Part 1 of 2*, 46-46:04.

<sup>3</sup> ProjectCensored, *Kent State 50<sup>th</sup> #TeachIn Part 1 of 2*, 20-25:00.

<sup>4</sup> Rhodes "Campus Disorders in Kent May 3, 1970."

The students were advised to not protest and keep a low profile.<sup>5</sup> But students still went out to protest, against the advice of others. During the protest the National Guard, over a bullhorn, announced that the students were illegally assembling and should return to their dorms.<sup>6</sup> No one left after the announcement and the National Guard fired tear gas at the students. The students covered their faces with a wet rag and threw the tear gas back.<sup>7</sup>

The National Guard marched down a hillside and onto a practice football field. With students following and stopping on the hillside that over looked the football field.<sup>8</sup> The National Guard, on a bullhorn, once again told the students that they have them surrounded. Also, while this was happening the National Guard had been getting harassed in the parking lot by students. Some of which were throwing gravel at the National Guardsmen. Alan Canfora came out with a black flag because a friend of his from high school had just been killed in Vietnam. The guard aimed the rifles at Alan and the other students. But didn't fire at Alan and the other students, it was more of an intimidation tactic.<sup>9</sup> The National Guardsmen created a huddle in the middle of the field they then got up and retraced their steps up the hill. While looking over their shoulder towards the parking lot. The first three turned when they got to a certain point and aimed and fired their guns.<sup>10</sup> It all lasted 13 seconds which left four students dead and nine others injured. As a result of this tragedy the way that the Ohio National Guard dealt with civil unrest changed to ensure that nothing like this happened again.

The May 4, 1970 shooting resulted in changes in the way the National Guard responded to civil disobedience. The result was in a new guide and better training for the guardsmen. For a

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<sup>5</sup> ProjectCensored, *Kent State 50<sup>th</sup> #TeachIn Par1 of 2*, 48- 48:06.

<sup>6</sup> ProjectCensored, *Kent State 50<sup>th</sup> #TeachIn Part 1 of 2*, 48:30-:33.

<sup>7</sup> ProjectCensored, *Kent State 50<sup>th</sup> #TeachIn Part 1 of 2*, 50:00-:20.

<sup>8</sup> ProjectCensored, *Kent State 50<sup>th</sup> #TeachIn Part 1 of 2*, 51.

<sup>9</sup> ProjectCensored, *Kent State 50<sup>th</sup> #TeachIn Part 1 of 2*, 52:18- 53.

<sup>10</sup>ProjectCensored, *Kent State 50<sup>th</sup> #TeachIn Part 1 of 2*, 53:30-56.

time after May 4, 1970 people forgot what happened or pretend that it didn't happen. The changes that came after this tragedy were not wanted and they didn't last. The public view on protesters afterwards was not a good one. The protesters were blamed for the casualties of this event. With the commission recommendations to the President and the National Guard not much changed afterwards. Which may be due to the fact that the amount of civil unrest had gone down to where the army didn't feel that there was a need for them to make changes.

### I. Background

How did America become involved in Vietnam? Vietnam was originally a French colony and in the late 1920s and early 1930s the Vietnamese attempted to get rid of the French. They were unsuccessful and remained under French control. That's until the start of World War II, with the start of World War II the French were busy dealing with Germany. The French didn't put in as much time in Vietnam due to this issue. Without the French being as prevalent of a force to keep the people in check. It allowed for the communist Vietnamese to meet with each other. In order to figure out a plan to get their independence. With the French away dealing with Germany this gave Vietnam time to be able to restart their resistance to the colonial power. Not only at this time did they have to deal with the French problem but now they would have to deal with Japan who had invaded parts of Vietnam. With the meetings they not only had to try and figure out how to get their freedom from the French but also from the Japanese. There was hope that the United States would support them in their efforts. But at the time President Roosevelt did not want Vietnam to have their independence. Instead the President wanted someone to oversee the country for a time. Even with that the Vietnamese still held meetings and created a new party called the Independent Nationalist-Communist Party (ICP).<sup>11</sup> After World War II and the

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<sup>11</sup> Ruane Kevin, *War and Revolution in Vietnam 1930-1970*, 5.

surrender of Japan, Truman wanted to restore the French power in Indochina at this point in time. With negotiations they came to the conclusion that China would be in charge of overseeing Japan leaving North Vietnam and Britain would be in charge of South Vietnam. They would split the territory in half right at 16<sup>th</sup> parallel.<sup>12</sup> It was the goal of the United States to have a better relationship with the French. Believing that if they helped the French in Indochina this would help their relationship. The French power in Vietnam didn't last long the Vietminh in 1947 began to rise up against the French again. It was expected that the French would have no problem beating them with having a stronger army but that didn't happen. It was the French's plan to try and overwhelm the Vietminh which didn't happen.<sup>13</sup> With all the fighting they agreed to sit down and discuss freedom. After some meetings France and America agreed that Vietnam would be recognized as independent with in the French Union.<sup>14</sup> Even with this compromise there were still uprisings amongst the Vietnamese. They wanted the French out of their country but with the fear the Soviet Union was going to expand a long with their communist ideals. America didn't want that to happen, the goal was to keep communism from spreading. If any other country fell to communism at the time, then it would only be a matter of time until every country did. Which is why for the United States it was very important for the French to maintain the control that they had in Vietnam. Which prompted the United States to get more involved with assisting the French which in turn created a snowball effect of America becoming more and more involved. Even with America's assistance the French eventually were done and ready to discuss peace talks. After the peace talks Vietnam was divided into two at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel and France was able to maintain some honor.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ruane Kevin, *War and Revolution in Vietnam 1930-1970*, 10.

<sup>13</sup> Ruane Kevin, *War and Revolution in Vietnam 1930-1970*, 21.

<sup>14</sup> Ruane Kevin, *War and Revolution in Vietnam 1930-1970*, 23.

<sup>15</sup> Ruane Kevin, *War and Revolution in Vietnam 1930-1970*, 34.

After the convention that created this new line and decided what country is in charge of what. America decided to get more involved in the politics of it all. It was very important for South Vietnam to become anti-communist with North Vietnam being communist. In order for the United States to build the nation they wanted to get France to be out of Vietnam. America didn't sign the same Geneva settlement, so it wasn't subjected to the same rules as France. Working with Ngo Dinh Diem they planned to work around these accords. It was the goal of the administration to create stability in the south. They believed the best way of doing this was by creating instability in the north. They did this by starting rumors, one of them was that those who opposed the Vietminh during the war with France would face retribution. Around 900,000 people fled to the south. Ngo Dinh Diem was the first president of South Vietnam and was really liked by the United States due to him being Catholic and anti-communist.<sup>16</sup> Diem won with a 98.2 percent vote, which was suspicious.<sup>17</sup> But America didn't really care what he did since he was anti-communist. It was very important to America at the time to keep communism from expanding any further than it had. If that meant supporting someone who wouldn't be the best to be in charge than so be it.

With the new president opposite political parties were illegal, the freedom of speech and association was restricted also. People were not allowed to criticize the regime which was punished with the use of concentration camps.<sup>18</sup> Pretty much what America stood for was not reflected in South Vietnam and the United States didn't care. Since Ngo Dinh Diem was effective in shutting down communist ideals. With the beginning of Diem trying to shut down communism in the south, the southern communist had looked to North Vietnam for help. The

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<sup>16</sup> Ruane Kevin, *War and Revolution in Vietnam 1930-1970*, 37-38.

<sup>17</sup> Ruane Kevin, *War and Revolution in Vietnam 1930-1970*, 42.

<sup>18</sup> Ruane Kevin, *War and Revolution in Vietnam 1930-1970*, 45

North had to be careful with what they did in order to support the southern communist. Since Diem had the support of the United States who at the time was more powerful than the North was. If the North did anything to provoke a war, they would not be ready for it. They did this by sending in “4,000 southern-born communists back into South Vietnam”<sup>19</sup> through Laos and Cambodia. After this there was a rise in violence there were peasant uprisings, assassinations and abductions of government officials. In 1960 there was the creation of the National Liberation Front for South Vietnam and a few years later with in this group there was the People’s Revolutionary Party. There was increasing worry with in the United States of the rise of insurgency. The Kennedy administration wanted to maintain the separate states. To do this Kennedy sent more advisers to South Vietnam and instructed the CIA to disrupt the trail that was bringing in weapons from North Vietnam in to South Vietnam. Once Johnson took office after Kennedy’s assassination the war was escalated, and Johnson received some blowback from this. Eventually after the air raids Johnson wanted peace talks. But at that point he got nowhere since Nixon was voted in as President. Nixon ran on ending the war and to “...bring the boys home.” It was Nixon’s goal to have North Vietnam renounce claims to the south and to get the Soviet Union and China to stop supporting North Vietnam. Nixon wanted to Vietnamize the war,<sup>20</sup> which is where the United States would remove their troops and he succeed it doing exactly that. Between 1968 and 1972 a total of 1,464,000 troops were removed. The death rate dropped significantly between that time too. It went from 3,000 a week to one a week. The removal of troops helped with the anti-war movement that was until March 1970 when things in Cambodia took a turn. By April Nixon had announced that there was going to be an incursion into

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<sup>19</sup> Ruane Kevin, *War and Revolution in Vietnam 1930-1970*, 48.

<sup>20</sup> Ruane Kevin, *War and Revolution in Vietnam*, 89-90.

Cambodia in his speech on April 30, 1970. The following days of protests against this action across college campuses leading to the May 4, 1970 Kent State Shooting.

## II. After the Shooting

After the May 4 shooting President Nixon had set up a committee to better understand what was contributing to campus unrest. In September 1970 the Campus Unrest Report came out, addressing all the actors the committee felt had a hand in the unrest on campuses across the country. Explaining how their actions contributed to this event and what each actor should do to ensure that something like this doesn't happen again. This report also helped better understand where the students and even teachers at the time were coming from. The committee discovered what the three main issues for students were which was the racial injustices, the war, and the university. The report says:

A "new" culture is emerging primarily among students. Membership is often manifested by differences in dress and life style. Most of its members have high ideals and great fears. They stress the need for humanity, equality, and the sacredness of life.<sup>21</sup>

The students felt as if their view was different, that the opposing sides views and ideals were out of touch with these new views and ideas that the students had. But the students weren't the only ones who were intolerant to the opposing side. The side opposite of the protesters also didn't have a very tolerant view of student protesters. The opposing side's view on the protest, even the protests that are peaceful, deserve to have had a harsh punishment.<sup>22</sup> There is the divide between these two groups that created a hostility within the country that can be harmful.

The report goes on to address the recommendations that they have for the President, the government, law enforcement, the university and students. The recommendations from the

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<sup>21</sup> Scranton, *The President's Commission on Campus Unrest*, 4.

<sup>22</sup> Scranton, *The President's Commission on Campus Unrest*, 5



committee to the President were that he was continuously informed of the views that the students and black Americans have. It was also recommended that he put an end to the war in Indochina. To meet with the opposing sides, students, law enforcement, and university leaders, to come to an understanding. Essentially to make people feel like they are being heard and to bring together the opposing sides. The government needs to end the harsh and bitter words that just end up pitting citizen against citizen. The governor should hold meetings and develop contacts to facilitate in the reconciliation. They also should have guidelines that give the circumstances that justify ordering of the National Guard to intervene on campus during times of unrest. For law enforcement to improve their ability to respond to civil disorders. Specify who is in charge when there are multiple other forces working together. They shouldn't be armed to kill since they aren't needed on campus's aside from tear gas. The University needs to improve their ability to respond to campus unrest and have areas where students first amendment is protected. They should be able to handle protests on campus and should call for help of law enforcement agencies when it turns violent. The governing systems should allow for student participation in the policies that affect them. Should facilitate a community who respect, have tolerance and responsibility for each other. Students need to present their ideas in a persuasive and reasonable way. They also need to protect the right of those that they disagree with.<sup>23</sup>

It was the job of the commission to put together a report on the reasons why there was campus unrest. For the students it was the war that was the main issue at the time of the Kent State shooting. The report than gave recommendations for each actor that had a hand in what had happened on May 4, 1970. Not every actor had taken the advice of the commission, some ignored it. But this was the beginning of the change that was to come. In order to ensure that

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<sup>23</sup> Scranton, *The Report of The President's Commission on Campus Unrest*, 9-15.

something like this would never happen again. It was the students right to air their grievances that they had with the United States government.

Following the shooting there was several investigations into the National Guard. To see if the force that they used was needed. The National Guardsmen claimed that they fired at the students in self-defense, that they feared for their life. There were two grand jury investigations, a state and federal, four major investigations by the FBI, the Scranton Commission, the US Justice Department, and the American Civil Liberties Union. This was all done to figure out what happened to cause the death of four student and the injury of nine others. Also, to figure out who is responsible for what happened. All of that was done only to have no answers of who is responsible and what exactly happened that day. Even though the investigations couldn't find anyone responsible for the tragedy, people still had their own ideas as to who is responsible for the shooting. The victims did receive some sort of retribution, in 1979 in a settlement to the Krause v Rhodes lawsuit. Twenty-eight guardsmen wrote an apology and the victims were awarded \$675,000.<sup>24</sup> But that was all that they had received after that.

Many in Kent State supported the National Guard.<sup>25</sup> In a poll taken in August of 1970 they asked 1012 adult men if they strongly/somewhat in agreement with protesters, somewhat/strongly opposed, don't feel anything one way or the other, or not sure. The responses were 31% in agreement, 64% opposed, 3% don't feel anything and 2% not sure.<sup>26</sup> The issue that people had wasn't necessarily with what the students believed but how they went about letting their issues be known. Taking a look at the survey that was done shortly after the shooting it's clear that a majority of people agreed with the protesters. Taking a look at another question that

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<sup>24</sup> O'Hara, "The man who started the killings at Kent State: the Myron Pryor lie detector test," 81.

<sup>25</sup> Bristow Nancy, "The Kent State Shootings, the Long 1960s, and the Contest over Memory," 518.

<sup>26</sup> Roper (USHARRIS.70VSM1.RM10A/31107584)

was asked in this survey was if they agreed with how the protesters went about showing their resentment of the war. Overwhelmingly 83% were against the tactics that the students were taking. People were writing letters to editors to express their discontent with what the students were doing. Some even blamed the parents of the students for their deaths.<sup>27</sup> Not all of the guardsmen were against the protests. But the guardsmen had to be there because it was their job. That doesn't mean the guards condoned what the students were doing to protest. They were very much against the students throwing rocks and wrenches at them.<sup>28</sup>

### III. What changed?

After the commission it was expected that the recommendations that were made would be implemented as quickly as possible. This wasn't the first time that there had been recommendations to change how the National Guard handled civil unrest. Before the May 4 shooting at Kent State there had been some training for dealing with civil disturbances. This training began after the 1967 Newark and Detroit riots but eventually that training dwindled out. To a point where all they did was a weekend training refresher in the first four months of every year.<sup>29</sup> The Army staff didn't want to have more training and pushed back on the proposal for more. They didn't want to devote time they could be training for combat to training for civil disobedience. Even though the National Guard was mostly dealing with civil disobedience and not seeing anything combat related. Another reason for the push back was that they had decided to reimplement the Senior Officers Civil Disturbance Orientation Course (SEADOC), which was created in 1968 but in the year previous to the Kent State shooting was no longer active. The SEADOC brought together military and civilian personal for a week to have training on how

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<sup>27</sup> Davies, Peter, "Kent State (Continued)."

<sup>28</sup> Furlong, William Barry. "The Guardsmen's View of the Tragedy at Kent State." 13.

<sup>29</sup> Scheips, *The Role of Federal Military Forces in Domestic Disorders, 1945- 1992*, 412.

have a better handling of civil disturbances. It was a slow change with the training that the army didn't want to make.<sup>30</sup> During basic training for the National Guard the vice chief of staff wanted to have three hours of instruction on dealing with civil disobedience, even though it was recommended to have three days. Eventually both sides were able to negotiate to a common ground of doing twenty hours of training. The Directorate of Military Support (DOMS) recommended twenty hours of training with eight hours of junior leadership training annually which didn't last very long. The following year there was a recommendation from the Continental Army Command to cut the training from twenty to sixteen hours. This recommendation was approved March of 1972. The rules that were laid out in the Field Manual 19-15 was last edited in 1968. With the Kent State shooting there was a need to reevaluate the rules that were laid out in the manual. The goal was to create more flexible rules that will limit the change of a person's impulse that could end up leading to the violence that was seen on May 4, 1970.

There also was a look at the soldier's right to defend themselves and the use of bayonets and warning shots. The Army staff wanted there to be a statement that said a soldier had the right to defend his own life. They also wanted warning shots to be excluded since it could do more harm than good. The secretariat wanted to ban the use of bayonets in crowd control, but the staff believed that they were a useful deterrent and provided flexibility. Eventually a compromise was agreed upon that a bayonet could be used for a violent crowd but if the crowd was not violent, they weren't allowed.<sup>31</sup> The manual also gives explicit circumstances that have to all happen in order for them to use deadly force:

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<sup>30</sup> Scheips, *The Role of Federal Military Forces in Domestic Disorders, 1945- 1992*, 413.

<sup>31</sup> Scheips, *The Role of Federal Military Forces in Domestic Disorders, 1945- 1992*, 414

Lesser means have been exhausted or are unavailable. The risk of death or serious bodily harm to innocent people is not significantly increased by its use. The purpose of its use is one or more of the following: self-defense to avoid death or serious bodily harm. Prevention of a crime that involves a substantial risk of death or serious bodily harm, such as setting fire to an inhabited dwelling or sniping including the defense of other people. Detention or prevention of the escape of a person who, during detention or while escaping, presents a clear threat of loss of life or serious bodily harm to another person.<sup>32</sup>

The Senate tried to make it mandatory for the states to abide by these new rules. If they didn't, they wouldn't receive grants for ammunition or rifles. This didn't pass, 87-2 in the Senate. The Army didn't think that the law had any legal basis for requiring the Guard to follow the Army civil disturbance doctrine and rules of engagement.<sup>33</sup>

Even though President Nixon ordered for the commission he wasn't pleased with it. It upset him because the advice of the report was to end the war in Vietnam since it was causing the biggest issue for the protesters at the time. Nixon wasn't happy about the view or advice for the Vietnam War. Nixon decided to ignore the report.<sup>34</sup> It's safe to assume that Nixon didn't take the advice or recommendations of the committee. There wasn't much change that was going to happen in regard to ending the Vietnam War anytime soon at that time.

#### IV. Conclusion

May 4, 1970 is a day that parents, students, teachers, and many others at Kent State won't ever forget. For some they lost their daughter, son, or friend. It is important to remember and learn from the mistakes that were made in the past. To change the way things are handled or

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<sup>32</sup> Department of The Army, *Civil Disturbances*, FM 19-15. (Washington DC: Department of the Army, 1985) <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=437393> 7-4.

<sup>33</sup> Scheips, *The Role of Federal Military Forces in Domestic Disorders, 1945- 1992*, 417.

<sup>34</sup> Graham, "The Ambiguous Legacy of American Presidential Commissions." 17.

addressed to ensure that it doesn't happen again. It was the job of the commission to understand why there was the campus unrest which resulted in the death of four people, Jeffery Miller, Allison Krause, William Schroder, and Sandra Scheuer; and the injury of nine other students, Joseph Lewis, Thomas Grace, John Cleary, Alan Canfora, Dean Kahler, Douglas Wrentmore, James Russell, Robert Stamps, and Donald Mackenzie.<sup>35</sup> Despite there being no one held responsible, for these deaths and injuries there was a small amount of change.

My research revealed that change happens slowly and there are times when it goes backward rather than forward. The views of the students on that day have not changed and have been passed down to the next generation. Each wanting to change the world and leave it a better place than it was before. The fear that they will not live to see the future and wanting to prevent that from ever coming true.

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<sup>35</sup> Lewis and Hensley, "The May 4 Shootings at Kent State University: The Search for Historical Accuracy."

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