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Introduction to the Second Edition

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Introduction to the Second Edition

Academic freedom can get you killed.

—Spiro T. Agnew

Kent and Jackson State: 1970-1990 was originally published to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the shootings at Kent and Jackson State. Edited with care and passion by Susie Erenrich, this is a patchwork quilt of a book. A varied collection of personal narratives, scholarly articles, poetry, fiction, and photography has been pieced together to form a powerful and coherent whole. Every contributor to this issue has been personally involved in the struggle over the meaning of the Kent and/or Jackson State shootings in 1970, and the work they submitted to *Vietnam Generation* reflects this deep, long-term commitment. Every writer stands firmly on the side of the students in this controversy, and condemns the actions of the police and military authorities, as well as the higher political authorities, who sanctioned the violent suppression of student dissent. Other anthologies may publish arguments justifying the shootings—we felt that on the twentieth anniversary of the murder of four students at Kent State and two at Jackson State we needed to take a firm stand in support of students and other Americans who protest American policy, and who exercise their First Amendment rights.

In the five years since the publication of the first edition, the popularity of this anthology has underlined the importance of presenting participants' views of history, and the effectiveness of an interdisciplinary approach which does not privilege scholarship over testimony, but presents them side-by-side. We've realized that *Kent and Jackson State: 1970-1990* is not an ephemeral publication, but a long-lived text that meets a strong need for high-quality materials on the Sixties. It's our intention to keep this volume in print indefinitely, preserving the history of an event which has become shrouded in myth.

One of the most remarkable features of the volume is that it demonstrates that the people most deeply involved in activism around the shootings are not immune themselves to the pull of myth and the shift in historical perspective. The shootings at Kent State, at least, reached the status of myth within days of their occurrence, and have become a part of the contested history of the United States. The cover photo, by John P. Filo, has become an American icon. In addition to secondary materials, we've included the text of speeches which were given at Kent State on anniversaries of the shootings; these speeches span almost two decades. An examination of the changing emphases of the speakers is a most enlightening exercise..

For example, Peter Davies, in 1990, equates the Kent State dead with the soldiers killed in the Vietnam war, asserting that “there had never been any difference between these ... victims of forces beyond their control, only what President Nixon had wanted us to see.” This desire to see the soldier as victim seems new—there is certainly no hint of it in Davies’ 1974 speech. The conflation should be of interest to historians of American popular culture, for it suggests the effective rehabilitation of the veterans’ image which began with the publicity about the Vietnam memorial wall in Washington, D.C. in 1981. In 1974, the soldier in Vietnam would more likely have been analogous to the National Guardsmen of Ohio in the minds of most critics of the Kent State killings, while the protesters would have resided in quite a different category. This creation of the larger category of “victims” (typical of post-1981 thinking) also simply erases the category of Vietnam veterans and active duty servicemen who protested the war, and who actively defied the directives of President Nixon. These soldiers, many of whom suffered and died, and these veterans, many of whom still live with the painful knowledge of their complicity in crimes committed by the United States in Vietnam, seem to be closer in spirit to the Kent State protestors than the 57,939 men who died in Vietnam.

A comparison between the sentiments of Kent State activists and Jackson State survivors is even more enlightening. The differences between the Kent and Jackson State shootings seem to lie in the interpretations of, rather than the nature of the crime. Clearly, in both cases, unarmed students were killed by armed members of law enforcement agencies. In both cases there was tension and hostility between the attackers and their victims—the armed men were seen by the students as the representatives of an oppressive system. The students were seen by the armed men as a force which threatened the foundation of their power—“law and order.” If all things were equal, public outcry or public apathy should have been the same in both instances. But, as Gene Young writes, “If it were not for the tragic events at Kent State University ten days earlier, this murderous Mississippi morning would have, perhaps, received little or no recognition and indignation.”

The black survivors of Jackson State appear to view themselves as part of a larger group, a group which includes all black survivors of white violence. The tradition of struggle against white injustice and willing or unwilling martyrdom to the cause of black freedom is part of the fabric of black southern community life. Though the argument over violent and nonviolent tactics continues, no one questions the necessity of protest. Outside the dormitory where Phillip Gibbs resided, a modest stone dedicated to Gibbs and James Earl Green reads:

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Phillip Gibbs will remain in the memory of all Jacksonians as a martyr who nobly relinquished his life for the cause of human brotherhood.... Green, like Gibbs, did not choose to die but was a victim of death's mandate. He nobly takes his station among other martyrs of the cause.

“The cause” is not at issue here, and there is no strong faction arguing that the students were at fault, while the Jackson Police were merely doing their jobs. “All Jacksonians” (including, if the testimony of Dr. Peoples is any indication, the administration) agree that Gibbs and Green were murdered in the same campaign which claimed the lives of Medgar Evers, Emmett Till, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., James Chaney, Addie Mae Collins, Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesley and Denise McNair. The message here is that no black person in America is safe from racial violence, from an eleven-year-old girl attending church on a Sunday morning, to the leading light of the civil rights movement, and that all must stand together in the fight for freedom.

While the black community can be united in memorializing black martyrs (since all blacks are oppressed), the white community will be unable to agree on just who is the martyr and who is the offending principal in a white against white confrontation. Just as the black community is realistic enough to know that if they want a memorial for black heroes they are going to have to build it themselves, so white dissenters ought to be able to guess that if they want a memorial to their attempt to overthrow the power structure they will get precious little help from the authorities who represent the structure they wanted to overthrow. The administration of Kent State University, whose members are, after all, representatives of state power, will naturally resist efforts to build a monument to those who sought, and seek, to undermine their authority.

The struggle over the May 4 Memorial at Kent State is both strongly symbolic, and ironically akin to the struggle over the construction of the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in Washington, D.C. When public pressure to build a memorial overcomes official efforts to resist its construction, the battle will shift to the physical and symbolic attributes of the memorial itself.

It was the ambiguity of the the Vietnam Memorial Wall which so upset conservative critics of the design. All those names engraved on a flat, black surface would most likely fail to evoke the patriotic and heroic images upon which our national mythology is built. How could one reclaim history in the face of such a refusal to offer definition? Only after the placement of a representative sculpture of three soldiers was proposed and accepted would the right-wing critics of the Memorial allow the construction process to commence. Now, one could hear them say, now we have a *story*, now we have a *reason* for this war. The students and activists of the May 4 Task Force at Kent State are fighting a similar battle—but this time it is the conservative forces who are arguing for ambiguity.

Memorial supporters want a monument which clearly defines the event,

and one which includes a written description of the historical incident—the shooting of four students by the National Guard at Kent State University, May 4, 1970. Let us make no mistake about it, they say, a wrong was perpetrated here. The University administration, and the conservative critics have bowed reluctantly to public pressure, and have said let there be a memorial, but let us not decide whether the act which was committed was evil or good. When offered the opportunity to accept George Segal's sculptor of Abraham and Isaac, the university turned it down—the symbolism was too obvious. An arch, a set of pillars, a flat, paved area—these were preferable because they would not strongly evoke the incident. And the administration wants no descriptive plaque.¹

Those who study the rhetorical stance of these articles will also notice that there seems to be a general reluctance to declare that two of the students killed at Kent State—Allison Krause and Jeffrey Miller—were active protesters, and two of them—Sandy Scheuer and William Schroeder—were not. Schroeder's status as a ROTC student further complicates the issue. Clearly, the National Guard did not make any distinction between them, but it is our duty as historians to embrace the complexity of the issue; the murder of both protesting and bystanding students, and the subsequent media treatment of those murders is inadequately understood by those who refuse to examine the stake of the murderers, the general public, the media, and the defendants in claiming the authority to define the dead.

This is not only a problem in the case of the Kent State killings, but of the Jackson State killings as well. As John Peoples explains, the "corner boys" who hung out around the Jackson State campus were a group distinct from (and frequently hostile to) the university students, but, "At night, neither policemen nor campus authorities could distinguish between the corner boys and the students." Riots at Jackson State, in Peoples' description, seem to have sometimes started out as fights *between* the corner boys and the students, and then escalated into riots as both groups joined forces in assaulting white motorists in response to racial insults or grievances. Police, however, turned their guns on students and non-students alike in response to a perceived threat (most likely to their authority rather than their physical well-being), and wounded and killed members of both groups, as well as non-participants—the women taking shelter in their own dormitory.

This tendency to merge the identities of those wounded and killed reflects the desire of the left to make all the students martyrs and the desire of the right to lump them all together as "undesirables." If we fall for this ploy, we will lose the ability to accurately analyze the event, in the same way that we lose our ability to accurately analyze the Vietnam war when we reduce all soldiers to "heroes" or "victims." In the words of Laura Riding,

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from *Anarchism Is Not Enough*:

A complicated problem is only further complicated by being simplified. A state of confusion is never made comprehensible by being given a plot. Appearances do not deceive if there are enough of them.

One of the most frequently used words in this anthology is “tragedy.” It is a term used by victims, eyewitnesses and scholars to describe the murders of students at Kent and Jackson State. Tragedy, as Bill Gibson suggests in his book *The Perfect War*, is also a term commonly used to describe the war in Vietnam “as if thirty years of American intervention in Vietnam were a Greek play in which the hero is struck down by the gods. In the face of the incomprehensible, absolute: fate decreed defeat.”² When we use the word “tragedy” we bow to the notion that these events were “no one’s fault,” that they were decreed by a Higher Power, inevitable, rather than the result of human decision. This is not simply semantic nitpicking—you will notice that “tragedy” and “rage” rarely coexist. Raging at the gods, after all, is a pointless activity and one that can occasionally get you killed.

Reading these articles as I edited them and typeset them was a strong emotional experience. At times I was overwhelmed by anger, and frustrated to tears. No person has spent a day in jail for committing these murders. Gene Young reminds us that this miscarriage of justice was the rule rather than the exception for the black community, and many of the writers here have taken this lesson to heart, connecting their struggle to the greater struggles against racism, poverty, and oppression. I hope that this collection moves you, as it has moved me. Remember the killings at Kent and Jackson State not as “tragedies,” but as deliberate and unpunished instances of violence and oppression perpetrated by the state against dissenting groups.

*Those who do not remember are in jeopardy of
suffering at the hands of those who say they do.*
—Stephen Vaughn

—Kali Tal, *Viet Nam Generation, Inc.*

Notes

- ¹ Maya Lin has designed a memorial at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center in Atlanta Georgia—dedicated to the activists who died in the struggle for black civil rights. The design was not controversial—most likely because it was built and paid for by civil rights activists and their supporters, who know which side they stand on, and who stands there with them—contains both a symbolic and representative aspect, and clearly honors those who died.
- ² William Gibson, *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press) 1986: 435.



Arthur Krause at settlement news conference in 1979. Photo © by John P. Rowe.