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Four Students: Address Delivered at Kent State, May 4, 1974

Peter Davies

As this is the first anniversary I have been able to attend, I would like to direct our thoughts back to the time before the shootings: to remember the four students who died here, and to reflect on what their families, this university and the community at large so tragically lost four years ago. By recalling who they were I hope to remind our fellow citizens that regardless of all the lurid stories to the contrary, they were the innocent victims of a chain of events that few Americans can look back at with pride. Such unnecessary destruction of human life is far from being unique in our history, but I believe that Kent State of May, 1970 will come to mark a significant turning point in our tendency to excuse official lawlessness no matter how blatant the abuses may be.

The recent federal indictments against one present and seven former members of the Ohio National Guard, no matter what the final disposition of the cases may be, has made it possible for us to assemble today without the sense of injustice that has haunted previous anniversaries. Although many grave questions still remain to be answered, the unanimous decision of the Supreme Court, on three of the civil suits stemming from the killings, has opened the door to further revelations. Those who made the decisions that maneuvered the students and the guardsmen into a confrontation situation have been called upon, by the high court's ruling, to account for their actions in a court of law. Consequently, there is every reason to now believe that justice will at long last be done. This holds equally true for the Jackson State cases which have, I understand, been in a state of limbo pending the Supreme Court's findings on the Kent appeals.

No student, James Michener said on many occasions, did anything for which he, or she, deserved to be shot, and yet we are here today to remember that four died and nine more were injured, two of them permanently. One is Dean Kahler, a gentle young man whose lifeless legs are mute testimony to the horror of what happened on this campus four years ago, and who is with us to share these moments of remembrance.

Who were those four students? Why were they so ferociously condemned as radicals, or passionately hailed as martyrs, when they were neither? Why did their deaths to the bullets of a few national guardsmen set them apart in the minds of a great many Americans? Some of the answers,

I believe, are self-evident in the tone and content of the rhetoric that rolled so glibly off the tongues of our now disgraced national leadership. We all know what was said, and their words fostered an emotional atmosphere of anti-student sentiment which turned into an almost frightening fury at the victims, as though killing students was too mild a punishment for their audacity in refusing to disperse. The facts of what these four young people were doing at the time they died were literally buried beneath an avalanche of official allegations and distortions, and it took almost four years for the parents and many others to dig those facts out into the light of day.

Now that a Federal Grand Jury of Ohio citizens has found probable cause for prosecuting some guardsmen, just as a State Grand Jury found similar cause for prosecuting twenty-five students and others back in 1970, it is time to talk about the human qualities those four young citizens possessed and, perhaps, to explain why I am here today. My contribution toward justice in this incident began, four years ago, with the feeling that any one of the killed and wounded could so easily have been my own child because of the circumstances surrounding that long fusillade of deadly gunfire. Subsequent intensive probing of their backgrounds and life styles by the government, the news media and Mr. Michener, not only justified those feelings, but made me very proud to know the parents of such fine sons and daughters.

When Jeffrey Miller was in fourth grade he, and a friend, on their own initiative, decided to conduct a study of racism in America. To complete this ambitious project they contacted *Ebony Magazine* for additional material and information. It was not until a staff member of the Journal called Jeff's mother to praise her son for his concern and resourcefulness, that his parents learned of his keen interest in social problems at such a young age. Although Jeff very much enjoyed participating in just about every kind of sports activity, his happiness was frequently darkened by the suffering of others, both at home and abroad.

During the last few years of his brief life, spent mostly at Michigan State University, Jeffrey Miller became increasingly concerned about our involvement in the Vietnam war, and as early as 1966 he wrote these words:

The strife and fighting continue into the night.
The mechanical birds sound of death
As they buzz overhead spitting fire
Into the doomed towns whose women and children
Run and hide in the bushes and ask why,
Why are we not left to live our own lives?
In the pastures, converted into battlefields,
The small metal pellets speed through the air,
Pausing occasionally to claim another victim.
A teenager from a small Ohio farm
Clutches his side in pain, and,
As he feels his life ebbing away,

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He, too, asks why,
Why is he dying here, thousands of miles from home,
Giving his life for those who did not even ask for his help?

Much was made of the fact that Jeff, with his distinctive head-band, was out there that day giving the national guardsmen the finger and throwing objects at the soldiers from distances of about two hundred feet. We have, in the past, ascribed to his behavior whatever our social and political environments have conditioned us to see in his conduct. Nevertheless, I believe it is fair to say that Jeffrey Miller was simply expressing, inappropriately, the same kind of frustration that motivated Allison Krause to shout obscenities, Dean Kahler to throw a rock, and Alan Canfora to wave a black flag. All were shot by guardsmen. Jeff and Allison were killed and Dean paralyzed in what we were told was a lesson in just what law and order is all about. But what of some of the other victims?

Sandy Scheuer, for example, was faithfully following the instructions of former University President Robert White to attend classes as usual. This generally happy-go-lucky young woman was more concerned with trying to help those afflicted with speech impediments than attending demonstrations to protest America's participation in the killing of civilians in Southeast Asia. Sandy had what I call an open heart, one that is as vulnerable to the pain of others as it is strong in the determination to give aid and comfort where it can be the most effective. This loving, outgoing human being had so much to offer those less fortunate than herself, yet she died here four years ago because of that chain of events that no official, with the power to intervene, sought to break before it culminated in disaster.

Sandy was not a politically conscious person, but rather a generous individual who believed she could contribute something constructive toward overcoming our general tendency to shun the needs of the handicapped. As fate, or what you will, would have it, she was walking to her next class in speech therapy when a guardsman's bullet tore through her neck. We shall never know how many Americans Sandy could have helped to conquer their speech problems, anymore than we shall ever know what Jeffrey Miller might have contributed toward improving our society. Both were taken from us violently, just as tens of thousands of fine young Americans were taken from us in a war that few of us understood and fewer still can now endorse. The loss to science, medicine, industry, and the liberal arts, that is this nation's sacrifice to a questionable cause, can never be calculated in terms of impeded progress and parental grief.

If it were necessary to classify Bill Schroeder as symbolic of something in our society, my immediate response would be that almost meaningless label, the All-American Boy. A more appropriate description, perhaps, would be world citizen. This sensitive young man had involved himself in so many aspects of our past and future that it is equally impossible to assess

what we have lost by his untimely death. Throughout his pre-college education he was an honor student, with a keen interest in the history of the American Indian and an abiding love for music. Not only was he a dedicated athlete, concerned about the causes and affects of war, but also he was able to make time available in which he could explore the worlds of geology, psychology and photography. In 1969 Bill accepted an ROTC scholarship, thereby committing himself to four years at college, four years of active military service, and two years in the Army Reserves. Such a commitment at the age of seventeen may, or may not, have eventually been regretted, but whatever the outcome might have been there is little doubt in my mind that he would have faithfully honored his obligation. How is it, then, that Bill Schroeder is dead?

The answer to this question is not easy to come by, but I believe he was out there four years ago today because he was going through that difficult period in our lives when we hover on the brink between childhood and adulthood, when we have to make a decision that is strictly on our own. I think that Bill was confronted with a natural desire to remain faithful to his family's code of behavior and his need to identify with the frustrations that so many of his peers were experiencing following President Nixon's decision to support the South Vietnamese invasions of Cambodia. Had he not possessed such a thirst for knowledge and participation in human events, I doubt that he would have bothered about the noon rally that day. But he did, and he went, and it cost him, his family, and the nation, because he died to a bullet that struck him in the back as he lay motionless face down upon the ground.

Just eleven days before her death, Allison Krause celebrated her nineteenth birthday in the company of her parents and her lover. At that happy gathering was her younger sister, a remarkable person who was to suffer to a degree that few of us could experience without sustaining permanently crippling scars. Her fortitude after May fourth, in the face of such cruel adversity, symbolized for me the spirit of Allison. It is hardly surprising that her parents, and the young man who loved Allison, and myself, should find in this sister the quiet strength of a character that unwittingly became the fountainhead of our determination to establish the truth about the circumstances surrounding Allison's death.

It is difficult for me to speak about Allison because, right or wrong, it was her death that touched me the deepest. Since it happened, I have tried to explain to myself why this should be, but answers such as beauty and youth do not adequately justify the commitment of four years of one's family and business life. I admit to an emotional contempt for male assault upon the female, but it is more likely that I saw myself in Allison as much as I saw her as my own daughter. Despite my political conservatism, I understood why she was out there shouting at the advancing guardsmen with their M-1 rifles and fixed bayonets. On the other hand, it might well have been a response

to the fact that she had shouted at a guard officer, "Flowers are better than bullets," or that she had wept that day, not from the tear gas, but because of what was happening to her, her friends, and her campus. Whatever the explanation for my being here may be, I do know that it began because a part of me died with Allison Krause, and the stubbornness that was one of her inherited characteristics, as much as her love for, and desire to help retarded children, aroused my British blood of never going along with the popular notion that authority is infallible, especially when the facts point to the contrary.

Time does not permit me to speak at length about the four students who died here. Suffice to say that on this fourth anniversary they are remembered as much for who they were as why they are dead. I do, however, want to take a few moments to remind you about the young man who was killed at the University of Wisconsin when the mathematics center was the object of a bomb protest against the war. The fact that the perpetrator of this crime was unaware of the victim's presence in the building is no more excusable than the claim that guardsmen firing into a crowd of students did so without intent to kill. Blowing up a building is just as inexcusable as shooting at defenseless people, and the rationales given for both incidents are equally offensive to my concept of law and order.

There is no denying my sense of vindication now that a Federal Grand Jury and the Supreme Court of the United States have set the wheels of justice in motion. That this is happening, I feel compelled to point out, is in no way due to any great efforts over the last four years by the so-called new left or the antiwar movement, but rather because a few citizens worked day in and day out to get the Justice Department and the courts to recognize the fact that the constitution and the laws of the United States had been violated by the shootings. Now it is up to juries to decide whether or not these violations warrant convictions and compensation. Whatever the outcome, these citizens accomplished this breakthrough despite the intimidating handicap of having to deal with an administration in Washington that had wrapped itself in our flag whilst presiding over the slow and secret burying of our Bill of Rights.

To those of you who share my concern about the future of our country, the reversal of the Nixon-Mitchell decision against ever convening a Federal Grand Jury investigation should inspire you to follow in the footsteps of Paul Keane, Greg Rambo and Bill Gordon, former students who came to the support of the families with their petition to President Nixon, an act of faith which was recognized by Dr. Glen Olds when he accompanied Keane and Rambo to the White House in October, 1971. Apathy and cynicism, as Arthur Krause has said on more than one occasion, will get you nowhere, and he should know, because it was this man who went before the nation the day after his daughter's death and asked if dissent is a crime, if that was a reason for killing her. Not only can you fight City Hall, you can fight the

White House too, if you have the patience and stamina to remain true to your convictions and to work within the channels provided by our democratic system of government.

In a recent article I wrote for *American Report* concerning the Patricia Hearst kidnaping, I expressed my belief that the ultimate human failure in any society is our inability to envision our own children in the tragedies which befall the sons and daughters of others. As the parents of the four students killed soon learned, a great many of us are all too quick to moralize about the lives of strangers that have been destroyed under circumstances comparable, or not even similar, to what happened here. How often do we hear people criticizing a female victim of murder because she was "out late," or she must have been "no good" because she let her killer enter her apartment. The perpetrator of the crime is all too often the object of misplaced sympathy, so it is hardly surprising that the four dead students should become the objects of such chilling venom that one wonders to what extent social guilt inspires vitriolic condemnation of the victims.

Patricia Hearst, for example, existed in an isolated world where summary execution was a day to day possibility, yet there were quite a few ready and willing to suspect the worst and to accuse her of engineering her own kidnaping. After the dramatic bank robbery in San Francisco even the Attorney General of the United States got into the act and accused her of being a "common criminal." After the shootings here, Allison Krause was called the "campus whore" who was "tattooed from head to toe" and Jeffrey Miller was said to be "so covered with lice" he was destined to die anyway from being "so dirty." Such utter nonsense is easily dismissed, but we should ask ourselves why there are people who so quickly condemn the victims. Is it the human trait of selfishness? We can always afford to sacrifice the life of the other guy for the so-called general good of the majority, and this was painfully evident in the reaction to the killings on this campus. Jeff, Sandy, Bill, and Allison symbolized the public's sacrifice to atone for the bombings and burnings committed by others. The fact that they were innocent was irrelevant to the greater need for a tough stand against the weathermen and their kind.

Murder, kidnaping and rape have plagued mankind since the beginning of recorded history, yet civilization is presumed to be at its most advanced stage as we approach the twenty-first century. Recent events, however, suggest that respect for human life is declining in a world where overpopulation is becoming a major threat to our ability to meet such a challenge. The Reverend John Adams put his finger on this problem when he noted that the condensation of James Michener's account of "What Happened and Why" in the April 1971 issue of *Reader's Digest* contained an advertisement for Ortho Chevron Chemical Company. "In advertising insecticides for use in gardens," he wrote, "bold black words stated: 'The balance of nature is

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predicated on the fact that one thing dies so that another may live.' Some believe," Mr. Adams continued, "That this is what happened. Some believe that the shooting of students at Kent was necessary in order that other students could live and the society could be preserved." Likewise some believe that Patty Hearst should be abandoned to whatever fate the SLA might decree for her so that others may not become the victims of kidnaping, just as many supported the bombing of Hanoi as a means of forcing North Vietnam to sign a so-called peace settlement. The fact that hundreds of civilians were killed to accomplish this political necessity was irrelevant, just as the Viet Cong's vicious murders of helpless men and women in the villages of South Vietnam is irrelevant to their political goals. Yet all, including My Lai, are contemptible, inexcusable crimes against humanity, crimes which the allies prosecuted so vigorously at Nuremburg, but which the United Nations ignore today.

I could, of course, go on at great length about our feelings toward the violence that seems to have become a part of the daily existence of countless millions who simply want to live out their lives in peace and free from fear. It is so much easier to turn a blind eye on the day to day tragedies which befall our fellow human beings, and sometimes it becomes imperative that we do, otherwise we would all become victims of the pain and anguish that is constantly before us in newspapers and the television screen. So I want to close on a more uplifting note, if not a happy one.

We are here today not to mourn the death of four students, but rather to honor their memory. We are here to recall once again that they were decent young people, like their two black brothers killed at Jackson State ten days later, people who should not, by any yardstick of right and wrong, be dead. There are many more than these six students, but their deaths, like those of the unknown soldiers, are symbolic of the countless victims who died from shootings that were unnecessary, unwarranted, and inexcusable.

To the Trustees, the Administration, the Faculty, and the Student Body of Kent State, I say the turning point we have so recently reached will eventually lead to the long awaited healing of the terrible wounds inflicted here four years ago. The spirit of what Jeff Miller, Sandy Scheuer, Bill Schroeder, and Allison Krause represented for our future has been ever restless until this day. They should never have been killed, but they were, and so it fell to their parents and a few others to make sure that this truth be known. The time will come, I say to you today, when this University will be looked upon as a symbol of the triumph of American justice over the travesty that has haunted you for so many unhappy years.



Reverend John Adams at a rally. Kent State University, August 20, 1977. Photo © by John P. Rowe.