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Address Delivered at Kent State, May 4, 1984

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Address Delivered at Kent State, May 4, 1984

Tom Grace

Fourteen years ago today, our surroundings were being disturbed by the din of agitated protest, by clouds of teargas, and finally by the horrifying sound of gunfire. Impassioned voices were stilled, some forever, by thirteen seconds of terror—sixty-two shots in all—from M-1 rifles, shotguns and .45 caliber automatics.

By the time National Guard officers finally regained control over their gunmen and had them cease firing, thirteen Kent students lay dead, wounded, or dying. Hundreds more were stunned as if they had been hit. None who saw defenseless people shot down—save the guardsmen responsible for the shooting—will ever be the same. Our lives were permanently changed.

How far away that day must seem for many of you, as we gather inside on an overcast afternoon on a day unlike the one of fourteen years ago. How profound the contrast between those seconds and minutes of terror and the misty serenity of this day.

For those assembled here too young to remember, for those who were guilty of the wanton killings, and for the legions of Americans who cried out for peace in 1970, we are here today to tell all who will listen that our dead classmates will not be forgotten.

Ever year for the past fourteen springs, hundreds—and sometimes thousands—have come to pay respects to the memory of Allison Krause and Sandy Scheuer and Jeff Miller and Bill Schroeder. Some of us who still bear scars from wounds suffered on the fourth of May have come from distant portions of the country to recall our classmates' sacrifices.

With the recent birth of my second child, I have been more aware than ever of the magnitude of the sacrifice made by Sandy and Jeff, and of what was stolen from Bill and Allison. They will never know the joys and trials of parenting. Their families will never see their children grow into adulthood. Why? Because a group of armed men robbed four people of their futures by gunning them down just as they entered the threshold of their adult lives.

I will not attempt to retrace the events that led up to the burst of gunfire. The outcome has become part of our heritage even if the facts and meaning of the killings remain in dispute.

Rather, we will address ourselves to the legacy of Kent State and of what we are memorializing.

The deaths of four students here and of two more at Jackson State occurred because some had the audacity to protest, in sometimes militant fashion, the invasion of Cambodia by U.S. ground forces. The then-governor of California surely spoke for many in the establishment when he intimated a bloodbath for those who opposed the country's policy. It was left to the governor of Ohio, James Rhodes, to make good his western counterpart's admonitions.

Yet if the killings were supposed to silence antiwar critics, then the tactic failed, for the shootings only served to intensify the movement. Never before or since were so many campuses racked by protests. Even today, when I meet a college-educated person of my age, they are able to recall their involvement in protests against the killings and the invasion of Cambodia.

The demonstrators accomplished what electoral activity alone could not—to force the issue of Vietnam and Cambodia into the body politic in such a way that it could no longer be ignored. Over Richard Nixon's strong objections, two U.S. Senators, Sherman Cooper and the late Frank Church, co-sponsored an amendment restricting future operations in Cambodia. Its terms required the executive to withdraw the U.S. forces two months after the original April 30, 1970, invasion.

The politics of protest grew to such magnitude that the system was compelled to respond or face further measures. Cooper-Church, passed in final form as the War Powers Act, marked the first time during the Vietnam experience that Congress acted to restrict a President's ability to wage undeclared war. I have been told by combat veterans who were a part of the Cambodian invasion that they felt their lives had been saved by the protests. If true, then the lives lost here have greater meaning.

Most recently, the War Powers Act served as the basis for the Lebanon debate. Had Congress exercised their power instead of showing only their timidity, some three hundred Marines would undoubtedly now be alive. Missing in the fall of 1983, however, was the vibrant mass movement of the late 60s and early 70s. The apparent lesson is that mass pressure is required to prevent the introduction of U.S. soldiers into unpopular foreign conflicts.

While a mass movement opposing imperial penetration of Third World countries such as Lebanon or El Salvador does not exist on the scale it once did, there remains a widespread skepticism about American foreign policy objectives.

This is a legacy of Kent State and of Cambodia that has become known as the Vietnam Syndrome. There are millions of Americans who agreed with George McGovern when he said it was wrong for our country to support every two-bit dictator in the world. And part of the appeal of Gary Hart and Jesse Jackson is their often-stated opposition to the commitment of

U.S. forces into conflicts in the underdeveloped world. In Jackson's case, he has questioned the very motives and aims of corporation and government policies.

We have today an entire generation of Americans who came to a newfound political understanding during the Vietnam war. Our political outlook was shaped and fashioned by the utter ruthlessness of American policy in Indochina, as well as on the home front in Kent, Ohio and Jackson, Mississippi. Commentators, speaking of a largely white, university educated group, have dubbed us the "Big Chill" generation. While the consciousness of many of the college-educated Sixties generation reflects primarily middle-class aspirations and, hence, is often found wanting on issues concerning working Americans, the poor and disfranchised minorities, it nevertheless forms a basis of opposition to reckless foreign adventures. This, too, is a legacy of Kent State and Vietnam.

On the domestic front, the Kent and Jackson State killings awoke millions of our countrymen to the ugly realities of which minorities and the urban poor have long been aware—that the police and National Guard are the ultimate instruments of rule. At Kent and Jackson, deadly force was used to contain what, in retrospect, was resistance not to government rule, but only to Nixon's war policies.

"Kent State," in the words of former presidential aide and convicted felon H.R. Haldeman, "marked a turning point for Nixon—a beginning of his long downhill slide towards Watergate."

Some apparently are anxious to rehabilitate Nixon. I will always remember him for the siege mentality he developed during the years of protest that engulfed his administration. Illegal countermeasures first used against Black Panthers were next employed against the antiwar movement. Reactionary steps were then taken towards the press and were finally directed at the opposition party headquartered in 1972 at the Watergate Apartments in Washington.

During the unraveling of Nixon's administration between 1973 and 1974, three Attorney Generals, two of whom were convicted for criminal wrongdoing, occupied the office directing the Justice Department. The first two—Mitchell and Kleindienst—blocked federal action on Kent State. Hence, four years passed before the Justice Department, badly shaken by Watergate, succumbed to pressure from 50,000 people who in their petitions demanded action against the Ohio National Guard. A large measure of credit is due to author Peter Davies and churchman John Adams who pleaded and prayed for justice from a department whose stated mission is to uphold the law.

When indictments were returned against eight Ohio guardsmen for their roles in the shooting deaths, they were charged only with conspiring to violate our civil rights. Rather than indict the guardsmen for charges easily

proven, the Department of Justice, as they recently did in the case of the shooting deaths of five anti-Klan demonstrators in Greensboro, North Carolina, chose to prosecute the killers under hard-to-prove sections of the U.S. Criminal Code. This “let’s indict the killers for charges we can’t prove” mentality led to predictable results.

In 1974, a federal judge dismissed the cases against the guardsmen before sending them to a jury. The charade was played out again three weeks ago when an all-white jury exonerated nine Nazi party and Ku Klux Klansmen in the execution-style killing of five protestors.

The lesson of Kent State? Simply that Mississippi justice prevails in Ohio and North Carolina if the victimized are protestors calling for peace or racial justice. Jesse Jackson’s statement that the Greensboro travesty “threatens everyone in a free society” rings true for Kent State as well.

These are unpleasant realities for some, but important lessons for all. For those of us present on May 4, 1970, the foregoing constitutes a lasting legacy. Yet, lessons seldom outlast the living and legacies survive—in part, because of permanent memorials.

Following years of disputes and no small amount of callousness, the new Kent State administration is giving serious consideration to the erection of a fitting memorial to the dead.

Even an unrepentant antiwar activist like myself can feel a welcome sense of openness from Dr. Schwartz. His administration has a chance, as all new administrations do, to right many wrongs and to help heal our wounds.

Here at Kent we already have a grossly-placed monument to insensitivity, for the construction of the gym on the other side of the commons stands out as the single most unfeeling act ever committed by a post-1970 Kent State administration. If the building of the gym represented callous disregard, other memorial ventures, such as were proposed by former KSU President Brage Golding, were simply ridiculous.

The most serious, and in my mind, appropriate, tribute to date was created by the renowned sculptor George Segal. His memorial was rejected by Kent State as being too violent. Imagine that. A university administration that cooperated with police in employing all manners of repressive tactics and public humiliation against its students, its alumni, and—on one occasion—even the parents of slain student Sandy Scheuer, rejected a thought-provoking sculpture of Abraham slaying his son. One can only assume that the thought the sculpture provoked would be ones past administrations could not bear.

The current efforts by the May 4 Committee to choose a suitable permanent memorial will serve as a litmus test of the new administration’s sincerity. The Committee, which I understand has an appointed chairman, cannot escape the sad fact that violence was done to defenseless civilians.

While shape and design are not unimportant, what is inscribed or not inscribed will be of lasting significance.

I submit that an inscription which tells in unadorned fashion what happened here is essential. We do not need more gymnasiums to conceal what occurred at Kent State. Rather, we need a Committee ready to act with moral fortitude so future generations can stand near the pagoda and read of how thirteen Americans were killed and wounded by the Ohio National Guard in a protest over the invasion of Cambodia.

“Why should it say that?” some will ask. I answer: “Because that is what happened.”

While a student at Kent State I majored in History with a particular focus on the Civil War. The battlefields of that war—America’s bloodiest and most-remembered conflict—dot the landscape from Southern Pennsylvania to Western Missouri. Decades after the war, veterans returned to the sites to dedicate monuments to their fallen friends and to commemorate their sacrifices, deeds, and actions. Today, long after the last veterans have died, we can still visit the fields of conflict. We can read the inscriptions on the granite monuments and understand what happened on the banks of Antietam Creek or on the hills surrounding Gettysburg.

It may be inevitable that the Committee’s charge of memorializing the controversial killings will itself generate controversy. Yet we must remember who it is that comes back to remember and pay homage. Certainly not James Rhodes or General Canterbury or General Del Corso. No, it is those of us who were wronged and our supporters both old and new. Our feelings—the views of the four families—must not be dismissed again.

None of us are anxious to re-fight past battles, but all of us, like the Civil War veterans who fought either for or against freedom and the Union, will someday be dead. This memorial can ensure that future generations will know and understand the bloody day of fourteen years past. We owe that to the memory of those who died on the other side of this campus.

If Kent State truly wants to make peace with the past, they must make peace with the living. We will not rest until we are certain that our classmates are never forgotten.



Julian Bond and Tom Grace at Kent State, May 4, 1988. Photo © by John P. Rowe.