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Carl Oglesby

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On the Trouble at Kent State

Carl Oglesby

It was not until sixteen and a half years after the event, in the *New York Times* of October 9, 1986, that conservative columnist William Safire reported “sitting with [Reagans’ Secretary of State] George Schultz in 1970 watching and listening to the film of the shooting at Kent State; stunned, the former marine said, “That was a salvo.” From the sound, he knew an order had been given to fire at the students, and—a good Administration soldier, but not one to march over cliffs—he would not accept explanations that the shooting had been sporadic.

That is point number one: that the shooting was planned, ordered, and intended.

Point number two emerges from a simple reflection on the above fact and its completely unambiguous status. Just as with George Schultz, no one who has studied the evidence in this case with a half open eye and an unbiased mind has ever been able to reach any conclusion other than that the shooting was premeditated. Yet despite this fact, the government has never done anything at any level to probe for an answer to the obvious questions, namely: Who authorized the planning to shoot people at KSU and who gave the order to keep the truth from coming out?

Thus, the central facts about the Kent State shootings twenty years later are exactly the same as the central facts about the other cardinal assassinations of the Vietnam period, those of John Kennedy in 1963, and of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy in 1968. In each case we confront, first, a conspiracy to carry out the actual murder and, second, a second conspiracy to cover up the first one.

Nor does it take a blathering paranoia to say so. The evidence of conspiracy in the JFK and MLK cases has in fact been explicitly reported and acknowledged as such by the U.S. Congress itself, which in 1979, after two-year-long investigations reported that JFK was “probably” and MLK was “likely” killed by conspiracies, not by lone, self-motivated madmen. Despite pretending to still believe that Lee Harvey Oswald pulled a trigger that day in Dealey Plaza, the House Select Committee on Assassinations found and reported strong if indirect evidence that Oswald was exactly what he said he was in his one confrontation with the media before he himself was murdered—a “patsy.” Oswald’s assassin, Jack Ruby, was found to have had deep and extensive ties to precisely the segments of organized crime, the New

Orleans Mafia under Carlos Marcello and the Miami Mafia under Santos Trafficante, that had the strongest motive to eliminate Kennedy.

In the King case, the congress found that James Earl Ray was indeed the killer, but that he was operating in cahoots with his brothers and that their motive may not have been simple racism but rather a desire to collect a bounty that had been placed on King's head less than a year before by southern fascists with links to a shadowy Tennessee organization called the Southern States Industrial Council.

As to the Robert Kennedy case, there has been no official investigation since that of the Los Angeles police department upon which the conviction of Sirhan Sirhan was based, but students of the case (perhaps most notably Allard Lowenstein, an aide of RFK's who was himself subsequently murdered) have produced compelling factual grounds for assuming that here too we face a conspiracy of killers, not a lone madman, a conspiracy that was itself protected by a higher-level conspiracy of official cover-up artists.

Set in such a context, we must see the KSU killings and their cover up as the doings of forces based somehow within the "legitimate" government and capable somehow of subverting the powers of "legitimate authority" to their own ends. These ends were, in all these cases, apparently shaped by the Vietnam war and by the fanatical conviction among American ultra-rightists that the war against Communism justifies any crime against dissent and even against the Constitution itself.

This is what we face in the case of the KSU shootings: an effort to intimidate the forces of popular dissent, first, by murderous violence and, second, by the absolute protection of the guilty principals from the least legal penalty. The message is: If your dissent becomes to strenuous or seems about to make a real difference, we will kill you where and when we choose and you won't be able to do a thing about it; and we will do it in such a way that others look on and understand, so that your death will set an example. The politics of the Death Squad.

Why do people believe that political murder works? For one thing, surely, because it so often does. As we can now say with great certainty, JFK was about to withdraw U.S. military forces from Vietnam and to normalize relations with Castro's Cuba at the moment at which he was murdered. When Johnson took over, those plans were out and the era of escalation in Vietnam and the militant isolation of Cuba was upon us. The difference made by Dealey Plaza was the difference between JFK's 16,000-man U.S. expeditionary force and Johnson's half-a-million-man army. The difference made by the assassination of Robert Kennedy, who had become by the time of his death a proponent of U.S. disengagement, was the difference between winding the war down starting in 1969 and winding the war to a higher intensity, as occurred under Nixon.

In the case of King, the result was less direct but equally profound. When King, “the Dreamer,” died, the Dream died with him, or at least suffered major trauma and prolonged deactivation. The Dream in this case, of course, was the proposition embodied in King and his political work that nonviolent action within the framework of the U.S. Constitution could in fact bring about fundamental change in public attitudes and official policies. When King was gone, the stage was left to a generation of leaders who did not share King’s vision or values, or who at least felt themselves compelled by the circumstances of King’s death to take up a politics of violence, or in the parlance of the time, of “direct action.” When the civil rights movement’s leadership vacuum was filled by Black Panthers such as Eldridge Cleaver and Huey Newton, it was only a matter of a very short time before black leadership had been essentially eliminated altogether by the forces of state repression. In fact, repression had a much easier time politically with the Black Panthers than it had ever had with King’s Southern Christian Leadership Council and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. Those of us who were close to the Panthers knew that their violence was overwhelmingly an expression of rage, grief, and frustration, and that in purely human terms it was infinitely forgivable as a reaction to the violence visited upon the black community by white fascists and, in particular, by the assassination of King.

But this did *not* mean that Panther violence made the least sense from a political standpoint. On the contrary, the only political result of the Panther’s explicit and indeed vociferous rejection of nonviolence was to confer a kind of retroactive legitimacy on the forces of white repression. There are clearly conditions and circumstances in which this would not be the case, but for the United States of the late 1960s, any action taken by the dissenting forces that tended to move confrontation from nonviolence to violence was uniformly negative for dissent. The repressive state was *always* the winner when the movement gave vent to its passions and expressed itself in violent ways.

I believe this has a bearing on the Kent State killings.

About two months before the Guardsmen whirled around upon the students and unleashed their murderous fire on the Kent State campus, a group of young antiwar radicals from Students for a Democratic Society met secretly at a townhouse in Manhattan to assemble a bomb—a bomb with which they intended once and for all to transcend symbolism and draw actual blood. The bomb was powerful and was packed with nails. When it blew up accidentally in the basement of the townhouse, it instantly killed three SDSers of the pro-violent Weathermen, the faction which earlier had overseen the dismemberment of SDS on the grounds that SDS, as an organization committed to nonviolence, no longer had a mission to fulfill. SDS was in this sense the King of the antiwar movement, and the Weather-

men were its Black Panthers. Except that in this case, the death of SDS was the doing not of a paid outside assassin, but of its own children, children who dared in their colossal inexperience and arrogance to believe that they could adopt a politics of violence in their struggle with the repressive state and win.

Some victory. Besides killing three of their best people, the only thing the Weathermen achieved by the attempt to escalate the level of internal violence was to lend urgency and a perverse aura of legitimacy to the forces that were already only all too eager to abandon the least restraint and go for the movement's jugular.

I cannot prove that the shooting at Kent State on May 4 was in any direct way motivated by the Weatherman townhouse explosion of March 6. But as one who went through that period as an activists and was in a position to watch the transformation of American attitudes both toward the war and toward the antiwar movement, I know for a fact that the movement's apparent adoption of violent means of struggle made it incalculably easier for the National Guard to kill white students in Ohio—and for the State Police to kill black students in Mississippi ten days later—and get away with it.

I freely acknowledge the seeming paradox in this line of reasoning. On the one hand, the powers of state repression would never have permitted the victory of the nonviolent antiwar movement without at last adopting violent counter-measures against it. That is to say, nonviolent activists cannot expect their nonviolence to be a shield. On the other hand, I am saying that the abandonment of the posture of nonviolence and the adoption of physical intimidation as a mode of political struggle provided a kind of legitimacy to repression, a hunting license, which repression would otherwise have lacked, as in a certain respect the Weathermen provided a kind of license to the individual National Guardsmen who agreed and planned to shoot to kill unarmed students.

But there really is not contradiction here. Nothing the movement could have done in the 1960s would have kept the Nixon state from loading live ammunition. Rewind the tape and play through those days again with the Weatherman madness deleted, and *still* repression would fire its guns, just as repression had fired its guns in the Battle of People's Park in Berkeley in May, 1969—ten months before the explosion at the townhouse. But perhaps—just perhaps—the guns of repression could not have been fired so easily in the absence of what many would have regarded as direct provocation. And perhaps—again, just perhaps—once they were fired, the willingness to let the assassins get away with it might not have been so widespread within the general population.

This is of course totally speculative. There is no way in the world to prove that the beginnings of the May 4 shooting are perhaps in part to be found in the self-bombing of March 6. But I am at the same time convinced

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that there is a symbolic if not an actual connection between these two grim events, and that the lessons of Kent State cannot be fully perceived without a study of the lessons of the Weatherman townhouse. These events are permanently linked in the horrifying dramaturgy of that time, and they need to be studied in unity.



Kent State students take cover from national guard fire. Used by permission of Peter Davies.