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The Sixties, Kent State, and Historical Memory

Scott L. Bills

Writing in the mid-1980s, historian Bradley Smith observed that the formative years of the cold war had “proven unusually resistant to the smoothing arts of historical study.” The era had not taken on a “coherent and composed historical persona.” “The forties,” Smith noted, “have tended to remain more segmented, more controversial, and more intertwined with present events and current political controversies than most other recent historical epochs....”¹ Much the same can be and has been said about the 1960s: a time of great motion and passion, yet a time that seems curiously distant from the pliant present and oddly fragmented in terms of imagery and theme. The sixties often appear now as a disembodied decade, its movements led by charismatic, tragic figures whose visage and ideas sprawled across the landscape—brazen, daring, virtuous, mystical, and inspirational. But that was then. The political struggles launched remained unresolved, unfinished, unburnished by historical smoothing. An Ohio newspaper, the *Kent-Ravenna Record-Courier* told its readers in October 1969, “Breathe a sigh of relief, Americans: we’ve almost made it through the Frantic Sixties; let’s hope that the Seventies will be the calm after the storm, a decade when Americans get to know and trust each other again and join together to construct a more wonderful America.”² The sixties were already being widely portrayed as a series of cascading faces and crowds and decontextualized violence—alternately bizarre, funny, sad, inconvenient, stupid, and demonic—rather than as a momentous era of challenge and reform. Or was it so momentous?

The 1960s have eluded easy analysis because of the obvious complexity of both domestic and foreign affairs. Movements overlapped. Powerful forces jockeyed for attention. William Chafe has described the civil rights struggle as “the most significant social movement in all of American history.” Clayborne Carson focused upon the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) as the cutting edge of the black movement, forging its “militant identity” in the Freedom Rides of 1961, then moving leftward,

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schooling white activists in the tactics of nonviolent resistance.³ White students from the north and west saw a different America while registering voters in the South. Their vision of social change catapulted the nation's campuses into the center ring as the youth movement (New Left and otherwise) swelled after 1965. It was the experience of white radicals and countercultural advocates—not always in tandem—that produced the “long fine flash” imagery: the stellar conjunction of innocence, energy, virtue, and heroic idealism that heaved and collapsed, crashed and burned.⁴ The revolutionary fantasies of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) has been a prominent theme of recent books on the antiwar movement.

Yet another centerpiece of the decade was the Vietnam War, burdening the domestic economy, undermining the government's commitment to social reform, straining the social fabric—and comprising the quick “proof” of all claims of American malevolence while leering into every television-lit home. Stir in the potent mix of mainstream political personalities, the verve of New Frontierism, the inflated rhetoric of the Great Society, the deliberate pursuit of polarization—culminating with the return of the jowly, hard-bitten Richard Nixon, the shrewd cynic-king. There were strange days. Shorthand stereotypes have been our staple pop-culture handles on the convoluted reality of the 1960s. But the reign of the simplistic has not served us well. In 1987, former SDS activist James Miller wrote, “...As a mood of smug tranquility began to settle over the political culture of the United States in the early Eighties, I found myself increasingly uncomfortable with both the neoconservative scorn and the facile nostalgia that have typified popular attitudes about the Sixties.”⁵ Naming the problem, however, does not resolve it. How do we recollect complex, genuine history and commemorate meaningful events while preserving authenticity and continuity?⁶

The Kent State shootings of May 1970 were a bitter capstone to several years of heightened intolerance and confusion within the antiwar movement. The same years marked growing tension within American society overall—a nation in the moody grip of generational division, racial hatred, class hostility, and taut chauvinism—the refusal to let sleeping dogmas lie. Many themes and sub-themes coalesced at Kent State University in the spring of 1970. The students' May 4th rally, while their campus was under military occupation, showed again the courage, naivete, and bravado of young activists. The indiscriminate violence of National Guardsmen epitomized the majority's inchoate longing for a *resolution* of the youth movement's challenge to conservative mores and traditional political authority. The media coverage illustrated once again the abiding bias in favor of white victims of official violence—though student revolutionaries shared the blame with local officials and guard officers. It was eerily similar to the year before, May 1969, in Berkeley, during the struggle over People's Park—when activists stood throat-to-bayonet with ranks of the National Guard,

when young women walked up to guardsmen and put flowers in their rifle barrels, and when a white youth was killed by police shotgun fire and many others were wounded⁷.

Rather than the unfolding of high-level conspiracy, the Kent State murders were the bloody results of rampant fear and polarization, stoked by irresponsible politicians and lawmen. Yet, a get-tough policy was clearly on the agenda. For at least a full year in advance of May 1970, spokesmen for the Nixon administration had routinely and harshly disparaged antiwar demonstrators. Even then, their remarks merely reaffirmed J. Edgar Hoover's viewpoint of 1 November 1965, when he said, "Anti-Vietnam demonstrators in the U.S. represent a minority for the most part composed of halfway citizens who are neither morally, mentally nor emotionally mature. This is true whether the demonstrator be the college professor or the beatnik."⁸ It was a code of name-calling well rooted in previous red scares and witch-hunts—scoring "deviants," banishing protesters to society's periphery. The name-calling found new corrosive currency in the midst of chaos at home and floundering warfare abroad.

May 1970

The Kent State story has become reasonably familiar over the past twenty years, though gaps remain. It is important to remember that student unrest in northeastern Ohio was part of a nationwide movement, and that demonstrations in May 1970 were part of the most extensive country-wide student uprising in U.S. history. True, Kent State University was in the Midwest, tucked away from coastal war zones like Berkeley and New York City. It rested in the American heartland, near Akron and Cleveland, not far from Amish farmland southward in Hartville. Kent was a greenbelt town, nicknamed "Tree City." Its 900-acre campus bore the signs of steady, planned growth. By spring 1970, construction was underway on a twelve-story library. The inner core of the campus remained largely open, a broad Commons bordered by tennis courts, a wooded hillside, and a grassy knoll called Blanket Hill. Kent State's New Left activists bore the late-1960s stamp of confrontation and sharp rhetoric about the imminent revolution. The local SDS chapter led active protests in the spring of 1969 but had collapsed by the end of the year. As elsewhere, then, in early 1970, there was no broad-based antiwar group to coordinate leftist protest at Kent State.

Quickly, in the wake of President Nixon's dramatic announcement of April 30, that U.S. troops had launched an offensive into Cambodia, there was the spontaneous rebuke of street sit-ins, marches, and anti-government rallies. Mayor Leroy Satrom heard rumors that a radical guerrilla army was headed for Kent and asked for outside assistance. On Saturday night, May 2, the wood-frame campus ROTC building was set afire. Paranoia struck deep. Residents feared for their property and lives. The National Guard

arrived and took charge of the town as well as the university. The Guard's bivouac on the southern edge of the campus looked like vintage war footage. Such was one student's recollection of the soldiers' arrival: "They were getting out of their vehicles . . . and it looked more like a movie than it did real life. I had to keep reminding myself that everything that had happened was real."⁹

On Sunday, May 3, Governor James Rhodes flew in for a brief verbal assault. Holding a press conference at the local fire station, he likened protesters to Nazis and terrorists. "They're the worst type of people that we harbor in America," he said.¹⁰ Monday was a bright, sunny day. By noon on May 4, two thousand students had gathered on the Kent State Commons to rally against Nixon and Rhodes. The protesters' shouting drowned out a police bullhorn telling them to leave. Guardsmen formed a skirmish line and moved forward, up and over Blanket Hill. But tear-gas on the Commons was less effective than on cramped inner-city streets. Students retreated, then regrouped. After 25 minutes of frustrating and unsuccessful efforts to disperse the rally, back on the crest of Blanket Hill, a small group of guardsmen deliberately turned and fired into a shifting mass of students. Once again—as at Orangeburg or Berkeley—people were witness to the brutal impersonality of bullets plunging into a crowd. Four dead in Ohio. Nine wounded. "People were killed here, people who hadn't really done anything," said KSU vice-president (now president) Michael Schwartz ten years later. "They were killed by the authorities of their own government. That's an ugly phenomenon."¹¹ Students lay dying while guardsmen milled around and then trooped back to the Commons, uncertain whether more shooting would be necessary. Across the country, the student uprising flared. The vigils began. Crosses and coffins once again adorned protest marches. There was talk of renewed dedication to mainstream political involvement. A *New Republic* editorial asked: "So the question becomes: what are those of us to do who oppose the terrifying drift of American society, and who remain committed to tolerance, freedom of dissent and inquiry and personal liberty?"¹² In death's shadow, there were no easy answers.

Kent activist Ruth Gibson has recalled her initial sense that the antiwar movement was still building. "At the time, I didn't see Kent State as ending anything; I thought that it was raising things to a new level." At many hinterland colleges—out of touch with the dead-end, kamikaze mindset of SDS and SNCC elites—the movement did appear rejuvenated. *New York Times* correspondent Max Frankel wrote that the widespread domestic upheaval "sent tremors of fear through the White House that revolt and repression might be nearer than anyone had dared to imagine."¹³ But there was no "new level" of mass resistance. "Kent State" became yet another symbol of the final, echoing efficacy of gunfire when the state faced political

challenges in an atmosphere of social disintegration. But what kind of efficacy? People had only acted out their school-ingrained monomyth of American freedom. They were killed, willy nilly, with their eyes on the prize. They were killed in the midst of what had become a generic spectacle—student rebels massed against oncoming police or soldiers. The spectacle had become formulaic, it seemed, and thus less daunting—except amidst the raw, visceral polarization of May 1970. As in other towns and cities, where poll after poll revealed the public hatred of student radicals, the typical reaction was to exalt the Guard and curse the young. “They should have shot more of them”—this was the common refrain. Or, better yet, a convenient sports metaphor: “Guard—4, Radicals—0.” As one woman wrote from a nearby community, “I say all of the *students* out on the commons shouting obscenities, throwing rocks and generally harassing the Guard are guilty of murder.”¹⁴ Radical long-hairs deserved to die because they represented an evil menace—a dark, unknown, elemental force that prowled the land, called to life by the jungle rhythms of rock and roll, sustained by movie montages of atomic horror and mean-mouthed rebels, nurtured by ivory-tower permissiveness, twisted by the influence of psychedelic drugs, bent by the malice of hipster communists and black messiahs. It was a hard rain.

“Kent State” was the guttural puncturing of myths—a thirteen-second smoking gun that cleared away the wispy remnants of millenarian dreams. There would be no new morning, no cultural revolution on the wings of electric blue, no new world rising up from the Goodwill Stores of the old. There were instead the same, unyielding realities combined with a growing sense of despair that marshalling the forces would no longer avail the peacemakers. Despite the freshly minted martyrs, there arose little hope that their sacrifice could achieve any positive political end. The collective judgment of ex-activists, journalists, government officials, and historians has been remarkably consistent: the deaths at Kent State marked the end of the era of mass youth protest, the end of widely held aspirations for a rapid, substantive restructuring of society. Referring to the shootings as the “death knell for the Movement,” James Miller asserted, “The bullets were real. The days of revolutionary fantasy were over.” Spring 1970, he wrote, was the last season of protest. Afterward, the New Left and the antiwar movement plummeted “into cultural oblivion as if it had been some kind of political Hula-Hoop.”¹⁵ The harshest version of this assessment came from Ohio guardsman Robert Gabriel in a 1982 interview: “I suppose I thought that the shootings were a good thing, because they stopped everything right there. Everything cooled down after that. That took the hot air out of the radical stuff in the nation.”¹⁶

Remembering “Kent State”

It would be simpler sometimes if history were a series of well-sorted benchmarks, precise lines delimiting eras—the rise and fall of civilizations, movements, and political zones punctuated by specific, easily identifiable events. But real life is typically more complex and ambiguous than we would prefer. Still, some events push themselves to the fore as markers, milestones, and powerful symbols, redolent of causes won and lost. And themes pile upon each other—as do ironies. Richard Nixon liked to say in early 1969 that he knew young America, that college and high-school students were perhaps more assertive than his own generation had been but nonetheless good hearted and well-intentioned. Thus, he remarked to one student audience: “The important thing for a young person to remember is not whether you win or lose, but whether you play the game. Don’t stand aside. Don’t be up in the bleachers when you can be down on the field. Remember that the greatness of your life is determined by the extent to which you participate in the great events of your time.”¹⁷ Undoubtedly, the “great event” of the latter 1960s was the Vietnam War, its destructive affect upon domestic reform efforts (such as civil rights), and the youth-spearheaded movement to end it. The fields of action were the streets of America. As we look back, it is important to remember who played the game and who won and lost. Threads intersected. Idealism suffered gridlock. The civil rights movement fragmented after heroic gains. Resistance abroad and opposition at home blunted the sharp, aggressive edge of the “*Pax Americana Technocratica*.”¹⁸ But the guns remained locked and loaded against dissent which became too insistent upon upsetting the status quo. Even so, the “imperial way of life”¹⁹ was eroding, and the unreeling of the past two decades has revealed not only the structural weaknesses of American power but also the return of multi-polarity in international affairs. The failure of U.S. intervention in Vietnam, which played a major role in reorienting American foreign policy, has yet to find an accepted or acceptable analysis among our political leadership.²⁰ As a polity, we still must confront what Michael Frisch has called “a present that seems to float in time—unencumbered, unconstrained, and uninstructed by any active sense of how it came to be.”²¹ Historical events do not come unbundled. Students killed on their campus, civil rights workers killed along byways of the rural South, Americans and Vietnamese soldiers killed on rain-soaked battlefields—all of them must be pulled together into one story that explains and describes the web of historical forces that spawned the 1960s and beyond.

Twenty years later, what have we learned from “Kent State”? The deaths of four students on May 4, 1970, were more than the loss of innocence, less than the rupture of the fabric of American society. Remembering “Kent State” breaks the spell of the seamless present and calls to mind a great effervescence of energy and hope. The Kent State shootings clearly will not

be forgotten: they comprise an obligatory referent in every textbook commentary on the Vietnam War. Yet, such events can be sanitized by their ritualistic incantation. We likely do not want to recapture in all its glittering frenzy the intense polarization of Chicago in 1968, Berkeley in 1969, or Kent in 1970. But if we forget the vitality, brutality, and volatility of the times, events and ideas lose their meaning. The present is uncoupled from the past. Remembering “Kent State” must be part of recreating an authentic history of the 1960s and linking it with broad patterns of challenge and change. From the Vietnam War we have apparently learned little. We have chosen to commemorate not the conflict itself but rather the courage of American soldiers who fought in the war. The 1980s marked a wider recognition of Vietnam veterans’ heroism and struggle. Perhaps the 1990s will give us cause to remember the courage of those who led the way in turning the nation against an imperial war—those who realized the terrible cost it imposed upon the political and economic life of the country, those who saw the scars at home and the wounds inflicted overseas, and those who believed that the American system, whatever its flaws, protected them from the awful retribution of authoritarian regimes. Remembering “Kent State” is one step toward remembering a past that is complex and whole, one step toward reconstructing a present that is meaningful.

Notes

- ¹ Bradley F. Smith, *The War's Long Shadow: The Second World War and Its Aftermath; China, Russia, Britain, and America* (New York: Simon and Schuster) 1986: 281.
- ² *Kent-Ravenna Record-Courier*, 11 October 1969, editorial: 2.
- ³ William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press) 1986: 146; Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press) 1981: 4, 32, 53.
- ⁴ The phrase is from Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, 1971 (New York: Warner Books) 1982: 67.
- ⁵ James Miller, *“Democracy is in the Streets”: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago*, 1987 (New York: Touchstone) 1988: 17.
- ⁶ This is a question I first explored in my introductory essay, “The Past in the Present,” *Kent State/May 4: Echoes Through a Decade* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press) 1982. An updated paperback edition appeared in 1988 and is the source used for subsequent references. My discussion here is influenced by Todd Gitlin’s assertion that it was the decontextualization of 1960s-era events that deprived them of their historical personae; *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making & Unmaking of the New Left* (Berkeley: University of California Press) 1980: 193, 235-36.
- ⁷ See Todd Gitlin’s account in *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books) 1987: 353-61. James Rector, age 26, was the young man killed. Gitlin noted, “For those who paid attention to Berkeley, the sense of white exemption died there, a full year before Kent State” (p. 361). A similar point was made by Milton Viorst, *Fire in the Streets: America in the 1960s*, 1979 (New York: Touchstone) 1981: 527.
- ⁸ Quoted in Thomas Powers, *Vietnam: The War at Home; Vietnam and the American People 1964-1968*, 1973 (Boston: G. K. Hall) 1984: 89.

- ⁹ Interview with Ruth Gibson, *Kent State/May 4*: 87.
- ¹⁰ Transcript, Rhodes press conference, 3 May 1970, Box 63, May 4th Collection, Kent State University Archives.
- ¹¹ Interview with Michael Schwartz, *Kent State/May 4*: 215.
- ¹² Editorial, *New Republic* (30 May 1970): 11.
- ¹³ Gibson interview, *Kent State/May 4*: 88; Max Frankel, "Nixon: He Faces a Divided, Anguished Nation," *New York Times*, 10 May 1970: sec. 4.
- ¹⁴ Olex to Robert White, KSU president, 8 May 1970, emphasis in original, Box 40, May 4th Collection, Kent State University Archives.
- ¹⁵ Miller, "Democracy is in the Streets": 310-11. See also Kirkpatrick Sale, *SDS*, 1973 (New York: Vintage Books) 1974): 641; Viorst, *Fire in the Streets*: 543; Gitlin, *The Sixties*: 414; Bettina Aptheker, "In Memoriam," *Left Review* 4 (Spring 1980): 3-4; Bob Howard, "The Fourth of May, 1970: An Overview," *Left Review* 4 (Spring 1980): 13-14; and John Logue, "Official Violence," in *Kent State/May 4*: 143-49. Gitlin, however, rejects as too simplistic the notion that the movement was snuffed out by official violence. Also important, he believes, was the internal collapse of the New Left: "...An exhausted movement had lost its moral edge, and with it the capacity to console and rally its afflicted" (*The Sixties*: 415). Aptheker argued that it was the female "innocence" of Allison Krause and Sandra Scheuer that "triggered the mass revulsion to the killings" ("In Memoriam": 4). On the fading of 1960s from popular cultural memory, see also Michael Klein, "Scenes from the politics and culture of the Movement in the beginning and the end," in *Vietnam and the Antiwar Movement: An International Perspective*, ed. John Dumbrell (Aldershot, England: Gower Publishing Company) 1989: 84.
- ¹⁶ Interview with Robert Gabriel, *Kent State/May 4*: 122.
- ¹⁷ "Remarks to Participants in the 1969 Senate Youth Program," 7 February 1969, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*, Richard Nixon, 1969 (Washington: Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Service) 1971: 82-83.
- ¹⁸ The term is from James C. Thompson, Jr., "How Could Vietnam Happen? An Autopsy," *Atlantic Monthly*, April 1968: 53. For assessments of the impact of the antiwar movement, see Charles DeBenedetti, *The Peace Reform in American History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press) 1980): xvi, 165, 174; Powers, *Vietnam: The War at Home*: xii, 318. Powers, a journalist, wrote, "The war was one of those things that come along once in a generation and call entire societies into question, forcing people to choose between irreconcilables" (141).
- ¹⁹ The phrase is from William A. Williams, *Empire As a Way of Life: An Essay on the Causes and Character of America's Present Predicament Along with a Few Thoughts About an Alternative* (New York: Oxford University Press) 1980. The author's main themes concern, first, the widespread acceptance of the imperial way as a norm in twentieth-century America, and, second, the costs paid for such a popular mindset and expansionist foreign policy—not only in terms of the dead and wounded in wars abroad and social tension at home, but also "in the loss of our vitality as citizens. We have increasingly ceased to participate in the process of self-government" (p. 13).
- ²⁰ See, for instance, the discussion by David Fromkin and James Chace, "What Are the Lessons of Vietnam?" *Foreign Affairs* 63 (Spring 1985): 722-46.
- ²¹ Michael Frisch, "The Memory of History," *Radical History Review* 25 (1981): 12.