

The day the war came home

[War](#), [Vietnam War](#)



May 4th, 1970 played host to monstrous societal anarchy. Following demonstrations and revolting in resistance to the Vietnam War, the Ohio National Guard was sent to Kent State University to preserve peace. However, on this day, the National Guard stationed at Kent State open fired into a swarm of students. These fatal shots wounded nine, killed four and left a nation torn. American lives had been destroyed on American soil by American citizens and the consequences would have immense effects on the nation, provoking a new phase in American history. The United States became enveloped by the events of Kent State and the country became split, bringing a clear divide to a society at war. The terror of May 4th set in motion a hurricane of political and social uproar, storming its way from the town of Kent to Washington, D. C and all areas along its path. In this essay I will discuss the events leading up to the Kent State Shootings, the incident as it unfolded and its subsequent impact on America's legacy.

The events of the Vietnam War reigned over the United States. The war was fought between North Vietnam and South Vietnam over the way a unified, post-war Vietnam should be governed. North Vietnam sought a nation ruled by communism while South Vietnam favoured the approach of Western nations. The threat of communism led America to enter the war under Truman's policy of containment, on the south's side in 1954. In the beginning, many accepted and respected America's involvement, however, as their role began to intensify, the nation grew diverged. Opposition to the war strengthened in mid-1960 and became a social movement in retaliation. By Late 1967, the number of American troops in Vietnam neared 500, 000, with a staggering 15, 000 killed and 100, 000 wounded. Richard Nixon's

election in 1968 brought renewed hope to America as he vowed to end the war. However, on May 18th, 1969, American forces bombed North Vietnamese camps in neutral Cambodia. Referred to as Operation Menu, the bombings were initially a secret from Congress, high-ranking military officials and American people. These fatal bombings killed thousands of innocents and minimally aided the war, only blazing an outpour of riots against the war from those at home. The Vietnamese war were at the centre point of social, political and cultural controversy. Riots took place nationwide in opposition to the war and were particularly driven by young activists. Living-room war played a role in protests as television depicted brutal scenes of warfare that the government couldn't deny. Rallies were a common trend in universities with demonstrators compellingly voicing their right to protest. Youths were passionate about the subject and felt it was unjust that any male as young as 18 could be drafted, whereas the voting age was 21. The fact that these young men, who were sent to fight a war that was not their own, had not been granted a say in those in authority deeply resonated with students. Young Americans were granted the perfect climate for a revolt. A group known as the Students for a Democratic Society organised rallies, marches, sit-ins and teach-ins. Most prominent of which was their " Ten Days of Resistance" which climaxed in the US' largest student strike on April 26th, 1968. This movement invaded its way into a multitudinous of universities cross-country, including Kent State. University officials began to employ measures to combat this social chaos as University President Robert White was suspicious of SDS infiltration into campus grounds. As their rebellious confidence grew so too did their violence which was channelled into the

subgroup, ' Weathermen'. This group brought a more revolutionary sting, planning and executing 14 bombings against the government. One of these bombings accidentally caused the death of three weathermen, one of whom was Terry Robbins, a prominent figure in Kent rally organisations. The fatalities of those calling for peace triggered bitter outrage and released waves of pent-up unrest amongst like-minded protestors. What ensued was a mass portrayal of resentment felt by Kent State University pupils, who felt they had no voice to challenge a deceitful government. The state descended into mayhem as streets bared the brunt of student rage. Bonfires were lit, civilian and police cars were damaged and store windows were smashed and looted. Kent State represented a generation oppressed by the war who wouldn't rest until they secured peace, this perseverance would later result in ineffable tyranny.

April 30th marked the beginning of a four-day crusade of mutiny that would forever haunt America. The weekend became enshrouded by President Nixon's announcement that the " Cambodian Incursion" had been initiated by the US. This was met by an outpour of indignation, particularly at Kent. May Day 1970 held Kent's opening demonstration of the weekend with over 500 students attending. A group of students buried the Constitution in protest of US troops being sent into Cambodia without a declaration of war by Congress and as a sign that this outright betrayed American values. A protest for the following Monday, May 4th, was called. As darkness descended on the streets of Kent so too did opponents to the war. Students emerged from bars empowered and expelled this passion through chants, bonfires, store attacks and traffic blockades. Police arrival intensified the

situation as some of the 120 people crowded began verbally and physically assaulting them with glass bottles. The entire Kent force and an Ohio National Guard representative began scattering the crowd and curfew was placed on bars. The €5000 of damages was combated by police teargas, sticks and arrests, further emblazing the youths. Kent woke to vandalised streets and an air of fear was evocatively present, foreshadowing the night's additional revolts. Despite curfew, students gathered in the evening for chanting and speeches and the crowd accumulated to 2, 000 at the wooden ROTC building, a WW2 barracks that represented everything they loathed. Vandalism and stones escalated to the building's burning, luring police and media attention. Demonstrators were determined to destroy a symbol of the war and so rallied together to prevent firemen extinguishing the flames. Spectators were appalled by such lawlessness and some requested the firing of arms. Nonetheless, the building disintegrated to dust paving the way for civil conflict.

The violence of the two previous nights and mounting aggression prompted Kent Mayor Leroy Santrom to request aid from Governor James Rhodes, who appointed the Ohio National Guard to patrol Kent streets. This only further riled protestors who viewed the arrival of nearly 1, 000 armed guards as a symbol of what they despised. The National Guard composed a formidable force of men experienced both abroad and at home. Despite this, their weapons and tanks were not viewed as hostile by students, but rather antagonised by the cause they defended. A figure widely disliked was Rhodes, who favoured the Vietnamese efforts and wished to subvert protestors, and this hatred appeared neutral as he dubbed the students " the

worst type of people that we harbour in America". In an effort to eradicate protests and garner electoral support, the governor visited Kent State University and announced plans to "employ every weapon possible" in opposition to demonstrations. This was accompanied by a blanket ban on protests, including the planned May 4th rally. Naturally, students were outraged by the denial of the right to voice their opinion and the night once again became submerged by student violence and the guard's retaliation. Student perseverance carried them into the early hours of Monday May 4th, a day which would later be known as "one of America's most horrific campus tragedies".

Kent State University was alight with burning passion at noon of May 4th. Despite the ban on all campus riots, sheer curiosity and intense belief rocketed attendance to 2,000 at the Commons. With the ringing of the Victory Bell, the area became encapsulated by chants and speeches ridiculing the war. Under control of Governor Rhodes, the National Guard armed their M-1 rifles and .45 pistols, as opposed to traditionally displaying it, and began attempting to disperse the crowd. As expected, protestors were not willing to have their freedom of speech undermined and so both parties faced a standoff. Troop's tear gas was thrown back accompanied by rocks, with wind and bandanas hindering the guard's efforts.

The guard began to push forward up Blanket Hill leading to a stalemate with protestors positioned in the parking lot against troops on the football field. Chaos ran rampant on the campus as chants of get off our campus filled the air as well as rocks being propelled at troops, leading them to break

formation to fire canisters. Seemingly bringing a cease to the anarchy, the guard retreated up Blanket Hill which was met by an outcry of triumph by students. However, at the top of the hill the guards towered over the protestors and suddenly an eruption of gun shots and screams plagued the air. The area became submerged in turmoil as many thought the bullets were canisters or rubber. The gushing of blood answered the calls of protestors to “bring the war home” but in a most unimaginable and far too literal sense.

Chaos flooded the campus, with screams of disbelief filling the air. Naturally, students were enraged by the shootings and regrouped at the Commons, while the guard remained at the burnt ROTC building. General Robert Canterbury wanted to clear the area and ordered his troops to disperse remaining protestors. Enraged with passion, the students were determined to stand their ground, however Kent State professor Glenn Frank convinced them to move as the students realised the imminent danger present. The war had split America and the atrocities committed further tore the nation. Public opinion led to serious divisions within Kent State, permeating its way into the lives of families and friends. Many resonated with the supporters, however, some people held the students responsible. One woman in particular was frank in her interpretation of the shootings saying “I’m sorry they didn’t kill more”.

In total, four students lost their lives at the hands of the guard, none of which were part of the protest but only innocent passer-by’s. Jeffery Glenn Miller, whose photographed corpse later won the Pulitzer Prize, was 81m

away from the guard and had steered clear of the weekend's rebellious demonstrations. Allison B. Krause was casually walking with her boyfriend to class when she was struck down 105m away. William Knox Schroeder was merely spectating out of curiosity from a distance of 116m when he was shot and killed. Sandra Lee Scheuer was on her way to a speech-therapy class, when like her fellow victims, was murdered despite posing no threat. In addition to this, nine students were injured, most severely of which was Dean R. Kahler, who was permanently paralyzed from the chest down. As the tragedy garnered worldwide attention, it triggered an eruption of animosity and bitterness targeted at both protestors and the government.

The events of May 4th 1970 provoked a cascade of events that would continue to shock the world to this day, nearly 50 years later. The reality of students being killed on campus, a place of apparent solace, evoked comradery nation-wide across many universities. Over 13, 000 demonstrations took place in retaliation to Kent, notably of which at Jackson State University in Mississippi where a further two casualties occurred. Such protests led to America's largest student strike with over 500 colleges being forced to close. Remorse and poignancy riddled the nation, however some strongly opposed Kent protestors. One resident captured the opinion of those against them, claiming " You can't really help but kind of think they've been asking for it and finally got it". The contrasting opinions and outpouring of peaceful and violent protests that followed the Kent State shootings confirmed what many had feared, the Vietnam War had come home. The social revolutions depicted in response to the massacre highlights Dr.

Benjamin Spock's sentiment, that the Kent State shootings " may do more to end the war in Vietnam than all the rest of us have been able to do".

Following the shootings, both those defending the protestors and the guard clashed in a series of legal investigations. In September 1970, twenty-four students and one faculty member, AKA the " Kent 25", were accused of burning the ROTC building. Five trials took place in which one was charged, with two others pleading guilty. December 1971 later brought a cease to all charges against the remaining twenty due to a lack of evidence. Two civil trials, a criminal trial, a presidential commission and a state grand jury occurred against the National Guard. Due to an abundance of differing accounts, it was difficult to build a case against the guard, thus they did not present it. 8 of the guardsmen were accused of violating student's civil rights, however, none were charged and each was acquitted. This was followed by the civil trial of 1975, in which 9-3 jurors voted against the charges of the guard. Cases were difficult to execute as under an Ohio National Guard regulation, you are permitted to fire if you feel you're live is endangered. The trial against Governor Rhodes, the President of Kent State, and the National Guardsmen by the victim's families ended the legal negotiations with a settlement of \$675, 000 to the wounded students and victim's parents. A statement was issued by the National Guardsmen, acting as a notation of regret not an apology of malpractice. In the end, protestors drew to the conclusion that it was not the fault of the guardsmen but instead General Rhodes and General Del Corso, who called the orders and inflicted pressure on officers.

As we near the tragedy's 50th anniversary a multitudinous of unanswered questions still hover over Kent State University, main of which questioning the guard's motives the government bodies who issued orders and the student's violence. The National Guard took the stance that they fired under their right to shoot if in danger, despite none warranting medical attention. However, it is suspected that these shots acted as an attempt to permanently silence the protests. Alan Canfora, a protestor wounded, came forth in 2007 in possession of an audio tape which hears the command "Right here, set, point, fire". It was argued that the traditional command of "commence firing" would have been used and a lack of context dismissed this. General Robert Canterbury held the opinion that each man was entitled to protect his life and that no orders were issued. The element of threat is questionable as the students were unarmed, besides stones, against the ammunition of the guardsmen. Witnesses claim the guard turned and fired simultaneously but this is counter argued by the guard's allegations that a shot triggered their instincts. This is supported by photographer Terry Normal allegedly being in possession of a gun with used ammunition. An uncounted bullet of a type different to the guards was also recovered. However once again, conflicting stories and a lack of evidence subverts these claims.

Despite a magnitude of resources surrounding the shootings, the contradictory complexity of them means that we will unlikely ever learn the truth. The Kent State shootings of May 4th, 1970 still hold a significant part in America's legacy. Each victim has their own memorial where they fell and an annual candle lit vigil ensures their memory lives on. Questions still

persist on the use of weaponry that unleashed such a lethal fate on the students, as the nation failed them despite their constitutional rights. On a wider scale, the shootings did little to prevent further brutalities. In today's climate, school shootings have reached unprecedented levels, not under government orders but also without their serious interference. Wars are continued to be fought against foreign powers and more appear on the horizon. With law enforcement troops being cautioned that " we don't want another Kent State", it begs the question if such a betrayal of patriotic values could occur today. Unfortunately, the answer is yes. However, the Kent State shootings are undeniably a pivotal time in history, serving as a symbol of the importance of voicing your opinion, the danger that accompanies it and most of all, the camaraderie it instills that triumphs hate.