

The shootings at kent state university history essay



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On Thursday, April 30, 1970, President Nixon announced the invasion of Cambodia. This announcement came after the administration boasted an effort to reduce troops in Vietnam and end the war quicker than expected. (Nixon also ran on a campaign of “ peace.”) This announcement triggered many protests on many of the nation’s campuses. It was the small Ohio campus at Kent State University that would trigger a domino-effect chain of historical events.

On Friday, May 1, students at Kent State organized a demonstration to protest the invasion of Cambodia. The demonstrators buried a copy of the US Constitution as a message that it had died. When the protest was over, the group called for a second meeting for noon on Monday, May 4. That evening, many of the protestors and some just along for the ride, went into the city of Kent, Ohio, and caused a ruckus by breaking store windows and causing general mayhem. Kent police met and dispersed the growing crowd and ordered that they return home or to campus.

Watching the event in town, the Kent city mayor, acting on nothing more than unsubstantiated rumor, he declared a state of emergency and called the governor, James A. Rhodes, in Columbus for help. The governor immediately dispatched a group of National Guardsmen to Kent. The bars were ordered to be closed, and many of the “ rioters” were sent out of town by tear gas (“ Kent state shootings,” 2010).

On Saturday, May 2, many students offered to help clean-up the mess that was downtown Kent caused the night before. Many of the radical rumors were still flying around, and at this point, most townspeople and city officials

believed them. In fear of damage to Kent State, the university obtained an injunction prohibiting damage to buildings on campus.

Shortly after 8: 00 p. m. on Saturday, over one thousand protestors surrounded the barracks housing the Army Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) on campus, and a few managed to set the building on fire. The Fire Department responded, but they soon left the scene after hoses were punctured and cut open, unable to extinguish the fire. Since the National Guard had just made it in, they cleared the campus, forcing students and non-students into dormitories, where many spent the night (" Kent state shootings," 2005).

On Sunday, May 3, the campus was " calm" and crawling with National Guardsmen (Caputo, 2005). Rumors of delinquency were still flying around, and many people got involved at this point, including Governor Rhodes. Rhodes appeared on campus and promised to use " every force possible" to maintain order. Rhodes accused the protesters of being " worse than brownshirts," and vowed to keep the Guard in Kent " until we get rid of them" (" Kent state shootings," 2010).

Later Sunday evening, a crowd gathered on the commons at the Victory Bell. Many of the gatherers were unaware of the state of emergency declared in the area, and they failed to disband. By 9: 00 p. m., the Ohio Riot Act was again read to them by the National Guardsmen, and they were bombed with tear gas when they still did not leave the area. Moving away, but together, the crowd reassembled in town and blocked traffic. They believed that officials would speak to them, but no one arrived. The crowd became very

hostile at this point, and by 11: 00 p. m., the Riot Act was read again, tear gas was used again and a number of people, including both demonstrators and Guardsmen, were injured in the confusion.

Some argue that the events on Sunday night between the Guardsmen and demonstrators is what truly “ broke the camel’s back,” and led to the slaughter on Monday afternoon (Caputo, 2005). Everyone involved was bitter, angry, resentful, and ready to fight. The crowd of demonstrators promised to assemble again, even unlawfully, at noon on the next day.

By noon on May 4, two thousand people had gathered in the commons area on the Kent State campus. Many knew that the rally had been banned, but it is still unclear if it was widely known (Caputo, 2005). Others, especially commuting students, did not know. When told by Guardsmen to leave, they were met with yelling, chanting and thrown rocks.

Shortly after noon on that fateful Monday, tear gas canisters were again fired. Because it was an especially windy day, the gas had little effect. The Guardsmen came towards the demonstrators with bayonets insisting they retreat off of the commons area. The group soon reached the crest of the hill by Taylor Hall, and with the fixed bayonets, the Guardsmen managed to move the demonstrators even further to a nearby athletic practice field. Once the group reached the practice field, the Guardsmen realized that they made a poor decision because the field was sectioned on three sides. The crowd grew even more angry and again threw rocks and verbal threats (“ Kent state shootings,” 2010).

Knowing that the crowd had nowhere to go, the Guardsmen started back up Blanket Hill away from the crowd. Some of the demonstrators followed them as close as 20 yards, but most were between 60 and 75 yards behind the Guardsmen. Near the crest of the hill, 28 Guardsmen turned, and in an apparent fighting formation, fired between 61 and 67 shots in 13 seconds toward the parking lot (Caputo, 2005). Six Guardsmen were held accountable, but their names were never released to the general public. It has never been determined if the order to shoot was called or if the Guardsmen just acted out of anger (Knepper, 2003).

Four people died, and nine more were wounded in the attack. The closest casualty was 20 yards and the farthest was almost 250 yards away. It is hard to believe that even at 20 yards away someone could be causing enough of a ruckus to justify being murdered. All of the 13 people were students at Kent State University. The four students who were killed were Jeffrey Miller, Allison Krause, William Schroeder and Sandra Scheuer. The nine wounded students were Joseph Lewis, John Cleary, Thomas Grace, Alan Canfora, Dean Kahler, Douglas Wrentmore, James Russell, Robert Stamps, and Donald MacKenzie. Kahler was permanently paralyzed from his chest down from his injury ("Kent state shootings," 2005). Tragically, many of the victims were simply just walking to class and not involved in the protest.

Within minutes after the massacre, rage overtook the remaining students as they sought aid for their slain and injured classmates. A group of several hundred demonstrators gathered on a slope nearby, and the Guardsmen ordered them to move. In an almost miraculous manner, several faculty members were able to convince the group to disband. It is this act of bravery <https://assignbuster.com/the-shootings-at-kent-state-university-history-essay/>

by the Kent State faculty that likely saved even more lives on campus that day (Caputo, 2005). The university closed shortly after the massacre, and classes did not again resume until the summer.

As many were left wondering why the massacre happened and how such an unheard of event could happen on US soil, several key events took place immediately following the massacre. On July 23, for example, information is leaked to the local newspaper highlighting the fact that the Defense Department urged the Portage County prosecutor to seek penalty on the six Guardsmen that were indicated in the massacre. On July 31, Attorney General John Mitchell stated that both students and Guardsmen violated federal laws and hints that a federal grand jury may be convened " if Ohio authorities do not act." By August 3, Governor Rhodes orders that a " special" state grand jury be empanelled (Caputo, 2005).

In a shocking decision on October 16, the " special" state grand jury exonerated the six Guardsmen, but indicts 25 individuals, mostly students, for a variety of offenses that occurred on campus before the shootings. The country saw this decision as a governmental ploy to shift blame to the students instead of officials in the military (Caputo, 2005). By late October, demands for a federal grand jury grow after it is revealed that the " special" state grand jury ignored key evidence and that one of the " special" prosecutors told a newsman he felt the Guardsmen should have " shot more students" (" Kent state shootings," 2010). Ultimately, no one was legally held accountable for the massacre, and that is a very sore subject among the public to this very day.

The only good that came out of the massacre were several significant events that happened in the years after. The largest student strike occurred immediately following May 4, with over 100 campuses closing throughout the US. Over 175, 000 faculty members joined in on the strikes, and over 30 ROTC buildings were burnt to the ground by students in the weeks following (Caputo, 2005). Many GI's deserted their posts after the massacre, and some refused to invade Cambodia. A few months later, Congress passed the War Powers Act which prevented any president from invading a country without Congressional approval. Congress also rescinded the Gulf of Tonkin Act which had authorized US forces in Southeast Asia (Caputo, 2005).

After the massacre, President Nixon was pushed to the point of physical and emotional collapse, and many argue the massacre sparked the administrations paranoia which would mark the rest of Nixon's reign. Nixon stated (many feel untruly) that the days following the massacre were some of the darkest of his presidency (Caputo, 2005). Much to the relief of many Americans, he finally withdrew his US military invasion of Cambodia within two months of the massacre. The historical impact of Kent State and the massacre will remain a permanent reminder of the tragic tensions of the Vietnam War.