

Thirty that are going  
on today.” kent  
graduate



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Thirty Years Later- Kent State May 4, 2000 Thirty years later, just after noon, the Victory Bell again rings through the green grass of Kent State University's Commons. The bell rings twenty-seven times; one toll for each of the four students killed and nine wounded by the Ohio National Guard May 4, 1970, and 14 times in solidarity for the two students murdered and twelve wounded by Mississippi Highway Patrol at Jackson State University May 15, 1970. Kent State University officials stopped holding Commemoration ceremonies in 1975, but dedicated students have kept the ideals represented by the Kent State shootings alive.

For the past twenty-five years, the students of the May 4th Task Force have organized the annual May 4th Commemoration ceremonies, bringing such speakers as Jane Fonda, William Kuntzler, Dr. Hellen Caldicot and performers including Peter, Paul and Mary, Joan Baez and Crosby, Stills and Nash. Co-chair of the May 4th Task Force from 1995-98, and still considered the backbone of the organization by many students, Kent State senior Wendy Semon believes that continued student activism is the true remembrance of May 4, 1970.

"The living legacy of those four students is activism," Semon states. "The only appropriate way students of today can keep that legacy alive is to promote activism and educate others." This year, the Task Force brought some of America's most prominent leaders of social and political change to embody all facets of the current movement.

These speakers include; the American Indian Movement's Vernon Bellecourt, environmental and social justice advocate Julia Butterfly Hill, Philadelphia's

MOVE member Ramona Africa, Global Exchange’s Julliette Beck, political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal and world-renowned political theorist Noam Chomsky. Kent State junior Jeff Ritter, and current co-chair of the May 4th Task Force feels that this year’s Commemoration reflects the unification of the current national movement. “ So many movements are represented here today, the American Indian Movement, the environmental movement, anti-globalization, the MOVE organization. It’s a real symbol of solidarity, of all the things that are going on today.” Kent graduate student Kabir Syed, a ten-year member of the May 4th Task Force sees the Commemoration as a place for political activists to gather and connect with one another. “ The wide variety of issues speaks to the growth of the social-political movement which exists in the U. S.

We see a range, and yet, an integration of ideology here today. Though there are differences between us, we are growing aware that these differences need not separate us from accomplishing our tasks.” Around three thousand current college students, anti-Vietnam War veterans, and activists from as far away as Quebec and Seattle observe a moment of silence as the last hollow brass toll rings across campus. These people have gathered today at Kent State not only to remember the murders of 1970, but to celebrate America’s long tradition of protest and resistance. Chic Canfora, a survivor of the May 4, 1970 shootings, high school teacher, and longtime community activist explains, “ Today we assemble and pay tribute to four friends who fell here thirty years ago, but let us also pay tribute today to the countless students who have since then, in the past thirty years, followed in their steps.

May 4th is not just about tragedy. We assemble here each year not only to remember our fallen friends, but to resurrect the issues and ideals for which they died. The most important of which, for all of us, for every American citizen, is freedom of speech." History of the May 4 Shootings On April 30, 1970, President Richard Nixon announced to the nation that he was expanding the Vietnam War into neighboring Cambodia.

Immediately, college campuses across America rose in protest. At Kent State, a mid-size public Ohio college, Nixon's announcement began four days of protest, which cumulated in the wounding of nine students and the murders of Allison Krause, Jeff Miller, Bill Schroder, and Sandra Scheuer by thirteen members of the Ohio National Guard. To this day, heated controversy and questions still surround the events at Kent State April 30- May 4, 1970.

Perhaps the most debated and controversial event of these days is the burning of Kent State's Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) building the evening of May 2, 1970. In response to the two previous days of demonstrations, on Saturday May 2, 1970, Kent Mayor Leroy Satrom declared that Kent was in a state of Civil Emergency. The sale of alcohol, firearms, ammunition and gasoline was prohibited and a citywide curfew was established for 8: 00 p.

m. Although the curfew was effect in the city, Kent State's curfew was not until 1: 00 a. m, which forced students to gather on campus, or risk arrest. At 8: 00 p. m., around 1500 students protesting what they saw was the actualization of marshal law, gathered at the university's Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) building. Activist Alan Canfora, one of the students

shot on May 4, and a participant in the ROTC demonstration explains, “ Some of the students there did try to light the building on fire.

It was like the Three Stooges trying to burn the ROTC building; throwing matches through the windows. Then the fire trucks showed up with the Sheriffs, State Troopers, campus police and Kent police, and thoroughly doused out the few curtains that did catch fire. Then they started taking flash pictures of us and then they started using tear gas, so we left.

When we left, that fire was completely out.”” At that point,” Canfora continues, “ the group decided to head towards town to gather more people. When we did come back about an hour later, the building had burned to the ground. It is important to understand that the building burned while it was under control of the authorities. Today, it remains one of the biggest mysteries of Kent State because that was the excuse to bring in the National Guard” (personal interview with the author, April 15, 2000). The October 16, 1970 Report of the Special Grand Jury under Portage County Common Pleas Judge Edwin W. Jones concluded, “ It is obvious that the burning of the ROTC building could have been prevented with the manpower then available.

Six years later, Senator Frank Church and his Senate investigation committee report was issued, exposing years of CIA, FBI, state and local sabotage of America’s social and political movements. (This was the report that exposed the COINTELPRO and HOUSTON programs). Though it says little about Kent State, the FBI admits that only five days later, on May 7, 1970, they deliberately lit an ROTC building on fire in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. In FBI

memos obtained under the Freedom of Information Act concerning Kent State, scores of crucial information remain missing.

Not only are entire pages blacked-out concerning the fire, but at least six pages of the ROTC fire reports are listed as “ deleted”(author s personal investigation). As the ROTC building smoldered, Kent Mayor Satrom called in the Ohio National Guard, who were still on duty in nearby Akron for a Teamsters strike. Between the time the Guard was pulled out of Akron and arrived in Kent at 10: 00 p. m., they had replaced their rubber bullets with live ammunition. On Sunday May 3, 1970, Ohio Governor James Rhodes held a press conference in downtown Kent about the unrest at Kent State. “ These protesters,” Rhodes declared while pounding a table top with his fist, “ are the worst type of people we harbor in America, worse than the brown shirts and the communist element.

.. We’re going to use every force of law that we have under our authority..

. We are going to employ every weapon possible. There is no place off limits. There is no sanctuary and we are going to disperse crowds.” Despite the fact that the Portage County Prosecutor wanted to close the university down until the situation calmed, Gov. Rhodes refused.

Closing the university, he said, “ would be playing into the hands of the SDS and the Weathermen.” During these early days of May, Governor Rhodes was in a losing Republican primary election race for the U. S. Senate against incumbent, Robert Taft (whose son is currently the Ohio Governor). The week before the May 5 primary elections, Rhodes was 7% behind Taft in the polls.

Rhodes decided strategy was to take a vocal hard-line stance against campus activists in an effort to appeal to the traditionally conservative Ohio voters. To some extent, he was successful; Rhodes lost the primary election by less than 1% the day after the Kent State shootings. Canfora firmly states, "there is every reason to believe that Nixon was helping Rhodes in his election race against Taft. This was a desperate politician trying to get votes (the May 4 shootings were) very likely planned and approved by U. S.

military and political leaders including President Nixon and Governor Rhodes. In particular, President Nixon had a personal grudge against Kent State anti-war activists since October, 1968, when the Kent SDS repeatedly shouted him down during his speech at nearby Akron University" (personal interview with the author April 15 and April 19, 2000). Indeed, in transcripts obtained from the 1975 Cleveland Federal Court civil lawsuit against Rhodes and the Ohio National Guard, Governor Rhodes admitted under oath that he had twice committed perjury in earlier trials regarding two telephone conversations he had with President Nixon in the days prior to the shootings.

The topic of their conversations, as Rhodes finally admitted, was the Kent State anti-war students militant actions on Friday the first and Saturday May 2. Just before noon, on Monday, May 4, as classes were letting out for lunch, around 300 students had gathered in the KSU Commons for a rally. The Victory Bell rang out, calling all students to gather for a demonstration. The Ohio National Guard stood at the other side of the Commons as more students, on their way to lunch, joined the rally, swelling the number of students to over 2, 000.

The National Guard addressed the students over a bullhorn; " This assembly is unlawful. The crowd must disperse at this time. This is an order!" This message was repeated five times by the Guard, each time the students responded with chants of " Power to the People, Pigs off campus!" and " 1, 2, 3, 4 we don't want your fucking war!" A few minutes later, the Kent State University police pleaded, " For your own safety, all you bystanders and innocent people, leave.

" Tear gas was fired on the crowd, and students sent the canisters back to the Guardsmen. With more tear gas, the Guardsmen, then numbering about 100, corralled the demonstrators between two buildings and up Blanket Hill. Students began throwing sticks and gravel pebbles at the advancing troops as they retreated towards the Prentice Hall parking lot.

Canfora points out that at the beginning of the tear gas barrage the National Guard " suddenly prevented the TV and news media from following the troops as they began their march on the unarmed students" (personal interview with the author, April 19, 2000). A few moments later, out of approximately 76 guardsmen, only the thirteen " members of Troop G were ordered to kneel and aim their weapons at the students in the parking lot south of Prentice Hall. They did so, but did not fire (U. S. Justice Department Summary of FBI Reports, July, 1970)." The Guard quickly assembled together for a short conference, and then moved back to their positions, focusing upon the most vocal contingent of demonstrators, who were now below Blanket Hill, on the Prentice Hall parking lot. At 12: 24 p. m.



the thirteen members of " Troop G" of the Ohio National Guard simultaneously turned, aimed their M-1 rifles and opened fire on the crowd of unarmed students. The 1970 U. S. Department of Justice Summary of FBI Reports revealed, " no verbal warning was given to the students immediately prior to the time the Guardsmen fired." Canfora states, " It is clear there was a verbal order to fire.

The well-coordinated actions of these triggermen seemed quite planned and executed like a firing squad upon orders to shoot" (personal interview with the author, April 19, 2000). After thirteen seconds and 76 bullets, Jeffery Miller, Sandra Scheuer, Allison Krause and Bill Schroder were dead. Nine more were wounded, one of whom was permanently paralyzed from the waist-down. Sandra Scheuer was not involved with the demonstration, only on her way to a speech-therapy class. Bill Schroder, an ROTC student, also not involved, was only trying to make sense out of the confusion when he was shot.

The day before, Allison Krause had placed a daisy in the rifle barrel of a National Guardsman and told the soldiers, " flowers are better than bullets." Jeff Miller, previously an active member of SDS, was saluting the troops with his middle fingers when a bullet entered his jaw. None of the murdered students was closer than 275 feet from the Guard. In fact, " only two (students) were shot from the front. Seven students were shot from the side and four were shot from the rear" (U.

S. Justice Department Summary of FBI Reports, July, 1970). One of the initial reasons the National Guard gave for firing into a crowd of unarmed students was they felt threatened because the crowd was closing in on them.

A photo of the Guard taken only seconds before the shooting began shows the main body of students were gathered in the Prentice Hall parking lot, about 300 feet away, and absolutely no students were behind the soldiers to hinder their retreat. Again, the U. S. Department of Justice Summary of FBI Reports concludes, “ the Guardsmen were not surrounded.

.. they easily could have continued going in the direction which they had been going.” In an immediate show of solidarity, the only national student strike in American history erupted with over four million students shutting down some 800 campuses. Across the nation, thirty ROTC buildings were burned in protest.

Maryland students blocked Highway # 1 outside of Washington D. C. President Nixon found himself trapped inside the White House, surrounded by 150, 000 student demonstrators. In San Francisco, students stormed and occupied City Hall, demanding the impeachment of Richard Nixon. President Nixon addressed the nation after the shootings with a message aimed at political activists.

“ When dissent turns to violence,” he warned, “ it invites tragedy.” Despite clear evidence that the National Guard had fired in offense, (rather than defense) derived from over one thousand pages of FBI reports, countless eye-witness testimonies and a through investigation by local, state and federal authorities, the courts ultimately blamed the student protesters. The <https://assignbuster.com/thirty-that-are-going-on-today-kent-graduate/>

Report of the Special Grand Jury under Judge Edwin W. Jones concluded, “  
We find.

.. that those members of the National Guard who were present on the hill adjacent to Taylor Hall on May 4, 1970 fired their weapons in the honest and sincere belief...that they would suffer serious bodily injury had they not done so. They are not, therefore, subject to criminal prosecution under the laws of this state from any death or injury resulting therefrom (October 16, 1970).”