

Remembering Kent State

“People Aren’t Ready to Let May 4th Die”

Bill McCormick

When I entered Kent State University in the Fall of 1975 it was by no means a revolutionary situation I was stepping into. It is ironic, because ever since the shooting on May 4, 1970 by Ohio National Guardsmen of thirteen students, resulting in the death of four and the wounding of nine others, Kent had gained an almost worldwide reputation as being a radical campus. But when I was there in 1975 and 1976 the average member of the student body had about as much connection with what happened there just a few years earlier as they did with the man on the moon.

I went to Kent State in 1975 in search of student radicalism. I did not find it. In five short years the remnants of my mecca had been so widely scattered that they were now almost unrecognizable. The few hardline marxist-leninists that still hung around the campus spent more time fighting among themselves than any “common enemy,” and inspired more amusement than enthusiasm from the student body. My peers seemed only to want a piece of the American dream. They didn’t have time to be bothered with images of the ‘60’s.

Besides, everyone knew that the 70’s was the “me” decade, responsible activists were now interested in the effects of processed food on the human body, Transactional Analysis, Transcendental Meditation, EST, Primal Scream Therapy, and so forth. The phrase “still living in the ‘60s” became almost a stigma, and nobody wanted that hanging around their neck. Some even said the 60’s died and was buried at Kent State.

I had grown up in a politically conservative family, and had been carefully shielded from the pitched battles between police and anti-Vietnam war protesters during the late ‘60s that culminated in the shootings at Kent, just 50 some miles from the same town where I grew up. So, in a large sense I was not aware of the day-to-day events going on around me at that time, and yet they left their indelible mark on me nonetheless.

So much so that when I first saw the pictures of Guardsmen kneeling in tight formation, pointing their loaded weapons into a crowd of largely bewildered students (some of whom were actually “protesting,” an offense not normally punished by death), some of whom were only watching or on their way to class, I felt an instinctive connection with the students.

Gun Down the People

Of course the gunning down of people of color had been accepted as a matter of course ever since our forefathers first landed on this continent, and it was just ten days later, on May 14, 1970 that black students Phillip Gibbs and James Green were killed by police at Jackson State University in Mississippi. So blacks would be quite correct in saying that to focus exclusively on the killing of middle-class white students at Kent, while ignoring the fact that this had been standard treatment for people of color who stood up for their rights for centuries, would simply be another more subtle form of racism. But Kent State perhaps more than any other incident showed that power knows no bounds, and that when this nation’s immoral war in Southeast Asia was unmasked for what it truly was, even the children of the power structure were not exempt from its headless and soulless march.

After I found out in 1975 that Kent was not a hotbed of student radicalism left over from the '60s, it did not take me long to drop out. It took two quarters, to be exact (not really a fair time period for higher education to show me what it had to offer). For about a year I hung around Brookfield, Ohio generally acting nihilistic and alienated (isn't that what all 19 year olds are supposed to do?). Then in 1977 something happened that drew me back to Kent, and it wasn't for more classes.

Tent City vs. Gymnasium

It seemed the University administration wanted to build a new gymnasium on the site where Allison Krause, Jeffrey Miller, Sandra Scheuer and William Schroeder had been killed. I heard that a tent city had been erected on the site by a motley crew of students, ex-students and outside agitators (mostly the latter) called the May 4th Coalition. At first I could not believe my ears. I had just about given up on anything like this occurring, and in those pre-1980 days before the revitalization of the peace movement, there seemed to be ample evidence all around me that activism as a social force in America was dead.

So I held off for a while, thinking perhaps the whole thing would blow over. It was finally when I heard on the radio that an ultimatum had been given to the tent city protesters that they would either evacuate the premises so that construction could begin or face arrest that I went scurrying for my sleeping bag and pup tent.

I hitched the 50 miles to Kent State and in no time found myself in the middle of a revolutionary situation! There were hundreds of people on blanket hill—singing, chanting, eating, sleeping—I felt as if I had died and gone to Woodstock. It was on the morning of my third day there that the police moved in to make the arrests.

It was not quite as scary as seven years earlier. This time the authorities carried neither guns nor fixed bayonets (just long clubs). We all sat on the ground roughly half way between where the shots had been fired in 1970 and where the students fell, and taking a cue from the civil rights movement, we linked arms with the people to each side and legs around the person in front. This certainly did not make it any easier for the police to remove us, but all in all, remarkable restraint was shown on both sides.

One hundred ninety-three of us were arrested that day, including the parents of slain student Sandra Scheuer, and Alan Canfora and his sister, who were wounded on that same spot in 1970, with their parents.

For this action we spent less than a day in the Portage County jail, mostly taken up in booking procedures (the usual 1,000 sets of fingerprints and so forth). After our release a good number of us were willing to risk re-arrest after a heated meeting one night about which was the best way to proceed to halt the construction. The construction had been started, but was halted by a temporary court order. Sixty-one of us did a middle-of-the-night guerrilla sort of action where we hopped the fence which had been put up around the area while supporters created a diversion of loud noises around the other side to decoy the police.

This time the head of campus security and the Portage County sheriff came to have a private council with us. Amidst the television lights and shouts of supporters we were essentially begged by these two men not to make them go through this again. They were reminded by someone that they had no obligation to go through with it, that they could always resign their jobs if they did not wish to compromise with evil. But this argument unfortunately did not have the intended effect. So we were arrested once more, this time split up into smaller groups and bused out to different counties. I was with a group that graced Cuyahoga County Jail in downtown Cleveland for three days, later dubbed the electronic people crusher because of its Star Trek-like doors and futuristic design.

Well, to make a long story short, we lost the battle (as for the war, the results are still not in). The new gym annex was built, and to this day stands fully operational. The controversy between the university and the parents of the slain, wounded and their supporters over how the killings should be memorialized has not yet been resolved.

Won't Let May 4th Die!

In 1978 national attention was once again directed toward Kent State when the University administration refused to accept a memorial sculpture by artist George Segal depicting Abraham bearing a knife over his son, Isaac,

who is bound and kneeling before him. Two years later, the administration proposed a monument which would “acknowledge the event without interpretation,” but it was met with such overwhelming opposition that the idea was dropped. A school official said, realizing that a decade’s time had not stilled anger over the killings, “People aren’t ready to let May 4th die...”

I think that perhaps though inadvertently, this official has summed up the feelings of many of us better than we could, in a thousand words. No, we are not ready to let May 4th die. Although I am not out getting arrested every day protesting the imperialistic acts that our country commits either at home or abroad, ever since my involvement at Kent State, I have chosen to live my life in such a way as to not let the meaning of May 4th die.

And whether that means my being with the Catholic Worker dealing with the daily victims of the system, or choosing to live simply and in such a way as not to oil the wheels of that system. It is all intimately connected with not letting May 4th die.

Between the early ‘60s and the early ‘70s, literally millions of Indochinese people and thousands of Americans lost their lives half way around the world in an immoral war which accomplished nothing other than to harden people’s hearts and create a near permanent state of war and chaos in that region. On May 4th, 1970, a little bit of that war came home to the innocent, rolling hills of northeastern Ohio, and for a moment we were able to glimpse what it might feel like to have brown or yellow skin and live in a Third World country which has been declared of “strategic importance” to the United States. It seems to me that this is why Allison Krause, Jeffery Miller, Sandra Scheur and William Schroeder died, and this is their legacy to us. Let us therefore live our lives in such a way that we may know they did not die in vain.

FE Note: Since receiving Bill’s article several months ago, Kent State University has announced that a memorial for the slain students has been selected which appears to have widespread support.

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<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/323-summer-1986/remembering-kent-state>
Fifth Estate #323, Summer, 1986

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