

ON THE KENT STATE TRAGEDY

A REPORT BY THE PRESIDENT'S COMMISSION
ON CAMPUS UNREST

1970

On April 30, 1970, President Nixon announced the invasion of Cambodia and the need to expand the military draft as part of the escalating war in Vietnam. Student antiwar protesters responded by staging massive demonstrations, shutting down campuses across the nation. At Kent State University on May 4, members of the National Guard shot into a crowd of demonstrators, killing four. The president established a committee to investigate the protests sweeping college campuses. The committee submitted the following account of the Kent State events.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY : Analyzing Issues

What does this account reveal about the issues of political dissent and government use of force?

Blanket Hill is a grassy knoll in the center of the campus of Kent State University, named by students who use it as a place to sun themselves in the day and to romance at night. From here, shortly after noon on a sunny spring day, a detachment of Ohio National Guardsmen, armed with World War II-vintage army rifles, fired a volley of at least 61 shots killing four college students and wounding nine.

All of the young people who were shot that day were students in good standing at Kent State University.

The National Guardsmen were there under orders from both civilian and military authorities. Duty at Kent State had not been pleasant: they had been cursed and stoned, and some feared physical injury.

Stones were thrown, then bullets fired.

The events at Kent State over the long May weekend were tragic. They need not and should not have occurred. The Commission has drawn on the lessons learned from Kent State in making its report. This special report is made to give an explicit context to the recommendations made there.

The Commission staff spent several weeks studying reports of other investigations of the May 1970 events at Kent State, including 8,000 pages of reports by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Three weeks were spent in Ohio interviewing hundreds of witnesses, including students, faculty, university administrators, law enforcement personnel, National Guardsmen, townspeople, and others in possession of relevant information. Special efforts

were made to gather contemporaneous photographic and audio evidence from all available sources. The Commission was able to study motion picture films and tape recordings of parts of the events and hundreds of photographs taken by persons present at the scene. The Commission held hearings at Kent State University in Kent, Ohio, on August 19, 20, and 21, 1970....

MONDAY, MAY 4

As they lined up opposite students on the Commons shortly before noon, the three National Guard units involved in the Kent State shooting had had an average of three hours of sleep the night before.

Company C of the First Battalion, 145th Infantry Regiment, went off duty at 2:00 a.m. Monday morning. At 5:30 a.m., the company commander, Capt. James R. Snyder, received orders to return to patrol on city streets near Kent State.

At 6:00 a.m., Troop G of the Second Squadron, 107th Armored Cavalry Regiment, relieved Company A of the First Battalion, 145th Infantry, which had been on duty all night. Company A then had to move their bivouac area, however, and the company commander, Capt. John E. Martin, said none got to bed before 9:00 a.m. At about 11:30 a.m., they were roused to return to duty on the campus.

Troop G had gone off duty at 6:00 p.m. Sunday, according to the troop commander, Capt. Raymond J. Srp. But they had just lined up for their first hot meal of the day when they were sent back to duty on campus. They served until between midnight and 1:00 a.m. Monday and then were awakened between 4:00 and 4:30 a.m. to prepare to relieve Company A....

The movements of the crowd in the last minute or two before the firing are the subject of considerable dispute. General Canterbury, in a statement to a Commission investigator on August 25, gave this description:

As the troop formation reached the area of the Pagoda near Taylor Hall, the mob located on the right flank in front of Taylor Hall and in the Prentice Hall parking lot charged our right flank, throwing rocks, yelling obscenities and threats, "Kill the pigs," "Stick the pigs." The attitude of the crowd at this point was menacing and vicious.

The troops were being hit by rocks. I saw Major Jones hit in the stomach by a large brick, a guardsman to the right and rear of my position was hit by a large rock and fell to the ground. During this movement, practically all of the guardsmen were hit by missiles of various kinds. Guardsmen on the right flank were in serious danger of bodily harm and death as the mob continued to charge. I felt that, in view of the extreme danger to the troops at this point, that they were justified in firing.

General Canterbury also testified that the closest students were within four to five yards of the Guard. In the direction the Guard fired, however photographs show an open space in front of the guardsmen of at least 20 yards. To their side, the nearest student, one of several on the terrace of Taylor Hall, was at least 15 yards away. The nearest person wounded, Joseph Lewis, Jr., who was 20 yards away, said there was no one between him and the Guard. The closest person killed, Jeffrey Glenn Miller, was at least 85 yards away.

An 8-millimeter motion picture film, taken by an amateur cameraman from a point approximately 500 yards northeast of the firing line, indicates that the main body of aggressive students was about 60 to 75 yards away, at the foot of the hill near the corner of the Prentice Hall parking lot.

The crowd's movements can be reconstructed from testimony, photographs, and investigation.

As the guardsmen left the practice field on their way back up Blanket Hill, they encountered a crowd of several hundred students fanned around in a broad parabola from Memorial Gymnasium and Lake Hall on their left to Taylor and Prentice Halls on their right. The crowd divided to let the Guard through.

A small gathering of 25 to 50 persons stood on the crest of Blanket Hill. As the Guard approached them, they retreated down the west slope of the hill and away from the scene of action.

About 100 persons stood on the east terrace of Taylor Hall, watching the guardsmen approach the adjacent hill. They are not known to have thrown any rocks and seem to have been spectators throughout. Perhaps another 100 persons withdrew from the edge of the practice field to a slope just below the east side of the hall. They threw some rocks.

A crowd of about 200 persons near Johnson Hall had generally watched the guardsmen pass by and had not followed them to the football field and back.

As the Guard crossed the road that lies between the football field and the foot of Blanket Hill, perhaps 200 persons moved off to the left of the troops through the trees toward Lake Hall. Among them was student James D. Russell, subsequently wounded as he stood more than 100 yards from the firing line on Blanket Hill.

In the Prentice Hall parking lot, to one side of the withdrawing Guard, were some 100 to 200 students, some throwing rocks, others carrying books. At the time of the firing, some thought the action was over and had started away toward classes, including student Douglas Wrentmore, whose back was toward the guardsmen when the firing began.

About 20 to 50 persons formed the most conspicuous part of the crowd, moving first along the guardsmen's right flank and then behind them. In this group were those most active in throwing rocks. It is not known precisely how many of this group threw rocks, but perhaps half of them threw rocks at one time or another. Included in this group of 20 to 50 were two young men, one carrying a red flag and the other a black flag. This group was particularly aggressive, cursing and jeering the guardsmen, following and pursuing them at a

range varying from about 20 to 80 yards. At the time of the firing, most of this group were just south of the Prentice Hall parking lot, just below the eastern side of Taylor Hall.

Movie film and testimony indicate that as guardsmen reached the top of the hill, some students surged from the east face of Taylor Hall and the southern end of the parking lot up toward the guardsmen on Blanket Hill. The film is too indistinct to tell how many of the students involved in this movement were throwing rocks. The leading edge of this crowd appears to have advanced to a point no closer than 20 yards from the guardsmen, with the main body 60 to 75 yards away, before the gunfire began and they reversed their direction. It is possible that some of them had no aggressive intent but instead began running up the hill in the direction of the Guard to get a good vantage point on Blanket Hill after, as they expected, the guardsmen retreated down the far side of the slope.

Near the crest of Blanket Hill stands the Pagoda, a square bench made of 4-by-4 wooden beams and shaded by a concrete umbrella. The events which occurred as the Guard reached the Pagoda, turned, and fired on the students, are in bitter dispute.

Many guardsmen said they had hard going as they withdrew up the hill. Fassinger said he was hit six times by stones, once on the shoulder so hard that he stumbled.

Fassinger had removed his gas mask to see more clearly. He said the guardsmen had reached a point between the Pagoda and Taylor Hall, and he was attempting to maintain them in a reasonably orderly formation, when he heard a sound like a shot, which was immediately followed by a volley of shots. He saw the troops on the Taylor Hall end of the line shooting. He yelled "Cease fire!" and ran along the line repeating the command.

Major Jones said he first heard an explosion which he thought was a firecracker. As he turned to his left, he heard another explosion which he knew to be an M-1 rifle shot. As he turned to his right, toward Taylor Hall, he said he saw guardsmen kneeling (photographs show some crouching) and bringing their rifles to their shoulders. He heard another M-1 shot, and then a volley of them. He yelled "Cease fire!" several times, and rushed down the line shoving rifle barrels up and away from the crowd. He hit several guardsmen on their helmets with his swagger stick to stop them from firing.

General Canterbury stated that he first heard a single shot, which he thought was fired from some distance away on his left and which in his opinion did not come from a military weapon. Immediately afterward, he heard a volley of M-1 fire from his right, the Taylor Hall end of the line. The Guard's fire was directed away from the direction from which Canterbury thought the initial, nonmilitary shot came. His first reaction, like that of Fassinger and Jones, was to stop the firing.

Canterbury, Fassinger, and Jones—the three ranking officers on the hill—all said no order to fire was given.

Twenty-eight guardsmen have acknowledged firing from Blanket Hill. Of

these, 25 fired 55 shots from rifles, two fired five shots from .45 caliber pistols, and one fired a single blast from a shotgun. Sound tracks indicate that the firing of these 61 shots lasted approximately 13 seconds. The time of the shooting was approximately 12:25 p.m.

Four persons were killed and nine were wounded. As determined by the FBI, their distances from the firing line and the types of wounds they received were as follows:

1. Joseph Lewis, Jr., 20 yards, wounded in the right abdomen and lower leg.
2. Thomas V. Grace, 20 yards, wounded in the left ankle.
3. John R. Cleary, 37 yards, wounded in the left upper chest.
4. Allen Michael Canfora, 75 yards, wounded in the right wrist.
5. Jeffrey Glenn Miller, 85 to 90 yards, killed by a shot in the mouth.
6. Dean R. Kahler, 95 to 100 yards, wounded in the left side of the small of his back. A bullet fragment lodged in his spine, and he is paralyzed from the waist down.
7. Douglas Alan Wrentmore, 110 yards, wounded in the right knee.
8. Allison B. Krause, 110 yards, killed by a bullet that passed through her left upper arm and into her left side.
9. James Dennis Russell, 125 to 130 yards, wounded in the right thigh and right forehead.
10. William K. Schroeder, 130 yards, killed by a shot in the left back at the seventh rib.
11. Sandra Lee Scheuer, 130 yards, killed by a shot through the left front side of the neck.
12. Robert Follis Stamps, 165 yards, wounded in the right buttock.
13. Donald Scott Mackenzie, 245 to 250 yards, wounded in the left rear of the neck.

Of the casualties, two were shot in the front, seven from the side, and four from the rear. All 13 were students at Kent State University....

Guardsmen have claimed that they were under an increasingly heavy barrage of rocks and other objects as they advanced back up Blanket Hill and that students rushed toward them threateningly. Many indicated that they began firing when they heard one or some of their fellow guardsmen open fire.

Although General Canterbury said his men were "not panic stricken," it is clear that many of them were frightened. Many suffered bruises and abrasions from stones, although only one guardsmen, Sgt. Dennis L. Breckenridge, required overnight hospitalization. He passed out from hyperventilation and was removed from the field in an ambulance.

A few students and a few guardsmen claim to have heard something like an order to fire. One student testified to the Commission that he saw an officer raise and lower his pistol just before the firing, possibly as a signal to shoot. The weight of the evidence indicates, however, that no command to fire was given, either by word or by gesture.

As the shooting began, students scattered and ran. In the parking lot behind Prentice Hall, where two were killed and two were wounded, students dove

behind parked cars and attempted to flatten themselves on the pavement. On the slope east of Taylor Hall, where four were wounded, students scrambled behind a metal sculpture, rolled down the incline, or sought cover behind trees. The scene was one of pell-mell disorder and fright.

Many thought the guardsmen were firing blanks. When the shooting stopped and they rose and saw students bleeding, the first reaction of most was shock. Jeffrey Miller lay on the pavement of an access road, blood streaming from his mouth.

Then the crowd grew angry. They screamed and some called the guardsmen “murderers.” Some tried to give first aid. One vainly attempted mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on Sandra Lee Scheuer, one of the fatalities. Knots of students gathered around those who had fallen.

Sandra Lee Scheuer, 20, a junior, is believed to have been on her way to a 1:10 p.m. class in the Music and Speech Building when she was struck. She has not been identified in any available photographs as having attended the prohibited noon rally on the Commons.

Allison B. Krause, 19, a freshman, was among the group of students gathered on the Commons by the Victory Bell shortly before noon. After her death, small fragments of concrete and cinder block were found in the pockets of her jacket.

Jeffrey Glenn Miller, 20, a junior, was present in the crowd on the Commons when the dispersal order was given and made obscene gestures with his middle fingers at guardsmen. He also threw back a tear gas canister at the Guard while it was on the football practice field.

William K. Schroeder, 19, a sophomore, was an ROTC cadet. A photograph shows him retreating up Blanket Hill from the rally on the Commons, but he is not shown taking part in any harassment of the Guard....

At the moment of the firing, most of the nine wounded students were far beyond a range at which they could have presented any immediate physical threat to the Guard.

The closest casualties—Lewis, Grace, and Cleary—were all within 20 to 40 yards. At the moment shooting began, Lewis was standing between Taylor Hall and the metal sculpture, making obscene gestures at guardsmen with the middle finger of his right hand. Cleary was standing on the other side of the sculpture, which was perforated by a bullet. Grace was near them, but a little farther away from Taylor Hall. His actions are not known.

Canfora, who said he had been chanting antiwar slogans earlier, had started to run for cover behind cars in Prentice Hall parking lot when he was hit.

Kahler was standing at the northwest corner of the football field, beyond stone-throwing range, when the firing began. He dropped to the ground and was hit while prone.

Wrentmore was in the Prentice Hall parking lot and said he was walking away to a class when he heard the firing begin, turned, and was wounded.

Russell, apparently hit by a ricochet, was standing far away from all the other casualties, near Lake Hall and Memorial Gymnasium.

Stamps, tear gassed on the Commons, had just left Prentice Hall after washing tear gas off his face. He was wounded in Prentice Hall parking lot as he tried to run away from the firing.

Mackenzie, the casualty most distant from the Guard, said he heard the firing begin and had turned to run when he was hit. The entire length of Prentice Hall parking lot and the east slope of Blanket Hill lay between him and the Guard.

After the shooting, students ran to Taylor, Prentice, and Dunbar Halls to telephone for ambulances. Others ran down to the Commons screaming for ambulances. Several minutes passed before the ambulances came. Students linked their arms and formed rings around the bodies to keep them from further injury. Some students wept. Others wandered around dazed.

The shooting on Blanket Hill was done principally by members of Troop G and Company A. Company C, except for two members who went down to the football field and returned to Blanket Hill with the main body of troops, remained at the northern end of Taylor Hall where they had been dispatched by General Canterbury. The C Company members at that position, which is at the opposite end of Taylor Hall from Blanket Hill, did not fire their weapons.

After the firing, the C Company commander, Capt. Snyder, took seven men down to the Prentice Hall parking lot to render first aid. He looked at two young men who had fallen, probably Miller and Schroeder, but concluded both were dead. While the detachment was in the vicinity of the body of Jeffrey Miller, enraged students began to scream at them. The guardsmen responded by throwing a tear gas pellet at the student group. Capt. Snyder withdrew his unit to its original position and then back across the Commons, leaving the casualties where they had fallen. Many students subsequently believed that no guardsmen made any effort to render first aid after the shootings and added this to their catalogue of charges against the troops.

The scene after the shooting was tense, and there was a possibility of further trouble. After an ambulance removed Miller's body, a demonstrator who had carried a black flag during the confrontation dipped the flag into the pool of Miller's blood and waved it at nearby students in an apparent attempt to inflame them further.

Canterbury withdrew his troops to the Commons almost immediately. He ordered a weapons check to determine how many guardsmen fired how many rounds. He also ordered that no more rounds be fired except at a specified target and upon an officer's order.

After the casualties were removed, students began to gather again on the hills overlooking the Commons. The largest concentrations, varying from 200 to 300, congregated on the slope below Johnson Hall at one corner of the Commons. Many of them would later have trouble describing their emotions.

Source: *The Report of the President's Commission on Campus Unrest* (New York: Arno Press, 1970), pp. 233-278.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY : ANSWER

Students may answer that this account reveals the limits and consequences of political dissent and the government's use of force against political protesters. Students may argue that the use of deadly force was unjustified in the face of rock-throwing students, who did not seriously injure any of the National Guard troops. They may argue that the government's use of force, rather than suppressing dissent, actually created greater outrage and increased protests. Other students may argue that the use of force was justified to bring order to the campus, although the loss of life was regrettable.