

Fifty-One Years Ago: The Lessons of Kent State. Open Fire on Unarmed Student Anti-War Protesters

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May 4, 2021 is the fifty-first anniversary of the Kent State University massacre that saw Ohio National Guardsmen open fire on a group of unarmed student anti-war protestors killing 4 and injuring 9 on campus. Not satisfied with the carnage, police forces killed 2 black students and injured 12 others at Jackson State University in Mississippi on May 15, 1970. On two spring days in May the veil of democracy was momentarily discarded to expose the ugly face of state terror revealing its murderous intent. The revelation uncovered a brutal reality. The American ruling class will execute its own youth to preserve oligarchic power.

The barbaric nature of the U.S. government had long been known to blacks but came as a profound shock to white America. That the government would gun down white middle-class students signified the regime in power would play hardball with young rebels. 'If you dare to protest against the war, we will shoot you down like the ungrateful dogs that you are' was the explicit message sent by the Nixonian state to the country's dissidents.

As for black insurgents, the U.S. police state had barred its vicious teeth in an ongoing series of savage attacks designed to repress black rebellion that began in the streets of Watts in 1964 and reached a crescendo in the ghettos of urban America in 1968 with the murder of the honorable Dr. King, itself an act of monstrous [state criminality](#) preceded by 400 years of oppression.

The quintessential lesson of Kent State teaches the need to confront American fascism. The lesson of Kent State was taught once again at New York State's [Attica](#) prison in 1971 and the Branch Davidian compound at [Waco](#), Texas, in 1993. It is the lesson of [Wounded Knee](#) in 1890, [Ludlow](#) in 1914 and [Rosewood](#) in 1923. It is a lesson that runs like a bloody thread throughout American history. It is the lesson of the [iron heel](#) and the need to oppose a system of might, not law or morality, making right.

When studying this history it should be remembered that it was Daniel Shays' rebellion that prompted representatives of a newly independent wealthy class to meet secretly in Philadelphia in 1787 to draft a [constitution](#) that delegated power to a strong centralized federal government. James Madison, the document's chief architect, understood that the most essential function of any government was the protection of those with property from those who had none.

Understanding the fascist tendency that exists within the United States once prompted the black revolutionary H. Rap Brown to say in response to critics who decried [black rebellion](#) that "Violence is necessary. Violence is part of America's culture. It is as American as cherry pie."



Photo taken from the perspective of where the Ohio National Guard soldiers stood when they opened fire on the students (Source: Public Domain)

Brown was counterposing revolutionary to repressive violence. He was asserting the right of oppressed peoples to free themselves by any means necessary, including by violent means. Throughout its history, the U.S. government has attempted to maintain a monopoly on the use of what it defines as 'legitimate', repressive violence. Violence that is used by the oppressed is always criminalized. This is an essential feature of the [politics of terrorism](#); state terror is lawful, revolutionary terror is not. All revolutionary movements are compelled to challenge the ideology and practice of state sponsored terrorism in their struggle for justice and freedom, a truth that was well understood by anti-colonial writers such as [Frantz Fanon](#) whose work exerted a profound influence on young American radicals.

The corollary lesson of Kent State teaches the efficacy of resistance. It is a political axiom that oppression breeds resistance, a principle that needs to be remembered during times of quiescence that carry with them the danger of adopting a politics of apathy and cynicism. Quiescence is a prelude to action, not its permanent negation, a condition of inertia the intellectual establishment seeks to foster in the consciousness of the oppressed by denuding history of its revolutionary content.

The vast scope of student resistance to the Vietnam War is sanitized from American history in contemporary classrooms of higher education. That over 4 million students protested the Kent State massacre at 1,350 colleges and universities is a compelling fact that is conveniently ignored by conventional historians, political scientists and political sociologists who teach the nations' youth. The emergence of the 'New Left' and prevalence of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) on American campuses during the 1960s is awarded similar treatment or if mentioned at all, reduced to a cultural stereotype of the 'hippie era' of sex, drugs and rock-and-roll.

Beyond the pale, is any discussion of an SDS scion known as the [Weather Underground](#), a

radical organization that brought the war home to the war makers with a series of bombings of government facilities that dramatized militant opposition to the mass slaughter in Vietnam that bloodied the hands of the American power elite.

Sustained opposition to the prosecution of the Vietnam War by the New Left is partly responsible, along with the heroic and indefatigable resistance of the Vietnamese people, for ending the war. The anti-war movement was also directly responsible for ending the military draft. This history needs to be reclaimed for future generations of young activists who are animated, as were their predecessors, by a desire for peace and justice.

In their relentless pursuit of cultural hegemony, representatives of the American plutocracy wage an unending battle for ideological supremacy. The 'Vietnam syndrome' was a concept developed by the notorious [war criminal](#) and former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to describe the reluctance of the American population to support a long and costly foreign war in the wake of the Vietnam fiasco. The desire of the American ruling class to overcome the 'syndrome' lies behind its relentless drive for technological superiority that allows the U.S. war machine to use devastating weaponry to 'shock' and 'awe' opponents into rapid submission. The failure of this strategy was evidenced in Iraq where the most powerful military on earth could not quell an Iraqi insurgency that compelled the U.S. to end its illegal occupation of the beleaguered country by withdrawing all but 5,000 isolated troops. The United States was defeated in [Iraq](#), but not before reducing civilization's cradle to a [pre-industrial age](#) littered with [depleted uranium](#) that will remain toxic for 4.5 billion years and killing 2.5 million people during a prolonged [assault](#) that lasted two decades.



Bullet hole in *Solar Totem #1* sculpture by [Don Drumm](#) caused by a .30 caliber round fired by the Ohio National Guard at Kent State on May 4, 1970 (Source: Public Domain)

The historical context of the Kent State protest was the public announcement on April 30, 1970, by President Richard Nixon of the invasion of Cambodia and expansion of the [genocidal](#) Vietnam War. The announcement touched off a massive wave of angry demonstrations across the nation. It was into a cauldron of emotional rage that National

Guard troops were deployed to Kent State, setting the stage for the galvanizing confrontation between the forces of peace and war that resulted in tragedy. In response to the Kent State massacre, [student strikes](#) were organized that shut down 500 colleges and universities in a demonstration of the mass solidarity. By 1970, United States involvement in the Vietnam War had radicalized an entire generation of American youth.

Nixon struck back against the anti-war and black liberation movements with an intensification of the FBI's [COINTELPRO](#) program of political suppression and a '[war on drugs](#)' that targeted black America. He relied on the unwavering support of what he called the "silent majority" of citizens whose social base was composed of 'hard hat' workers in the building and construction trades industry along with blue-collar workers in manufacturing. These craftsmen and laborers comprised a reactionary and privileged section of the working class that was represented by the AFL-CIO trade union bureaucracy. The AFL-CIO was derisively referred to by radicals as the AFL-CIA because of its strident 'cold-war' anti-communism and its support for the war.

Media coverage of the 50th year anniversary of the Kent State massacre comprised a revisionist account of the day's events that ignores the historical context of the anti-war protests and attempts to exonerate National Guard members who opened fire on students with 'fog of war' excuses about the confusion that occurred as the conflict between students and guardsmen escalated on that fateful day. Responsibility for the escalation is insidiously shifted to students who were filmed throwing tear gas canisters back at guard troops who had fired gas at protesters. Why the National Guard was firing tear gas on peacefully protesting students was not discussed or investigated by media commentators.

Students were also blamed for burning down an ROTC officer training facility on the Kent State campus the night before the shootings. That students were outraged by graphic reports of American troops burning Vietnamese children with napalm as commanded by their officers was not mentioned during media coverage of the retrospective. Student protests against the presence of [ROTC](#) training facilities on American campuses had begun as early as 1963.

Student protests against the presence of Dow Chemical recruiters had been organized on campuses beginning in 1966. Dow was the manufacturer of napalm, an anti-personnel jelly-like ordinance that adheres to the skin and burns through flesh and bones. By 1967 pictures of Vietnamese peasants who had been horribly burned by the U.S. military's use of napalm were printed in Ramparts magazine touching off a [campaign](#) to stop the production of the horrific weapon yet the moral outrage of student protesters was not mentioned by the media.

Nor was the decision of reactionary Ohio governor James Rhodes to deploy military troops to an American university to "eradicate" the "Communist element" on campus questioned, the underlying assumption being that 'law and order' must be preserved.

The 'lawlessness' of the American military slaughter in Vietnam that students were protesting is beyond criticism by media propagandists who supported subsequent wars in Grenada 1983, Panama 1989, Iraq 1991, Yugoslavia 1999, Afghanistan 2001, Iraq 2003, Libya 2011 and Syria 2014 in their effort to overcome the 'Vietnam Syndrome'.

Today, a greatly expanded militarized police state hovers over a restive and divided population. The USA Patriot Act of 2001 has stripped Americans of their civil liberties just as

effectively as the National Defense Authorization Act Section 1041 of 2012, denuded citizen and non-citizen alike of habeas corpus. The Department of Homeland Security, NSA, FBI and CIA continue programs of mass surveillance during the unending 'war on terror'.

Yet, resistance to the American hegemon is not only possible, it is inevitable. The question remains whether the resistance will be informed by the lessons of history or remain blind to its cautionary tale. Will future rebels oppose imperialism or will they ignore its destructive legacy? Will they come to understand the cost of freedom that was paid by the martyrs of Kent State and countless other massacres, or be oblivious of the sacrifice it demands? And most decisively, will they be willing to pay the price needed to achieve victory in a revolutionary struggle against fascism or will they submit to its bestial demands? An answer to these questions will emerge during the conflict between the forces of liberation and repression that lies ahead.

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