

May 4, 1970

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On May 4, 1970, the Ohio National Guard opened fire on students at Kent State University who were protesting President Nixon's invasion into Cambodia, injuring nine and killing four.¹ The killings on May 4th were the culmination of a total of four days of student protest at Kent State that began on May 1st, following Nixon's announcement of the invasion on April 30th.² A nationwide wave of student activism and strikes were set into motion following the shootings, accompanied by a divisive reaction from the public.³

Chronology

May 1st

Friday, May 1st marked the beginning of the protests at Kent State, the first of which took place on the wide stretch of grass on campus known as the Commons.⁴ The Commons rests at the base of Blanket Hill, where the guardsmen would three days later begin their fatal advance toward the students.⁵ At this gathering, students spoke out together against the Vietnam War and symbolically buried a copy of the United States Constitution, representing its "murder" resulting from Nixon's decision to invade Cambodia.⁶ As reported by then-student [Donald Grant](#), the protesting escalated later that evening as it moved into downtown Kent, with a bonfire lit in the middle of the street and rocks thrown into store windows. Police officers from both the city of Kent as well as other parts of Portage County were brought to the scene, ultimately breaking up the crowd with tear gas as the then-mayor of the city of Kent, LeRoy Satrom, declared a state of emergency.⁷

May 2nd

May 2nd brought the arrival of the Ohio National Guard to Kent's campus and the surrounding area of the city.⁸ Following the unrest and destruction downtown the night prior, Mayor Satrom requested the guard's presence from then-Ohio governor Jim Rhodes in an effort to avoid any further disruption.⁹ At around 8:00 that evening, over a thousand students participated in a

¹ Kent State University Libraries, "[May 4 Chronology](#)," Special Collections and Archives, n.d.

² Jerry M. Lewis & Thomas R. Hensley, "[The May 4 shootings at Kent State University: The search for historical accuracy](#)," *The Ohio Council for the Social Studies Review* 34, 1 (1998): 9-21.

³ Erica Eckert, "[Learning from the tragedy at Kent State: Forty years after May 4](#)," *About Campus* 15, 1 (2010): 2-10.

⁴ Lewis & Hensley, "The May 4 shootings at Kent State University"

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Kent State University Libraries, "[May 1, Students Bury the Constitution](#)," Special Collections and Archives, n.d.

⁷ Lewis & Hensley, "The May 4 shootings at Kent State University"

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.



march around campus that ended with the burning of the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) building.¹⁰ It remains undetermined whether the fire was initially begun by a student or an outside protestor.¹¹ Firemen were brought to the scene, but protestors cut their hoses to prevent them from stopping the burning, and the building eventually entirely burned down.¹² The Guardsmen arrived later that night, using teargas and arrests to force students to clear the areas on campus where they were gathering.¹³

May 3rd

Close to one thousand Ohio National Guardsmen were present on campus by May 3rd, and Governor Rhodes made a special trip to Kent where he declared the student protestors “the worst type of people that we harbor in America” at a press conference.¹⁴ The students began to march to downtown Kent, and when guardsmen attempted to interfere with them doing so, they held a sit-in at the intersection of Lincoln and Main Street (see [Mapping May 4](#) for visual).¹⁵ According to then-student [Danny Benedict](#)'s first-hand testimony of that day, the students were told that Mayor Satrom would be coming to speak to them about the list of demands they had regarding the current situation on campus, but instead they were bayoneted by guardsmen and tear gassed from helicopters until they cleared the area. There was a ban placed on student rallies, and by the end of the day, the Ohio Riot Act had been read to them twice.¹⁶

May 4th

Over two thousand people gathered to protest at the Commons at noon on May 4th, disregarding the ban that had been put into place the day prior.¹⁷ Students were informed of a State of Emergency put into place by Governor Rhodes that was intended to prevent further rallying, however the State of Emergency had never become an official declaration—it was only mentioned by Rhodes as a consideration during his press conference on May 3rd.¹⁸ Due to Rhodes' threat, however, it was widely (mis)understood that the guardsmen, rather than the University, now had control over the students on campus, and that it was illegal for the students to continue to hold protests.¹⁹ Attempts were made by a Kent State police officer and a group of guardsmen to break up the crowd at the Commons, and protestors responded by throwing rocks at the jeep they were driving.²⁰ Following this, General Canterbury, the highest-ranking officer present on campus, reportedly ordered the guardsmen to prepare their weapons for fire.²¹ At

¹⁰ Mapping May 4, “[May 2: ROTC Building Burns](#),” n.d.

¹¹ Lewis & Hensley, “The May 4 shootings at Kent State University”

¹² Kent State University Libraries, “May 4 Chronology”

¹³ Lewis & Hensley, “The May 4 shootings at Kent State University”; Kent State University Libraries, “May 4 Chronology”

¹⁴ Lewis & Hensley, “The May 4 shootings at Kent State University”; Kent State University Libraries, “[Speech: Rhodes, James A.](#)” Kent State Shootings: Digital Archive

¹⁵ Mapping May 4, “[May 3: Main & Lincoln](#),” n.d.

¹⁶ Lewis & Hensley, “The May 4 shootings at Kent State University”; Kent State University Libraries, “May 4 Chronology”

¹⁷ Kent State University Libraries, “May 4 Chronology”

¹⁸ Lewis & Hensley, “The May 4 shootings at Kent State University”

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

this point, tear gas canisters were being thrown at the demonstrators, but they did not have a strong impact due to the blowing wind.²²

Bayonets fixed in hand, the guardsmen advanced toward the students, with both groups moving up Blanket Hill and approaching Taylor Hall.²³ The group of demonstrators and guardsmen reached a fenced-in practice football field as they reached the opposite side of the hill, where the guardsmen became surrounded by the students.²⁴ After several more minutes of an exchange of tear gas and rocks, the guard began to retreat back to the top of the hill, when they suddenly turned back around toward the students and began to fire.²⁵ Of the more than seventy guardsmen present, twenty-eight opened fire, firing sixty-seven shots in thirteen seconds.²⁶ Nine were injured and four were killed, all of whom were Kent State students.²⁷ The students killed were Jeffrey Miller, Alison Krause, William Schroeder, and Sandra Scheuer.²⁸ Wounded students included Joseph Lewis, Thomas Grace, John Clearly, Alan Canfora, Dean Kahler, Douglas Wrentmore, James Russell, Robert Stamps, and Donald Mackenzie.²⁹

Aftermath

Immediately after the shootings, the other protesting students began to advance toward the guardsmen in retaliation upon realizing that real shots had been fired and students had been hit.³⁰ It's been widely agreed that the interaction between the students and the guard would have continued to escalate had it not been for the intervention of several Kent State faculty members, specifically Professor of Geology Glenn Frank.³¹ Frank was able to get the students to disperse from the area through an emotional plea, convincing them that many more would die if they didn't leave.³² Following the dispersal of the students, the university was closed indefinitely, not resuming regular courses until the summer.³³

There has been much debate as to whether or not the guardsmen who fired at the protesting students did so out of self-defense and were consequently justified in their actions.³⁴ This argument was supported by the rulings of the federal criminal and civil trials dealing with the case; a jury vote of 9-3 at the 1975 federal civil trial declared that the guardsmen held no legal responsibility in what occurred on May 4th.³⁵ Similarly, a striking 58% of the country held firmly to the belief that the shooting was justified, with some going even further to argue that more

²² Kent State University Libraries, "May 4 Chronology"

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Lewis & Hensley, "The May 4 shootings at Kent State University"

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Lewis & Hensley, "The May 4 shootings at Kent State University"; Kent State University Libraries, "May 4 Chronology"

²⁷ Kent State University Libraries, "May 4 Chronology"

²⁸ Lewis & Hensley, "The May 4 shootings at Kent State University"

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Eckert, "Learning from the tragedy at Kent State: Forty years after May 4"

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Lewis & Hensley, "The May 4 shootings at Kent State University"

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.



students deserved to have been killed.³⁶ However, many others argue against this claim, specifically citing the proximity of the guardsmen to the students; the closest student wounded, Joseph Lewis, was 70 feet from the guardsmen when the shootings occurred, and the closest student killed, Jeffrey Miller, was almost 300 feet away.³⁷

Significance to civic/political engagement

What took place at Kent State University on May 4, 1970 is significant on a wider scale for many reasons, particularly those related to the idea that the events of that day served to “bring the war home.”³⁸ The violence and devastation occurring in Vietnam over the course of the war—to most, something that was happening “over there”—suddenly became intensely personal for all Americans aware of and impacted by the May 4th killings. One of the most notable responses to this was the wave of student activism that spread across the nation following the protests at Kent State.³⁹ Close to 450 colleges and universities were closed due to student strikes in the weeks after May 4th.⁴⁰ A particularly significant example was the six thousand students at the University of Washington who, on May 5th, created a blockade on the I-5 interstate while marching to the Seattle federal courthouse in protest of the war and support of the Kent students.⁴¹ They made this march three times, with the numbers of protesters on the interstate eventually reaching close to ten thousand.⁴² Student protests also took place at the University of Iowa, Princeton University, the University of Maryland, the University of California, San Diego, among numerous others.⁴³

The May 4th shootings are also a clear demonstration of a failure to uphold First Amendment protections, an issue that remains as relevant now as it was during the protests of the seventies.⁴⁴ The actions of the guardsmen, the federal court rulings to the event, and the negative public backlash toward the students all underscore the degree to which recognition of the right to protest has disintegrated amidst political divisiveness and repressive acts of state violence. As summarized by [Magarian \(2021\)](#), May 4th glaringly highlighted these issues, but the pervasiveness of them stretches far beyond and through those events, even to the present day—“Just as soldiers in 1970 could wantonly shoot protesters against military aggression in the heart of an Ohio campus, police officers in 2017 could savagely beat protesters against police violence on the streets of downtown Saint Louis.”

³⁶ Eckert, “Learning from the tragedy at Kent State: Forty years after May 4”

³⁷ Gregory P. Magarian, “[Kent State and the Failure of the First Amendment Law](#).” *Washington University Journal of Law & Policy* 65, 1 (2021): 041-060.

³⁸ Lewis & Hensley, “The May 4 shootings at Kent State University”

³⁹ Eckert, “Learning from the tragedy at Kent State: Forty years after May 4”

⁴⁰ Magarian, “Kent State and the Failure of the First Amendment Law”

⁴¹ Zoe Altaras, “[The May 1970 Student Strike at UW](#).” Antiwar and Radical History Project - Pacific Northwest, 2014.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Howard Means, *67 Shots: Kent State and the end of American innocence*. (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2016), n.p.

⁴⁴ Magarian, “Kent State and the Failure of the First Amendment Law”



Further resources

Books:

Barbato, Carole A., Laura L. Davis, and Mark F. Seeman. *This we know: A chronology of the shootings at Kent State, May 1970*. The Kent State University Press, 2013.

Bills, Scott L., ed. *Kent State/May 4: Echoes Through a Decade*. Kent State University Press, 1988.

Grace, Thomas M. "Kent State: Death and dissent in the long sixties." (2016).

Lewis, Jerry M., and Thomas R. Hensley., eds. *Kent State and May 4th: A Social Science Perspective*. Kent State University Press, 2010.

Academic articles:

Hine, Darlene Clark. "[The greater kent state era, 1968–1970 Legacies of Student Rebellions and State Repression.](#)" *Peace & change* 21, no. 2 (1996): 157-168.

Johnson, Heather. "[Memorializing Conflict and Controversy: A Look Into the Kent State Memorials.](#)" *History in the Making* 4, no. 1 (2011): 7.

O'Hara, John Fitzgerald. "[Kent State/May 4 and postwar memory.](#)" *American Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (2006): 301-328.

Other:

[Fire in the Heartland](#) documentary, produced and directed by Daniel Miller

[Mapping May 4](#) project, created by Dr. Jen Mapes and Dr. Sara Koopman

[The May 4th Augmented Reality Experience](#), created by Dr. Richard E. Ferdig (project director) et al.

[May 4 Collection](#) in Kent State University's Special Collections and Archives

Developed in Collaboration with the Growing Democracy Project.

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