

Race, May 4, 1970, & The Jackson State Killings

By Jo Cottrill, Peace and Conflict Studies Major, Kent State University Race & Democracy Intern, Growing Democracy Project

Four students were killed and nine were injured at Kent State University on [May 4, 1970](#), after being shot by members of the Ohio National Guard for protesting the continuation of the Vietnam War.^[1] Much discussion and debate has occurred following the shootings—questions of who was responsible, whether the killings violated the students' First Amendment rights, and more—but what is often left out of the conversation are the racial dynamics that were involved, both during the protests as well as in the aftermath. In particular, the perspectives and roles of Kent's Black student population, namely those in the university's Black United Students organization (BUS), are frequently neglected to be mentioned.^[2]

Just ten days after the May 4th shootings, fourteen students were wounded and killed by police and highway patrolmen on their campus at Jackson State University, a historically Black college in Mississippi.^[3] Although occurring so soon after and having clear similarities to the events of Kent State, remembrance of Jackson State has long been undermined in comparison to remembrance of May 4th – and this disparity has overwhelmingly been attributed to the racial differences between the victims of the two universities.^[4]

May 4th racial dynamics

It can be observed that all victims of the May 4th shootings (killed and wounded) were white, and the photographs from that day and those leading up to it overwhelmingly feature white students. Although Kent State's Black students made up only 3% of the university's total student population between 1969 and 1970, this was not the only reason for their apparent absence in the protests.^[5] There are several key points about the racial dynamics of May 4th that are often left unaddressed in discussion about the events, beginning with the student anti-war efforts on campus being an overwhelmingly white movement.^[6]

The mid-to-late sixties saw Black student groups (amidst many other local and national organizations) primarily oriented toward voting rights campaigns, and Kent State's Black United Students (BUS) in particular were putting most of their efforts at that time into addressing the structural racism present within the university's curriculum and hiring processes.^[7] Due to these factors, the Black students were less focused on the events of the Vietnam War, as they were overshadowed by the issues at their university that were currently directly impacting them.^[8] As stated by 1969 Black United Students president Erwind Blount, "...for me to rally to 'bury the constitution' was just a distraction from the real war Black students were fighting on campus."^[9]

The difference in the level of participation in the May 4th protests further came from the experience and knowledge of law enforcement the Black students had that the white students

did not, in particular with the capacity for violence held by the guard.^[10] Knowing the historical racism and disproportionate brutality of law enforcement toward Black individuals, especially young Black men, on May 3rd, the president of Kent's Black United Students urged its members to avoid any involvement in the protests taking place.^[11] Similarly, immediately following the killings, when tensions between the guardsmen and students were at their highest, BUS anticipated and prepared for Black students to be the first injured in any additional exchanges between the guardsmen and students.^[12] It was these dynamics, in union with the general climate at Kent State that was inattentive to the safety and wellbeing of its Black students, that led them to respond accordingly, avoiding direct involvement in the protests.^[13]

Jackson State shootings

The shootings at Jackson State University occurred on May 14, 1970, in a state that had long experienced racial tensions and racially motivated violence from its law enforcement.^[14] The image of white officers killing Black community members was not out of the norm in Mississippi; both groups brought to campus that night to put an end to the student gatherings, the Jackson city police and the Mississippi Highway Patrolmen, were notorious for their racism and overt use of violence against Black citizens.^[15] While parallels can be drawn between the Jackson State and Kent State shootings, it is important to note this distinction in the contexts that gave rise to each event. A deep-seated climate of racism and police brutality in the city of Jackson was foundational in the situation that unfolded and the way in which law enforcement responded to it, which was not a factor that influenced the May 4th killings.

Chronology

The environment at Jackson State began to escalate the day before the shootings, May 13, 1970, when a group of several hundred students were gathered at a main road in Jackson called Lynch Street.^[16] There was somewhat of a yearly "springtime ritual" of Jackson State students coming together to stand along Lynch Street and throw rocks at the cars of white drivers passing by.^[17] One student attending Jackson State at the time of the shootings described this activity as a means of letting out anger for the racism in their city and country; "[i]t was like the whites were doing them an injustice for so long, and then they go and ride by in those nice big cars. It was like rubbing salt into the wounds. It was easy to throw rocks at them."^[18] On May 13th, one of the cars struck by the rocks and bottles being thrown was a police car, and the officer driving it called the station to make a report of the incident.^[19] This brought a group of officers onto campus to barricade Lynch Street in an effort to prevent the students from continuing to throw items at the cars driving through.^[20]

After Lynch Street was barricaded, some of the students left to attempt to burn down the university's Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) building.^[21] To them, this building represented the racism and militarism that existed in the country and on their campus.^[22] Though the building was never successfully caught on fire, it was at this point that the Mississippi Highway Patrolmen arrived onto campus, as authorized by then-Mississippi governor John Williams.^[23] The Jackson law enforcement, in addition to having over twenty officers present, decided to also bring a military tank to the scene - though still the only damage done by the students had been the rocks and bottles thrown at the motorists.^[24] Eventually, the

students dispersed from where they had been congregating and returned to their dormitories, at around 2:30 in the morning.^[25]

On May 14th, little significant interaction took place between the students and the law enforcement on campus until late into the evening.^[26] The then-president of Jackson State, Dr. John A. Peoples, attempted to persuade the city's mayor, Russell Davis, to keep Lynch Street barricaded until the atmosphere at the university settled down.^[27] The law enforcement officers refused, saying that doing so would inconvenience too many residents driving on Lynch Street as they came home from work.^[28] However, the barricade would be set up again later that night, when, at around 9:30pm, more rocks were thrown outside of a men's dormitory on campus.^[29] Although around one hundred students had gathered at the dormitory, the majority of those actually throwing the rocks were "corner boys," the name given to the college-aged kids who did not attend Jackson State but often hung around the streets near the campus.^[30] By 11:00, the corner boys had lit a fire in a dump truck sitting on campus, which brought both the fire department and a group of law enforcement to the scene.^[31]

After the firemen had extinguished the fire and left the area, the law enforcement officers who had arrived with them stopped at the women's dormitory, Alexander Hall.^[32] A large group of students stood outside, jeering at the officers and some throwing rocks in their direction as members of the city police, the highway patrolmen, and the tank were all positioned around the dormitory.^[33] The students refused an order to disperse and were continuing to taunt the law enforcement when, suddenly, there was a loud sound from a bottle smashing into the ground near the officers.^[34] It was at this moment that the police and patrolmen immediately opened fire on the students, firing over two hundred and fifty shots in thirty seconds.^[35] As reported by another student present that night, "[t]he moment the bottle hit the ground the police and highway patrolmen appeared to go crazy. They began to fire their weapons as if all they had been waiting for was an excuse to fire."^[36]

Two were killed in the shooting; one was current Jackson State student Phillip Gibbs, and the other was high schooler James Earl Green, who was just passing through the campus on his way home from work.^[37] At least twelve were wounded, though this number is assumed to be a gross underestimate, as the only injuries on official records are those who were treated at the hospital.^[38]

Aftermath

The immediate aftermath of the shootings was its own stark demonstration of the racial climate of Jackson, Mississippi at that time. As ambulances brought the wounded students to the hospital nearest to the university, they were turned away and refused treatment solely because of their race.^[39] Once a hospital was found that agreed to treat their injuries, there were many reports from students of mistreatment from doctors and nurses being neglectful and insulting toward them - many even went to see their family doctors rather than going to the emergency room in anticipation of this treatment.^[40]

In the legal handling of the shootings, the officers involved justified their decision to open fire by claiming that the noise the bottle had made as it broke on the ground sounded like a gunshot

coming from the crowd, though all students present were unarmed.^[41] They also alleged that there were snipers in the dormitories who had caught them in a crossfire, and that was what prompted their shooting - but again, this claim was unfounded as no evidence of snipers was ever found.^[42] That being said, when the official ruling of the case was made almost two years later, all officers and highway patrolmen involved in the shooting were declared not guilty in the deaths and injuries of the students at Jackson State.^[43] Important to note is that this consensus was reached by an all-white jury.^[44]

Significance to civic/political engagement

As is made evident from the examples of the May 4th and Jackson State shootings, racial dynamics of state violence are often left unmentioned, though they are hugely influential in how events unfold and are remembered. While the May 1970 events of Kent State and Jackson State are comparable in that both were instances of state violence against university students, the role of race materialized in very distinct ways between the two. At Kent State, racial dynamics were the cause for Black students' intentional distancing from the interactions with the guardsmen and protest over the war, while at Jackson State, race entirely formed the basis for the exchange that took place between the students and law enforcement.

Particularly in the context of the victims of the violence, the element of race largely dictates which stories are foregrounded and which are overlooked. Many, particularly those in Jackson's Black community who experienced the events or aftermath of the shootings, argue that even the limited attention Jackson State did receive was only due to what had already taken place at Kent State so soon before.^[45] Had the shootings of May 4, 1970 not happened, they believe, the Jackson State killings likely would have been given no attention at all.^[46] It's argued that the overshadowing of the events of May 4th over those at Jackson State stemmed in large part from the uniqueness of the racial dynamics of the situation; in the United States at that time (and arguably still), it was highly unusual for the victims of white members of state law enforcement to also be white.^[47] It has been argued that this was a significant contributing factor in the amount of concern given to May 4th over that given to the Jackson State shootings.^[48] What occurred at Jackson State was unfortunately commonplace in a country that had routinely seen killings of Black individuals by white law enforcement for centuries, and thus was not viewed by the public as unordinary in the way that the May 4th shootings were.^[49] These examples clearly highlight the role of race in dictating which stories are foregrounded and which are overlooked.

Further resources

Articles:

Chura, Patrick. "["Mississippi Phenomenon": Reinterpreting the 1970 Jackson State Shootings in the Era of Black Lives Matter.](#)" *Peace & Change* 44, no. 1 (2019): 68-90.

Hughes-Watkins, Lael. "[Between Two Worlds: A Look at the Impact of the Black Campus Movement on the Antiwar Era of 1968-1970 at Kent State University.](#)" *Ohio History* 124, 1 (2017): 41-64

Peoples, John A. "[The Killings at Jackson State University: May, 1970.](#)" *Vietnam Generation* 2, no. 2 (1995): 14.

Young, Gene Cornelius. "[May 15, 1970: The Miracle at Jackson State University.](#)" *Vietnam Generation* 2, no. 2 (1995): 17.

Books:

Bristow, Nancy K. *Steeped in the Blood of Racism: Black Power, Law and Order, and the 1970 Shootings at Jackson State College*. Oxford University Press, 2020.

Spofford, Tim. *Lynch street: The May 1970 slayings at Jackson state college*. Kent State University Press, 1988.

Other:

[Kent State and the War That Never Ended](#) - The New Yorker

Democracy Now! interview with Gene Young, Jackson State student present during the shootings - "[40 Years Ago: Police Kill Two Students at Jackson State in Mississippi, Ten Days After Kent State Killings](#)"

More [multimedia resources](#) through the [Zinn Education Project](#)

NOTES:

- [1] 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.
- [2] Lae'I Hughes-Watkins, "[Between Two Worlds: A Look at the Impact of the Black Campus Movement on the Antiwar Era of 1968-1970 at Kent State University.](#)" *Ohio History* 124, 1 (2017): 41-64
- [3] Mark S. Giles, "[Race, social justice, and the Jackson State University shootings.](#)" in *Historically Black Colleges and Universities*, eds. Marybeth Gasman and Christopher L. Tudico (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 105-120.
- [4] Ibid.
- [5] Hughes-Watkins, "Between Two Worlds"
- [6] Ibid.
- [7] Ibid.
- [8] Ibid.
- [9] Ibid.
- [10] Ibid.
- [11] Bryan Warde, "[Black male disproportionality in the criminal justice systems of the USA, Canada, and England: A comparative analysis of incarceration.](#)" *Journal of African American Studies* 17, 4 (2013): 461-479. ; Hughes-Watkins, "Between Two Worlds"
- [12] Hughes-Watkins, "Between Two Worlds"
- [13] Ibid.
- [14] Giles, "Race, social justice, and the Jackson State University shootings"
- [15] Ibid.
- [16] Melandie McGee and R. Eric Platt, "[The forgotten slayings: Memory, history, and institutional response to the Jackson State University shootings of 1970.](#)" in *American Educational History Journal* 42, no. 1/2 (2015): 15., Giles, "Race, social justice, and the Jackson State University shootings"
- [17] McGee and Platt, "The forgotten slayings"
- [18] Spofford, Tim. *Lynch street: The May 1970 slayings at Jackson state college.* Kent State University Press, 1988, cited in Giles, "Race, social justice, and the Jackson State University shootings"
- [19] Giles, "Race, social justice, and the Jackson State University shootings"
- [20] Ibid.
- [21] Ibid.
- [22] Ibid.

- [23] Ibid.
- [24] Ibid.
- [25] McGee and Platt, "The forgotten slayings"
- [26] Ibid.
- [27] Giles, "Race, social justice, and the Jackson State University shootings"
- [28] Ibid.
- [29] Ibid.
- [30] Giles, "Race, social justice, and the Jackson State University shootings," McGee and Platt, "The forgotten slayings"
- [31] Giles, "Race, social justice, and the Jackson State University shootings"
- [32] Ibid.
- [33] Ibid.
- [34] Ibid.
- [35] Ibid.
- [36] Ibid.
- [37] Ibid.
- [38] Ibid.
- [39] Ibid.
- [40] Spofford, Tim. *Lynch street: The May 1970 slayings at Jackson state college*. Kent State University Press, 1988, cited in Giles, "Race, social justice, and the Jackson State University shootings"
- [41] Spofford, Tom. "[Lynch Street: The May, 1970 Slayings at Jackson State University](#)." *Vietnam Generation* 2, no. 2 (1995): 15., Giles, "Race, social justice, and the Jackson State University shootings"
- [42] Ibid
- [43] McGee and Platt, "The forgotten slayings"
- [44] Giles, "Race, social justice, and the Jackson State University shootings"
- [45] McGee and Platt, "The forgotten slayings"
- [46] Ibid.
- [47] Ibid.
- [48] Ibid.
- [49] Ibid.

