



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on May 4, 2020

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Kent State What Happened and Why

Tension filled the air as Ohio National Guardsmen made the climb toward Blanket Hill on the campus of Kent State University, and students surged toward them. The National Guard had been called to the campus following the torching of the ROTC building on Saturday night, and now, on Monday, May 4, 1970, a few thousand students filled the commons area of the campus for a planned protest.



The Guardsmen half-turned, keeping a wary eye on the students drawing ever nearer — some of whom had been mixing verbal assaults with rocks and other projectiles for the past several minutes. Then, at 12:24 pm., several Guardsmen turned and began firing M-1 rifles.

Within a few seconds, Guardsmen had fired 67 shots, killing four students and leaving nine wounded. One student was permanently paralyzed.

Fifty years have now passed since this tragic incident. Why did it happen, and why did it happen at Kent State?

It seemed so unlikely at the time. A violent confrontation like this would not have been all that surprising at such radicalized campuses as Cal-Berkeley, or some other high-profile university in California or New York in the toxic atmosphere of the times, during the Vietnam War. But as James Michener wrote in his book *Kent State: What Happened and Why*, this event happening at Kent State was “no accident.”

As we make a closer examination of the shootings at Kent State, we are struck by the *organization* of events throughout, leading us to the conclusion that a small core of revolutionaries *wanted* martyrs to their revolutionary socialist cause.

Howard Means, writing in *67 Shots: Kent State and the End of American Innocence*, noted that the FBI had met with the Kent police and the campus police *two years earlier* to inform them of the ramped-up radical activity going on. In 1968, the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) began intense efforts to radicalize Kent State, with organizers from Chicago and Cleveland making multiple trips to the campus.

Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)

The SDS was launched in 1960 as the student branch of the League for Industrial Democracy, founded in 1905 by socialists such as Upton Sinclair and Jack London. Then, in 1962, a University of Michigan student — Tom Hayden, who later married pro-Viet Cong actress Jane Fonda — captured leadership of the SDS, and dropped the group’s earlier opposition to communists joining the group. Instead it now welcomed leftists of all persuasions, all with the intent to tear down the present structure of society, and rebuild it more to their liking.

Intrinsic to the existence of the SDS was provoking confrontation, and this they quickly accomplished at



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Kent State. In April 1969, SDS led about 50 students in storming the administration building, demanding, among other things, the termination of the ROTC program and the degree program in law enforcement. After a scuffle with campus police, the SDS's campus charter was revoked.

This forced the SDS underground, but not out of existence, at Kent State.

An official SDS publication summarized the event, explaining that “the struggle is not over” at Kent State.

Kent State was also the focus of the Youth International Party, better known as the “Yippies,” a leftist group whose manifesto was co-written by Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman. At a rally on the Kent State campus less than one month before the May 4 shootings, Rubin told about 2,000 students, “The first part of the Yippie program is to kill your parents,” and insisted that Kent State was a “super prison.” He promised, “We’re going to build a new society within American society.” When Michener went to Kent State after the shootings to research his book, one anonymous SDS leader told him that they were for the eventual overthrow of the government, hatred for Israel, admiration for Communist China, blowing up police stations, ending monogamy, and support for ecology.

Two days after the shooting, after searching the body of one of the slain students — Jeff Miller, who was one of the campus radicals — the Highway Patrol found a scrap of paper with a telephone number and the words “communication center.” After tracing the number, the Kent police obtained a search warrant of the address and found a letter from Rubin’s Yippie comrade, Abbie Hoffman, to a Kent student, dated April 30, 1970, in which he urged them to “build the conspiracy in your back yard that will defend our growing nation.”

Kent was the focus of many well-known outside agitators, such as Bernardine Dohrn, who had been elected interorganizational secretary of the national committee of SDS in 1968. Dohrn made multiple appearances at Kent State, urging revolutionary action. When asked what her qualifications were for such a high-ranking post in the SDS, she responded that she was a revolutionary communist. Indeed, she met later that year with leaders of the National Liberation Front, the political arm of the communists in South Vietnam. When speaking at the University of Washington, she warned, “A bunch of us who believe this, and a few well-placed bombs, could stop a lot of the institutions from functioning in this country.” She even praised Charles Manson.

Years later, a young community organizer in Chicago, Barack Obama, would launch his campaign for state senate in the home of Dohrn and her husband, Bill Ayers, who as founder of the group Weathermen embarked on a series of bombings across the country (a man Obama would later defend as “just a guy in the neighborhood”). Ayers was one of many of what the SDS called “regional travelers” (itinerant revolutionaries) who frequented Kent State in the months before the shootings. Michener described Ayers as a man who was well-known for his ability to organize radical groups for “effective action.”

Another regional traveler who made trips to Kent State was Mark Rudd, who was a “hero” to the Kent SDS for his role in temporarily shutting down Columbia University.

And not all the outside agitation was from inside the United States. Two war correspondents for the *Chicago Daily News*, Keyes Beech and Georgie Anne Geyer, investigated the radicalization on American campuses, and their investigation led them to Communist Cuba. “The pattern is clear,” they wrote. “Mark Rudd, Bernardine Dohrn, Angela Davis, and Joudon M. Ford, who led the riots at San Francisco



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University, all received instruction in Cuba.” American revolutionaries even met with representatives from Communist North Vietnam while in Cuba.

But most of the money to support the radicalization at Kent and other campuses came from domestic sources. The Illinois Crime Investigating Commission discovered a diary and address book left behind by Bernardine Dohrn when she fled her apartment in Chicago. Using the book, they found that a Chicago bank handled over \$200,000 for SDS activities. One large tax-exempt foundation was among the contributors to the cause.

Nixon Announces the Cambodian Incursion

Clearly, the potential for trouble at Kent State was growing in the spring of 1970 when President Richard Nixon announced in a nationally broadcast television address that he was sending combat troops into Vietnam’s neighbor, Cambodia. Nixon had campaigned on an ambiguous promise to “bring an honorable end to the war in Vietnam.” This turned out to be Vietnamization — turning the bulk of the fighting over to the South Vietnamese army, as U.S. forces were slowly withdrawn. The ferocity of the antiwar movement had lessened over the first year and a half of the Nixon presidency, but his announcement that he was pushing into Cambodia to clear out Viet Cong there led to an eruption of charges that he was “widening the war.”

While it has been logically assumed that the burning of the ROTC building on the Saturday following Nixon’s announcement was precipitated by the invasion of Cambodia, Kent’s Fire Chief, Fred Miller, had called his firefighters together *a week before the attack on the ROTC building*, and told them, “Fellows, we have pretty good intelligence that the university kids are going to burn down the ROTC building,” and that it “could be any time.”

But there is no doubt that Nixon’s announcement provided a ready excuse to implement those plans.

The day after Nixon’s speech was May 1, celebrated around the world by communists as a day of “solidarity.” It was also the day that violence erupted not on the campus, but in downtown Kent. It was the first warm night after what had been a long, hard winter in Ohio, and a larger-than-usual crowd was milling around. At around 10 o’clock, someone threw a beer bottle at a passing car on Water Street, breaking out the back window.

Joseph Bujack, who ran a business on Water Street, later told Michener’s investigators that he was worried. There were several people whom he had never seen before, and they were wearing what looked like uniforms, with red armbands. One protester was waving a Viet Cong flag. Bujack called the police, and as the patrol car made its way along the street, it was hit by a beer bottle. A few minutes later, an elderly couple’s car was pelted with multiple beer bottles. As the couple sped away, someone in the crowd shouted, “Pigs off the street! We won’t go to Cambodia.”

Several merchants reported they were warned by some protesters that they were to either display antiwar slogans in their front windows, or their businesses would be burned down.

Then, at 11:30 trash cans were emptied into the middle of the street and their contents set ablaze. This was soon followed by the smashing of store windows up and down the block. Eventually, 47 windows were broken out. Mayor LeRoy Satrom declared a state of emergency, and placed a call to the governor’s office, advising one of the aides that he might have to ask for help. Satrom returned to downtown and announced that he was instituting the Ohio Riot Act.



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Eventually, calm enveloped the city — and the campus — but the worst was yet to come.

The Torching of the ROTC Building

The burning of an ROTC building was not unique to Kent State. During 1969 and 1970, almost 200 such buildings came under attack at both large and small universities across America. They were obvious targets for the antiwar movement.

Kent police chief Roy Thompson told Mayor Satrom that afternoon that he had received information that not only the ROTC building was to be burned, but attempts would also be made to torch the local Army recruiting stations and the local post office.

At 8:10 p.m. on Saturday, Glenn Frank, a popular geology professor at Kent, was watching the growing mob with concern, when he suddenly heard someone from behind Taylor Hall shout, “Down with ROTC!” This was followed by a mob of about 2,000 students surging across the commons, heading toward the ROTC building. After several abortive attempts to get a fire started inside the building, they finally succeeded in setting the building afire.

Informed of the trouble on campus, Mayor Satrom placed a call to the National Guard, asking for help. By 8:49 p.m., the building was clearly on fire, and someone finally called the fire department. Four minutes later, a fire truck arrived, but without the help of police, they had difficulty getting close enough to the fire to be effective in putting it out.

After a fire hose was hooked to a fire hydrant, some students grabbed the nozzle and took it out of the reach of the firemen. When a second effort was made to attach a hose, the same group attacked the hose with knives and ice picks. Another student used a machete to hack the hose into two pieces. Finally, the firefighters themselves were assaulted, with one being struck with a wooden club, which caused them to give up their efforts. After all, even after all this time, no police, either from the campus or the city, had arrived on the scene to help them.

Photo: AP Images

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It was not until about two hours after the first assaults began on the ROTC building that 10 men from the county sheriff’s department arrived, followed by a few members from the campus police. Tear gas was used to drive the mob back from the building, but by this time, the fire was already smoldering.

At almost 10:00, shouting was heard that the president’s house would be burned next. Another group even attempted to burn the library. Fortunately, by this time, highway patrolmen had arrived at the scene, and additional arson was prevented.

As some units of the National Guard entered the city late that night, they were greeted by pieces of flying bricks and rocks, sending one Guardsman to the hospital for treatment.

Fortunately, the arrival of National Guard troops — placed at strategic points near the campus — using tear gas liberally prevented any more destruction of property. By midnight, General Robert Canterbury was able to report, “The situation at Kent is under control.”

Murvin Perry, then head of the School of Journalism at Kent, later recalled the night. “As ROTC burned, I stood on the walk north of the tennis courts, watching the National Guard clear the commons area. It



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was then I heard someone shout, 'Here they come! Chicks up front!' This was the traditional cry of street fighters who rely on the hope that neither the Guard nor the police will fire at girls."

This is just one of several examples of *organization* in the Kent State episode. Michener interviewed a young man, Nick Haskakis, who tried to take photographs of the event. Haskakis told Michener, "There was strong leadership of the sort that says, 'Let's do this next.' And when they spoke, people acted."

Sunday Calm Turns Ugly

The next day — Sunday — was a day of relative calm, until nighttime. As Michener wrote, "Many students, disturbed by the rioting of the two preceding nights, and gratified that the troubles had apparently ended, went to church, where ministers preached against violence and deplored its consequences."

There was even some flirting between coeds and the Guardsmen that Sunday afternoon. A foreign student from India, Ramesh Garg, took the iconic photograph of Allison Krause placing a flower in the muzzle of one of the Guardsmen's guns, with the words, "Flowers are better than bullets." Ironically, Krause was one of the campus radicals who would die the next day.

Similar fraternization continued throughout the afternoon, but after seven in the evening, the atmosphere changed abruptly. A young blonde-headed man began shouting, "One, two, three, four! We don't want your f*****g war." After a few minutes of that, he led a crowd in a second chant: "Two, four, six, eight! We won't live in a fascist state."

A couple hours later, his incendiary rhetoric became more specific: "Let's march to the president's house," and hundreds of students began surging across campus. Soon there were about 3,000 in the mob, led by the blonde-headed radical, shouting, "To the president's house!" as though they were storming the Bastille.

Fortunately, they were stopped by the National Guard, who began tear-gassing them. "Back to the commons," shouted the leaders.

Soon, the leaders decided the mob needed to march on the town, but once again they were intercepted by other units of the National Guard. With that, most of the mob retreated back to campus. But some refused to leave, and staged a sit-in in the middle of the street.

Leaders pushed the mob closer to the Guardsmen, whose bayonets were glistening from street lights. At 10:23, students with white bands on their arms and large white crosses in the middle of their backs began to taunt the Guardsmen and urge resistance from the crowd.

One Guardsman recalled, "Who was leading the riot? There was a hard core of about twelve, with white armbands and crosses on their backs, cutting around in back of us, linking hands at the far edges of the mob and pushing forward, making people crush in on us. 'Move on in!' this determined crowd kept repeating, but they didn't come in themselves."

Finally, the Guard moved forward with bayonets, and the mob dispersed. As bad as the last three days had been, it would get even worse on Monday, May 4.

The Shootings on Monday

A rally for Monday on the commons had previously been announced on Friday, but Mayor Satrom had declared a state of emergency, outlawing any outdoor demonstrations that day. It is unclear how many



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students were aware of Satrom's declaration, but General Canterbury was prepared to enforce it. At noon, there would be a surge of students in the commons, as one set of classes was dismissed and the next began, and the commons provided a convenient walkway, so to speak, between classes.

At 11:48 a.m., two students climbed on to the brick housing of the Victory Bell that was now ringing, issuing calls to action. At 11:49, Harold Rice of the Kent campus police began shouting into a bullhorn, "Attention! This is an order. Disperse immediately. This is an order. Leave this area immediately. This is an order. Disperse." Unfortunately, it is doubtful many students could hear him.

At 11:55, the order came to the Guardsmen: "If you have not already done so, load and lock. Prepare for gas attack." Then, at 11:59, Canterbury gave the order to move out and "disperse this mob." The plan was to use his small force of less than 100 enlisted men and officers to sweep the commons, driving the demonstrators across the crest of Blanket Hill, keeping Taylor Hall on their left, and the pagoda — a square bench shaded by a concrete umbrella — on the right.

Students began throwing rocks, along with chunks of wood studded with nails, and jagged hunks of concrete. Lieutenant Colonel Charles Fassinger told the *Cleveland Press*, "I was hit a number of times, once with a triangular shaped rock seven inches on the side and two inches thick." One person even charged a Guardsman with a parking meter. A grand jury later reported, "Fifty-eight Guardsmen were injured by rocks and other objects." Nearby construction workers testified later that about 200 bricks were taken from a construction site. The FBI later collected 175 pounds of rocks, bricks, and wood with nails from Blanket Hill where the Guard were being assaulted. They were also hit with human feces and urine.

As the Guard retreated under the constant barrage, at just before 12:30 p.m., they suddenly turned at the corner of Taylor Hall and fired, leaving four students dead and nine wounded.

Before answering why Guardsmen fired, one must ask why any sane person would surge toward men with M-1 rifles. Multiple witnesses have testified that the students had been told, repeatedly, by the "leaders," that the Guardsmen's rifles were not loaded.

Eventually, the Department of Justice, then led by liberal Republican Elliot Richardson, opened an investigation that led to a federal grand jury indicting eight members of the Guard for violating the students' civil rights. They were acquitted. Civil actions against them led to out-of-court settlements. The local grand jury cleared the Guardsmen of any criminal liability. In fact, the bulk of the criticism in their report was directed toward the outside agitators.

One could certainly understand a lone Guardsman panicking as an angry mob surged toward him, but why did multiple Guardsmen turn in unison and fire at the same time? For one, they had been told that some of the students had firearms, and two, they had been alerted to beware of snipers.

Evidence of a Sniper

Michener quoted a Guardsman named Jim Pierce who had told a friend that there were snipers on rooftops on Sunday night. General Canterbury specifically said that he heard a shot that preceded the gunfire by his men. *Cleveland Plain Dealer* writers Joseph Eszterhas and Michael Roberts, writing two days after the event, said, "Ballistics experts were also checking a wall which had allegedly been struck by a bullet or bullets fired toward the Guardsmen." Dr. Joseph Ewing of Akron treated one wounded student at St. Thomas Hospital and told the *Elyria Chronicle-Telegram* less than a week later, "This boy



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was not injured by a weapon carried by the National Guard. I found no bullets in the x-ray, which means it had to be of small caliber. If the bullet had been either a .45 or a .30 caliber, he would be dead, his spinal cord would have been severed and side of his head blown away.”

Too, a student told the *Akron Beacon Journal* the next day that he heard what he thought was a gunshot from atop Taylor Hall, though the Guardsmen were on the ground near the hall, not on the roof. Famed investigative journalist Alan Stang noted in the June 1974 edition of *American Opinion* (forerunner of *The New American*) that Guardsmen were also standing near a thick, steel sculpture, which suffered a gunshot from a bullet fired toward the Guardsmen.

He then cited Michener’s interview with teacher Elizabeth Runyan, who recalled that she and her students “walked in a kind of daze to that big piece of steel sculpture in front of Taylor Hall and we saw where one of the bullets had cut its way right through the thick steel.”

Very importantly, Esztherhas and Roberts discovered a non-military shell casing and wrote, “A preliminary test indicated there was a bullet hole in a 15-foot welded steel sculpture in front of Taylor Hall. The bullet would have been fired in the direction of the Guardsmen.”

Stang photographed the bullet hole, which showed one side of the plate is jagged, with shards of extended metal around the circumference of the hole. “That is the side of the plate where the Guardsmen were standing, which means that the bullet that made the hole was fired *at* them, not *by* them. It does not even take a ballistics expert to determine that the aforesaid condition of the plate indicates that the bullet exited from it and sped toward the Guardsmen.”

Stang concluded, “There *was* a sniper!”

But being the careful journalist that he was, Stang sought an expert opinion — and was referred to C.H. Mallett, the chief of the Windham, Ohio, police department. Mallett was a law-enforcement trainer. After Mallett examined the bullet hole in the steel plate for several minutes, using a variety of instruments, Stang asked him which way the bullet went. He pointed to the spot between the pagoda and the corner of Taylor Hall, where the Guardsmen had been standing.

“How sure are you?” Stang asked.

Mallett responded, “Absolutely positive,” adding there was no doubt in his mind.

To Stang, it now all made sense. “It was because of the sniper that the Guardsmen suddenly about-faced and fired. In fact, it is reasonable to speculate that the sniper finally fired when he did because the students had failed to provoke the Guardsmen to retaliate.”

As Stang summarized, “When the professional terrorists became afraid that the incident would end without the ‘martyrs’ they had worked almost two years to get, the sniper opened fired with his weapon. The Guardsmen did what they were trained to do — they fired in the direction from which the sniper’s bullet came.”

Stang explained that the direction of the bullet’s travel shows that the bullet came from beyond the parking lot, in the general area of Prentice Hall, most likely from the green door on the roof leading to the stairwell, from one of the windows, or from the grassy area at one corner of the building.

Stang admitted that he did not know exactly who the sniper was, and 50 years later, we still do not know. But as Stang asserted, he was “most probably” a member of one of the revolutionary terrorist



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squads trained for the purpose.

When Stang visited Kent campus four years after the incident, the bullet hole was still there, but for some inexplicable reason, the Scranton Commission, set up in 1970 by President Richard Nixon to investigate the shooting, claimed that it found “no evidence” for a sniper.

What we can conclude from this unhappy incident, in which four Kent students were killed and nine others wounded, is that Kent State was targeted by revolutionaries for an incident, and they got it. At every step, revolutionary socialists pushed for martyrs for their cause — not themselves, mind you — but gullible students who were told that the National Guardsmen had empty guns. Radical leaders pushed these students into the line of fire.

The National Guardsmen were also victims, being thrown into a very difficult situation, with inadequate numbers to control the situation. For those who want to play Monday-morning quarterback 50 years after the event, it is easy to create scenarios of what the Guardsmen could have done differently to have avoided the tragic ending. After hours of enduring not just verbal assaults, but physical assaults with rocks, bricks, and pieces of concrete, and an angry mob surging toward them, a mob that could have been upon them in a mere few seconds, just what should they have done when they heard a shot directed at them?

Blame should rest not on the Guardsmen, but upon those revolutionary leaders who worked for months to provoke this incident, certainly one of the saddest in American history.

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