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Honors Thesis

Outrage at Oklahoma:

Campus Protests in the Weeks after the Kent State Shootings

In his book, *The Debate over Vietnam*, David Levy suggests that college campuses, as a whole, were not the breeding grounds of antiwar protests as they are often depicted in popular culture. He states that, “In fact, if one was considering only a person’s age, older Americans were far more likely to oppose the war than were younger ones.” He cites Gallup polls from 1965, 1968, and 1971. In all three polls, the “Under 30” age group expressed a greater support of the Vietnam War than the middle-aged and older demographics. By his estimation, “Probably fewer than half of all campuses experienced organized antiwar activity during the 1960s.”¹

However, measuring the percentage of campuses that hosted protests has its pitfalls. Levy explains that a large number of colleges had no culture of protest on campus at all, especially if they were small, conservative, vocational, or were two-year institutions. These schools either lacked the infrastructure to organize protests, attracted the sorts of students supported the war, or students did not see them as an adequate stage for antiwar protests. Rather, “elite” institutions hosted the largest number and the most visible of campus protests. Levy defines “elite” as the 150-200 most prestigious universities in the country that had a reputation and attracted students from beyond their immediate communities (the University of Oklahoma met those criteria). And even within that subset of universities at which protests were the most common, it is important to remember that “opponents of the war on America’s leading campuses were able to project an image of discontent with the war than was probably actually the case.” Even into the mid-1960s,

¹ Levy, David. *The Debate over Vietnam*. Second edition. Johns Hopkins University Press. Baltimore, 1995. p.103

support for the war among younger Americans was widespread enough that students often staged counter-demonstrations when antiwar protesters tried to draw attention to themselves. When a group of about seventy-five protesters heckled cadets at an ROTC ceremony at Cornell in 1965, they faced shouts and even thrown eggs from about four thousand students who did not approve of them.² Conservative student organizations such as the Young Republicans and the Young Americans for Freedom provided an organizational structure for students who were in favor of the war. But as the war went on and public support declined for it across all demographics, the antiwar groups became “more vocal, more visible, more energetic, more deeply aroused, [and] more profoundly engaged.”³

Until 1970, the anti-war movement had not impacted the University of Oklahoma campus. There were no organized student strikes, no occupation of administration buildings, and no demonstrations that broke out into violence or ended in arrests. The University had about 12,000 students at the time most of whom were white. Black and Native American students made up a small minority. OU tended to attract a more urban student body from a larger radius compared to Oklahoma’s other flagship university, Oklahoma State University. Some students published an underground paper that published articles against the draft and the war, but overall the University of Oklahoma had been a tranquil place compared to hot-beds of student protest found on the East and West Coasts. Many OU students focused their energy on issues other than the Vietnam War. The Afro-American Student Union lobbied for the creation of an African-American Studies curriculum, socially liberal students wanted easy access to birth control

² DeBenedetti, Charles. *An American Ordeal: The Antiwar Movement of the Vietnam Era*. Syracuse University Press. Syracuse. 1990. p. 119

³ Levy, David. *The Debate over Vietnam*. Second edition. Johns Hopkins University Press. Baltimore, 1995. p.106

literature on campus, and students of all political streaks were upset when the university raised the mandatory on-campus residency age from twenty-one to twenty-four in order to pay off the newly constructed dormitory towers.

On May 4th, 1970, thousands of students gathered at Kent State University to protest U.S. military incursion into Cambodia. Members of the Ohio National Guard attempted to disperse the students, and the students responded by throwing back the guardsmen's tear gas canisters and lobbing bricks. The guardsmen opened fire on the crowd in a moment of confusion. The guardsmen killed four students and wounded another nine. Two of the slain students were not even participating in the protest, but had just walking from one class to the next. Furious reactions erupted on college campuses across America. According to Kirkpatrick Sale, "from May 5 to May 8, there were major campus demonstrations at a rate of more than 100 a day, students at a total of at least 350 institutions went on strike and 536 schools were shut down completely for some period of time." Furthermore, more than half of all universities in the nation experienced demonstrations in the days following the Kent State shooting.⁴ Charles DeBenedetti's data corroborates those statistics and adds that, "Over 4,000 students were arrested from San Francisco State to Swarthmore, while 7 percent of the country's schools reported violent protests including property damage or personal injury."⁵ Students at Brandeis University took the initiative to create The National Student Strike Information Center in an attempt to co-ordinate student strikes across the country.⁶ At the University of Texas Austin,

⁴ Sale, Kirkpatrick. *SDS*. Vintage Books. 1974.

⁵ DeBenedetti, Charles. *An American Ordeal: The Antiwar Movement of the Vietnam Era*. Syracuse University Press. Syracuse. 1990. p. 242-243

⁶ Zaroulis, Nancy & Sullivan, Gerald. *Who Spoke Up?: American Protest Against the War in Vietnam 1963-1975*. Doubleday & Company, Inc. Garden City, New York. 1984. p. 320

hundreds of students marched on the state capitol on May 5th, and a demonstration of over 10,000 students and other citizens of Austin took place on the 8th.⁷

There was a good deal of concern amongst university administrators about “outside agitators” instigating student protests on campus, and this anxiety only increased after the Kent State shooting. On May 5th, Hollomon met with an impromptu committee of faculty members to figure out “What to do about these kookies that were infiltrating the campus from Berkeley and Michigan and Wisconsin.”⁸ Bill Jones confirmed that “we had an element [of agitators] at that time...that was moving literally from campus to campus promoting these demonstrations,” and that “we were dealing with professional agitators for lack of a better term.”⁹ However, these fears may have been unfounded, or even a deliberate effort to scapegoat the unrest on campus to nebulous outsiders. Some antiwar activists made their home in Norman. Though the members of the struggling SDS chapter on campus had stopped meeting regularly in 1969, due to low recruitment numbers and police surveillance of the SDS office, activists frequently congregated at the Renaissance Fair, a coffee shop on Campus Corner. Activists printed up *The Jones Family Grandchildren*, an anti-draft and antiwar newspaper in the back room and distributed copies on campus.¹⁰ There is no evidence that “outside agitators” played any significant role in the protests that occurred in the weeks following Kent State. Perhaps they were very covert in their efforts, but it appears that bona fide OU student activists planned the demonstrations that took place on Brooks Street, the North Oval, and in the football stadium.

⁷ *Twentieth Century Texas: A Social and Cultural History*. Ed. Storey, John W. and Kelley, Mary L. University of North Texas Press. 2008. p. 186

⁸ Hollomon, Herbert. Personal interview with Herbert Hengst. April 8, 1980.

⁹ Jones, Bill. Personal interview with Herbert Hengst. February 2, 1984.

¹⁰ Wright, Michael. *The Sociology of Human Relations*. M.A. Thesis. University of Oklahoma. p. 16

The University of Oklahoma was not immune to the tension that gripped colleges across the country. The next day students gathered to protest outside of the ROTC building on campus, known as the Armory, just north of the football stadium. As the most tangible symbol of the military on campus, the ROTC program was the logical target for protestors to express their anger. However, this protest did not carry a tone of sadness or rage that one might expect the day after national guardsmen shot students on another college campus. In fact, the *Oklahoma Daily* described the protest as having a “holiday atmosphere”.¹¹ Students tossed Frisbees to each other, blew bubbles, and danced about as the ROTC cadets practiced the drills that they were going to perform at an awards ceremony the next week.

Some people held the opinion that this first protest was not particularly serious. OU campus police chief Bill Jones said that, “It wouldn’t have mattered what the hell the reason was, they would have been doing their little fairy dances and carrying on to get themselves on TV.”¹² A film of the protest shows one of the demonstrators wearing an Uncle-Sam top hat.¹³ But as the protest continued the demonstrators gradually got more into the faces of the cadets, the nature of the event became darker and angrier. The protesting students walked amongst the cadets, taunted and jeered at them, and encouraged them to break ranks and participate with them in the demonstration. But even then, the protesters did not manifest their anger into physical violence. According to Michael Wright, one of the protesting students, “I don’t recollect it [the protest] as

¹¹ Davis, Fred. “Disorder Hits Campus”. *The Oklahoma Daily*. May 6, 1970, p. 1

¹² Jones, Bill. Personal interview with William McKeen. March 26, 1986.

¹³ Hockman, Ned. *May 5th Through 12th: The University of Oklahoma*. Norman: The University of Oklahoma Office of Motion Picture Production, 1970. Archived at Oklahoma Historical Society.

being vicious. The protestors did not throw things at the ROTC cadets. I don't recall seeing anyone assaulted.... I do recollect that the general tenor was 'friendly taunts.'”¹⁴

Bill Jones had a different recollection of the interactions between the protesters and the cadets. Bill Jones praised the ROTC, stating that, “These cadet officers were being everything but spit on and their commanders kept them in tow and kept them in line and did not over-react.”¹⁵ Whatever the level of venom the protesters packed into their shouts, the atmosphere definitely took a sour turn when a student, Keith Green, started waving a Viet Cong flag. Campus police grabbed the flagpole away from him, and forced him to the ground when he wrestled with the officers over the flag. The officers arrested Green and charged him with flying the flag of an enemy nation.¹⁶ In his subsequent trial, his lawyer, Stephen Jones, successfully argued that the statue was unconstitutional and the judge dismissed the case. Jones would later gain national notoriety for representing Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh.¹⁷ Because Green was visually impaired, he brought a fellow protester to accompany him to the police car. Once the protestors saw Green being taken away to be arrested, they turned on the campus police. According to Gordon Christenson, assistant to university president Herbert Hollomon, “That provoked a mob...then it was against students, because they got this poor martyred symbol there and the cops tackled him. So students who would not have participated immediately congregated around.”¹⁸

¹⁴ Wright, Michael. Personal interview with William McKeen. April 26, 1986.

¹⁵ Jones, Bill. Personal interview with William McKeen. March 26, 1986.

¹⁶ Davis, Fred. “Disorder Hits Campus”. *The Oklahoma Daily*. May 6, 1970, p. 1

¹⁷ Voices of Oklahoma website. http://www.voicesofoklahoma.com/stephen_jones.html. Accessed 12/13/13.

¹⁸ Christenson, Gordon. Personal interview with William McKeen

Hundreds of students surrounded the police car on Brooks Street for over an hour, despite police exhortations to disperse. They also “let all the air out of the tires, jumped up and down on it, beat the hell out of it, and were trying to light rags in the gas tank.”¹⁹ Eventually Bill Jones requested help from the Oklahoma Highway Patrol. The troopers advanced on the protesters in formation with billy clubs at the ready. They were able to transfer the police officers and their detainees into a “paddy wagon”. A few blocks away they transferred the group into a different police cruiser to take them to the police station.²⁰ The Highway Patrol arrested two other students who had scuffled with them as they tried to clear the street.²¹ After the crowd had thinned officers drove the battered police car away on its flat tires, and order re-emerged just as quickly as it had disappeared. According to State Attorney General G.T. Blankenship, who had been sent to campus by Governor Bartlett to observe the demonstration, “All of a sudden everything stopped, as if turning off a switch.”²²

Despite all of the chaos and anger, there were remarkably few injuries. Only one student went to the hospital to have cuts on his chin treated.²³ The fortuitous absence of violence is exemplified in an anecdote from that day. During the skirmish, a pistol somehow fell from the holster of one of the police officers. “That conjured up all kinds of wild thoughts about who was

¹⁹ Jones, Bill. Personal interview with William McKeen. March 26, 1986.

²⁰ Fulkerton, Ron. “It was a Party – At First”. *The Daily Oklahoman*. May 6, 1970, p. 16.

²¹ Pitts, Teresa. “Student Unrest Breeds Rally”. *The Oklahoma Daily*. May 7, 1970, p.1

²² Blankenship, G.T. Personal interview with William McKeen April 27, 1986.

²³ Tempest, Rone. “OU Students, Police Clash Over Protest”. *The Daily Oklahoman*. May 6, 1970, p.1

going to get shot with it,” said Jones. But after the dust had settled, a man simply walked up and told an officer that he had found the gun on the ground, and handed it back over.²⁴

Coincidentally, Bill Moffitt was sworn in as the student body president at a student congress meeting that evening. He was the first African-American student ever elected to the position. Immediately afterwards, he spoke at a rally of two thousand students on the South Oval. He implored the students to keep their cool, and warned them that, “We can’t change the world with dead students.” He left the crowd with the suggestion that they re-assemble on the North Oval the next morning.²⁵ He then went to his new office and met with a number of students who wanted to help him keep the protests on campus peaceful. Moffitt designated a special group of “peace marshals” that were to wear a white armband with a black peace symbol during protests. This group expanded over the course of the week and included faculty members as well. In just a few days the peace marshals grew to dozens of students and professors from across the political spectrum.²⁶ The peace marshals kept tempers cool and proved to be invaluable in their role as a neutral “buffer zone” between protesters and ROTC cadets at the awards ceremony later that week.

Demonstrations continued on campus the following days. On May 6th, about three thousand students congregated on the North Oval to listen to nine different speakers over two hours. No violence or damage to the university occurred, but rather students listened to various professors, including Dr. Shanker Dwivedi, who had participated in nonviolent protests against British colonialism in his homeland of India and assured the students that “Non-violence is not

²⁴ Jones, Bill. Personal interview with William McKeen. March 26, 1986.

²⁵ Martin, Kay and Sandgarten, Alan. “Moffitt Says ‘Keep Cool’”. *The Oklahoma Daily*. May 6, 1970, p.2

²⁶ Moffitt, Bill. Telephone interview with William McKeen. April 27, 1986.

the weapon of cowards, but of brave peoples.” Other speakers denounced the war in Southeast Asia or the actions of the National Guard at Kent State. Some of the speakers urged the students to vote for a strike. Hollomon was another scheduled speaker.

John F. Kennedy appointed Hollomon as an Assistant Secretary for the Department of Commerce during his administration and later Lyndon B. Johnson promoted him to Undersecretary of Commerce as a part of his Great Society programs. But Hollomon left Washington in 1967 due to his disagreements with Johnson’s escalation of the Vietnam War.²⁷ So when Hollomon appointed to his position at OU, he found himself a liberal in a very conservative state. He was well-liked by many students because of his easy-going and approachable character, but his informal nature often irked parents and administrators, especially when they received reports that he occasionally drank beer with students. Former university president George Lynn Cross heard rumors that Hollomon had even smoked cannabis with groups of students, but there is no evidence to corroborate those claims.²⁸ Hollomon tried to approach his work from the position of a technocrat as much as possible. During his time as the president-designate, he established over twenty committees to examine how he could improve the structure of the university administration and wrote a report based on those findings. Despite pressure from some students to make an official antiwar statement on the behalf of the university, Hollomon told the crowd on the North Oval that, “I don’t believe that the university should have a policy on the war or on problems of the cities as formal university policies.” The students initially greeted him with jeers and frequently interrupted him, but as he explained his dedication to freedom of speech on campus, reactions to him warmed slightly amongst the

²⁷ *Biography of J. Herbert Hollomon*. Office of Media Information. University of Oklahoma.

²⁸ Cross, George Lynn. Personal interview with William McKeen. February 27, 1986.

crowd. “The most important thing about our university,” he said, “is that this kind of thing [protests] can happen. And we’re not going to stop you.”²⁹

Hollomon’s calming words and even keel at the North Oval demonstration paid valuable dividends later on in the week. Up until that point, students had no indication of how he would react to protests on campus. Had he not spoken to the students, they might have signaled that he was opposed to demonstrators or that he did not care about what they had to say. But by telling the students that he would defend their freedom of expression and make peace on campus his priority, he was able to humanize himself to the student body. This establishment of a relationship and dialog between the students and the administration laid the groundwork for cooperation between the two that was able to keep tensions on campus from boiling over.

There were, of course, some students who were not won over by Hollomon’s rhetoric. Jody Bateman, a member of the national board for the SDS, accused Hollomon of using a façade of amiability to attempt to co-opt and defang the student protests. He felt that the university administration was intentionally working to undermine the authenticity of the antiwar movement by “loving it to death” so that it might become “part of his [Hollomon’s] show” of empty protests to be held at the university’s convenience.³⁰ But it seems that most students on campus did not hold this negative view of Hollomon, because later that night over one hundred students took up Hollomon on his offer to meet with them in his house to discuss their concerns, even when they disagreed with him.³¹

²⁹ Pitts, Teresa. “Student Unrest Breeds Rally”. *The Oklahoma Daily*. May 7, 1970, p.1

³⁰ Bateman, Jody. Personal interview with Herbert Hengst. June 6, 1985.

³¹ Fulkerson, Ron. “Hollomon Keeps his Cool in a Crisis. *The Daily Oklahoman*. May 7, 1970, p.1,5.

After the speeches on the North Oval, Bill Moffitt went to Walker Tower where he gave a brief press conference listing the demands of the student body. He reported that the students wanted the university administration to disarm the campus police force, make birth-control literature easily accessible to students, and to end all university-sponsored research of biological and chemical weapons. It should be noted that neither the Vietnam War, nor Cambodia, nor Kent State was mentioned at all. Moffitt made it clear that the Student Congress had drawn up the list earlier, and he was just the messenger. But the questions from the reporters focused on those controversies that were not on the list. One reporter asked Moffitt if the guardsmen at Kent State were justified in their actions because the students were throwing bricks at them. "Bricks are not bullets," Moffitt replied. He went on to explain his own disagreement with the war and his disgust at the events at Kent State before concluding with his thoughts on the situation on campus.

"I'm sure the governor wants to protect the property of the citizens of Oklahoma....That's why we are trying to open up lines of communication with the governor now, we can speak together and I can tell him our position and he can tell me his. As such, we are operating on different planes and we're both reacting against one another and I don't think that's absolutely necessary."³²

Many of the student protesters had negative opinions of Governor Bartlett, and according to Bateman, "Bartlett's idea of order on campus was having somebody killed or hurt."³³ He had been elected governor as a conservative, pro-war Republican, and he had little patience for protests on the campuses under his jurisdiction.

³² Hockman, Ned. *May 5th Through 12th: The University of Oklahoma*. Norman: The University of Oklahoma Office of Motion Picture Production, 1970. Archived at Oklahoma Historical Society.

³³ Bateman, Jody. Personal interview with Herbert Hengst. June 6, 1985.

Meanwhile on that Wednesday, about seventy-five students occupied the purchasing office on the third floor of Evans Hall. But this protest was more well-mannered than the one the day before at the ROTC drill practice. No violence occurred, and no university property was destroyed or damaged. The occupation seemed to have a party mood that was similar to the initial tenor of the previous day's protests. The students just hung out in the office and listened to rock-and-roll music, putting the purchasing staff more or less a day behind in their work. An Oklahoma City newspaper, *The Daily Oklahoman* interviewed D.R. Kimrey, the Director of Purchasing for the university, about the occupation. When asked about the goals of the protesters, Kimrey replied that he had not received a list of objectives or demands. "I don't even know what's going on. We're occupied, that's all." He went on to say that he had asked that same question to one of the protesters, who simply told him, "I don't know. I'm just here." The occupiers left the office when it closed at 5 PM.³⁴ There were rumors that the occupation would resume the following day at 9 AM, but it did not materialize.³⁵

Many students at OU also expressed their anger over the Kent State shootings by calling for an official student strike to close the university. This response was common across the United States. According to the *New York Times*, "Some 400 of the nation's 2,500 higher academic institutions were affected by strikes."³⁶ However, many OU students felt that a strike would not be a worthwhile endeavor. The editorial staff of the *Oklahoma Daily* took an official stand against a strike in their May 7th column, in which they stated that: "We cannot agree that a strike is a solution to this problem [police/military abuse of student protesters]. And we do not believe

³⁴ "Life Under an 'Occupation'". *The Daily Oklahoman*. May 7, 1970, p.53

³⁵ Pitts, Teresa. "Frustrated Peace Settles". *The Oklahoma Daily*. May 8, 1970, p.7

³⁶ "Students Step up Protests on War". *The New York Times*. May 9, 1970, p. 1

that it will help this nation get out of Cambodia any faster.”³⁷ At eleven o’clock that evening, the Student Congress tallied the votes: 3,628 in favor of the strike and 3,831 against the strike. Though the strike was defeated, the voted reflected a deep divide amongst the students on campus. University faculty did not participate in the voting, nor was there a separate vote on a strike amongst the faculty.

Despite the failure of the vote, hundreds of students decided to strike anyway. They picketed in front of most buildings on the North and South Ovals. Students hoisted signs calling for an end to the Vietnam War, the U.S. military campaign in Cambodia, and criticizing the National Guard’s actions at Kent State. Peace marshals also had a presence on camps. By this point a number of faculty members had become involved in the marshal program, and they stationed themselves about every hundred feet on both ovals. One of the more active faculty members, Dr. Larry Hill, was a political science professor who was against the war. He explained that there was no formal leadership structure to the marshal program, but that, “There was a small group who gradually became active and I suppose leadership just flowed to us.”³⁸ The marshals made sure that the students on strike did not harass or impede the students who wanted to go to class, and the day went by without any major confrontations.

On Monday, May 11th, many students on campus felt certain that there was going to be a protest during the ROTC awards ceremony scheduled for the next day. However, there had been no attempt to organize a demonstration. So campus activist Michael Wright took the initiative and printed up some fliers for a meeting in Dale Hall later that day. Over 400 students showed

³⁷ ‘Referendum Vote Today’. *The Oklahoma Daily*. May 7, 1970, p.1

³⁸ Hill, Larry. Personal interview with William McKeen. April 1, 1986.

up.³⁹ At the meeting they decided that they would protest on the field during the ceremony in OU's football stadium. The students also agreed that it would be wise to keep in place the system of faculty and student Marshals that had been effective at keeping the peace during Friday's demonstrations.⁴⁰ At some point somebody suggested that as one of the leaders of the activists on campus, Michael Wright should take a position as one of the chief marshals. He accepted the role.⁴¹

A bit later, Bill Jones stopped by the meeting at the request of student-body president Bill Moffitt to answer questions from the students. He assured the students that, "The role of the police is to keep peace on the campus. It is as much our role to protect you as anyone else on campus."⁴² Later, Jones and Wright worked out some basic guidelines about how the protest was going to go the next day. They agreed on the compromise that the protesters would stay in an end zone while the ROTC cadets performed their drills and accepted their awards in the center of the field. The faculty and student peace marshals were to provide a buffer between the two groups to ensure that no physical confrontations would take place.

On the day of the protest, Herbert Hollomon, G.T. Blankenship, and other administrators were in the press box of Oklahoma Memorial Stadium. Only five campus police officers were stationed in the stadium. The protesters entered at 3:30PM, before the cadets marched in. They immediately went to the middle of the field and sat, contrary to the agreement that Jones and Wright had made the day before. After requests to vacate the field from Jones's bullhorn, the

³⁹ Wright, Michael. Personal interview with William McKeen. April 26, 1986.

⁴⁰ Moffitt, Bill. Telephone interview with William McKeen. April 27, 1986.

⁴¹ Wright, Michael. Personal interview with William McKeen. April 26, 1986.

⁴² Pippy, Val. "Discussion Plans Protest Activities". The Oklahoma Daily. May 12, 1970, p.2.

stadium public address system, and the student and faculty peace marshals, the protesters, several hundred in number, took their time moving into the endzone. Four o'clock came and went, and some protestors refused to leave the field.⁴³ Tensions began to escalate. The protesters did not know that Bob Lester, the Public Safety Commissioner of the state of Oklahoma, was in the press box monitoring the situation. The protesters were also unaware that he had at his command 150 highway patrol state troopers stationed on the football practice field, not even a mile away.⁴⁴ By about 4:30, all but four protestors had retreated into the endzone. Bill Jones went and spoke to them. "I'm going to ask you for the final time to get off the field," he said. "If you don't do that I'm going to place you under arrest and take you to jail." The protesters, one of whom was a Vietnam veteran, did not resist, but calmly accepted Jones's instructions in a calculated act of civil disobedience. They followed him out of the stadium "just like little lambs."⁴⁵ The protesters in the south endzone saw that the four students were being arrested, but they did not make any move to harass Jones or to block their path out of the stadium.

After Jones removed the four students from the middle of the field, a large number of students were not yet actually in the endzone. At some point there was a misunderstanding and some protesters thought that they been given the right to stand all the way up at the ten yard-line. At this point, Colonel Leroy Land, the commander of OU's ROTC program, made a concession to allow the protesters that space rather than risk igniting another conflict. In Jones's estimation, Land's flexibility that day made him an unsung hero of the event.⁴⁶

⁴³ Davis, Fred. "Protesters Mar Honors Ceremony". The Oklahoma Daily. May 13, 1970, p.1

⁴⁴ Oklahoma State Archives, Office of the Governor, Dewey Bartlett. 8-R-19, Box 7, Folder 5.

⁴⁵ Jones, Bill. Personal interview with William McKeen. March 26, 1986.

⁴⁶ Jones, Bill. Personal interview with William McKeen. March 26, 1986.

Land's decision not to escalate the tension in the stadium was particularly beneficial because Governor Bartlett was perfectly content to do so. He was not in the stadium personally that day, but he spoke with Blankenship, Lester, and Hollomon over the telephone in the press box. Bartlett expressed his desire to use the National Guard Troops that he had stationed a few miles south of the campus to keep the peace. Hollomon vehemently disagreed with him. "I'll broadcast what they do to these kids," he threatened. "Every mother and father in Oklahoma will be on your back." Bartlett initially thought this was a bluff, but Hollomon pressed him further, and assured him that, "I will do that. That's the only way I know how to stop you."⁴⁷ Bartlett was evidently nervous that a riot would break out, but backed down in the face of Hollomon's threats.

The telephone exchange between Hollomon and Bartlett showed an underlying tension between the two over how the university would handle protests. The animosity between the two men was personal as well as political. Even at social events they made an effort to avoid each other.⁴⁸ According to Ron Fulkerton's report to the Oklahoma City newspaper, *The Daily Oklahoman*, Bartlett had pressured Hollomon to use campus police to eject or arrest the students that had occupied the purchasing office earlier in the week. Ultimately Hollomon won the battle and kept Bartlett from imposing his will on the campus. But Bartlett had his revenge. He had appointed a number of the members on the board of regents, and between them and other regents who did not like how Hollomon had managed the university for their own reasons, the board voted not to renew his contract.

The ceremony began as almost one hundred faculty and student peace marshals patrolled a sort of no-man's-land between the cadets and the protesters. Many of the protesters chose to

⁴⁷ Hollomon, Herbert. Personal interview with Herbert Hengst. April 8, 1980.

⁴⁸ Jones, Stephen. Personal interview with Dominic Granello. December 13, 2013.

remain seated during the National Anthem, and shouts and chants of varying levels of obscenity rang from the south end of the field throughout the ceremony. This disrespect angered many of the about 3,000 spectators in the stadium bleachers, many of whom were relatives of the ROTC cadets. "I'm so mad I could spit," one mother of a cadet said, "I'd kick my son across the field if he let his country down like these demonstrators are doing."⁴⁹

The level of attention that was being paid to the ceremony and protest in the stadium is perhaps best expressed to Oklahomans by the fact that OU's head football coach, Chuck Fairbanks, along with a couple members of the Sooner football team, came out to help with crowd control. Though protesters initially greeted them with jeers, Fairbanks informed the protesters that he too was against the war in Vietnam, and that he and his players were there just to help everybody "stay cool."⁵⁰

The rest of the ceremony went on without incident, save for a scuffle in which a student who was upset with the demonstrators came down from the bleachers and kicked one of them. Peace marshals immediately separated the two, and the campus police decided to simply eject him from the venue. Campus police officers took the four students who had been arrested to the Norman PD station and booked them for "disrupting a lawful assembly. All four pleaded innocent and walked free that evening after posting the \$500 bond."⁵¹

⁴⁹ Tempest, Rone. "OU Protest of ROTC Calm Although Four Arrested". *The Daily Oklahoman*. May 13, 1970, pp.1-2

⁵⁰ Burr, David. Personal interview with William McKeen. July 3, 1984.

⁵¹ Tempest, Rone. "OU Protest of ROTC Calm Although Four Arrested". *The Daily Oklahoman*. May 13, 1970, pp.1-2

Later that day, a television reporter interviewed Hollomon about the day's events. He summarized his remarks with the statement that "It was a beautiful day." By this he meant that he was proud of the dedication and effectiveness of the peace marshals, the self-control of the protesters, the flexibility of the ROTC cadets and officers, and the general fact that the protest went about as well as it could have.⁵² But a large number of viewers interpreted it as an endorsement of the protester's disruption of the ceremony, and Hollomon's opponents used it as ammunition in their campaign to prevent the renewal of his contract.

There were some instances of property damage at the University of Oklahoma, though none of them took place in conjunction with a demonstration. According to Bill Jones, arsonists set fires in Walker Tower, a building on the "South Base" area of campus, and Dr. Sharp's home suffered damage from a Molotov cocktail thrown over the fence.⁵³ Malevolent pranksters sent bomb threats to the ROTC armory building, but fortunately they all proved to be hoaxes.⁵⁴ President Hollomon even received a bomb threat on the night of 5th, just hours after the protest that had resulted in an arrest. A campus police officer drove him around in secret and he stayed at a friend's house until he got the all-clear from Bill Jones. He immediately returned to his office where he met with students to hear their concerns about the university's actions earlier that day and what its policies concerning protests would be going forward.⁵⁵

For a period of about a week the University of Oklahoma was a pressure cooker that could have exploded into violence or vandalism at any moment. So why did it not? The simple

⁵² Hollomon, Herbert. Personal interview with Herbert Hengst. April 8, 1980.

⁵³ Jones, Bill. Personal interview with Herbert Hengst. February 2, 1984.

⁵⁴ Land, Marjorie. Personal interview with William McKeen. March 28, 1986.

⁵⁵ Hollomon, Herbert. Personal interview with Herbert Hengst. April 8, 1980.

answer is that the people in leadership positions across the campus, and most students in campus in general, knew that an outbreak of violence on campus would only have negative consequences for everyone involved. Many people made a concentrated effort to make sure that did not happen. Herbert Hollomon kept his office open late into the night on May 6th. He had discussions with small groups of any students who wanted to talk with him. He tried to make it clear that they did not have to resort to violence to be heard.⁵⁶ Likewise, despite the confrontation between students and police on the 5th, Bill Jones went out of his way to talk with the students and assure them that the primary objective of the OU police officers was to protect the students of the university, and that he would only call in the Highway Patrol again if he felt that OU PD had lost control of a situation.⁵⁷

Despite the fact that he had been elected as the student body president less than a week before, Bill Moffitt showed poise and courage in his efforts to cool the tempers of angry students. In fact, he had been sworn in only hours before he stood on the hood of stranded police car and urged the crowd to disperse.⁵⁸ It is noteworthy that even though he had run on an “activist” platform, he did not set himself in opposition to university administration or attempt to use the tension to extort concessions from them. Rather, he partnered with them in an effort to keep the peace on campus at all costs.

Michael Wright took similar steps to demonstrate his commitment to nonviolent protests. He engaged in open communication and negotiated in good faith with Bill Jones. His example of

⁵⁶ Fulkerton, Ron. “Hollomon Keeps his Cool in Crisis”. The Oklahoma Daily. May 7, 1970, p.1

⁵⁷ Pippy, Val. “Discussion Plans Protest Activities”. The Oklahoma Daily. May 12, 1970, p.2.

⁵⁸ Moffitt, Bill. Telephone interview with William McKeen. April 27, 1986.

cooperation with campus authorities without compromising his principles set a precedent that the vast majority of student protestors followed.

Every university faced a unique set of challenges in the weeks following the tragedy at Kent State. Some universities carried on with business as usual while others were not able to fully re-open until the fall. The University of Oklahoma fell between those extremes. The proposed strike failed but won over 3,000 student votes, and the students who were passionate about the strike picketed classes anyway. The entire week was a tense time on campuses throughout the nation. Several factors may have determined whether a campus was wracked by violent protests or simply mourned the loss of fellow students in a peaceful manner. OU shared demographic characteristics with schools erupting in violence and with schools that emerged from the difficult week relatively unscathed. On one hand, it was an “elite” flagship university with a national reputation and a relatively urban student body. But on the other hand it was not particularly racially diverse, and was located in a conservative state in the middle of the country. This combination of factors, along with the calming efforts of campus leaders such as Herbert Hollomon, Bill Moffitt, Michael Wright, and Bill Jones explains the events that occurred at OU in May of 1970. Ultimately, the University of Oklahoma was fortunate to have student, faculty, and staff leaders who collaborated to avoid violent protests on campus.