

**“LIGHTS, CAMERA, HISTORY”:
MEDIA CULTURE AND THE
KENT STATE SHOOTINGS**

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**Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate College of the
Oklahoma State University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the Degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
May, 2005**

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KENT STATE SHOOTINGS

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A work of this nature would not be complete without recognition of the many parties who helped to make this dissertation a reality. My research committee, composed of Dr. Michael Logan, Dr. Ron Petrin, Dr. Joseph Byrnes and Dr. Charles Edgley, has been a source of hope and encouragement throughout this long process. While they have, more than once, expressed concern that this work would ever happen, they never wavered in their support of my research interests. Dr. Stacy Takacs also deserves special commendation for her willingness to serve on my committee due to Dr. Edgley's retirement. Dr. Peter Rollins, while not a member of my committee, has been and continues to be a great friend and influence. His interest and support of my research kept me on my toes and prevented me from throwing in the towel when things were not going as hoped. I am forever in his debt. Any weaknesses or errors in this work are no reflection of the efforts of these fine scholars, but are the failings of the author alone.

I also must acknowledge the entire faculty and staff of the Department of History at Oklahoma State University. Their knowledge, collegiality, and support made my graduate experience at OSU both a challenge and a joy. The success I have enjoyed in my own work is due in great part to them. Maybe one day this department will receive the recognition that it so justly deserves. Likewise, I extend my gratitude to the faculty of the Department of History and Geography at the University of Central Oklahoma in Edmond. Their guidance during my Master's work, and their continued support to this day, were invaluable to my continued professional accomplishments.

My fellow graduate students in the departments of history, sociology and film studies at Oklahoma State deserve huge commendation. Their friendship and

professional acumen made Ph.D. work a delight. While all of my fellow grad students deserve mention, Rodney Mittelstedt, Cynthia Landrum, Ben Secunda, Rich Faillace, Stacy Reaves, Phenix Benton, Marion Umeno, Shelly Lemons, Patricia Loughlin, Ron Scharton, Mark Vandelogt, Amy Carreiro, Lisa Guinn, Mark Tate, David Tait, Deborah Carmichael, David Amstutz, and Kevin Sweeney are forever my comrades in academe. Thank you for being both great scholars and dear friends to me. I could not have done it without you.

Kudos to my colleagues at Oklahoma Panhandle State University in Goodwell, Oklahoma, for their support and collegiality during this process. My dean, Dr. Sara Jane Richter, is not only a great dean, but also a dear friend. Her encouragement and understanding were essential to the completion of this work. My department chair, Mr. Sam Nelson, provided friendship and the occasional pep talk to make this dissertation a reality. My departmental colleagues—Dr. Ron Becker, Dr. James Benjamin, and Mr. Tom Ellzey provided support, criticism, and the occasional kick in the pants throughout the research and writing process. The faculty and staff at OPSU are some of the finest people that I have ever known, and I am grateful to them for their interest in my research and teaching.

Three cheers to Dr. William Housel of OPSU, now at Northwest Louisiana State University, and my life-long friend Dr. Joey Brown of Missouri Southern State University for taking the time to read drafts and offer criticism where needed. Any weaknesses in this work are in spite of their much-appreciated efforts.

My students in the Department of Behavioral and Social Sciences at OPSU are not only my pride and joy; they are also a continuous source of inspiration. Their encouragement (and occasional harassment) kept me on my toes and was important in helping see this work to a conclusion. Thanks also go to Dr. Michael Schoeneke of Texas Tech University, Dr. Ken Dvorak of San Jacinto (TX) Community College, Dr.

James Yates of Northwestern Oklahoma State University, Dr. Philip Simpson of Brevard (FL) Community College and my other colleagues in the regional and national Popular Culture Association/American Culture Associations. They are true friends and great scholars, and our associational gatherings provided me with a forum for many of the ideas that became this finished dissertation.

Special commendations go to those persons who assisted me in my research endeavors at Kent State University. Dr. Nancy Birk and the staff of the May 4 Archive at the KSU Library made thousands of copies, retrieved countless sources, and provided me with a wonderful research experience. You are truly amazing and I am grateful to you for your assistance beyond the call of duty. Dr. Jerry M. Lewis, Dr. Tom Hensley, Alan Canfora, Roseann “Chic” Canfora, Robbie Stamps, Dr. Tom Grace, and the students of the May 4th Task Force showed me the meaning of true hospitality during my visits to Kent. Dr. Lewis, Dr. Grace and Mr. Canfora discussed my research at length and provided me with information and sources I would have missed without their assistance and support. Thank you for your time and your support in making this work a reality. Thanks also to Dr. J. Gregory Payne of Emerson College, Boston, Massachusetts, for taking the time to hear out my ideas and offer helpful advice and insight.

Finally yet importantly, my wife Amy and my sons, Benjamin and Joseph, have been long-suffering and patient supporters through what has seemed like an eternal process. I am undeserving of their love and encouragement. I could never have done this without them. My parents have always been there for me and I am forever in their debt. They taught me the value of hard work and instilled within me the faith and values that remain the foundation of my life. Even when they did not understand what all of the fuss was about, they always stood by me. Likewise, my brother Barry is one of the main reasons that I entered the field of history in the first place. His influence and support through the years cannot be quantified. My family is my stability and I am thankful to

have them in my life.

This work is dedicated with love and admiration to five individuals who planted and nurtured the love of history within me: Mrs. Mildred Blanton of Comanche Middle School, Mr. Morgan Mannen of Comanche High School, Comanche, Oklahoma; Drs. Lloyd Musselman and Lawrence Cobb of Oklahoma City University; and Dr. David Webb of the University of Central Oklahoma. They made history a vibrant, living subject to every student that graced their classrooms. I am forever indebted to them and can only hope that I have “done them proud” with my work both in and out of the classroom.

I also wish to dedicate this dissertation to the victims and their families of the Kent State shootings. More importantly, this work is in memoriam of Allison Krause, Jeffrey Miller, Sandra Scheuer, and William Schroeder, who lost their lives on May 4, 1970. I hope this study pays them the proper honor and respect that they deserve. One can quibble with details and meanings until the end of time, but the fact remains that four young Americans lost their lives in an unnecessary tragedy that left an indelible mark on a nation. May they rest in peace.

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Introduction

The community of Kent looks much like any other small town in northeastern Ohio. For the most part, it is a quiet community, a typical college town with its share of stores, clubs, and services devoted to serving the campus population and the surrounding area. The evening of May 3, 2000 was different. Around 11 PM, a large crowd gathers on the commons area in front of Taylor Hall in the central area of the older campus. The gathering, estimated at five to ten thousand persons, consists of individuals from near and far. The sound of soft guitar music wafts through the night air and the strains of “We Shall Overcome” grow in intensity as the crowd grows in number with each passing moment. Each person walks past the victory bell that is situated on the east side of the commons, picking up a lit candle as they move past. At the front of the march are survivors and family members of the victims of the Kent State shootings of May 4, 1970. A silent procession begins, moving from the commons area on a mile long trek around campus, culminating at the Prentice Hall parking lot on the north side of Taylor Hall. It was on this spot some thirty years earlier that students encountered the loaded rifles of Ohio National Guardsmen given the task of restoring order to what some saw as a campus in turmoil. Bullets hit thirteen students. Four of those students—Jeffrey Miller, Sandra Scheuer, Allison Krause, and William Schroeder—died as a result of the confrontation.

Tonight, as the crowd reaches its destination and gathers in the Prentice Hall parking lot, the memory of that fateful day is as alive as it was in 1970. Prayers are

offered up on behalf of the fallen, tears shed in their memory, and survivors and friends embrace, comforting one another in the chilly Ohio night. For the next twelve hours, students, friends and volunteers stand silent vigil, holding candles on the spots where the four students lost their lives that warm spring day. “Quite a sight, isn’t it?” states Alan Canfora, a survivor of May 4 and one of its most prominent activists to this day. Indeed it is, but it is only the prelude to what will transpire the next day. On May 4 at 12:24 PM, the university commons will be awash with people who have come to remember those who lost their lives on this, the thirtieth anniversary of the shootings at Kent State. The commons bell will ring twenty-four times in memory of the dead and wounded at Kent State as well as Jackson State, where eleven students were killed and wounded some two weeks after May 4. The crowd is not only composed of friends, families, and students of Kent State. The most visible sight that afternoon is the long line of television cameras, satellite trucks, and reporters crowding the commons area to cover the memorial gathering.

This day, Kent State became the focal point of national media attention as it had thirty years earlier. Just as then, the importance of May 4, 1970 and what happened that day remains unresolved, or at best, contested. Some call it premeditated murder, while others regard it as an unfortunate tragedy or an unnecessary act carried out by overreacting guardsmen. As the glut of media attention reveals, Kent State is something more than a tragic event in a restless time—it is a symbol of an era. The problem is what does the symbol represent? What is the significance of May 4, 1970 in the scope of American history in that tumultuous time often mislabeled the “sixties?” If, as some have argued, Kent State signaled the end of the “Age of Aquarius,” it instigated another

struggle—a struggle for meaning that continues unabated over three decades later.

Visual media such as television, film and the internet are central to this struggle for understanding. They are the tools used to shape our understanding of the past through reenactment and reexamination in visual form.

My interest in the Kent State shootings of May 4, 1970 stemmed from discussions in a graduate seminar during my first semester as a PhD student in history at Oklahoma State University. The discussion topics of the day were “what were the 1960s” and “why were the 1960s in the United States so significant?” The group, composed of students ranging in age from 21 to 55, engaged in an animated discussion on 1960s America. One of the more striking observations from the class that day was the disparity of understandings and impressions of this period in American history. Older students (and faculty) who lived through the time spent a lot of time talking about politics, social movements and student activism. Younger students who did not live through the era or were too young to remember it firsthand focused more on popular culture aspects of the 1960s. We knew more about Jim Morrison and Charles Manson than Stokely Carmichael or Tom Hayden. We could wax philosophical about the finer points of the Monkees and the artistic messages of *Easy Rider* but had little to say about the formation and gradual fragmentation of Students for a Democratic Society. We appreciated Russ Meyer and Roger Corman but not Betty Friedan and Eldridge Cleaver for their contributions to American society.

Why was this the case among so-called “learned individuals?” What created the discrepancies of understanding and knowledge between these two groups of budding historical scholars? One explanation—and perhaps the most significant—is quite simple.

Post-Baby Boomers learned much of our understanding of history and “the Sixties” as it passed through the filter of audio-visual media, particularly film and television.

The question this event and ensuing epiphany planted within me focused on the need for greater understanding of the complex nature and influence of visual media in shaping popular historical understanding of particular eras and events. Post-1945 America is particularly worthy of inquiry because during this time film and television, rather than print, became primary forms of mass communication. This is even more pronounced when examining the 1960s, where nearly every major event (and trivial sideshow) played itself out before an omnipresent camera, punctuated with commentary and/or a musical audio soundtrack to set the mood and elicit the proper reaction. At first, I hoped to construct a study on this phenomenon of “mediated” reality and what I call the “symbolic sixties,” that tie-dyed, pot-smoking, activist party era that is mass-produced and marketed as an authentic representation of history. Such a task proved unworkable, particularly within the confines of dissertation research, where topics are required to be narrower. To accommodate this limitation, I sought out a single event that encapsulated many of the elements of 1960s America, including the struggles over the Vietnam War, popular protest, and the counterculture (both in its political and social forms). More importantly, this event must be something that captured the public imagination and manifested itself within the popular culture of mass media such as film, television, and other forms of popular culture. The Kent State shootings fulfilled all of these criteria. Television news covered it. Rock music icon Neil Young wrote a song about it. Documentary filmmakers and Hollywood heavyweights made it the focus of numerous film studies. No one can see any documentary or presentation on the era without seeing

the Pulitzer Prize-winning John Filo photograph of Mary Ann Vecchio kneeling over the lifeless body of Jeffrey Miller, her face frozen in an eternal, silent scream.

As I began my research, I discovered that there is no shortage of source material on the Kent State shootings. But was there anything left to do that had not been done with May 4? As one author stated to me during an interview, “nobody cares about Kent State any more because there is nothing left to be said about it.” I noted that he said this after spending ten minutes telling me how his book was the final word on the shootings.¹ While many books and articles deal with the Kent State tragedy, few of them discuss the role of media in providing a historical framework for understanding the event. Most works (including that of the aforementioned Narcissus) focus on what is known and/or what is not known about the shootings themselves and the decade of civil and criminal trials that followed, while others venture into that intellectual quicksand that is conspiracy theory as they attempt to piece together a puzzle that is missing many of its key parts. That is not the goal of this project.

This study, using elements of media theory and historical research, attempts to understand the role of visual media in shaping popular historical understanding of the Kent State shootings. How have documentary, docudrama, television journalism and the uncharted sea that is the internet covered and examined May 4? Are there instances where conjecture and suspicion have become accepted parts of popular understanding? What details are emphasized, ignored, and embellished in these accounts? How have

¹William A. Gordon, interview by author, 8 January 1999. Gordon continues to make the argument that no one cares about Kent State any more, although he still writes articles and editorials about the incident. See William A. Gordon, “Is Kent State in Denial About what Happened There 35 Years Ago?,” *History News Network*, 13 December 2004, www.hnn.us/articles/8592.html.

these studies changed over time, both in tone and in assertion? Finally, what are the implications for popular historical interpretation in what some have called a post-literate, visual age? Granted, this approach takes me away from the hallowed confines of “traditional” history and places me within the Keseyesque day-glo school bus that is qualitative history and popular culture studies. This study is both an investigation of the Kent State shootings within academic historical interpretation and popular historical understanding, and seeks to understand how visual media accounts have left their mark on both schools of thought.

The value of this type of study is threefold. First, visual media and its proliferation, be it film, television, or internet, changes the scope of historical understanding among the masses. Visual media have done for the modern era what the printing press did for the Middle Ages. Second, visual media are, in their own unique way, forms of historical text and evidence that require careful handling and demand serious attention and consideration. The notion that only written sources and quantitative investigations are important when studying history no longer holds. More people watch Oliver Stone films and the History Channel than read the latest tome on the socio-economic stratification of Eugene McCarthy supporters. Visual media “is the principal means by which most people learn about history today.”² Historians must address the role of media culture if we are to adapt and address its implications on popular understanding of historical eras and events. To discard visual media as pop history candy

²Gary R. Edgerton, “Television as Historian: A Different Kind of History Altogether,” in *Television Histories: Shaping Collective Memory in the Media Age*, ed. Gary R. Edgerton and Peter C. Rollins (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 1.

consumed by the masses fails as a persuasive argument. We owe it to ourselves to see what lays in the “forbidden zone” that is media culture and attempt to understand its implications for popular historical understanding.

The study of history has always been a problematic undertaking at best. Traditional, scholarly, historical inquiry reflects its grounding in modernism, filtered through the pursuit of truth through scientific examination of tangible evidence. The testing of source accuracy and reliability occupies the professional historian, as each piece of information requires stringent testing in order to assure accuracy of presentation. While this is certainly no new phenomenon, the testing of source accuracy became increasingly difficult after World War II. The rising technological proliferation of the media, particularly visual media such as film and television, drove popular historical understanding of post-World War II society and culture away from print sources alone. Every memorable historical event of the last fifty to sixty years has come via the filters of film and television, finding its way into the living rooms of America. When persons, particularly baby boomers and their offspring, are asked today to recount their most vivid memories of historical events, they tend to articulate their accounts through the lens of the motion picture and video camera. The Kennedy-Nixon debates, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the JFK assassination, Vietnam, the 1968 Chicago Democratic convention, Watergate—each of these events were played out on television. The question arises as to how much television and film, along with other visual media, help to frame and shape these incidents over time, creating a particular historical context and contributing to the popular historical memory and consciousness of an event or era. Such an intervening variable raises important questions for historians of post-World War II America, and

other areas of study for that matter, as they attempt to understand the past.

In recent years, some historians have explored and embraced the practices of literary and film theory, each of them influenced by the philosophical ideas of postmodernism and poststructuralism. The result is an attempt by such scholars to apply these perspectives to the questions of historical interpretation, or how history is created and propagated. It is an uneasy partnership at best, and wading through the frequent verbosity of such scholarship leaves one feeling frustrated. Part of the problem arises from a lack of understanding and communication between disciplines. Many historians view literary and film theory with a skeptical eye while some film theorists see historians as relics of a by-gone era, unable to move beyond the bounds of their own practices. No doubt this chasm stems in part from the sometimes redundant verbosity of film theory studies. It is a frustrating undertaking to disseminate some of the current ideas of film scholars, who owe much of their theoretical foundation to critical theory.³ While film theorists have a valid point in criticizing the skepticism of their more vehement professional historian critics, they would do well to look beyond the boundaries of their own disciplinary shells. It is a two-way street. Film theorists can learn much from professional historical inquiry and their failure to recognize the historical roots of their own worldview undermines their position.

Cinema scholars and film theorists incorporate three specific criticisms to

³For examples of this type of film theory, see Vivian Sobchack, *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television and the Modern Event* (New York: Routledge, 1996) and Hal Himmelstein, *Television Myth and the American Mind* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994). While many of the articles in these works contain valid criticism and valuable insight into the problems of media and history, others are filled with what Robert Toplin calls “multisyllable words, vague references, and cloudy arguments.”

historians and their views of historical film. First, they contend that too many historians spend time examining individual films, comparing and contrasting cinematic portrayals with their own understanding of existing historical scholarship. The failure to understand film technique and/or greater philosophical issues undermines the credibility of a historian's film criticism as it fails to incorporate broader perspectives. The second problem, according to film scholars, is the historian's tendency to search for "an accurate, truthful, or representative picture of the past in the cinema."⁴ This is little more than a pipe dream, they contend, as film cannot possibly present a clear and accurate portrait of the past. Thus, all cinematic representations of history are fictitious, reflecting creative speculation rather than concrete recreations. Their final contention relies on postmodern arguments about the nature of "truth," as "a completely truthful presentation of the past is impossible, because there is no single truth to uncover."⁵ They argue that the work of academic historians is nothing more than constructs derived from the vested interests and ideological slants of each historian. History becomes nothing more than "interpretive dramatizations" of the past. Since all claims to truth in its purest form are illusory, one interpretation is as valid as another. The origins and validity of such arguments will be discussed later.

One of the primary challenges of looking at history through film and other forms

⁴Robert Brent Toplin, *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 161. Toplin's book is an excellent examination of the problems inherent to cinematic presentations of history and the debates that characterize current scholarship. Hereafter cited as Toplin, *Reel History*. For an excellent example of film theorists' criticism of historical scholarship, see Linda Hutcheon, *The Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988).

⁵Toplin, 161.

of mass media arises from media culture's tendency to ground everything in the present. In the world of film and television, there is little if any concept of time. There is only the here and now. Visual media, particularly television, lives in a continuous present and thrives on a certain "discontinuity" which if unchecked can destroy memory, explanation and accountability by wresting an event from its historical context.⁶ This propensity is a major stumbling block for academic historians, as one of the cardinal rules of historical study is to emphasize context and avoid the heresy of "presentism," or the inclination to judge the past using standards and ideas of the present age. In recent years, some historians have attacked this view, arguing that historical research "is much more about telling stories inspired by contemporary perspectives than recapturing and conveying any kind of objective truth about the past."⁷ The quest, or for that matter, the ability to know whether a source or study is reliable no longer holds sway as the chief goal of the historian in the arguments of many current scholars. This school of thought sometimes goes so far as to question whether there is such a thing as an "authentic, knowable history at all beyond the subjectivity of the present."⁸

Thus, history is viewed by some today as just a representation of an era or event, subject to multiple perspectives and interpretations. Central to this argument is the scholarship of Hayden White. White contends that all forms of history rely on interpretation and therefore cannot be construed as purely objective presentations of a

⁶Mary Ann Doane, "Information, Crisis, Catastrophe," in *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media*, ed. Marcia Landy (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 19-20. Hereafter cited as Landy, *The Historical Film*.

⁷Ibid, 3.

⁸Ibid.

truthful past. The distinction between fact and fiction is blurred since there are no authoritative presentations of the past. White argues that no two accounts of a historical event or era are the same, as archival evidence does not provide natural explanations. Instead, the historian constructs a coherent narrative based on personal interpretation and ideological slant, rendering the historical process subjective. He asserts that a historian's claim to objective truth is false, as presentation relies on interpretation. As some scholars see it, historians are "subjectively implicated in and responsible for the histories we tell ourselves or others tell us and that, while these are just representations, their significance has both value and consequence to our lives."⁹ White's contentions, while promoting colorful debate, rest on faulty assumptions about historical scholarship. The study of history does indeed have "value and consequence" to the present, but it also depends on the best available evidence. Historians must be fair to the past as well as to the present.

In a greater sense, visual media, with its global reach and influence, has "contributed to the dislodging notions of 'universal' truth and faith in essential and commonly share conceptions of reality."¹⁰ Postmodernists assert that nothing short of a revolution in thinking occurred, but many scholars willfully ignored or obliviously failed to notice the change. As to whether this change means, as Hayden White contends, that history is now just a story limited by bias and perspective or is a valid attempt to discern the "truth" about the past is still a matter of debate. Francis Fukiyama's heralding of the

⁹Landy, *The Historical Film*, 3-4; Toplin, *Reel Hollywood*, 162. For excellent examples of this perspective, see Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985) and Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

¹⁰Marcia Landy, Introduction in Landy, *The Historical Film*, 19.

“death of history” may be correct or it may be just another historical perspective. Technological change, particularly in communication and mass media, is the primary contributor to this postmodern, post-colonial, post-everything else state of affairs. Cultural critics like Francois Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, and Frederic Jameson argue that this proliferation of visual media leads to the breakdown of a shared notion of reality and the dissolution of grand narratives, creating a state known as “hyperrealism” or the “society of the spectacle.” Such observers contend that all we have left are “small narratives” which defy the old constructs and “come closer to addressing the differences that have been buried under the rubric of universalistic sameness.”¹¹ This view swept through the academy, particularly after World War II, as “increasingly vocal social groups” demanded their place in the historical narrative. Granted, history is a latecomer to the dance, but the ramifications of critical theory are everywhere. Many historians ignore its influence at their peril.

Despite the reactions of postmodern academicians, the origins of controversy are not recent ideas, but rather offspring of late nineteenth century criticisms. Ever since Darwinism shifted the discussion from discovering the mechanics of an orderly universe (the heart of Enlightenment ideology) to humanity struggling in a cosmos devoid of design and order, the disputation of grand narratives and objectivity captured the imaginations of philosophers and scholars alike. None other than Friedrich Nietzsche tackled the question of an objective history in his essay “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life” in 1873. Nietzsche contended that historicizing of the past is related directly to those who possess knowledge and desire to wield power. Such hopes led to

¹¹Ibid.

history with “excesses” that failed to capture the essence of a useful past—useful in that it was of service to the individual rather than to a select group, what he called history “in the service of life.” He presented what he believed were the three dominant forms of historical construction. Monumental history focused on great men, great events and a sterling past that contrasted with a decadent present, commonly called the “great men/glorious past” view of history. “Monumental history,” Nietzsche asserted, “is the theatrical costume in which they [historians] pretend that their hate for the powerful and the great of their time is a fulfilling admiration for the strong and the great of past times . . . as if their motto were ‘let the dead bury the living.’”¹²

Nietzsche’s second category, antiquarian history, emphasized artifacts of the past (architecture, writings, ancestral goods) with a reverential attitude. Such a view stifled development within both community and individual as “it knows only how to preserve life, not generate it” and it “hinders the powerful willing of new things.”¹³ Thus, Nietzsche asserts that antiquarian history ties societies to the past with such an iron grip that any questioning of the artifacts, be they religious, political or cultural, becomes presumptuous and/or criminal. Both monumental and antiquarian history can lead to foolhardiness and fanaticism where persons and artifacts of the past take on lives of their own, making it difficult to discern what is worthy of remembrance and the reasons for such remembrance.

Nietzsche regarded his final historical category, critical history, as the most

¹²Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Use and Abuse of History for Life,” (1873), trans. Ian C. Johnston, 1998. www.mala.bc.ca/~johnstoi/Nietzsche/history.htm

¹³Ibid.

acceptable approach, as it best acted in the “service of living.” The present age, Nietzsche believed, requires that persons should investigate and question the past, breaking it apart (deconstruction) and changing it if necessary. This approach allows for a challenging of accepted views of the past and the creation of a new, useful history where all that remains is that which is “cruelly beyond all reverence.” While this critical approach allows the study of history to exist in the service of the present, it can also lead to the excess of denying the existence of history altogether. Nietzsche recognized the danger, but believed that such excesses were preferable to a dead past, frozen in time, untouchable and useless to the individual.

What does all of this have to do with media culture and history? Visual media’s presentation of history reflects the latent tension between these three views. Visual media is both critical and hypercritical at the same time, not only questioning what is, but also going beyond the conception of reality itself. Cataclysm, spectacle, and media converge in the postmodern world, leading to questions of historical presentation and of history itself. The critical approach, left unchecked, can lead to a rabid perspectivism that culminates with what Francis Fukuyama calls “the end of history.” It is in finding a balance among the perspectives that historians encounter problems with popular understandings of history, particularly in a media age where information is but a click away.

Hayden White’s view of historiography as simply a way to arrange and tell stories as opposed to discovering and delivering some objective “truth” is now a more accepted, if problematic, proposition. This shift within the historical profession mirrors the changes within the greater academy and society, where relativism and perspectivism are

now more widely accepted factors. Such an extreme view often violates the tenets of its own foundations by constructing a straw man argument, as if historians ever believed that discovering the past beyond dispute or question was within their abilities. Each generation reinterprets its past from the viewpoint of the present whether it is acknowledged or not, so this argument is not as revelatory as its proponents assume.

White and others argue that the problem arises from scholars who continue to insist on an unbiased, dispassionate view of their own historical work. This is a “straw man” argument at best. Most historians recognize the potential pitfall of bias and attempt to curtail its influence, making irrelevant many of the charges leveled by critical theorists. Regardless of the many inconsistencies within critical theory, this perspective holds sway in many media culture histories and therefore demands understanding. The power of visual media has clouded the waters of popular historical understanding whether some professional historians like it or not. The closer the event or era to the present day and the more visually documented it is, the more complicated the process becomes. It is here that the Kent State shootings emerge as an excellent embodiment of the influence of postmodernism and poststructuralism on popular historical understanding in a media age.

Of additional importance to this discussion is the idea of collective or cultural memory. Defenders of the idea of collective memory contend that all cultural artifacts and products spring from and play upon collective memory. This collective or cultural memory is best defined as “the memory of a population’s shared experiences, stories, and images and the meanings ascribed to them.”¹⁴ Collective memory is multifaceted and

¹⁴Eric Greene, *Planet of the Apes as American Myth: Race and Politics in the Films and Television Series* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1996), 15.

cumulative, constructed from experiences of both the near and distant past. Cultural products utilize these experiences in all forms of symbolic discourse, be they written, oral, or visual. Discourse of a particular event in the present rests upon the discourse of previous experiences and events. Acceptance of interpretation rests in part upon its conformity to the accepted cultural view, an internalized process that is, for the most part, unrecognized by its participants and difficult to quantify. Collective memory provides the ingredients through which societies and other groups construct their past and interpret their present.

Film, television and other visual media play important roles in the shaping of modern (and postmodern) cultural memory and the understanding of history. Since repetition and acceptance on a large scale are key to the process, visual media are effective on a mass scale unparalleled in previous generations. Their instantaneous transmission allows the visual image to weave itself quickly into the tapestry of collective memory. “The images we get from movies and other popular culture media, especially the images that are repeated often or are especially popular or powerful, will likely influence how we view the world, which in turn must influence how we act in it.”¹⁵ Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner discuss this process at length, describing how “films transcode the discourses (the forms, figures and representations) of social life into cinematic narratives.” Visual images therefore, “become a part of that broader cultural system of representations that construct social reality.”¹⁶

¹⁵Ibid, 11.

¹⁶Douglas Kellner and Michael Ryan, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 12-13. For a thorough discussion of this process in the visual age, the works of Douglas Kellner

Today's society is awash in visual imagery via film, television and the internet. While one could argue that this expanded access to information is a positive development, a triumph of democracy and freedom in a "marketplace of ideas," the implications are much more complex. Visual imagery, much like the written word, is merely a representation of an event, shaped by a wide variety of factors. Factors of camera angle, sound, perspective, narrative structure, editing and the bias of the presenter all come into play, but many viewers are oblivious to these elements. The problem arises from the nature of visual media itself, as visual representations, unlike written accounts, give the viewer a sense of being an eyewitness to the events. Discernment is complicated by this sense of presence and observation—a notion of "being there."

Without a proper application of skepticism and discernment of the numerous factors that make up the construction of a visual source (a process often lacking when digesting written sources as well), viewers often internalize a source without a consideration of context. Once internalized, the representation exerts an influence on collective memory that is difficult to dislodge. These "cultural representations not only give shape to psychological dispositions, they also play an important role in determining how social reality will be constructed, that is, what figures and boundaries will prevail in the shaping of social life and social institutions."¹⁷ The result is what Douglas Kellner calls "techno-culture" or "the culture of the image." Industrial, commercial and high-

are essential reading. In addition to *Camera Politica*, see Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics Between the Modern and the Postmodern* (London: Routledge, 1995).

¹⁷Ibid.

tech, techno-culture is the seamless merging of culture and technology.¹⁸ Kellner asserts, “in today’s post-literate culture, techno-culture is the primary force of acculturation . . . how human beings see themselves, their societies, their world and their history/histories.”¹⁹

When writing about the Kent State shootings and the 1960s in historical memory, one author commented that the era has yet to take on a “coherent and composed historical persona.” The 1960s were, he noted, “a time of great motion and passion, yet a time that seems curiously distant from the pliant present and oddly fragmented in terms of imagery and theme . . . a disembodied decade . . . its political struggles launched remained unresolved, unfinished, unburnished by historical smoothing.”²⁰ Much of this problem arises from the aforementioned power of television and film coverage of recent history. The lines between account and event have become more blurred in the minds of the masses, and this haze has transcended the realm of academia and found its way into the popular culture and via visual media, into the collective memory. This process provides new challenges to historians, particularly those scholars who wish to share historical scholarship with the masses. No longer are historical sources primarily written sources, words written upon a page, that must be tested against each other in an attempt to reach the most realistic, viable conclusion. As one scholar sees it, “traditional history has in

¹⁸Kellner, *Media Culture*, 1-11.

¹⁹Ibid, 9.

²⁰Scott L. Bills, “The Sixties, Kent State, and Historical Memory,” *VietNam Generation*, vol. 2, no. 2, (1990), 1.

this century run up against the limits of representation.”²¹ The rise of popular television and cinematic commodification of historical periods and events, combined with the popularity of entities such as the History Channel, has made the quest for truth and accuracy in the understanding of historical objects by the masses more than just the product of written and oral sources.

Popular audiences now occupy a more active role in the process of history and its representation. In her introduction to *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television and the Modern Event*, Vivian Sobchack contends that “popular audiences have become involved in and understand the stakes in historical representation, recognize ‘history in the making,’ and see themselves not only as spectators of history, but also as participants in and adjudicators of it.”

Current debates around the nature, shape, and narration of history are no longer only the province of academic historians and scholars of film and literature. “History happens” now in the public sphere where the search for a lost object has led not only to cheap substitutes but in the process, also to the quickening of a new historical sense and perhaps a more active and reflective historical subject.²²

There is no better example of this implosion than that era referred to as the “sixties,” a term that many use but few bother to define. The term “sixties” is problematic in and of itself, as commentators rarely use it to delineate the decade that bears its name. More frequently, the term refers to the period from the assassination of

²¹Robert Rosenstone, “The Future of the Past: Film and the Beginnings of Postmodern History,” chapter in Sobchack, *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television and the Modern Event*, 216.

²²Vivian Sobchack, “History Happens,” chapter in *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event*, ed. Vivian Sobchack, (New York: Routledge, 1996), 7.

John F. Kennedy in 1963 to the resignation of Richard M. Nixon in 1974. Central to representations of the period are the Civil Rights movement, American involvement in the Vietnam War, the rise of the New Left and hippie countercultures (two terms clearly distinguishable within academic writing but virtually interchangeable in the popular culture, often collectively referred to as the youth culture), and the growth of anti-war protest movements on American college campuses. Square within the context of this period stands an event that encompassed all of the aforementioned elements that most people associate with “sixties” America. That event was the killing of four students by National Guardsmen during a protest rally on the campus of Kent State University in Ohio on May 4, 1970.

The Kent State incident is worthy of study because of its important ramifications on student protest, anti-Vietnam sentiment, and the use of force to maintain order on college campuses in late twentieth-century America. However, it is much more than simply an important historical event--it is a distinct, identifiable symbol of an age. More importantly, the Kent State tragedy found its way into America’s popular historical consciousness through the vessels of mass media—television, newsprint, film, music, and more recently, the internet. “Four dead in Ohio” became *the* icon of a traumatic period in American history. How and why this happened are issues that historians must address. Through its coverage and presentations of the incident, what role has the media (television and print journalism, documentary and Hollywood filmmakers) played in the development of popular understanding about the Kent State shootings and the era in which it occurred? This study attempts to explore and propose explanations to this perplexing, but vital, question.

Such an inquiry involves consideration of several problems in handling events from the “symbolic sixties” like the Kent State shootings: (1) the proximity of the events to the present day (the hazy line between “memory” and “history”); (2) the often-bitter conflict over the “meaning” of the 1960s and its key events and central figures, such as the Vietnam War (motivation, government deception, outcome), the “counterculture” (its composition, agendas, and effectiveness); (3) the current battle in academe and popular culture over what Rick Perlstein calls the “ownership” of the 60s, a struggle intertwined with the “nostalgia factor” of aging baby boomers longing for the days of their youth;²³ (4) the determination to find meaning and hidden order in a chaotic situation (the problem of clear-cut cause and effect) and its influence in shaping accounts of the shootings; (5) the problems that television and visual media bring to the idea of an “accepted history”--with consideration given to how visual media accounts and presentations have replaced descriptions derived from diverse sources. This is particularly relevant when examining news coverage, film documentaries, and docudramas that deal with Kent State; (6) the persistence and validity of the “bad soldier/good civilian” dichotomy both at home and abroad often found in accounts of the era. Has the distaste for the Vietnam War by some scholars on the one hand and the dislike of campus protesters and anti-Vietnam protest in general influenced scholarship and the various presentations of the Kent State shootings? This study attempts to explore and propose explanations to these perplexing, important questions and explore the importance of media culture in shaping both current understanding of the Kent State shootings in particular with its ramifications both in

²³Rick Perlstein, “Who Owns the Sixties?,” *Lingua Franca: The Review of Academic Life*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (May/June 1996), 30-37.

academic and popular historical understanding in general.

For many historians, as well as many activists of the period, the Kent State incident of May 4, 1970 represents a turning point in the history of modern America. Thirteen seconds of gunfire, resulting in four deaths and nine injuries, marked the climax of campus activism and protest. Those persons who remember seeing the events from this “quiet little campus in Ohio” on the evening news recall the shock they felt at seeing representatives of law and order firing on unarmed college students. The historical accounts of the shootings demonstrate the chaos of the day, and most scholars agree that examination of the incident leads to more questions than answers. The points of agreement about the incident number few when compared with the wide range of conjecture that surrounds the shootings. Even eyewitness accounts are filled with noteworthy, often glaring, discrepancies as to what occurred. That is one of the reasons that the Kent State incident is as disturbingly fascinating as it is—the incident itself, while undeniably important and certainly memorable in hindsight, is riddled with contradictions. While the question of why the guardsmen fired has never been answered to anyone’s satisfaction, leading to the typical accusations of conspiracy, the average visual media-educated American is oblivious to the complexities and unanswered questions surrounding the event.

Although the amount of literature on Kent State is voluminous, the scope of the research is rather narrow. With the exception of a few scattered articles, no studies address the role of visual media in creating a popular historical understanding, or what J. Gregory Payne calls an “accepted history” of the Kent State incident. General studies abound, finding their way to publishers every five to ten years, and are usually released

on the anniversary of the Kent State shootings. Not surprisingly, both popular and academic works on Kent State reflect the attitudes of the authors, particularly their views about Vietnam, the anti-war movement, and the youth culture of the time. No definitive account exists, and it is doubtful that such a study will ever appear without dramatic new evidence being revealed. Over thirty years after the shootings, there are too many unanswered questions and too many enflamed passions surrounding the event for an “accepted history” to be researched and written, much less published. Barring revelatory confessional statements from national guardsmen or Kent activists in the near future or the release of enlightening new government documents, we now know as much as can be known about the Kent State shootings. National Guardsmen descended upon a college campus by order of their governor. Four students died, nine others were wounded, and there is no consensus as to why this happened. What is ongoing is the struggle for the “meaning” of Kent State, an evolution of which visual media, and this study, is a part.

An overview of Kent State studies is essential to understanding the varying interpretations of this tragic event. The first major publication, albeit the product of the U.S. government, was published in October 1970 by The President’s Committee on Campus Unrest.²⁴ President Nixon formed this committee, headed by former

²⁴There were two publications that preceded the Scranton Report, but neither received the same attention nor reached as large of an audience. The Knight Newspaper chain, owner of the Akron *Beacon Journal*, published a 30,000-word piece on May 24, 1970. The article included the findings of the eight *ABJ* reporters who covered the incident, culling the material from three weeks of stories. The report won a Pulitzer Prize and the *ABJ* remains an indispensable source for researchers of May 4. Another book, written by a KSU student, is a collection of essays that recounted the feelings of the student community after the killings occurred. While it is an intriguing little book, its numerous factual errors undermine its validity as a historical source. See Knight Newspapers, Inc., *Reporting the Kent State Incident* (New York: American Newspaper

Pennsylvania Governor William Scranton, to investigate the events surrounding the shootings at Kent. Their report, *The Kent State Tragedy*, better known as “The Scranton Report,” represents the most thorough source on the incident to this day. The commission based its report on multiple sources, including the FBI investigations, research by the Commission staff, and public hearings held at Kent State in August 1970. These Commission hearings included testimony from university administrators and faculty, KSU students, Guardsmen, and citizens of Kent. While the main body of the Scranton Report dealt with American campus unrest as a whole (including the tragedy at Jackson State in Mississippi that occurred two weeks after Kent), it devoted a separate report on the May 4 shootings. The FBI report on Kent State was over 8,000 pages in length, culled from the finding of agents (some accounts say over 100 agents were involved) who began arriving on the KSU campus within twenty-four hours of the incident. The Scranton Report is the best primary source for understanding the basic facts and opinions surrounding the shootings. Its most famous statement is the conclusion that “the indiscriminate firing of rifles into a crowd of students and the deaths that followed were unnecessary, unwarranted, and inexcusable.”²⁵

The first published account of the incident, James A. Michener’s hastily prepared

Publishers Association Foundation, 1971) and Bill Warren, *The Middle of the Country* (New York: Avon Books, 1970).

²⁵*The Report of the President’s Commission on Campus Unrest: The Kent State Tragedy* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1970; reprint, Arno Press, n.d.), 90. Hereafter cited as *Scranton Report*. The pagination used in this work is from the edited version of the report available at the Kent State University May 4 Reading Room that leaves out the section on Jackson State. For a good synopsis of the Commission’s work and its findings, see Charles F. Kegley, “The Response of Groups to the Events of May 1-4, 1970 at Kent State University” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1974).

Kent State: What Happened and Why (1971), drew praise from some reviewers but intense criticism from survivors and witnesses within the Kent State community.²⁶ Originally published in serial fashion in *Reader's Digest*, Michener's book has not endured the test of time, due in part to alleged inaccuracies in eyewitness accounts as well as his tendency to fill in evidentiary gaps with questionable material to maintain the narrative. Released on the one-year anniversary of the shootings, the work bears all the marks of a book intent on making the initial splash in the public arena. As a result, it failed in its attempt to be an accurate description of the events of May 4. In the vernacular of the historian, the release of Michener's book was still "too close." Compounding the problem of the close proximity to the event are the allegations of some Kent State survivors that Michener did little of the research himself, leaving that to a swarm of paid assistants and *Reader's Digest* investigators while he spent his days sampling the tastes and tipples of the restaurants and taverns of Kent.²⁷ Although the book remains the best-known work published dealing with Kent State, its inaccuracies make it a questionable source at best.

The weaknesses are legion. Michener fails to give an accurate account of the political activism that characterized the Kent State campus in the years leading up to the shootings, an omission that continues to shape popular perception over thirty years later. On the one hand, Michener discusses the active nature of radical student activism in the years leading up to May of 1970, but then downplays the influence upon discovering that

²⁶James Michener, *Kent State: What Happened and Why* (New York: Random House, 1971).

²⁷Alan Canfora, interview by author, 22 January 1999.

radical leaders of SDS had no direct connection to the events of May 1-4. At the same time, he portrays KSU as a “sleepy little campus” prior to that fateful weekend. The decision makes for great drama, but misleads the reader into assuming that the shootings occurred amidst an isolated student revolt that emerged seemingly out of nowhere. In fact, during the spring of 1969, one year prior to the shootings, Kent State erupted over the arrests of five leaders of the campus chapter of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), resulting in an altercation between Kent students, campus police, and Ohio Highway Patrol that led to the occupation of the Music and Speech building on the northeast side of campus. In the end, numerous arrests were made and university officials revoked the charter of SDS, a story that dominated the local press of the day. Kent’s SDS chapter was active to say the least, and their significant presence on campus in 1968 and 1969 is downplayed in Michener’s account because he could find no direct connection between SDS and the incident. The tumultuous events of spring 1969 led to KSU president Robert I. White and other university representatives appearing before a House subcommittee investigating campus unrest in the summer of 1969.

Michener’s presentation complicates interpretation, particularly when one is attempting to dissect the underlying causes of dissension that culminated on May 4, 1970. He does a decent job recounting the events of the weekend of May 1-4, but leaves the reader believing that the activism that sprang forth at that time was an anomaly, not connected to prior events that reveal a campus brimming for years with political activity. His skill as a writer of fiction gives him the grand ability to weave an engrossing narrative, giving readers a sense of the urgency and chaos of the weekend. Yet his tendency to fill in the gaps when faced with incomplete or conflicting information (a

problem that plagues many works on May 4) undermines the book as a reliable secondary source for historian and non-historian alike. Many persons interviewed for the book claimed that their views were either misquoted or lifted from their proper context.²⁸ One study contends that Michener's research methods were slipshod on a level that undermined the value of the study.²⁹ Rather than providing a sense of closure, the book created a greater sense of frustration, particularly from survivors of the shootings.³⁰ As one Kent State survivor stated, Michener's book on May 4 may be his most impressive work of historical fiction.³¹

Ensuing works published throughout the 1970s mirrored the turmoil of the era as both Kent State and the nation at-large wrestled with the fallout of the tragedy. Most

²⁸Jerry M. Lewis, "Review Essay: The Telling of Kent State," in Thomas R. Hensley and Jerry M. Lewis, *Kent State and May 4th: A Social Science Perspective*, Second Edition (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 2000), 43.

²⁹Ibid. Lewis is referring to a study conducted by KSU speech professors after Michener's book hit the shelves. See Carl Moore and D. Ray Heisey, "Not a Great Deal of Error . . . ?" (Kent State University, 1971), mimeograph copy in the *Papers of Jerry M. Lewis*, May 4 Archive, Kent State University Library. Hereafter cited as *Lewis Papers*. Moore and Heisey are most critical of Michener's tendency to quote from memory rather than taking extensive notes or taping interviews.

³⁰While most persons on the scene that day would regard themselves as survivors, the term "survivor" is used in this study to indicate the nine persons wounded physically by the gunfire at Kent State.

³¹Ibid. See also Joe Eszterhas and Michael Roberts, *Thirteen Seconds: Confrontation at Kent State* (New York: Dodd and Mead, 1970) and I.F. Stone, *The Killings at Kent State: How Murder Went Unpunished* (New York: New York Review Book, 1971). Both books, while interesting for their strong denunciations of the shootings, are rather lacking in analysis and rely heavily on conjecture. Joe Eszterhas, who wrote *Thirteen Seconds* while a reporter for the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, later became a popular Hollywood screenwriter/producer. I.F. Stone was well known for his provocative writing style and his leftist leanings.

writings reiterated or disputed Michener's work, but added very little to the scholarship. One exception is Peter Davies' 1973 book *The Truth About Kent State: A Challenge to the American Conscience*. Davies became involved with the families of the victims in the months following the shootings, and his work reveals the passion and anger so characteristic of the time. Davies' most important contribution is a large section of photographs from the day of the shootings, showing the positions of students and guardsmen in the moments prior to the tragedy. The author asserts that photographic evidences demonstrates that much of the testimony offered by guardsmen to both their superiors and the Scranton Commission to justify their actions was at best inaccurate and at worst misleading. Davies states openly his reason for writing the book.

How much longer are the American people willing to let the questions surrounding these brutal deaths go unresolved? Indefinitely? Perhaps so, but we hope this book will sufficiently prod your conscience to demand that your government use the investigative and judicial tools at its disposal to find out, at least, *why* four young people lost their lives at Kent State.³²

As shown, Davies hoped to prod the Justice Department into convening a federal grand jury to investigate the shootings. This hope never became reality. However, the book was an important step in instigating state and federal authorities into an investigation and potential criminal action against the guardsmen who fired on the crowd, a desire achieved in 1975 with the first attempted legal action.

Yet Davies' contention that the shootings were part of a conspiracy carried out by some of the National Guard, the result of a premeditated burst of gunfire from ten of the Guardsmen, rests upon conjecture and assumptions about certain actions shown in the photographs. Conspiracy theories aside, *The Truth about Kent State*, unfortunately long out of print, is superior to Michener's more celebrated book, not only in its thorough

³²Peter Davies, *The Truth about Kent State: A Challenge to the American Conscience* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1973), 10. Italics in original.

chronology of the events surrounding the prelude and aftermath of May 4, but also for its presentation of the anger and cry for justice that epitomized the survivors and families of the victims in the years immediately following the shootings. Davies' work, with its combination of emotive narrative and provocative photographs, leaves an impression on even the most skeptical and jaded reader.

His righteous indignation and photographic evidence make the failure of legal action in the ensuing years all the more difficult to comprehend. Davies published numerous works throughout the 1970s calling for federal investigations into the shootings.³³ For the most part, his contentions failed to incite the necessary re-evaluation the shootings demanded. Still, his work is important for its emphasis on photographic evidence and eyewitness accounts. It would take the opening of previously unavailable government documents and evidence presented in civil and criminal trials to make Davies' contentions worthy of further inquiry. As the decade of the 1970s wound down, some of that evidence became available, due in part to legal cases surrounding both the shootings and their aftermath.

Throughout the 1970s, the campus community faced scrutiny for its attempts to construct a new gymnasium on the site of the old practice field, the place where the left flank of the Guard gathered minutes before the shootings occurred. Such construction would not only destroy the layout of a significant event, it would tamper with what the survivors called a crime scene in the midst of ongoing investigations and pending legal action. Rallies and protests again became common occurrences on the Kent State campus throughout the decade, as activists protested the gymnasium construction and called for a

³³For more examples of Davies' writing prowess, see Peter Davies, "Citizens Battle for Justice: Kent State Shootings by Ohio National Guard," *The Nation* (29 November 1971), 557ff. For an evolution of Davies' theories of conspiracy and cover-up, see idem, "The Burning Question: A Government Cover-Up?," in *Kent State/May 4: Echoes Through a Decade*, ed. Scott L. Bills (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 1982; paperback edition with a new preface by the editor, 1988), 150-159.

memorial to the victims of the shootings. Family members of the victims, as well as survivors, demanded an investigation into charges of conspiracy by government officials, university administration and the Guard to cover up their crimes by pushing for construction of the gymnasium on the selected site. These events provided the environment and impetus for a number of key works.

The first wrongful death and civil trial resulted in a single work, *The Kent State Coverup* by Joseph Kelner and James Munves, published in 1980. The book details the efforts by the chief counsel for the victims to hold Governor James A. Rhodes and the Guardsmen accountable for their roles in the shootings. Kelner and Munves present a fascinating overview of the legal machinations behind the trials, revealing the contradictory nature of the evidence available. While this work is valuable for revealing the complexities of the case, it offers no conclusive answers as to why the tragedy occurred. Kelner and Munves raise important questions about the governmental involvement at both the state and federal levels in creating a tragic incident, but they fail to answer culpability beyond reasonable doubt with tangible evidence.³⁴

While the first decade after the incident revealed shifting interpretations derived from new revelations and changing cultural attitudes, works that are more recent demonstrate no such changes. Even the release of the FBI documents on the Kent incident in 1985 failed to offer anything of a clarifying nature. According to Dr. Thomas Hensley, Professor of Political Science at Kent State, no new facts or revelatory evidence about the shootings have come to light since 1980, which explains the apparent stagnation of new revelations within the scholarship.³⁵ One such example is Scott L.

³⁴Joseph Kelner and James Munves, *The Kent State Cover-Up* (New York, Harper and Row, 1980).

³⁵Thomas R. Hensley, interview by author, 3 May 1998. Hensley also penned a work that is a fascinating overview of the trials surrounding the Kent State shootings. This political science study is important for its thorough overview of the criminal and civil trials dealing with the shootings and their greater impact on student attitudes at Kent

Bills' edited compilation, *Kent State/May4: Echoes Through a Decade*, published in 1982. The book includes excellent overviews of the "four days in May" and the decade-long battles that ensued, both in the courtroom and on campus. Bills hoped to create a work "about attitudes, about how people interpret events, about myths and zeitgeist."³⁶

Kent State speech professor Drew Tiene's essay, "Sensitivity to an Image," is of particular interest to the topic at hand. Tiene, who later made an excellent documentary of the Kent State incident, discusses the role of mass media in shaping public perception of the Kent State incident throughout the 1970s. He examines this evolution through a study of the three KSU presidents during the decade and their handling of May 4, particularly in the areas of commemorations and memorials. Heisey argues that mass media played an important role in shaping the ways that the various university administrations dealt with the shootings both on and off campus. "Each of the three Kent State University presidents during the last twelve years," he observes, "has expressed a sensitivity to the events of May 4 that shaped the manner in which he responded to pressures and proposals."

What separates the majority of works on Kent State since 1980 is not the presentation of new findings or evidence, but the asserted "meaning" of the incident within 1960s America. The primary exception to this tendency is William Gordon's 1990 work *The Fourth of May: Killings and Coverups at Kent State*, later revised, updated and reissued in 1995 as *Four Dead in Ohio: Was There a Conspiracy at Kent State?*³⁷ As of the present time, it is one of the most interesting, and most provocative,

State. See Thomas R. Hensley, *The Kent State Incident: Impact of Judicial Process on Public Attitudes* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981).

³⁶Scott L. Bills, editor, *Kent State/May4: Echoes Through a Decade* (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 1982; paperback edition with a new preface by the editor, 1988). Hereafter cited as Bills, *Kent State/May 4*.

³⁷William A. Gordon, *Four Dead in Ohio: Was There a Conspiracy at Kent State?* (Laguna Hills, CA: North Ridge Books, 1995).

volumes on Kent State. Gordon markets his book as the product of nearly twenty years of research into the incident, including research into the FBI's 8,000 pages of investigative files on Kent State as well as the government's extensive collection of documents on the prosecution of the Guardsmen. He conducted hundreds of interviews with Kent students and eyewitnesses, Ohio National Guardsmen, officials in both the Nixon White House and Justice Department, attorneys in the criminal and civil cases, parents of the victims, and Ohio government and law enforcement officials. Gordon's work is important because of his examination of the various theories of the circumstances that led to the shootings, including charges of conspiracy leveled against the Guardsmen, Ohio government officials, and the Nixon administration.

Gordon has done his homework, but the result is as frustrating as it is enlightening. His allegations of conspiracy echo those of Peter Davies with a few interesting twists. While he repeats Davies' allegations of a conspiracy among certain members of the Guard to shoot students and engage in a cover-up, his assertions are based on sketchy evidence and fail to convince the reader. Gordon's discussion of Terry Norman, the enigmatic figure seen in many Kent State photographs wearing a gas mask and brandishing a camera, leads to more questions than answers. He tries to incorporate Norman within a government conspiracy at May 4, but the lack of tangible evidence to support this claim leads Gordon into the realm of conjecture and the slippery slope that is conspiracy theory. Combine this tendency to conjecture with an awkward writing style and accusations from survivors and witnesses of the tragedy that Gordon has an "axe to grind," and one is left with a sense of skepticism regarding the work as a whole. As *Four Dead in Ohio* demonstrates, even after thirty years, an element of futility surrounds the hope for conclusive answers to the mysteries surrounding Kent State.

Gordon's book proposes answers to several important questions and reveals the complex extent of federal and state governmental involvement in the Kent State incident

and the ensuing decade of investigations and court trials. Like most of the other works on May 4, it does not address the various meanings that Kent State came to embody in American politics and culture, due in part to the media representations over the years. By the time Gordon's work first appeared in 1990, Kent State was already a cultural symbol--an icon--that served as an event rife with meaning and symbolism that transcended tangible evidence. Few studies address the importance of visual media in shaping popular historical understanding of an event, sometimes referred to as collective memory. When the visual mediums of television and film tend to exert a greater influence than academic scholarship on public opinion about a particular incident or era as they have in recent times, books and articles often find their conclusions overshadowed by views etched permanently within the cultural memory. Such is the case with the Kent State shootings of 1970 and the reason that this proposed study is important in the scope of understanding how historical events are understood within the popular culture.

This study examines the ways that both entertainment and journalistic media have examined, reported and presented Kent State since 1970. Only one monograph, J. Gregory Payne's *Mayday: Kent State* (1980), deals exclusively with visual media portrayals of Kent State, and its sole focus is the 1981 NBC docudrama, *Kent State*. Payne believes that the docudrama, while weak in areas due to creative license on the part of the filmmakers, represented a positive addition to popular understanding of the shootings. While Payne's book is an excellent overview of the difficulties of bringing the Kent State incident to television, his involvement in the project as historical consultant colors his view. He is also a continued presence at Kent State when it holds its annual May 4 memorial activities. One could argue that Payne is too involved with May 4 to be a credible source, but his involvement is also a positive element, providing him with important perspectives on the Kent State shootings, its history and its influence. His work as historical consultant on the Kent State television movie in 1981 (and his

bountiful research material on the complexity of the process) provides an important foundation to this present research. If Gordon is seen as a pariah to many of those within the Kent State community, Payne is regarded as a friend. Yet the arguments of someone close to the event demand as much, if not more, scrutiny and testing than the scholarship of “dispassionate” scholars.³⁸

Several articles also deal with the 1981 NBC docudrama of the incident, most notably Louis P. Cusella’s “Real-Fiction versus Historical Reality: Rhetorical Purification in *Kent State--the Docudrama*,” published in *Communications Quarterly* in 1982. Cusella, former roommate of shooting victim William Schroeder, contended that the film failed to portray the victims in a realistic way, although it served as a form of catharsis for the viewer. The failure of the film as realistic account while succeeding as a cathartic experience for survivors follows Robert Brent Toplin’s argument for historical film and its ability to portray “higher truths” of a time and place even when the “facts” fail the test of historical evidence.³⁹

Another important source that offers similar arguments is Kent State sociology professor Jerry M. Lewis’s 1981 article in the *Journal of Popular Film and Television* entitled “*Kent State--The Movie*.”⁴⁰ No comparative study of Kent State documentaries

³⁸J. Gregory Payne, *Mayday: Kent State* (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 1981). The book, no longer in print, is available for download from Payne through his website at www.may4archive.org. The downloaded version is used in this research. See also idem, “A Rhetorical Analysis of Selected Interpretations of the May 1970 Kent State Incident” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois, 1977). Payne’s research and expertise in rhetorical analysis and theory is a vital link in dealing with media aspects of May 4, and his interest and advice has been important to various aspects of this study.

³⁹Louis P. Cusella, “Real Fiction versus Historical Reality: Rhetorical Purification in *Kent State—The Docudrama*,” *Communications Quarterly*, vol. 30 (1982), 159-164; Toplin, *ReelHistory*, 58-89. Toplin’s approach will be tested and applied in ensuing chapters.

⁴⁰Jerry M. Lewis, “*Kent State—The Movie*,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, vol. 9 (1981), 13-18.

exists at the present time, a gap that this study will attempt to fill in part. Other works focus on the importance of imagery and symbol in the Kent State shootings, but as of yet, there is no single scholarly work that compares and contrasts visual media presentations of Kent State and examines their implications on popular historical understanding.

The first two chapters provide an overview of the events surrounding the shootings, including an examination of campus unrest on the Kent State campus prior to May 1970. Many studies of Kent State, both literary and media, present the campus as quiet and devoid of organized protest, creating the impression of an apolitical environment before the incidents of the weekend of May 1. The evidence presents a very different picture. This section also covers the events of May 4 and their aftermath, relying on the primary research and works surrounding the Kent State shootings, provides the historical foundation upon which the remainder of the study rests. Chapter three delves into the journalistic coverage of May 4, including the presentations of the major television networks and newspapers of the time. Many of the assumptions, both true and false, about the events of May 4 that persist to the present day derive from the initial coverage in the mainstream press. This section examines how information, whether good or bad, can influence perceptions of an event and create the framework for future examinations. The confusion of those initial reports, combined with the numerous unanswered questions of responsibility and culpability, continues to haunt popular understanding of the Kent State incident. When the foundation of any study is shrouded in mystery, it is no surprise to see wide, often glaring, discrepancies between accounts. That is the case with the Kent State shootings.

Chapters four and five shift the focus of the study towards mass media. Film documentaries of the Kent State shootings provide an interesting framework for understanding how an event moves from memory to history. It allows one to diagram the changes in collective memory over a thirty-year period. In the decade following the

shootings, most Kent State documentaries served as a means for pushing federal investigation and potential litigation. The programs served as a cry for investigation of the incident and a demand for justice that had been denied the victims and their families. After the court cases ended in 1979, the documentaries took on a different tone, attempting to present the incident within some kind of historical context. Many of the documentaries arrive on anniversaries of May 4, usually every five years. Included in this section is an in-depth study of the Learning Channel's 2000 documentary on Kent State, on which this author served as a historical consultant. The challenges of conveying an important event within a constricted time element without sacrificing accuracy are discussed firsthand, allowing for greater understanding of the positive and negative aspects of media studies of history.

Chapter six provides an in-depth investigation of the 1981 television docudrama on the Kent State incident from pre-production stages to final cut. The film is a classic example of the difficulties of bringing history to film. Based on source material provided by historical consultant J. Gregory Payne and collected at the Kent State University archive, the chapter uncovers the struggles between historian and filmmaker when creating a docudrama. Struggles over script content, dramatic license, and editing all manifest themselves in the final version of any film, and this project is no exception. The process of bringing history to the television or film screen is laden with potential pitfalls and unexpected triumphs as the 1981 film shows in many ways. How much dramatic license is too much? At what point does embellishment detract from the validity of a film as historical representation? These questions are addressed in addition to others concerning historical film and docudrama.

The conclusion brings the study full circle, providing a synopsis of the Kent State shootings and visual media. The implications go beyond the study of the Kent State shootings, and the chapter provides a framework for future inquiry into other historical

events. It is hoped that this work will not only shed light on one of the more important events of the last fifty years, but will also provide an impetus for further research on both the Kent State shootings and the role of visual media in shaping popular understanding of historical events.

Chapter 1

Prelude to May 4: Kent State Activism, 1965-1970

May 4 historian Scott Bills notes,

It would be simpler sometimes if history were a series of well-sorted benchmarks, precise lines delimiting eras—the rise and fall of civilizations, movements, and political zones punctuated by specific, easily identifiable events. But real life is more typically more complex and ambiguous than we would prefer. Still, some events push themselves to the fore as markers, milestones, and powerful symbols, redolent of causes won and lost. And themes pile upon each other—as do ironies.¹

Such is the case with the tragic shootings at Kent State on May 4, 1970. The events of that day contain more than a few complexities and ambiguities. At the same time, the shootings represent a powerful symbol seen by the masses as representative of an entire era of American history. The themes and ironies, while too numerous to mention in detail, demand careful consideration, particularly in light of the history of political activism on the Kent State campus in the years before the shootings.

It is tempting to bypass the historical debates and rush into dissecting the intricacies of cultural memory regarding an incident like the Kent State shootings. While such an approach makes for entertaining talk show topics and good magazine articles, it

¹Scott L. Bills, “The Sixties, Kent State and Historical Memory,” in Susie Erinrich, ed., *Kent and Jackson State, 1970-1990*, 2d ed. (Woodbridge, CT: VietNam Generation Inc. and Burning Cities Press, 1995), 178. Hereafter cited as Erinrich, *Kent and Jackson State*. Hereafter cited as Bills, “The Sixties.”

fails as historical research. To grasp the scope and importance of May 4 requires an overview of the shootings, their surrounding circumstances, and the disputed outcomes so that the Kent State incident abides within its proper historical context.²

Consideration of campus activism at Kent State in the years prior to May 4 also sheds light on factors rarely discussed in historical accounts of the confrontation. When one reads of the Kent State shootings in some history textbooks, it appears that National Guardsmen showed up unexpectedly to stop an antiwar rally and, with little or no provocation, riddled the campus with gunfire. This is hardly the case.³ Contrary to some renderings of May 4, Kent State was not a sleepy little campus prior to the spring of 1970. At the time of the shootings, KSU was the third largest university in the state of

²For overviews of the Kent State incident, see James J. Best, "The Tragic Weekend of May 1 to 4, 1970," in Thomas R. Hensley and Jerry M. Lewis, eds., *Kent State and May 4th: A Social Science Perspective*, Second Edition (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1978), 3-34, hereafter cited as Hensley and Lewis, *Kent State and May 4th*, hereafter cited as Best, "Tragic Weekend"; Scott L. Bills, "Introduction: The Past in the Present," in *Kent State/May 4: Echoes Through a Decade* (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 1982); paperback edition with a new preface by the editor, 1988), 1-61, hereafter cited as Bills, "Introduction"; and William A. Gordon, *Four Dead in Ohio: Was There a Conspiracy at Kent State?* (Laguna Hills, CA: North Ridge Books, 1995). Gordon's work is the best overview of the happenings of the first twenty years after the shootings in monograph form, but his sloppy writing and his tendency to lapse into conspiracy theory hinders the result. The Best and Bills articles convey the same information in a brief, more accessible form. *The Report of the President's Commission on Campus Unrest*, also known as *The Scranton Report*, is the most thorough government source on May 4, although it is not as readily available as other sources. Also worth a look are Peter Davies, *The Truth about Kent State: A Challenge to the American Conscience* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1973); Lesley Wischmann, "Four Dead in Ohio," *American History Illustrated* 25:2 (May 1990): 24-33, 70-72; and James Michener, *Kent State: What Happened and Why* (New York: Random House, 1971). Michener's work, although widely available, is not as reliable a source as the aforementioned works. He writes well, but his research is sloppy and many of his conclusions questionable.

³For a scholarly overview of the misinformation regarding May 4 in existing literature, see Jerry M. Lewis and Thomas R. Hensley, "The May 4 Shootings at Kent State University: The Search for Historical Accuracy," in Hensley and Lewis, *Kent State and May 4th*, 51-59. Hereafter cited as Lewis and Hensley, "Historical Accuracy."

Ohio, and one of the twenty-five largest institutions of higher learning in the United States with a campus population of 21,000. If one includes the nine regional campus centers operated by Kent State, the university surpassed Ohio University as the second largest university in the state. The dramatic growth that KSU experienced after World War II, especially during the late 1960s, led to its description as “the largest unknown university in the United States.”⁴

A high percentage of the campus population were first-generation college students who came from working class families. Four out of every five students came to KSU from Ohio high schools.⁵ Yet Kent State not only drew students from its home state, it attracted young people from across the country. Its affordability, location, and academic reputation provided an impetus for growth during the late 1960s that rivaled more visible institutions. According to some former students from surrounding states, the legal drinking age of eighteen in Ohio was an important factor as well.⁶ The bars of Water Street in downtown Kent served as the gathering place for students and the center of social activity, particularly on weekends. Although a majority of Kent State students in the late 1960s failed to fit within the category of “radical,” many of the students came from backgrounds conducive to political activism. For example, the children of labor activists from cities like Akron and Youngstown possessed a blue-collar activism that distinguished them from many of their peers around the nation.⁷ The growth of the Kent

⁴*Scranton Report*, 1-2.

⁵*Ibid*, 3.

⁶Thomas Grace, interview with author, 3 May 2000.

⁷For example, May 4 victims Alan Canfora, Tom Grace, and Allison Krause all had parents who were involved in labor union and social justice activities in their respective hometowns. Canfora’s father Albert was active both in the AFL-CIO in Akron and the Democratic Party of Barberton. Grace’s parents were active in Socialist Party activities in Buffalo, New York. Krause’s parents, especially her father Arthur, were outspoken advocates for social justice and members of the Anti-Defamation League in

chapter of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the increased frequency and volatility of campus protest were not solely the result of students energized by their first exposure to Marxist theory, Mao's "little red book," or the writings of Albert Camus. Many Kent students brought with them a pre-existent sense of social justice and political activism when they came to college, and they channeled that impulse into student activism.⁸ The events of the time (Vietnam, the Civil Rights movement, and the 1968 presidential campaign) awakened rather than created a tendency toward social and political action among Kent students, particularly those involved with SDS and other groups. This information contradicts James Michener's work, the first and most famous account of the Kent incident. Michener describes Kent State as "a conservative university, its nickname being Apathy U."⁹ While any claim that a majority of Kent students participated in radical political activities falls in the face of the evidence, Michener's caricature of Kent State as a conservative, apathetic campus with minimal activism in the years prior to 1970 is just as incorrect. Yet, it is a view that colored initial perceptions of what happened on May 4, 1970, and it remains a persistent perspective some three decades later.

The Kent Chapter of SDS organized in the spring semester of 1968, growing out of another campus organization, the Kent Committee to End the War in Vietnam

their native Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Alan Canfora, interview by author, 2 May 2000; Thomas Grace, interview by author, 3 May 2000. For a thorough overview of the history of student political activism at Kent State prior to 1970, see Kenneth J. Heineman, *Campus Wars: The Peace Movement at American State Universities in the Vietnam Era* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), hereafter cited as Heineman, *Campus Wars*.

⁸One example of this activism is Carl Oglesby, a native of South Carolina, who attended Kent State for three years during the mid-1960s. He later became national president of SDS. See Heineman, *Campus Wars*, 115-124.

⁹Michener, *Kent State: What Happened and Why*, 74.

(KCEWV). Key leaders of the KCEWV, active from 1966 to 1968, decided to organize as a chapter of SDS because SDS was better known as a national group.¹⁰ The formation of SDS also stemmed from a fragmentation along class and ideological lines within KCEWV, a battle between what one scholar called “working-class activists” and “privileged radicals.”¹¹ Dovish elements, which viewed the war in Vietnam as an aberration, held sway among the working-class leadership of the KCEWV. More radical elements, which saw the Vietnam conflict as another example of pre-meditated American imperialism, broke away to form the Student Religious Liberals (SRL) in early 1968. The SRL, led by Vince Mudugno and George Hoffman, provided the nucleus of the new Kent SDS. Both Mudugno and Hoffman believed in the necessity of a radical student movement at Kent, and saw SDS as the means to achieve that end.¹² George Hoffman contended that SDS was “basically anarchist, anti-establishment, anti-draft and action oriented,” a statement that demonstrated a marked departure from the moderate tone of the KCEWV.¹³

The Kent SDS failed to generate much interest in its initial stages during the spring session of 1968, with fewer than ten persons attending the regular meetings. This scenario changed during the fall session, due in part to the unrest and violence of the summer months. The initial Kent SDS meeting in the fall of 1968 attracted 250 people,

¹⁰Testimony of Margaret Ann Murvay, *Investigation of Students for a Democratic Society, Part 2 (Kent State University), Hearings before the Committee on Internal Security, House of Representatives, Ninety-first Congress, First Session, June 24 and 25, 1969* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office), 502. Hereafter cited as *House Internal Security Hearings. Papers of Jerry M. Lewis*, box 19, May 4 Archive. Hereafter cited as *JLP*. It bears noting that Murvay, now known as Margaret Garmon, currently works in the Public Relations Office at Kent State University.

¹¹Heineman, *Campus Wars*, 119.

¹²Ibid, 219-221.

¹³Quoted in Heineman, *Campus Wars*, 220.

many of the students energized by the assassination of Robert Kennedy in June and the riots at the Chicago Democratic National Convention in Chicago in August. May 4 survivors Alan Canfora and Tom Grace both joined SDS in the fall of 1968, although they shunned the more radical rhetoric and ideology of the Kent SDS leadership.¹⁴ Ensuing meetings drew fifty to sixty people during the fall of 1968, and included visits from Columbia SDS leader Mark Rudd in October and SDS founder Rennie Davis in November. Davis came to Kent to speak as part of a regional conference of northeastern Ohio SDS chapters. His visit coincided with cooperative attempts to generate national SDS support for demonstrations at the inauguration of President Richard Nixon on January 20, 1969. Forty-five Kent State students attended the protests in Washington, and according to one participant, the KSU chapter of SDS boasted the largest group of attendees from across the nation.¹⁵ The Kent SDS already enjoyed some notoriety with the incoming president, as some of its members had shouted Nixon down at a campaign stop in Akron before the November 1968 election.¹⁶

One could argue that organized campus activism at Kent paled when compared to actions on other campuses, but this reflects a frequent scholarly bias. Universities in middle America rarely received the same media attention as schools on the east and west coasts, but this oversight does not mean lack of activity. Kent State had its fair share of protests, some of them both disruptive and violent. The first organized anti-Vietnam

¹⁴The Kent SDS leadership included several noted names in addition to Hoffman and Mudugno. Rick Erickson and Howie Emmer held key positions in the chapter in 1968 and 1969. Both Erickson and Emmer went on to become a key leader of Weatherman. See Heineman, *Campus Wars*, 115-124.

¹⁵*Scranton Report*, 8-9; Alan Canfora, interview by author, 22 January 1999.

¹⁶Alan Canfora, interview by author, 22 January 1999. Kent SDS members also protested a spring 1968 visit by then Vice-President Hubert Humphrey, who they viewed as the embodiment of all that was wrong with Cold War liberalism.

protests on campus occurred in 1965 with only thirteen people in attendance.¹⁷ Yet, the seeming apolitical nature of the student body cannot be gauged accurately by actions before 1968. That year marked a dramatic shift in open political activism on the Kent campus, driven in part by the tumultuous events of the spring and summer months. By the fall of 1968, campus activism intensified with SDS in the lead, reaching levels of confrontation equal to or surpassing that of coastal universities. On November 13, 1968, the Kent chapter of SDS, in conjunction with the Black United Students (BUS), initiated a sit-in protest against recruiters from the Oakland, California police department. The university responded by announcing a planned disciplinary action, resulting in the walkout of 250 black students who demanded amnesty in exchange for returning to campus. After a consultation with university legal counsel, KSU president Robert I. White stated that the university would not charge students who participated in the sit-in, and the black students returned to campus. As a result of the BUS/SDS sit-in against the Oakland Police Department, the university established an Institute of African-American Affairs. Black students wanted more pronounced changes, including focused recruiting and enrollment of black students as well as the development of more African-American courses. Race-related disturbances ceased on the Kent State campus, but mistrust between the BUS and the Kent administration never abated.¹⁸

Another important development stemmed from the November 1968 incident, as KSU administration initiated confidential emergency procedural guidelines in the event of a future disruption. President White referred to this new system, created in August 1968, as his “no tolerance policy.” The policy included the issuance of temporary restraining orders in the event of a disruption. On March 30, 1969, the university added

¹⁷James Michener, *Kent State: What Happened and Why*, 470.

¹⁸*Scranton Report*, 3-4. The demands of African-American students at Kent and the administrative response to those concerns reflected similar sentiments found at other universities of the time, including the more heralded incidents at the University of California-Berkeley and Cornell University in New York.

the policy of immediate suspensions to this new framework. Any student involved in a disruption faced suspension from the university for no less than one quarter. President White explained the reasoning behind these new policies when testifying before the House Committee on Internal Security in June 1969. “It is deplorable that a university is required to maintain a massive peace-keeping operation,” he stated, “especially when those functions are so obviously beyond the scope of a university’s usual assignment.”¹⁹ Protest and dissent were fine, but violence and disruption stood outside the bounds of protected speech. The appearance of President White before the House Committee on Internal Security in the summer of 1969 demonstrates that Kent State was a focus of national authorities concerned with campus unrest a full year before the shootings. The presence of KSU representatives arose from a major campus disruption the previous spring, where SDS members clashed with campus police and Ohio Highway Patrol in an event that served as a harbinger of events to come.²⁰

During the spring of 1969, as a part of the national SDS “spring offensive,” the Kent chapter launched a new campaign formulated around four specific demands. Following strategies used by other SDS chapters around the nation, the group called for four specific changes: elimination of the campus ROTC training program; removal of the Liquid Crystals Institute, a university agency funded in part by the U.S. Department of Defense;²¹ removal of a state crime laboratory housed on campus; and the abolition of the university’s law enforcement degree program. On April 8, 1969, a group of approximately fifty students, including leaders of the Kent SDS, marched to the administration building to post these demands on an administrative office door. Upon

¹⁹*House Internal Security Hearings*, 481, *JLP*, box 19, May 4 Archive.

²⁰*Ibid*, 478-481.

²¹Kent State’s Liquid Crystals Institute developed chemicals for companies such as Dow, the primary maker of napalm. The demand to close the institute again reflected sentiments found on other American campuses.

reaching the building, the students encountered an assemblage of campus police officers. An altercation ensued, with students and officers pushing and shoving each other, with students allegedly striking several officers during the scuffle. Employing the procedures created in August of 1968 and March of 1969, Kent administrators charged a number of demonstrators with assault and battery, issued temporary restraining orders, and suspended them from the university. As punishment for their actions, Kent administration revoked the provisional status charter for SDS, depriving the group of university funding and the use of campus facilities.²²

The university administration scheduled an April 16 disciplinary hearing for two of the students involved in the incident to be held in the Music and Speech Building on the northwest side of campus. While the university claimed that it set up a private hearing at the request of one of the students involved, approximately 100 supporters of the suspended students converged on the Music and Speech Building, demanding that the hearings be open to the public. These demonstrators encountered around 200 “counter-demonstrators,” composed primarily of politically conservative fraternity members and KSU athletes. Fistfights erupted between the two groups, and demonstrators entered the Music and Speech Building, breaking open a door to the third floor where the hearings were taking place. The commotion in the hallway grew so loud that it disrupted the hearings. How the students got into the building in spite of the visible presence of KSU campus police remains a mystery, although it was likely a product of the chaos of the scene. After the students charged into the building, campus police officers locked all doors leading to the third floor and sealed the exits to the building. With the demonstrators trapped inside the building (except for a few students who managed to escape via an unwatched elevator prior to the sealing of the doors) and campus police outside, an impasse ensued. Convinced that they lacked the manpower to handle the

²²*House Internal Security Hearings*, 483, *JLP*, box 19, May 4 archive.

situation effectively, campus police called in the Ohio Highway Patrol, who made 58 arrests on charges of inciting to riot and/or criminal trespassing.²³

The Music and Speech Building incident set the precedent for how KSU administration would confront any demonstrations that it deemed beyond the bounds of civility. Campus police served as the primary option with the Ohio Highway Patrol providing assistance if and when events escalated beyond their control. What course of action to implement if this strategy failed to bring a situation under control and/or these resources were unavailable remained an unanswered question, at least until the first weekend of May 1970.

After the arrests, demonstrators complained that campus police were guilty of entrapment by allowing them into the building only to lock them in and charge them with trespassing. The following day, a contingency of Kent students formed the Concerned Citizens of the Kent Community, also known as CCC, 3-C, and Tri-C. A group composed of student moderates, liberals and radicals, they joined forces to express resentment and concern over what they saw as violations of procedural due process and student rights in the Music and Speech Building incident. The Tri-C immediately issued three demands: (1) the dismissal of all charges and suspensions since they violated the precepts of the Student Conduct Code; (2) the university adhere to the November 1968 Student Conduct Code, drawn up after the Oakland PD incident; and (3) the reinstatement of the SDS charter since its retraction did not follow the policies outlined in the Student Conduct Code. Tri-C successfully spurred a coalition of concerned students to its cause, not only those who supported the cause of SDS, but also faculty and students concerned with procedural due process.²⁴

²³Michener, *Kent State*, 99-100; *Scranton Report*, 5-6.

²⁴*Scranton Report*, 6-7; Best, "Tragic Weekend," 6-7.

The coalition forced a campus-wide referendum on their demands in late April 1969. In the days leading up to the vote, some student leaders on campus attempted to present the Tri-C as a pawn in the hands of SDS and other radical groups. With the implicit support of the university administration, Tri-C opponents distributed leaflets warning of a pilgrimage of 400 radicals descending on the campus, and issued a special edition of the *Daily Kent Stater* portraying the Tri-C as a front for SDS.²⁵ The strategy forced many Tri-C supporters to distance themselves publicly from campus radicals and such organizations, creating a fissure within the group that undermined its efforts. In the end, despite the highest turnout for a campus vote in KSU history, the Tri-C referendum failed to pass. Several days later, the Tri-C folded as an active organization, citing a loss of credibility and accusing university administrators of playing games that made “moderate tactics” useless and the Tri-C an “impotent” organization.²⁶

The university administration’s handling of the April 1969 incidents and the ensuing referendum received support from groups outside the campus community, but managed to alienate a large segment of both students and faculty, most of whom were no friends of SDS or radical campus politics. In the end, many KSU faculty and students faulted the White administration for “acting in a way perceived to be inconsistent with the Student Conduct Code, for overreacting, for discrediting the CCC and for failing to listen.”²⁷ Small protests over the White administration’s handling of the Music and Speech Building incident and the CCC referendum continued throughout the remainder

²⁵Best, “Tragic Weekend,” 6-7.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Phillip K. Tompkins and Elaine Vanden Bout Anderson, *Communication Crisis at Kent State* (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1971), 8; quoted in Best, “Tragic Weekend,” 7. The Tompkins/Anderson book is an excellent source for understanding communication failures, misunderstandings, and questionable tactics of students, faculty and administration in the years up to and including May 4.

of the term. It also incited a noted increase in confrontational, violent rhetoric among student politicians. At a campus rally on May 6, 1969, student activist Joyce Cecora made a statement that proved to be prophetic. "They used guns at Cornell and they got what they wanted," she proclaimed, "[and] it will come to that here."²⁸

Critics of White's administrative style contend that his tendency to control decision-making in his office without consulting vice-presidents, deans, and student groups, created unnecessary problems. Other administrators and faculty, as well as students, found White's office difficult, if not impossible, to access. This incommunicado presidential style placed the burden of all decisions on White alone, a strategy that often worked under ordinary circumstances. By 1969, Kent State ceased to be a campus conducive to a detached, aloof management approach. White's misreading the needs, demands, and opinions of the greater campus community antagonized rather than ameliorated crises. When faced with a crisis, White preferred isolation to interaction, with no clear chain of command or authority structure in place. This autocratic failure to delegate authority created havoc if and when White was off campus or out of town. That was exactly what happened the weekend of May 1-3, 1970.

The Kent chapter of SDS, paralyzed by infighting and external pressure, began to unravel after the revocation of its charter following the Music and Speech Building incident. The national SDS itself fragmented into three factions by 1969, torn asunder by conflict over methods and message. Some members joined the more violent Revolutionary Youth Movement I ("Weatherman") faction, bent on pushing for revolution through direct, often violent, action. The other two splinter groups, the Revolutionary Youth Movement II (RYM II) and the Progressive Labor Party (PLP), espoused various Marxist views and saw the United States as an imperialist oppressor, but continued to hope for a change in the system through education and action rather than

²⁸*House Internal Security Hearings*, 521, *JLP*, box 19, May 4 Archive.

violent revolution.²⁹ The Kent SDS broke apart under similar circumstances, a fracturing that accelerated with the loss of its charter. Much like the national organization, the Kent chapter experienced a crisis of purpose. Some members argued that the only way to bring growth to the movement was through action and confrontation. Others argued that educational work followed by action provided the best hope for success both at Kent and around the nation. By the end of 1969, the Kent SDS no longer existed as a viable, visible entity. Although no single radical, antiwar group functioned officially at Kent State, this lack of visible organization is deceiving. National groups like SDS imploded in late 1968 and early 1969, leaving in their wake a vacuum of centralized organizations for protest and small, competing groups, but the “Movement” (a term used more frequently by 1969) continued to grow both in numbers and direct action as the next two years revealed.³⁰

The fall of 1969 witnessed another wave of antiwar rallies and protest activity. The New Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam organized a series of nationwide protests in October 1969. The next month witnessed the largest antiwar demonstration in American history as over 250,000 protestors, including a contingency from Kent State, converged on Washington to protest the continuing American presence

²⁹*Scranton Report*, 9-10. For examinations of the fragmentation of SDS and its aftermath, see Kirkpatrick Sale, *SDS* (New York: Random House, 1972), David Farber, *Chicago '68* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), Paul Lyons, *New Left, New Right and the Legacy of the Sixties* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), Terry H. Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties: Protest in America from Greensboro to Wounded Knee* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) and Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

³⁰No scholarly consensus exists on what the collapse of SDS did to hopes for “true” change and reform. Some authors like Terry Anderson see the fragmentation of SDS as conducive to the size and influence of the Movement. Others like Todd Gitlin regard it as a death knell to real reform and the unfortunate, premature end of a dream.

in Vietnam. Such actions met with a mix of indifference and hostility from the Nixon administration. The president himself rarely acknowledged the movement in public, and when he did, his message was both derisive and dismissive. He left the primary job of attacking the Movement to the administration's "attack dog of hyperbole," Vice-President Spiro T. Agnew.³¹

Nixon's attempt at "Vietnamization" (the gradual shifting of combat responsibilities to the South Vietnamese while withdrawing American troops) undercut some elements of protest as 1970 began. Nevertheless, violent confrontations on college campuses continued, although the protests shifted in tone. Antiwar causes remained in place, but no longer remained the sole focus, a reflection of the decentralized nature of the "Movement" after 1968. Rallies became large anti-establishment free-for-alls, encompassing a wide array of causes, including racial issues, women's rights, corporate corruption and environmental concerns. Many campus protestors resorted to occupation and vandalism of university buildings, with ROTC facilities becoming a favorite target. Ohio universities, like others around the country, experienced a wave of such political protest in late 1969 and early 1970.

On December 10, 1969, black student activists took control of the administration building at the University of Akron. They occupied the building for four hours before National Guard troops arrived to evict them, sent in to handle the situation by Ohio governor James Rhodes, a man known for his use of drastic action. Demonstrations at Ohio University in Athens culminated with a bomb explosion outside the headquarters of campus police in February 1970. Large protests that targeted university administration

³¹Agnew's flair for verbosity often stretched the limits of credibility, leaving many Americans scratching their heads and reaching for a handy dictionary. For example, he characterized the antiwar demonstrators of October 1969 as the tools of "an effete corps of impudent snobs who characterize themselves as intellectuals." Quoted in Best, "Tragic Weekend," 8.

and the ROTC rocked the campuses of Denison University in March and Dayton University, Miami University, Ohio University, and Ohio State University in April.³² The Ohio State confrontation of April 29-30 was particularly nasty. Ohio Highway Patrol and Ohio National Guardsmen confronted a large group of students who attacked the ROTC building. A part of the “National Student Strike” of April 1970, most of the unrest at Ohio State centered on racial tensions between black students and the university administration. Nixon’s announcement of American intervention in Cambodia escalated the nature of the demonstration, shifting the emphasis from racial unrest to that of antiwar protest. Governor Rhodes sent in the National Guard to bring control to the situation when it intensified beyond the capacity of the Highway Patrol. The incident resulted in 49 arrests and 50 injuries (six of the injured due to gunshot wounds), as well as the closing of the Ohio State campus.³³ Note that this skirmish, with the presence of National Guardsmen and gunfire to quell a protest at an Ohio university perceived as out of control, occurred less than a week before the shootings at Kent State.

Through it all, the Kent State campus remained relatively quiet, with some peaceful protests but no major confrontations or violence. Yet political unrest bubbled just beneath the deceptively tranquil surface. As April gave way to May, an explosion of activism would culminate in confrontation, violence, and death.

The origins of the May 4 tragedy reside in a decision by the Nixon administration to expand the use of military force in Southeast Asia, a policy best known as the Cambodian Incursion. Nixon’s attempts of “Vietnamization” of the war resulted initially in a decrease in campus anti-Vietnam protest (if not protest in general), particularly in the early months of 1970. The decision to enter Cambodia as a means of “assisting” the anti-Khmer Rouge Lon Nal government while simultaneously attempting to restrict North Vietnamese military movements in that nation, radically altered perceptions in a dramatic

³²Best, “Tragic Weekend,” 8.

³³*Ohio State Lantern* (Thursday, April 30, 1970), *JLP*, box 19, May 4 Archive.

fashion. Many anti-Vietnam protesters viewed the Cambodian action as an escalation rather than reduction of American involvement in the region. After Nixon's announcement of the Cambodian "project" to a national television audience on April 30, 1970, hundreds of American campuses erupted in angry protest, particularly during the first weekend in May. Kent State was one of those campuses.

Kent, Ohio was, in the eyes of many of its citizens, a war zone on the weekend of May 1. It all began quietly enough, with a student protest at noon on May 1. Although a few protestors painted antiwar slogans on the walls and windows of North Water Street businesses the preceding evening, no major activity occurred until the next day. A group of history graduate students, collectively known as the World Historians Opposed to Racism and Exploitation (WHORE), led the protest against the Cambodian incursion. They gathered for speeches around the usual meeting place at the Victory Bell on the University Commons. Several hundred students listened attentively to a series of speakers, chanted slogans and sang songs. The gathering culminated with the burning of draft cards and discharge papers, and the dramatic burial of a copy of the U.S. Constitution. A Justice Department report noted "the general theme of the speeches was that the President had disregarded the limits of his office imposed by the Constitution of the United States and that, as a consequence, the Constitution had become a lifeless document, murdered by the President."³⁴ The rally ended with the announcement of another assembly to be convened at the same location on Monday, May 4 at 12:00 noon. The May 4 rally was to be a further protest of the Cambodian action, the Vietnam War itself, and other student concerns, including a demand that the campus ROTC program cease operations.³⁵ As events of the next few days played out, these concerns would take

³⁴U. S. Congress, House, Representative John Sieberling's insertion of the Justice Department's Summary of the FBI Report, *Congressional Record*, 15 January 1973, E207, hereafter cited as "Justice Department Summary"; Best, "Tragic Weekend," 9.

³⁵*Scranton Report*, 12-13.

a back seat to more pressing issues. By Monday, May 4, the town of Kent and the campus of Kent State would be occupied territory.

The peaceful gathering of noon May 1 provided no indication of the unrest to follow. The relative calm of the day was enough to give President White confidence to go to Iowa for the weekend to visit family and attend a meeting of the American College Testing Program. By the time he returned on Sunday afternoon, Kent was anything but quiet.³⁶ The night of May 1 witnessed the first in a series of disturbances that would shatter the community. As usual, students gathered in the bars of North Water Street, a popular gathering place for Kent students and young people from the surrounding areas. Kent allowed the sale of 3.2 beer to anyone 18 or older, making the Water Street district a lively social center. The bar crowds seemed livelier than usual, not only due to the Cambodian decision, but also because May 1 was one of the first warm nights of that spring. By 11 P.M., some of the students had taken to the streets, jeering at passing police cars assigned to patrol the area. Within thirty minutes, the boisterous nature of the crowd intensified. Young people began to chant slogans against the war while a local motorcycle gang performed bike tricks in the street. Around 11:30 P.M, an unknown bystander threw a beer bottle at a police car. Concerned Kent Police officers decided to abandon patrolling North Water Street until day shift reinforcements arrived. The crowd, now numbering around 500, noted the lack of law enforcement and took the opportunity to start a bonfire in the middle of the street. The crowd blocked the street and began stopping motorists to ask their opinion about the Nixon decision to move into Cambodia. When one driver accelerated away from the crowd, nearly injuring several bystanders, the tone of the throng shifted dramatically. A fabricated rumor that black students were

³⁶Ibid, 13.

rioting on the Kent campus further fueled the anger of the crowd.³⁷

At this point, the crowd turned destructive. A few demonstrators began breaking out store windows with rocks and bottles, stealing shoes and jewelry along the way. Some protesters took a fertilizer spreader from a local hardware store and lobbed it through the window of a downtown bank. Around 12:30 A.M., in light of the unrest and vandalism on Water Street, Mayor LeRoy Satrom, who had been in office less than six months, proclaimed a state of emergency, ordering all bars closed. As angry, evicted patrons rushed into the already congested streets, city police and sheriff's deputies moved to clear the area. Many of the people packing the streets were not demonstrators fueled by political frustrations. They were simply disgruntled customers, peeved at their loss of alcohol access and unfulfilled cover charges.³⁸ Panicked by what he saw occurring on Water Street, Mayor Satrom called the office of Ohio governor James A. Rhodes in Columbus at 12:47 A.M. Speaking to Rhodes' administrative assistant John McElroy, Satrom stated that "SDS students had taken over a portion of Kent," a baseless claim at best.³⁹ McElroy then phoned the Ohio Adjutant General, Major General Sylvester T. Del Corso, who sent a National Guard liaison officer to assess the situation in Kent. Meanwhile, Kent police and Portage County deputies continued their attempts to bring the downtown crowd under control. Thanks to the use of tear gas, the officers successfully pushed the protestors out of the downtown area, up the steep hills of East Main Street and back onto campus at the corner of Lincoln and East Main. The police and deputies expected KSU police to take over from there, but they were already

³⁷*Scranton Report*, 14-15; Alan Canfora, interview by author, 25 January 1999. Canfora says he knows who threw the bottle at the police car, but he refuses to give details.

³⁸Alan Canfora, interview by author, 25 January 1999. Canfora contends that if Satrom had not closed down the bars as he did, the incident would not have escalated.

³⁹*Scranton Report*, 16.

dispatched to guard university buildings against another crowd growing on the campus. City police and deputies would not enter the campus itself, thus creating a standoff between students and law enforcement at the corner of Lincoln and East Main. Only a “freak automobile accident” on Main Street broke the impasse and dispersed the crowd.⁴⁰

The events of May 1 served as a harbinger of things to come, acting as a blueprint for the weekend that followed. A small group created disorder and local officials, with no proper course of action in place, failed to react in a proper, timely fashion to prevent the incidents from spreading. When officials did act, they fell prey to rumors of outside agitation, punishing innocent bystanders as well as the instigators, an action that unified activist and loiterer alike in a common cause against perceived bias. Once the crowd became active, officials overreacted to the situation, forcing unnecessary confrontations, violence and arrests.

After the situation returned to a state of relative calm, the morning of May 2 saw local officials and business owners assessing the damage from the previous evening’s festivities. Protestors had broken forty-seven windows in fifteen separate business establishments in the downtown area. Mayor Satrom’s early outrageous estimate of \$50,000 in property damage shocked local citizens, although he later reduced the figure to \$15,000. A later study by the Kent Chamber of Commerce lowered the damage estimate even further, placing maximum destruction at \$10,000. The high damage estimates, combined with fears of more vandalism and violence, certainly played a role in Governor Rhodes’ decision to send the National Guard to Kent. It is worthy to note that the demonstrators targeted only specific businesses. Local businesses frequented by

⁴⁰Ibid, 16-17. An electrical repairman, standing on a scaffolding to repair a traffic light, had his truck hit by another car. The accident knocked the scaffolding out from beneath him, leaving him hanging onto the traffic light above the street. The crowd watched in amazement as he was rescued, then drifted away, most of them back onto campus.

students received little or no damage, while the local bank, electric company, and other firms viewed as “establishment symbols” received the brunt of the vandalism. Two police officers suffered cuts from projectiles.⁴¹ Law enforcement made fifteen arrests that night, and all of the suspects had Ohio addresses.⁴² Damage on campus amounted to little, although a broken window at the ROTC building provided a prophetic symbol for what was to follow.

Mirroring the reaction of their neophyte mayor, fear spread among the townspeople and members of the city government. Some university and Kent city officials voiced suspicions that outside agitators precipitated the actions of May 1, an assertion contradicted by the FBI report but understandable given national events and KSU’s recent history. The “Kent State 4,” four students jailed for their involvement in the Music and Speech Building incident of April 1969, were released from jail two days before the events of May 1. Although witnesses saw one of the KS4 downtown on the evening of May 1, the “FBI uncovered no evidence that the Kent State 4 were involved in planning or directing any of the events of the May 1-4 weekend.”⁴³ The FBI also concluded that neither the now-defunct Kent SDS nor its national parent played a role in the events of that weekend. Some Kent activists hint that outsiders were involved in the actions of the weekend, particularly on Saturday and Sunday, but no solid evidence exists to substantiate this claim.⁴⁴ This leaves scholars with conflicting claims of involvement, a situation that makes accounts of the incident rife for rumor and innuendo.

⁴¹*Scranton Report*, 16-17.

⁴²*Ibid*, 17.

⁴³*Ibid*, 17-18.

⁴⁴Alan Canfora, interview by author, 2 May 2000. Canfora states that several of the Kent State 4 were on Water Street the night of the incident and for the remainder of the weekend, but offers no further information.

Unfortunately, perception is often more important than reality. Talk of radical campus hordes overtaking the town, spiking the local water supply with LSD, and inflicting general mischief, spread among many of the conservative, blue-collar citizens of Kent. Such talk has become part of the telling of Kent State ever since by activists and non-activists alike.⁴⁵

Mayor Satrom returned to his office on Saturday morning, May 2. One of his first decisions was to formalize the civil emergency proclamation made the previous night. This decision included banning all liquor and beer sales, firearms, and any gasoline not pumped directly into an automobile. He also established an 8 P.M. to 6 A.M. curfew for both town and campus, although he changed the campus curfew to 1 A.M., more than likely due to pressure from university administration. Satrom held four meetings that day with city and university officials to discuss further actions, including a decision to put a company of 110 National Guardsmen on standby. KSU Vice-President for Student Affairs Robert Matson, functioning as *de facto* president in White's absence, began coordinating social activities on campus in lieu of the curfew. Matson, working with Student Government officers, distributed leaflets around campus announcing the social events and the 8 P.M. town curfew (but not the 1 A.M. campus curfew). Peaceful campus assemblies were not banned. Meanwhile, university officials set up a Rumor Control Center and Emergency Operations Center in the KSU Administration Building. Matson organized faculty marshals for mobilization in the event of a disturbance, although their exact duties remained vague. Matson told Mayor Satrom that if any unrest

⁴⁵For the perspective of one Kent resident, see Lucius Lyman, Jr., "Town in Crisis: 'It's Life, Liberty, and Property'" in Bills, *Kent State/May 4: Echoes Through a Decade*, 69-75. Lyman's account reveals the extent that fear and unsubstantiated rumors played in perceptions before, during and after the May 4 incident. Newspaper accounts fueled the rumor mill, particularly the assertion of outside agitation on the evening of May 1. See "7 Injured, Police Arrest 14 in Kent Disturbance," *Kent-Ravenna Record-Courier*, 2 May 1970. In this early account, Kent Police Chief Roy Thompson blamed the disturbance on "a bunch of agitators and subversive groups."

occurred on campus, he would follow the standard procedure of using campus police to deal with problem. If circumstances escalated, university officials would call in the Sheriff's Department and Ohio Highway Patrol to handle the situation.⁴⁶

Matson and other university officials felt uneasy about calling in the National Guard, especially after Guard Lt. Charles Barnette told them that if Governor Rhodes sent the Guard to Kent, they would assume jurisdictional control of the entire community, making no distinction between town and campus. This view represented a marked departure from the view of Barnette's immediate superior, General Del Corso, who viewed the Guard as an assistance to rather than replacement for local law enforcement. In the end, Barnette's view of the Guard's role shaped the perceptions of town and university officials alike. He also informed Mayor Satrom that he had until 5 P.M. that evening to request the Guard, so as to allow Guard units monitoring the Teamsters strike in Akron to mobilize and relocate to Kent. Such a statement meant that the mayor could not wait and see what happened on Saturday evening. If he wanted the Guard, he had to decide soon. Unsubstantiated rumors of "Weathermen observed on campus and positively identified, and evidence of weapons on campus" combined with fears of another Water Street incident and a perceived inability of local law enforcement to handle another major incident to push Satrom into action.⁴⁷ Shortly after his 5 P.M. meeting ended, the mayor called Governor Rhodes' assistant and requested that National

⁴⁶Best, "Tragic Weekend," 11-12; *Scranton Report*, 19-21.

⁴⁷Best, "Tragic Weekend," 12-13; *Akron Beacon Journal*, 24 May 1970. The fears of some Kent officials about Weatherman activity seemed reasonable to them at the time. The Weathermen were a known presence in the Kent community even after the banishment of SDS from campus. In light of escalating violent activities by Weatherman in late 1969 and early 1970, city officials' belief in the rumors makes sense. In hindsight, it was a mistaken assumption that escalated the confrontations. For the actions of Weathermen both nationally and at Kent State in the years and months leading up to the shootings, see Kenneth J. Heineman, *Put Your Bodies Upon the Wheels: Student Revolt in the 1960s* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001). Also see Heineman, *Campus Wars*, 182-256.

Guardsmen be dispatched to Kent. University officials, failing to recall Barnette's earlier pronouncement that the Guard would not differentiate between town and gown, left the meeting with the misguided notion that the Guard dispatch affected the town alone. That evening's events would reveal their misunderstanding in a grave fashion.⁴⁸

Thus, Satrom's fear of anarchy led to his request that Governor Rhodes call in the Guard, a decision that included the mobilization of troops monitoring a rather violent Teamsters strike in nearby Akron. While monitoring the Teamsters Strike, the Guardsmen had come under fire on more than one occasion.⁴⁹ Placed on alert shortly after 5 P.M., the troops were ready to move into Kent less than an hour later. At this point, both city and campus remained quiet, as they had all day long. Yet, rumors continued to circulate among the city administration and the Guard chain of command that radical Weathermen planned to stage a massive offensive that evening to destroy banks, the local post office, and the campus ROTC building. Kent State, like many other campuses during the time, had seen the radicalization of student protest from simply an antiwar stance to that of an activism that advocated the violent overthrow of the American capitalist system. While this was never representative of a majority of the protesters, they were vocal and visible enough to frighten officials at every level of government and society.⁵⁰ Many hoped that the presence of the Guard would ameliorate any further unrest, vandalism and violence. They were wrong.

Activists took to public demonstration again that evening. A crowd of students began assembling at the Victory Bell on the University Commons around 7 P.M. By

⁴⁸Best, "Tragic Weekend," 13; *Scranton Report*, 19-20.

⁴⁹*Scranton Report*, 24.

⁵⁰Gordon, *Four Dead in Ohio*, 24-25. Also see Kenneth J. Heineman, "'Look Out Kid, You're Gonna Get Hit!': Kent State and the Vietnam Antiwar Movement" in Melvin Small and William D. Hoover, eds., *Give Peace a Chance: Exploring the Vietnam Antiwar Movement* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1992), 201-22.

some estimates, 600 people were present at this impromptu rally by 7:30. No agreement exists about the composition of this gathering. The Scranton Commission referred to the crowd as a spontaneous assembly, composed of “an idle collection of students whom the curfew had prevented from going downtown.”⁵¹ Other sources see an organized mob made up of student activists and “a substantial cadre of hard-core radical leaders and perhaps one or two revolutionaries who had their eyes on much more than the rickety old ROTC building; among them, too, were many who had no connection with the university.”⁵² The crowd began to move toward the student dormitories, some of them talking about “liberating” students from their dorm prisons. By the time the group returned to the Commons from a cross-campus march to the Tri-Towers dorms, the site of one of the campus dances that evening, their number now stood at 1,000 to 2,000. As chants of “Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh” and “one, two, three, four, we don’t want your fucking war” pierced the humid night air, the assemblage moved toward the ROTC building, located on the northwest side of the Commons. Campus ROTCs around the nation faced the wrath of student activists, particularly after 1968, when radical elements began to exert a greater influence on the “Movement.” ROTC symbolized the “Establishment war machine” to many demonstrators, and the calls of the previous years to end the program at Kent fell on deaf ears. Activists decided to take matters into their own hands, as ROTC stood “as evidence that the university supported the Vietnam war effort by maintaining a military training program on campus.”⁵³

The Kent ROTC building, an aged, two-story wooden World War II-style Army barracks already in a state of disrepair, looked like kindling just waiting for a spark to

⁵¹*Scranton Report*, 25.

⁵²Michener, *Kent State: What Happened and Why*, 174.

⁵³*Scranton Report*, 26.

ignite it. Around 8:10 P.M., some members of the crowd began throwing stones in concert at the building, many of them pulled from bags of rocks brought by several demonstrators specifically for this purpose. Next came a trash can, then railroad flares through the broken windows, but the attempts to set the building ablaze failed. After thirty minutes of bungled efforts, protestors tossed a rag soaked in gasoline from a nearby motorcycle into the building. By 8:45 P.M., the Kent ROTC building started to burn. Faculty marshals, fearing for their safety, refused to intervene. Only a few of the demonstrators, around ten to fifteen individuals, participated in the actual vandalism and igniting of the structure. Most of the crowd stood around the perimeter or sat on the hills surrounding the Commons watching the event, some of them hurling the occasional rock or shouting in excitement as the building went up in flames.⁵⁴ Upon hearing of the unrest on campus, Mayor Satrom called for the National Guard, and the troops from Akron left immediately, arriving in Kent around 10 P.M. Satrom consulted with no university officials before making this decision. Meanwhile, units from the Kent Fire Department arrived to put out the fire around 9 P.M. Some members of the crowd greeted them with rocks and insults. With no police protection, a few of the demonstrators took the hose away from the firemen, stabbing and slashing it with pocketknives and ice picks. One participant used a machete. Within minutes, the firemen left the scene. To the surprise of the crowd, the fire began to subside on its own around 9:15 P.M.

Some students moved towards the Prentice Gate and Main Street on the northwest side of campus where they were forced back by local law enforcement. By this time, the KSU police were on the Commons and the ROTC building, mysteriously reignited, was

⁵⁴*Scranton Report*, 26-27; Best, "Tragic Weekend," 14. Best cites the observations of Kent scholar Jerry M. Lewis, who served as one of the faculty marshals that evening. Lewis divides the crowd into three categories: the "active core," "cheerleaders," and "spectators." He contends that most of the crowd fell within the latter two categories, with the small "active core" serving as the primary source of the physical damage to the building.

engulfed in flames. Even though the ROTC building was only 200 yards from the campus police station, officials decided not to involve their force out of fear for their safety. Kent city police refused to assist campus security, as they remained stationed in the downtown area in the event of a repeat of Friday night's activities.⁵⁵ By now, fire completely enveloped the ROTC building, punctuated with the sounds of exploding ammunition within the inferno. Many of the students watched the inferno in stunned silence, amazed that the building was ablaze yet no one was doing anything to stop it. Twenty officers of the Ohio Highway Patrol arrived on campus, assuming positions around President White's residence. They did not inform campus police of their arrival nor did they attempt to stop the burning of the ROTC building. With the aid of ten county sheriff's deputies, campus police now moved in on the crowd, using tear gas to push the protestors out of the Commons and back toward the dormitories. In the midst of this maneuver, the National Guard troops arrived in Kent from Akron. One guardsman described the surreal scene as the troops entered town. "The sky was all lit up. It was something out of *Gone with the Wind* with Atlanta burning."⁵⁶

Around 10 P.M., another dispatch of Kent fire fighters arrived on the scene in an attempt to extinguish the blaze. They were not alone. After a briefing with Mayor Satrom, National Guard General Del Corso decided to send one group of guardsmen to the downtown area to assist Kent police and another detachment of troops to campus for protecting the firefighters. No university official received notice of this decision, nor did they request or give permission for National Guard involvement. This move is consistent with Barnette's earlier statements to the mayor that the Guard would not distinguish between town and campus once they arrived. Since the ROTC building stood on state

⁵⁵*Scranton Report*, 28-29.

⁵⁶William Furlong, "The Guardsmen's View of the Tragedy at Kent State," *New York Times Magazine* (21 June 1970), 250; quoted in Best, "Tragic Weekend," 15.

property, Guard leaders failed to see the need for a request or permission to enter campus. Vice-President Matson agreed to the Guard's involvement, but his consent came only after the troops were on their way to campus.⁵⁷ Even with Guard protection, Kent firefighters failed to control the fire, and the ROTC building burned to the ground at an estimated loss of \$86,000. Its charred remains served as a symbol of unrest for the remainder of the weekend. Over the next two hours, the Guard assisted campus police and sheriff's deputies in their efforts to clear the campus. Students continued to roam about the campus and its perimeters, throwing rocks, vandalizing property, and attempting to build a bonfire on East Main Street. Using tear gas and physical force, the troops and officers pushed the crowds back on to campus and into various dorms, drawing no distinction between students and non-students.⁵⁸

By midnight, the Guard and law enforcement officials declared both city and campus to be "secure." Students responded with shock at the arrival of the National Guard. Despite several meetings between university officials and student leaders throughout the day, there was no mention of responses to additional disorder on campus. Any discussion of such matters remained confined to university and city officials. President White remained in Iowa, monitoring the situation throughout the day via telephone discussions with university officials. He decided to fly back to Kent that evening, but circumstances prevented his return until Sunday morning.⁵⁹

Abundant questions surround the actions of Saturday evening. If, as faculty marshal Lewis contends, the majority of the crowd were cheerleaders and observers, why did KSU police not respond? A quick response could very well have dispersed the

⁵⁷*Scranton Report*, 30-31; Best, "Tragic Weekend," 15.

⁵⁸Best, "Tragic Weekend," 15.

⁵⁹*Scranton Report*, 33-34.

gathering and prevented the destruction of the ROTC building—the very cause used to justify deployment of the Guard to campus in the first place. The Guard’s decision to use force, including tear gas, to restore order created feelings of anger and resentment among KSU students. Students not involved in the rally or its confrontational aftermath resented the bully tactics of the Guard. It set the tone for the next two days as well. Students, activist and non-activist alike, came to view the Guard as “outsiders” who “possessed ‘power’ rather than ‘authority.’”⁶⁰ Not surprisingly, citizens of Kent saw the Guard’s presence in a different light. The Guard represented the restoration of law and order out of chaos, a view shaped by the vandalism and unrest of the previous evening and stoked by an active rumor mill. Most Kent townspeople saw antiwar activism as an “unpatriotic, subversive activity” and the use of violence and vandalism as “illegitimate ways of resolving domestic conflict.”⁶¹ Therefore, in the eyes of Kent proper, campus demonstrators were dishonest, unpatriotic thugs in need of a good lesson in citizenship from the hands of olive-clad representatives of law and order. The local newspaper, the *Kent-Ravenna Record-Courier* did not help matters when it described the perpetrators of the ROTC fire as “a long line of blue jeans and long hair” and claimed that a small group of three young protesters told all reporters that “they would ‘get it’ if they took photographs of the demonstration.” One young man, an active participant in the torching of ROTC, “threatened to kill three *Record-Courier* reporters.”⁶² The tension between town and gown, a tenuous relationship in Kent even before the events of that weekend, worsened as the weekend progressed.⁶³

⁶⁰Best, “Tragic Weekend,” 15.

⁶¹Ibid, 16.

⁶²*Kent-Ravenna Record-Courier*, 4 May 1970.

⁶³For an excellent overview of the tensions between town and university in Kent, as well as an analysis of Michener’s view of Kent State as a model, conservative middle

The questions of who started the ROTC fire and why the building re-ignited within minutes of the initial fire subsiding remain unanswered. To this day, former student activists like Alan Canfora, along with a few scholars, contend that *agents provocateur* started the fire to justify tightening control over the campus.⁶⁴ Others contend that a small group of radical activist students started the blaze.⁶⁵ While the truth may never be known, it is that very lack of evidence that fuels accusations of “outside agitation” and covert governmental involvement. These contentions, while certainly not beyond the realm of possibility, rest on rumor and self-interest more so than tangible evidence. In light of revelations about the methods of Nixon and J. Edgar Hoover’s Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO), the involvement of *agents provocateur* seems plausible. Still, there is no specific evidence to support either accusation.⁶⁶ The

American university prior to 1970, see “Kent State University, May 4, 1970, A Study of Conflict,” May 4 Archive.

⁶⁴Charles Thomas, “The Kent State Massacre: Blood on Whose Hands?” *Gallery* (April 1977), 39ff; Alan Canfora, interview by author, 2 May 2000. While of some of Thomas’s findings on governmental covert activities at Kent provide interesting possibilities, many of his contentions border on hysteria and there is little to no evidence to back up his claims of a Nixon/Rhodes conspiracy to make an example of Kent State. The fact that Thomas’s article found a home in *Gallery*, a less than reputable “gentlemen’s magazine,” says a lot about his credentials. Canfora’s statements are more interesting. At the same time that he alleges covert governmental involvement led to the destruction of the ROTC building, Canfora also hints that he knows who started the fire, implying that it was not government agents. He refuses to say anything more on the matter, promising only to reveal some startling revelations in an upcoming book. As for Thomas, he died of cancer in 2003, leaving nine boxes of research materials to the May 4 Archive. For an overview of Thomas’s life and work, see “One Man’s Quest,” *Dayton Daily News*, 2 May 2004.

⁶⁵See Alan Canfora’s comments about the ROTC fire in panel discussion transcript for “Temper of the Times--‘A Failure to Communicate’: Local, State, National and International Perspectives,” Panel Discussion at the “25 Year Retrospective Conference on Kent State and Jackson State,” Emerson College, Boston, Massachusetts, April 24-25, 1995, available at www.may4archive.org.

⁶⁶Gordon, *Four Dead in Ohio*, 80-89.

FBI investigation into the ROTC fire concluded only that “of those who participated freely, a significant proportion were not Kent State students,” but no specific groups or individuals were named in the report.⁶⁷ Such speculation reflects the cynicism and frustration of many Americans (activists in particular) about their government that took root and blossomed during and since this era, serving as much as a product than a cause of events like Kent State. Nevertheless, it demands recognition as it provides an important element in historical accounts and interpretations within the technological, media-saturated society of modern America.

The guardsmen arrived on campus short on sleep and even shorter on patience after spending several days with rambunctious Ohio Teamsters. Within a matter of hours, the Guard assumed control of both the town of Kent and the KSU campus. Martial law had come to Kent State, with all assemblies forbidden (presumably), including the anti-Cambodian demonstration scheduled for Monday. This atmosphere of nervous fear, intensified by the stereotypical, hysterical rhetoric of the Nixon White House and the Ohio governor’s office combined with “a failure to communicate,” providing the perfect prescription for disaster. The following morning, Governor Rhodes arrived in Kent from a campaign stop in Cleveland around 9 A.M. for a tour of the downtown area and the burned out ROTC building. A closed meeting at Kent Firehouse # 1 between the governor, local law enforcement, a Guard delegation and university officials to discuss a plan of action took a dramatic turn when reporters entered the room.

Governor Rhodes, running against the incumbent Robert Taft for the Republican U. S. Senate nomination in a May 5 primary on a “law-and-order” platform, went on the offensive in true Agnewesque style. Calling the Kent students “the worst type of people that we harbor in America . . . worse than the brownshirts and the Communist element,” Rhodes pledged to “eradicate the problem,” promising to “take all necessary and I repeat,

⁶⁷*Scranton Report*, 31.

all necessary action to maintain order.”⁶⁸ The governor’s antagonistic tone reflected the irrational fear of the times, and he was not alone in overreacting to the circumstances of such situations. President Nixon’s May 1 characterization of campus protesters as “bums” (a statement made at one of the few times during his presidency that he was unaware he was being taped) combined with the omnipresent rabid rhetoric of Vice-President Agnew to create a climate of confrontation and violence across the nation. Rhodes followed their lead with equal aplomb, if not sophistication. The Ohio National Guard leadership’s promise at Governor Rhodes’ press conference to “apply whatever degree of force is necessary . . . even to the point of shooting,” sounded more like a declaration of war than a statement of purpose.⁶⁹

Rhodes’ decision to send the Guard to Kent in the first place set the stage for confrontation. The governor met with KSU president White before leaving town, telling him that “you have 400 of the worst riffraff in the state from all of the campuses” attempting to close the campus down. “Don’t give in,” Rhodes told the shaken president, “keep [it] open.”⁷⁰ The question of whether a legal state of emergency existed in Kent caused further confusion. As he left the meeting, Rhodes told the gathered officials that he would request “an injunction . . . equivalent to a state of emergency” for the town, but records indicate that he never followed through with the procedure, which was never

⁶⁸*Scranton Report*, 35-36.

⁶⁹*Ibid*; quoted in Wischmann, “Four Dead in Ohio,” 29; Gordon, *Four Dead in Ohio*, 27-28. Gordon attributes the statement of taking all measures “to the point of shooting” to Kent Police Chief Roy Thompson rather than Rhodes or Del Corso. Peter Davies argues that the statements at the press conference shifted the Guard’s task from protecting property and lives to the dissolution of all rallies and assemblies on campus. This appears to be a valid interpretation in light of the confusion surrounding the “state of emergency” assertions made by Rhodes. See Peter Davies, *The Truth About Kent State*, 22-23.

⁷⁰*Scranton Report*, 37.

defined precisely from the outset. No city, university, or National Guard officials knew of Rhodes' failure to acquire a legal state of emergency order. The assumption that a state of emergency existed combined with the Guard leadership's contention that they would draw no distinction between town and campus in the event of confrontation muddled the communications of an already tense situation. President White and the KSU administration under the assumption that a state of emergency existed, deferred all crowd control matters to the Guard. It proved to be a fatal mistake. The Guard, believing that a state of emergency existed, shifted its purpose from protection of property to the enforcement of curfews and the forced dissolution of all student assemblies.⁷¹ This confusion made university officials look complacent and passive in the eyes of students. Instead of quelling unrest and calming a dangerous situation, the Guard's presence was viewed by student activists as a sign that a state of war existed on their campus.⁷²

In compliance with the Guard's contentions, the university issued 12,000 leaflets describing the new order on campus. The statement, signed by KSU vice president Matson and student body president Frank Frisina (a vocal critic of the Tri-C activities of the previous year, and no friend of student activists) stated a new campus curfew hour of 1 AM. It also stated that the governor "through the National Guard had assumed legal control of the campus" and gave the Guard the power to arrest anyone not abiding by the new rules. Most importantly, the leaflet contained a provision banning "all outdoor demonstrations and rallies, peaceful or otherwise" as per the governor's announced state of emergency. Thus, the Guard no longer served as assistance for local and campus law enforcement. They *were* the law enforcement agents of both Kent and the KSU campus.

⁷¹Davies, *The Truth About Kent State*, 22-23.

⁷²Mayor Satrom had placed the city of Kent under a state of civil emergency, but no one saw this order as having any binding on campus. Even then, no announcement banning peaceful rallies existed. See *Scranton Report*, 38-40.

Students who saw the leaflet either disregarded it or fell into a further state of confusion as to what qualified as permissible activities. Did a legal state of emergency exist as the governor claimed and university officials believed? No clarification ever came, not from university officials nor the governor's office. KSU faculty expressed their concern over the growing tensions through two actions taken that afternoon. One statement, signed by 23 faculty members, decried both the student violence and presence of the Guard on campus, but also suggested that the burning of the ROTC building reflected student discontent with Cambodian incursion and Vietnam War in general. At the same time, a group of sixty KSU professors asked President White to call a general faculty meeting to discuss the situation. White declined the request, citing that such a request failed to come from the proper body. Even then, a general faculty meeting required permission of the Guard whom he now believed to be in control of the KSU campus.⁷³

Adding fuel to the fire of Rhodes' rhetoric, newspaper headlines that Sunday morning reflected the climate of confusion and panic brought on by the burning of the ROTC building. Despite the chaos surrounding the incident and its perpetrators, headlines screamed of "rioters" and "student radicals" firebombing the building.⁷⁴ Such accounts found their way into national press accounts of the incident as well, planting the impression in the minds of many Americans that Kent was a town spiraling out of control with only a brave governor and uniformed guardsmen standing between order and chaos. Kent became the focus of carloads of sightseers on Sunday afternoon, clogging traffic in and around the KSU campus. The burned-out shell of the ROTC building became a must-see attraction for hordes of onlookers. The sight of armed guardsmen, armored vehicles, and military helicopters on campus gave a surreal yet false sense of calm. As

⁷³*Scranton Report*, 39-40.

⁷⁴*Akron Beacon Journal*, 3 May 1970; *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 3 May 1970.

student Dean Kahler returned to Kent from a weekend visiting family, he encountered military checkpoints as he entered both town and campus. “It looked like a military occupation, the kind you read about in history books,” he later said.⁷⁵

The seeming calm of Sunday afternoon eroded quickly as evening arrived. Around 8 PM, a crowd of students surrounded the charred ROTC building, some of them wandering aimlessly, others singing, and a few chanting slogans of defiance against the Guard. By 8:45, the crowd reached a number that made campus security personnel nervous. They made a recommendation to Guard commander Colonel Harold Finley (Del Corso and Canterbury were not in town at the time) that the campus curfew be moved up to 9 PM instead of the stated 1 AM time. At 9 PM, officials read the Riot Act to the throng, telling them that they had five minutes to disperse or face arrest. When the crowd refused to leave, Guardsmen fired tear gas into the increasingly hostile gathering. The group of students divided into two groups, a small group heading toward the home of KSU president White while a larger group headed for Prentice Gate on the northwest side of campus near the corner of Main and Lincoln Streets. While Guardsmen rebuffed the students moving toward the president’s house with a barrage of tear gas, the other group of students sat down in the intersection of Main and Lincoln, blocking auto traffic and alarming the locals in the surrounding area. The throng refused to disperse, seating themselves on the street while singing songs and chanting slogans as more students from campus joined the growing human speed bump. The students found themselves surrounded, as Kent police officers took up positions in front while National Guardsmen lined up between the crowd and the Prentice Gate.⁷⁶

As helicopters with searchlights flew overhead, Kent Police and the Guardsmen,

⁷⁵Dean Kahler, interview by author, 3 May 2000.

⁷⁶Best, “Tragic Weekend,” 18-19.

not amused by this act of civil disobedience, demanded that the students return to campus in full compliance with the newly announced curfew. A standoff persisted for nearly an hour, neither side willing to back down and reach a peaceful resolution. Around 10:10 PM, several students approached Guard leaders and local law enforcement officers with a deal—allow them to speak with KSU president Robert White and Mayor Satrom, present them with a list of demands, and then they would return to campus. The six demands made by the crowd were “abolition of ROTC; removal of the Guard from campus by Monday night; lifting of the curfew; full amnesty for all persons arrested Saturday night; lower student tuition; and granting of any demand made by BUS.”⁷⁷ An unidentified male demonstrator, using the police public address system, told the crowd that Kent mayor Satrom was on his way to the scene and that attempts were ongoing to contact President White, assertions with no basis in fact. Kent officials contend that the young man had been told just the opposite. Why he made the claim to the gathering is unknown. Based on advice given to him by university advisors, White decided against making an appearance, as he continued to believe that the Guard was now in charge of campus. The young man on the loudspeaker then told the demonstrators that if they would move from the street, the Guard would move off campus as a reciprocal measure. Mayor Satrom chose to meet the request, but he arrived too late for any dialogue.⁷⁸

As the moments continued to pass with no sign of Satrom or White, the once peaceful crowd grew in number and its discontent increased accordingly. After another announcement to the gathering at 11 PM that White would not meet with them and that their assembly constituted a violation of the curfew, the students responded with anger, projectiles, and threats of confrontation. The Guard leaders read the Riot Act again and

⁷⁷*Scranton Report*, 41.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 40-42.

then ordered the students to disperse and return to campus as an 11 PM curfew was now in place. When the students refused to cooperate, the Guard launched a volley of teargas to push the demonstrators back onto campus. The troops unsheathed their bayonets in preparation for a showdown.⁷⁹ Guardsmen forced one group of students into the Rockwell Library a few hundred yards from the Prentice Gate. One female student reportedly suffered a bayonet wound as she attempted to climb through a library window to safety. Amidst broken windows and hostile emotions, the night guard locked the building, trapping the students inside the library. The students remained confined in the building until an announced forty-five minute grace period allowed them to vacate the building. Meanwhile, Guardsmen chased another group of about 300 students across the campus to the Tri-Tower dormitories, located on the southwest side of KSU. Helicopter searchlights illuminated the scene, as students ran in numerous directions in attempts to avoid the teargas and the bayonet-wielding Guardsmen. By the time the confrontation ended, fifty-one students were under arrest, most of them for violating curfew. This brought the total number of arrests to over 100 since the first incidents on Friday night.⁸⁰ Several guardsmen suffered minor injuries from flying projectiles. At least two students received bayonet wounds, although the extent of the wounds and the exact number injured remains in dispute.⁸¹ Guardsmen had restored order by 11:40 PM when General Canterbury returned to Kent. He called for a meeting of law enforcement, the Guard and other officials for Monday morning at 10 AM, hoping to better coordinate the roles of the various agencies and prevent another scene as the one just witnessed that night. He also hoped to clear up all confusion regarding curfew hours and other matters of dispute.

⁷⁹Ibid, 42-43; Best, "Tragic Weekend," 18-19.

⁸⁰Best, "Tragic Weekend, 19; *Scranton Report*, 43.

⁸¹*Scranton Report*, 43.

Despite efforts to bring peace to the troubled campus, the events of Sunday night further polarized the student demonstrators and the Guard, with befuddled university administrators and campus police caught in the middle. Student resentment of the Guard's presence on campus, combined with what they saw as deceptive tactics and excessive use of force, exacerbated an already tense situation. Most activists saw the Guard as the embodiment of oppressive governmental and military authority, an offshoot of the same process they believed existed in Southeast Asia. They viewed the Guardsmen not as citizen soldiers, but "as something like Nazi Storm Troopers who would delight in having an excuse to attack them."⁸² Law enforcement increasingly viewed the students as radicals bent on violent confrontation. The tired Guardsmen, some of them Kent students, grew tired of activists harassing them with verbal assaults and flying projectiles. The student activists of Kent State represented everything "wrong" with campus radicalism, and many Guardsmen began to view them as not only a threat to their personal safety, but also as a threat to national security. Sunday night gave way to Monday morning without further incident, although many students found themselves forced to sleep in rooms other than their own. Any attempt to leave a dormitory posed the risk of further confrontation with the Guardsmen standing guard around campus.⁸³

The hopes of a peaceful solution between the Guard and the students suffered a major setback with the mayhem of Sunday night. The confrontation served as a capstone to a weekend of violence, vandalism, and fear that had been building for years. Even more important, the wild weekend of 1-3 May 1970 laid the foundation of

⁸²Ed Grant and Mike Hill, *I Was There: What Really Went On at Kent State* (Lima, OH: C.S.S. Publishing Company, 1974), 52; quoted in Best, "Tragic Weekend," 19.

⁸³Dean Kahler, interview by author, 3 May 2000; Best, "Tragic Weekend," 19.

miscommunication, lack of coordination, and mistrust that culminated in bloodshed on May 4. Mayor Satrom's decision to ask Governor Rhodes for National Guard assistance set into motion a chain of events that would culminate in tragedy. Governor Rhodes' use of the ROTC fire as a political platform for his senatorial bid, exemplified by his unhinged speech at the Kent Firehouse, enflamed rather than quelled emotions. Furthermore, Rhodes' claim that a formal state of emergency existed in Kent despite his failure to make it official promoted confusion among the various authorities of town, gown, and Guard. Assumptions of state control, that the situation was out of their hands, influenced the decisions of KSU administration in all matters surrounding the unrest.

The confusion in the days leading up to May 4, a key element for understanding why the shootings occurred, rarely found its way into media coverage of the time—a glaring omission that persists nearly thirty-five years later. The journalistic coverage, especially newspaper accounts of the vandalism of May 1 and the ROTC fire of May 2, portrayed Kent as a town in the grips of student radicals bent on destroying the university. Rumor and innuendo found its way into these initial stories, becoming intertwined within the fabric of public perception. As television began covering Kent State during and after the events of May 4, the basic understanding (or misunderstanding) of the years and days before the shootings shaped the reports, and by default, the historical, journalistic and documentary accounts of the decades that followed. Journalists, out of either ignorance or deception, streamlined a chaotic situation by reprinting details misreported in previous accounts with no delineation between rumor and tangible evidence. Combined with the polarized accusations and innuendo of former activists and hawkish anti-activists, the events surrounding May 4 become a web of confusion and frustration. The tragic day of May 4 itself only leads to more complications and contradictions, further stoking the flames of oversimplification and conspiracy theory. Some observers, including some historians, have not used critical

methods to disseminate the erroneous and contradictory information of the time. The proliferation of visual media and a glut of sources and interpretations since 1970 makes the journey all the more difficult, but such is the “stuff” of history in our postmodern age.

Chapter II:

May 4, The Aftermath and the Search for Meaning

Images are created in peoples' minds, but they often carry the force of reality. In fact, images often become reality. The May 4 tragedy, as interpreted by the media, quickly produced images that had to be dealt with as realities. These images were not so much of the killings themselves, but of the victims, of students, of the University and its administration, of the National Guardsmen, and state officials. The images were created and carried by the media and evoked considerable reaction from readers and listeners.¹

D. Ray Heisey's observation about the role of media in shaping the perception of the Kent State shootings demonstrates the power of the image and its role in modern historical understanding by the general public. The public's incomplete understanding of the connection between image and perception reflects both the power and problematic nature of visual media. As stated previously, all forms of public discourse, including media accounts, operate as both subjects and objects of cultural memory. Observers process new information based upon existing understanding and interpretation. Unfortunately, consideration of context dissipates all too often in the face of new, visually stunning and emotionally compelling accounts. As psychologist Jerome Bruner contends, perception of the world around us is not merely a neutral registration of some external reality; perception involves an active construction (and reconstruction) that incorporates past memories and expectations in addition to the current context.² Memory and expectation stem from previous encounters, be they personal experience, written

¹D. Ray Heisey, "Sensitivity to an Image," in Scott L. Bills, ed., *Kent State/May 4: Echoes Through a Decade* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1982), 187.

²Jerome Bruner, "Another Look at the New Look I," *American Psychologist* 47 (6), 780-783.

accounts, or mass media. These are the building blocks of cultural memory and they play a central role in analyzing the evolution of popular historical understanding of events like May 4. The maze of contradictions and confusion surrounding the years and days before the shootings pale when compared to the multiplicity of perspectives surrounding May 4 itself. The shootings and their aftermath provide the focus of the evolution of cultural memory over time, and it is essential that observers compare and contrast mass media accounts of the Kent State tragedy then and now. This section focuses on the multiplicity of accounts about May 4 and the role of conspiracy theory in shaping perception. It also includes an overview of how mass media, particularly newspapers, and newsweeklies, presented the incident. If newspaper accounts are “the first rough drafts of history,” one cannot overemphasize their role in shaping perception and understanding. At the same time, media historian Philip M. Taylor contends that television journalism is likewise important, as it is a “flawed first draft of history, and any historian utilizing it as a primary source of evidence must be aware of the factors that make it so.”³

Classes went on as usual on Monday, May 4, but the presence of the Guard reminded students that this was no ordinary day. The charred remains of the ROTC building served as a focus of attention and discussion for students. General Canterbury’s called meeting convened at 10 AM that morning at the Kent Fire Station, attended by representatives from the city of Kent, the Ohio Highway Patrol, and the university. The legal officer for the National Guard sat in on the session. Kent Mayor Satrom and KSU President White were there, as was KSU Vice-President Matson. The group decided to apply the Kent city curfew hours of 8 PM to 6 AM to the campus in an effort to coordinate and clear up the confusion that contributed to the confrontations the previous

³Philip M. Taylor, “Television: The First Flawed Rough Drafts of History,” in Gary R. Edgerton and Peter C. Rollins, eds., *Television Histories: Shaping Collective Memory in the Media Age* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 247-248. Hereafter cited as Taylor, “Television.”

evening. Canterbury stated that he hoped to withdraw the Guard from campus as soon as possible, that evening if possible. The matter of the scheduled noon rally led to a convoluted discussion that reached no conclusions and set the stage for further confrontation.⁴ While the Justice Department later claimed that the Guard came away from the meeting believing that the noon rally would not be held, no such decision was made clear to anyone in attendance.⁵

Once again, a meeting convened to clear up confusion wound up contributing to more misunderstanding. General Canterbury later told the Scranton Commission that he left the matter in the hands of President White who told him that any such assembly “would be highly dangerous.” Conversely, White maintained later that he played no role in the decision to forbid the scheduled noon assembly.⁶ This difference in perception led to the actions later in the day, as Guard officials left the meeting believing that all rallies were banned, thus giving them the duty of dispersing any assembly on campus. Despite White’s claims to the contrary, university officials made no dissenting opinion to the decision at the meeting. In light of the belief that a state of emergency existed and the Guard was in control of town and campus, it is possible that White believed no discussion was necessary. If a state of emergency was in place, as Governor Rhodes implied the day before, no rallies were allowed. Once again, the incomplete actions of Rhodes created a climate of confusion and misunderstanding that resulted in unnecessary conflict. After the conference disbanded around 11:15 AM, White and Matson convened a brief meeting with university officials on campus before going into town to eat lunch at the Brown Derby Restaurant. They were just starting dessert when they would receive news of the

⁴*Scranton Report*, 46-47.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶Best, “Tragic Weekend,” 19.

shootings on campus. At the same time, General Canterbury returned to his headquarters at the campus Administration Building, where he told those present about the banning of the noon rally.⁷

Despite the confusion surrounding assemblies and the exact role of the National Guard on campus, the protest went on as scheduled at noon on Monday, May 4. Students began gathering as early as 11 AM, many of them arriving out of curiosity as to what would happen next. By 11:45 AM, approximately 2000 to 3000 students had gathered for the protest on the University Commons, the usual meeting place for protests on campus. By contrast, there were only 99 National Guardsmen present, all of them positioned around the charred remains of the ROTC building.⁸ In the estimations of many protesters and scholars, this assembly was now more a protest of the Guard's presence on campus than a demonstration against the Cambodian incursion. The accuracy of this statement depends on whom you ask, as some accounts of Kent State to the present day portray the protest as an antiwar gathering, with little or no context given to the events of the preceding days.⁹ As the crowd swelled in number, Kent State police

⁷*Scranton Report*, 47-48.

⁸Best, "Tragic Weekend," 21; Joe Eszterhas and Michael D. Roberts, *Thirteen Seconds* (New York: Dodd and Mead, 1970), 150; *Scranton Report*, 52-53. As the disparity found in these sources indicates, the number of students on the commons for the rally is disputed. Some sources assert that only around 500 to 800 persons were actual protesters, with the remaining numbers only bystanders. The Scranton Commission's statement of 2,000 total persons on the Commons is probably the most accurate. Surviving activists like the larger numbers, as it tends to make their sentiments look more widely held. Guardsmen on the scene that day also like the larger numbers, as it makes their actions justified in light of what they saw as impending danger. This is another case where the perception has shaped the depiction of the event, with the same evidence used to arrive at very different conclusions.

⁹Professor Jerry M. Lewis states in more than one source that the rally served as a symbolic protest to the Guard's presence on campus rather than an antiwar gathering. Much like the night of the ROTC incident, the majority of students on the Commons were spectators or "cheerleaders" with an active core of 200 to 1,500, depending on the source consulted. See Jerry M. Lewis, "A Study of the Kent State Incident Using

officer Harold Rice ordered the crowd to disperse by using a bullhorn. When the crowd refused, Rice boarded a jeep with a driver and two armed Guardsmen, driving from the ROTC building across the Commons toward the students congregated around the Victory Bell. Rice once again told the students to disperse as the rally was prohibited. The crowd greeted him with chants of “pigs off campus,” “one, two, three, four, we don’t want your fucking war” and other antagonistic slogans.¹⁰ When the students refused to leave, Rice returned to the main body of Guardsmen surrounding the remains of the ROTC building. Protesters continued to chant and hurl insults, along with the occasional rock, in the direction of the Guardsmen. While some students knew that all assemblies were forbidden, the presence of a large number of commuters combined with the general confusion of what was and was not allowed, contributed to the tense situation. No university administration officials were in the Commons when Rice gave his order to disperse, a decision that some observers assert led to unnecessary actions. This argument fails to take into account the perception among White and the administration that the National Guard was in complete control of campus. If the Guard was in charge, the administration had no role in dispersing any assemblies.¹¹

After the crowd ignored Rice’s order to disperse, Canterbury ordered his troops to lock and load their weapons. Most of the Guardsmen carried loaded M-1 rifles with fixed bayonets, and a few of the troops brandished .45 caliber pistol side arms as well. The remaining Guardsmen had shotguns loaded with buckshot and birdshot. Most of the students on the Commons were unaware that the Guardsmen carried loaded weapons, and

Smelser’s Theory of Collective Behavior,” *Sociological Inquiry* 42 (1971), 91; Eszterhas and Roberts, *Thirteen Seconds*, 149-150; Jerry M. Lewis, interview with author, 28 January 1999.

¹⁰*Scranton Report*, 51.

¹¹Best, “Tragic Weekend,” 21.

even if the guns were loaded, no student believed that the soldiers would use them.¹² Canterbury believed that the crowd's refusal to disperse required him to force the dissolution of the rally by any means necessary. This assumption coincides with the belief that a state of emergency existed, and Guard leaders believed the unrest of the previous weekend made an assembly a dangerous proposition.¹³ General Canterbury then ordered a group of eight to ten grenadiers to launch two volleys of tear gas canisters in the direction of the crowd. While the attempt managed to disperse some of the protesters, much of the gas dissipated in the stiff afternoon breeze and had little effect. Not only did the tear gas fail in its objective, it also emboldened many of the students, including some who were only spectators when the showdown began.¹⁴ Spent tear gas canisters became projectiles in the hands of angry protesters who chucked them back in the direction of the Guard. With the tear gas volley ineffective, Canterbury ordered the Guardsmen to put on their gas masks, position the bayonets on their loaded weapons, and march toward the students gathered around the Victory Bell at the base of Taylor Hall.

Companies A and C, on the right and left flanks respectively, along with Troop G

¹²See *Scranton Report*, 81-83, for excerpts of the Ohio Guard Riot Training Manual. The rules state that "when all other means have failed or chemicals are not readily available, you are armed with the rifle and have been issued live ammunition." Indiscriminate firing of weapons is expressly prohibited with "only single aimed shots at confirmed targets." These potential targets include "clearly observed" snipers or "in any instance where human life is endangered by the forcible, violent actions of a rioter, or when rioters to whom the Riot Act has been read cannot be dispersed by any other reasonable means, then shooting is justified." Guardsmen will use both justifications during ensuing investigations, although the validity of their claims, often contradictory in nature, fails to correlate with the evidence. In other words, the Guardsmen carried loaded weapons and the students on the Commons either did not know or refused to believe that this was the case.

¹³*Scranton Report*, 52-53; Best, "Tragic Weekend," 21-22. Many of the Guardsmen believed that the vast numbers of students gathered on and around the Commons placed them in grave danger.

¹⁴*Scranton Report*, 53-55.

in the center, advanced in the direction of the crowd. General Canterbury, still clad in a business suit, followed behind the line of Guardsmen. He gave no instructions for firing or orders to fire before the Guard left their positions.¹⁵ The crowd dispersed in numerous directions as the troops made their way to the Victory Bell at the base of Blanket Hill, with most of the students retreating to the opposite side of Taylor Hall. Canterbury planned to march his men to the crest of the hill, clear the Commons, and then withdraw to the Guard's original position at the ROTC building. Hoping to prevent the students from outflanking his troops, Canterbury dispatched contingents of soldiers on both the north and south sides of Taylor Hall. Such a tactic made sense, as it would allow the Guardsmen to disperse the rally and clear the Commons. Yet, in a decision that remains a mystery, Canterbury decided to continue pushing the students back over the crest of Blanket Hill and toward the dormitories. As a result, the Guard continued its march, moving past Taylor Hall, and took positions on the practice football field located about eighty yards from the crest of the hill. The troops then formed a skirmish line on the field and awaited further instructions.¹⁶

Canterbury realized quickly the error of this decision. During the march over the hill, the crowd failed to disperse. Instead, it opened up to let the troops pass only to close up ranks behind them once they reached the football field. The field itself was fenced on three sides, meaning that the troops could not move except back in the direction of the original march. The crowd, sensing the Guard's predicament, began harassing the troops with a renewed wave of projectiles and insults. Students hurled rocks and spent tear gas

¹⁵Best, "Tragic Weekend," 22. The question of firing instructions is another matter of dispute. The Justice Department summary states that no firing instructions were given before the Guard began its moves toward the students except that Company C was told that any order to fire would come from one man, possibly the commanding officer. No other information is available and no other documents note such an order.

¹⁶*Scranton Report*, 56-58.

canisters in the direction of the skirmish line, creating a surreal atmosphere that some observers likened to a “tennis match” between students and the Guard.¹⁷ Some of the more vocal protesters took positions to the north of the Guard in the Prentice Hall parking lot. The Guardsmen positioned themselves on the practice football field, facing the parking lot (a gymnasium now covers the spot, and the protests surrounding that 1977 decision are another story altogether).¹⁸ The larger group, many of them onlookers, stood at the base of Blanket Hill and on the porch of Taylor Hall. The guard paid little attention to them, preferring to face the more verbally abusive smattering of students in the Prentice Hall parking lot. The students became more united in purpose once the Guard took its position on the practice field. Shouting “pigs off campus,” the crowd directed its frustrations on the entrenched Guardsmen, viewing them as “fascist bastards,” a visible symbol of institutional oppression. The Guard’s use of tear gas and bayonets fed student perceptions that the campus was under attack from an occupying force.¹⁹

After crouching and pointing their weapons at the parking lot for approximately ten minutes, the frustrated troops regrouped. During the course of their stay on the practice field, a group of Guardsmen, primarily from Troop G, engaged in a brief huddled discussion. The subject of that meeting remains a source of dispute, as some studies

¹⁷*Scranton Report*, 57.

¹⁸The battle over the construction of a new gymnasium on the site of the practice football field resulted in mass sit-ins (or “Tent City” as it was called by its participants) and large protests in 1977. After much press coverage, numerous arrests and accusations that KSU was trying to cover up a “crime scene,” the university constructed the gym on the site any way. It now is used primarily as a student exercise and recreation center. May 4 survivor Alan Canfora calls it a “travesty” and an “eye sore.” While the “Tent City” protests are an important chapter in May 4 history, they are beyond the scope of this study. For detailed studies of the gym controversy, see Miriam Jackson, “Brothers and Sisters on the Land: Tent City, 1977,” in Erinrich, ed., *Kent and Jackson State*, 101-115; and the three articles in Section IV of Hensley and Lewis, *Kent State and May 4th: A Social Science Perspective*, 145-209.

¹⁹*Scranton Report*, 56.

contend that it was during this huddle that the Guardsmen conspired to shoot into the crowd, even choosing specific students as targets. Despite such damning claims of premeditation, no solid evidence exists to support this theory. Guardsmen who have talked about the huddle claim it was more of a discussion of how to get themselves out of an increasingly hostile situation and make their way back to the ROTC building.²⁰ Under orders from General Canterbury, the aggravated Guardsmen decided to end the standoff and retrace their steps back over Blanket Hill to the Commons. Canterbury made this decision in part because he believed that the troops had no more tear gas available. This was an erroneous assumption, as Troop G had four unused canisters, but Canterbury failed to check the status before giving the order to leave the practice field. The midday heat and humidity fogged up their gas masks, hindering their sight and their breathing as they made their way back toward Taylor Hall. Canterbury believed that such a move would diffuse a bad situation, “thus reducing the possibility of injury to either soldiers or students.”²¹ As the Guard began its move back to the Commons, students started celebrating, many of them feeling that they had “won” a symbolic victory. The insults and chants began again in earnest, although the majority of students remained scattered and disorganized. A few students came within twenty yards of the Guard as they marched back up the hill, but photographic evidence indicates that the nearest student to

²⁰See Peter Davies, *The Truth About Kent State* and William A. Gordon, *Four Dead in Ohio* for examples of the premeditated conspiratorial huddle theory. Gordon argues that an unidentified officer fired several shots while the Guard faced the students on the practice field, but no Guardsmen ever admitted to firing his weapon at this time. The Scranton Commission also noted that the alleged shots were “in dispute.” One eyewitness, Journalism professor Richard A. Schreiber, claims that he saw an officer fire one shot from a .45 caliber pistol over the heads of the crowd gathered on the Prentice Hall parking lot, a claim corroborated by Sgt. James W. Farriss of Company A. The next day, a spent .22 caliber shell casing was found near the edge of the practice field. Only Maj. Harry D. Jones carried a .22 caliber pistol that day, and he claims that he never fired his weapon at any time. See Gordon, *Four Dead in Ohio*, 34; and *Scranton Report*, 57-58.

²¹*Scranton Report*, 58-59.

the Guard was some seventy-five feet away when the troops reached the top of Blanket Hill. Canterbury's statements to the Scranton Commission investigator tell a different story.

As the troop formation reached the area of the Pagoda near Taylor Hall, the mob located on the right flank in front of Taylor Hall and in the Prentice Hall parking lot charged our right flank, throwing rocks, yelling obscenities and threats, "Kill the pigs," "Stick the pigs." The attitude of the crowd at this point was menacing and hostile. The troops were being hit by rocks. I saw Major Jones hit in the stomach by a large brick, a Guardsman to the right and rear of my position was hit by a large rock and fell to the ground. During this movement, practically all of the Guardsmen were hit by missiles of various kinds. Guardsmen on the right flank were in serious danger of bodily harm and death as the mob continued to charge. I felt that, in view of the extreme danger to the troops at this point, that they were justified in firing.²²

Canterbury's testimony contradicts the accounts of other witnesses. Some observers state that during the Guard's march up the hill the rock and projectile throwing diminished. Those students who did throw objects did so from a considerable distance, with the rocks falling far short of their intended targets. Other witnesses claim that the rock throwing grew in intensity as the Guard reached the top of the hill. These contradictory claims demonstrate the chaotic nature of the situation, although photographic evidence undermines Canterbury's account.²³ While he claims that students were within four to five yards of the Guardsmen, photographs reveal a distance of at least twenty yards between the troops and the nearest student to their front. The closest student to their side was at least fifteen yards away, standing on the terrace of Taylor Hall.²⁴

The best evidence in existence is an 8-millimeter film taken by student Chris Abels from his dorm room window some 500 yards northeast of the scene. The film

²²Ibid, 60.

²³Ibid, 60-61.

²⁴Ibid, 61; Best, "Tragic Weekend," 23.

shows that “the main body of aggressive students was about 60 to 75 yards away, at the foot of the hill near the corner of the Prentice Hall parking lot.”²⁵ Although a few students continued to throw rocks, most believed the confrontation was over. About 200 spectators stood near Johnson Hall, located south of Taylor Hall, but most of this group remained in their places when the Guard made its march to the practice field and back. A group of 25 to 50 standing on the crest of Blanket Hill opened up as before when the Guard approached, allowing them free passage. Approximately 100 people, most of them spectators, stood on the east terrace of Taylor Hall watching the Guard retreat, but none of them threw rocks. Another group of 100 or so students followed at a distance behind the Guard, standing near the slope on the east side of Taylor Hall. Students gathered on the road between the practice field and the hill, moved southeast towards Lake Hall as the Guard approached. The Prentice Hall parking lot contingency, the most boisterous of the gathering, now included a large number of students who were not involved in the standoff. Persons who had watched the scene from inside surrounding building and dormitories walked outside, some of them making their way to afternoon classes.²⁶ Of the 100 to 200 students in the Prentice Hall parking lot at that time, only 20 to 50 of them were a part of the rock-throwing group that faced off with the Guard on the practice field. This small group of active students followed the Guard from a distance,

²⁵Ibid, 61. This 8mm footage is included in the 1972 documentary on the shootings and in the Drew Tiene film made in 1995. Although the film is grainy and shot from a distance, it completely undermines the claims of Canterbury and other Guardsmen that aggressive students were within a few yards of them when they fired. This footage will be discussed further in a later chapter on May 4 documentaries.

²⁶*Scranton Report*, 62-63; Wischmann, “Four Dead in Ohio,” 31-33. The aggressive Prentice Hall parking lot crowd included Alan Canfora, who brandished a black flag that he waved defiantly at the Guardsmen as they kneeled on the practice field. Jeffrey Miller also participated in the rally, hurling rocks, spent tear gas canisters, and insults at the Guard. Both were later shot. Also on the parking lot were Sandra Scheuer and Douglas Wrentmore. Neither of them participated in the rally nor in the standoff with the Guard. They were on their way to class when the firing began.

anywhere from 20 to 80 yards away. Although film evidence and eyewitness testimony reveals a group of students surging up the side of Blanket Hill as the Guard reached its crest, no student came closer than 20 yards, with most of the group over 60 yards away. The Scranton Commission stated in its report that most of these students were simply trying to get into a better position to see the Guard withdrawal, as they believed the action was over. It was now 12:24 PM.

Upon reaching the top of the hill, occupying a space between Taylor Hall and a sculpture known as the Pagoda, the right flank of the Guard (some twenty-eight soldiers, most of them from Troop G) turned abruptly and began firing toward the parking lot in the direction of the scattered but vocal protesters. Thirteen seconds and sixty-one shots later, four students were dead and nine more lay injured on the ground. The nearest fatality, Jeffrey Miller, lay dead some 265 feet away from the Guard. The other three dead, Allison Krause (343 feet away), William Schroeder (382 feet), and Sandra Scheuer (390 feet away) were all shot in the Prentice Hall parking lot. Only Krause, Miller and Schroeder were on or near the Commons during the earlier rally, and Schroeder, a member of the KSU ROTC, was only a spectator in the crowd. Krause died in the arms of her boyfriend Barry Levine in the Prentice Hall parking lot, where the two students had attempted to dodge the gunfire by hiding behind a parked car. While Miller acted as one of the more vocal protesters, Scheuer was caught in the crossfire on her way to class.²⁷ The nearest casualty, Joseph Lewis, stood some sixty to seventy feet away from the Guardsmen. Donald MacKenzie, the furthest casualty, was over 750 feet away from the firing line.²⁸ The Guardsmen admitted to firing eleven rounds into the throng,

²⁷Wischmann, "Four Dead in Ohio," 33; *Scranton Report*, 67-69.

²⁸*Scranton Report*, 65-68. In addition to Lewis and MacKenzie, the other seven injured students were John Cleary, Thomas Grace, Alan Canfora, Dean Kahler, Doug Wrentmore, James Russell, and Robert Stamps. Fatality Schroeder and casualty Kahler both suffered their injuries while laying prone on the ground. Kahler suffered paralysis as a result. MacKenzie and Canfora were wounded as they ran away from the firing line.

resulting in a total of fifteen wounds and a number of bullet holes in cars, trees, and other surrounding objects. Almost every Guardsman who admitted firing stated that they did so only after hearing or seeing one or more of their fellow troops open fire.²⁹

The question of why the Guardsmen fired remains unanswered despite the court trials and numerous investigations that followed. Some members of the Guard testified in the 1975 civil trial that the crowd posed a serious threat to their lives, even arguing that protesters were as close as twenty feet from the retreating soldiers, a claim that collapses in the face of photographic evidence. More importantly, if the crowd posed the threat that many Guardsmen claimed and students were within ten to twenty feet of them, the wounded students would have fallen much closer to the Guard's line. Although only a few Guardsmen admitted to firing at specific protesters, the closest casualty was sixty feet away, not ten to twenty feet away as the Guard leadership asserted.³⁰ The key point here is the contrast between perception and evidence, and as history shows, perception often plays a greater role than evidence in shaping popular understanding, especially in a tense situation. Several studies support the soldiers' perceptions, contending that the Guard reached their physical and psychological breaking points and reacted out of fear and frustration.³¹

Russell and Stamps received their injuries due to ricochets. Of the injured, both Lewis and Russell received multiple injuries. Despite minor discrepancies regarding casualty positions between the various official reports, all studies reveal that none of the injured posed a direct threat to the Guardsmen at the time of the shooting.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Best, "Tragic Weekend," 24; *Scranton Report*, 66. The Scranton Commission found that few of the Guardsmen targeted specific students. 41 of the 63 shots were fired in the air or into the ground. Yet, the shots fired into the air help account for the casualties that occurred at a considerable distance from the Guard. As James Best notes, a bullet fired into the air, over the heads of persons within thirty yards or so, would continue traveling and inflict wounds on students who were nowhere near the firing line.

³¹Best, "Tragic Weekend," 24.

Although General Canterbury argued that his men were “not panic-stricken,” his assertions contradict the testimonies given by many of the Guardsmen. The “psychological breakdown” theory is the most plausible explanation for why the Guard fired on the students. Tired, frustrated, and placed in a difficult situation by clueless politicians, lacking proper strategies and sober planning from the Guard leadership, the Guard broke. The gas masks hampered their vision and hearing, distorting their surroundings and feeding their fear. Although evidence reveals no Guardsman was in any real danger, this fact does not account for perceptions in a stressful environment. Many of the Guardsmen *believed* themselves to be in mortal danger. Guard leader Charles Fassinger contends that students hit him six times with stones as the troops marched back up the hill. As they reached the crest of the hill, Fassinger said that he heard what sounded like a shot, followed by a barrage of gunfire. When he saw the troops firing their weapons, he began running up and down the line ordering the men to cease fire. Major Jones also heard a popping sound that he claimed sounded like a firecracker. He turned to see Guardsmen crouching and positioning their rifles. An M-1 rifle shot rang out followed by a volley of gunfire. Like Fassinger, Jones began yelling a cease fire, and then he moved quickly along the line of troops shoving rifle barrels up and hitting men on top of their helmets to make them stop firing. General Canterbury offered a similar testimony, contending that he heard a single shot fired from a distance. He did not believe that the shot came from a military weapon based on its sound and what he perceived to be its distance. He then heard the barrage of gunfire from the line of soldiers immediately southeast of Taylor Hall near the Pagoda. Canterbury stated that the Guard’s fire was not aimed in the direction that he believed the initial shot originated. Like Fassinger and Jones, he also began moving along the back of the line ordering the troops to cease fire. While their impressions of the shooting differ in small details, all

three ranking officers contend that no one gave an order to fire.³² While some students testified that they heard an order to fire or witnessed an officer raise his pistol as a signal to begin shooting, the greater part of the evidence reveals that no command to fire occurred.

When the shooting started, students began scurrying for cover. Many students dove behind parked cars or tried to lay flat on the pavement of the Prentice Hall parking lot. Students on the eastern slope of Taylor Hall sought shelter behind the metal sculpture that stands just north of the Pagoda, while others rolled themselves down the hill or attempted to hide behind trees.³³ When the shooting subsided, the students slowly began to realize the gravity of the situation. The notion that the Guardsmen's weapons contained only blanks dissipated at the sight of students bleeding, wounded, and dying. Roseann "Chic" Canfora, Alan Canfora's sister, recalled attempts to resuscitate Sandra Scheuer, a vain attempt due to the extent of her injuries.³⁴ Jeffrey Miller's body lay in the road just east of Taylor Hall, blood gushing from a fatal wound to his head. Mary Ann Vecchio, a fourteen-year-old runaway from Florida who happened to be on campus that day, kneeled over Miller's body. Vecchio wore a pair of sandals swiped from a storefront window during Friday night's unrest on Water Street. In a state of shock, Vecchio let out a scream for help. It was at that moment that KSU student photographer John Filo snapped a photo of the scene that has since become an icon; Vecchio's face frozen in what one filmmaker calls an "eternal, silent scream."³⁵

³²*Scranton Report*, 64-65.

³³*Ibid*, 69; Alan Canfora, Tour of Campus with Author, 3 May 2000. Canfora recounts frequently how his decision to hide behind a large tree saved his life, resulting only in a shot through the wrist.

³⁴Roseann "Chic" Canfora, interview with Author, 3 May 2000.

³⁵*Boston Globe*, 24 April 1995; *Boston Sunday Herald*, 23 April 1995. John Filo was one of the few students on the scene who managed to get off campus after the shootings with his camera and film intact. He fled to Pennsylvania and the offices of a

The greater question is not that the Guard fired, but rather why they fired when they did. By the time the firing began, the crisis has subsided. While some students continued to mock the Guard and throw the occasional projectile as they reached the crest of Blanket Hill, any genuine threat to the troops' safety no longer existed. Despite protestations to the contrary, by the time the Guard fired their rounds, their decision to shoot into the crowd defied the rules of riot control, resulting in a pointless tragedy. The Scranton Report summed the situation up nicely when it concluded that "the indiscriminate firing of rifles into a crowd of students and the deaths that followed were unnecessary, unwarranted, and inexcusable."³⁶

As the Guard began moving back to their position near the burned out ROTC building, students scrambled into the surrounding buildings to call for medical assistance. Ambulances arrived several minutes later as EMTs attempted to offer help to the wounded and dying students. General Canterbury withdrew his troops to the Commons almost immediately after the shooting stopped. After ordering a weapons check, he ordered that no more rounds be fired unless they received an order from an officer. Any shots fired were to be aimed at specified rather than random targets. As Canterbury

local newspaper, quickly developed his film and sent the photos out to the Associated Press. His famous photo of Vecchio won him a Pulitzer Prize in 1971, and was chosen as one of the Top 25 photos of the Twentieth Century by *Life* magazine. One cannot see any documentary or story on the tumult of 1960s America without seeing Filo's timeless photograph. Along with the work of Boardman News photographer John Darnell, Filo's numerous pictures served as important evidence in calls for criminal investigations of the incident, as well as in the trials themselves. The news stories cited here recount the first face-to-face meeting between Filo and Vecchio, twenty-five years after the shootings. While the photo launched Filo's career, it signaled the beginning of a downward spiral for Vecchio. Accused of being a communist plant and receiving numerous death threats after the shootings, Vecchio has attempted to distance herself from the photo and the tragedy that caused its publication. Although she has spoken publicly about the ordeal several times over the past decade, she prefers to keep a low profile. Vecchio declines most interviews, as the author discovered.

³⁶*Scranton Report*, 90.

moved his men back to the Commons, C Company commander Snyder led seven of his men to the Prentice Hall parking lot in an attempt to offer aid. He stated that he saw two young men that he believed dead, probably Miller and Schroeder. As the soldiers approached Miller's body, angry students screamed at them to get away. Realizing the possibility of further altercations, Snyder pulled his men back to their original positions and then back to the Commons area. His decision led to more controversy as students later accused the Guard of failing to render assistance. As EMTs moved Jeffrey Miller's lifeless body into an ambulance, one demonstrator brandishing a black flag dipped the flag into Miller's blood and then stomped his feet into the stream, splattering the blood on the concrete and on surrounding spectators.³⁷

Any hopes for calm evaporated quickly as angry students began gathering again on the hills surrounding the Commons. Approximately 200 to 300 students congregated near Johnson Hall before they moved towards the Guard, now standing nervously in a circle near their original position around the ROTC building. Shocked and defiant, the crowd appeared ready to make a full assault on the Guard, with fatalistic cries of "let them spatter us if they want to" and "murderers" punctuating the afternoon air.³⁸ The Guard leadership, as if bent on making a tragic situation even more damaging, seemed bent on breaking up the angry crowd through the further use of force. Faculty marshals, fearing further confrontations and potential injuries, moved into position between the students and the Guard. Professor Glenn Frank, along with fellow marshal and chair of

³⁷Erin Kosnac, "Tom Miller" from "Kent Twenty-Five," in *The Burr*, a bi-annual publication of the Kent State University Office of Student Media (Spring 2000), 42. Hereafter cited as Kosnac, "Kent 25." The student demonstrator's name was Tom Miller. Along with Canfora and Jeffrey Miller, Tom Miller taunted the Guardsmen from the edge of the Prentice Hall parking lot. His decision to dip the flag and jump up and down in Jeff Miller's blood stemmed from his shock and anger. "He said the people just looked stunned," Canfora recalls. "He just wanted to get blood on them to make it more real for them. When he saw the body of Jeffrey Miller lying there, he just lost it." Tom Miller left Kent State and later died in an automobile accident in 1972.

³⁸Michener, *Kent State: What Happened and Why*, 358.

the KSU psychology department Dr. Seymour Baron, discussed the situation with General Canterbury. After a brief exchange, Canterbury gave Frank and Baron permission to attempt a dispersal of the crowd. Armed with a bullhorn, Baron persuaded the students to sit down, stating that the Guardsmen would open fire again if they came any closer. Major Jones and his contingency approached the students from behind, causing Professor Frank to exclaim “for God’s sake, don’t come any closer.” Claiming that his orders were to move ahead, Jones’s troops pressed on. Frank stood between the Guard and the students, telling Jones that if he followed his orders, it would be over Frank’s dead body. As more Guardsmen appeared over the hill behind the crowd, some students sensed that they were surrounded and began moving away from the scene. Others stood their ground, determined to express their anger at the Guard for shooting, wounding, and killing their fellow students.³⁹

Professor Frank grabbed the bullhorn and began pleading with the students. “I am begging you right now, if you don’t disperse right now, they’re going to move in, and there can only be a slaughter. Jesus Christ, I don’t want to be a part of this.”⁴⁰ Frank’s pleas convinced some students to move away from the Guardsmen and exit the Commons, but faculty marshals and graduate students had to physically remove other students from the scene. About one hour after the shootings, the Commons was vacant. In the chaos after the shootings, Guard leaders ordered their men to check weapons and fill out incident reports. The initial reports were unreliable, due in part to a decision by Guard leadership to forego an immediate weapons check, as it was “a psychologically bad time” for such an action. As a result, no investigation or incident reports occurred until over an hour after the shootings.⁴¹

³⁹*Scranton Report*, 73-75.

⁴⁰*Scranton Report*, 74-75.

⁴¹*Ibid*, 75-76.

President White got word of the shootings as he finished lunch at the Brown Derby Restaurant. He returned to campus, and after a conference with university staff, ordered the campus closed for the remainder of the week. This decision proved to be academic, however, as Portage County Prosecutor Ronald Kane obtained a Common Pleas Court injunction that closed KSU indefinitely. Kane took this action after learning of the tragedy via the radio. His repeated attempts to reach Governor Rhodes failed so he took the necessary actions to close the campus pending investigation of the incident. With the injunction, the National Guard assumed complete control of the campus, marking the first specific legal authorization given to the troops since they arrived Saturday night. The injunction also gave KSU students until noon of May 5 to leave the campus. Kent city police and the Guard also closed down the town to all outsiders, halting all ingoing and outgoing traffic. Military vehicles patrolled the city, enforcing a dusk to dawn curfew. Over the next twenty-four hours, students packed up their belongings and exited the dorms, relying on university transportation or individual vehicles to get out of town. By early evening of May 5, only the Guard and campus police remained, conducting patrols of the area, a position they filled until Friday, May 8.

The initial news reports of the shootings at Kent State made a chaotic incident even more difficult to comprehend. Rumors and false information spread throughout the region and the nation at large. As one observer noted to the *Kent State University Alumni Magazine*, “rumors flew more swiftly than the military helicopters which circled the town incessantly, shining giant spotlights over houses and yards in an eerie treetop dance. Kent knew real fear.”⁴² Much like the previous nights of unrest, outrageous tales spread throughout the town of Kent and surrounding communities. Stories of armed students planning to destroy both campus and town were common among townspeople. One

⁴²*Kent State University Alumni Magazine*, June 1970, 3; quoted in Best, “Tragic Weekend,” 26, and Wischmann, “Four Dead in Ohio,” 71.

account accused communists of dressing themselves in Guard uniforms and shooting students in order to stir up controversy and create chaos. Another story circulated among Kent residents asserted that the students killed on campus “were so dirty and lice-ridden that the ambulance doors were thrown open on the way to the hospital in Ravenna.”⁴³ The long-standing tensions between town and gown prevented any sympathetic support from the townspeople. The Kent Chamber of Commerce issued a public statement on May 7, focusing its view on the problems the previous weekend that led to the call of the Guard. “The people of Kent were subjected to extensive loss of property, business and personal rights; subjected to profane language, both spoken and written; subjected to threats on the street and in the homes; subjected to the witnessing of abuse to the American flag.”⁴⁴ Three days of unrest, vandalism and violence put most Kent residents on edge, and if any show of support existed in the days surrounding the shootings, it sided with the Guard rather than the students.

As news of the shootings spread across the nation, over two hundred campuses erupted to an unusual extent not seen in some time.⁴⁵ The Filo photograph of a hysterical Mary Ann Vecchio leaning over the body of Jeffrey Miller ran in newspapers and periodicals across the nation. America would never be the same.⁴⁶

Tin soldiers and Nixon’s coming, we’re finally on our own

⁴³Bills, “Introduction,” 18.

⁴⁴“Statement Made by the Executive Committee of the Kent Area Chamber of Commerce, May 7, 1970”; quoted in Bills, “Introduction,” 19-20.

⁴⁵Best, “Tragic Weekend,” 28; For an overview of campus demonstrations in the wake of the Cambodian incursion and the Kent State shootings, see “Mr. Nixon’s Home Front,” *Newsweek*, 18 May 1970.

⁴⁶*Newsweek* 18 May 1970, 26-34; Davies, *The Truth About Kent State*, 29-137. For an artist’s perspective on the specific importance of the Filo photograph, see Carol Squiers, “Special Effects: On Kent and Jackson State,” *Artforum* 29 (Summer 1991): 14-16.

This summer I hear the drumming, four dead in Ohio . . .⁴⁷

The ensuing decade saw lawsuits, calls for a federal grand jury (stalled by the Nixon administration), demanded explanations, cries for apologies, and several rounds of indictments and failed court cases. Despite the conclusions of both the Scranton Commission and the FBI that the Guardsmen were not in danger when they opened fire and that their actions were unjustified, no one ever accepted responsibility for the deaths and injuries. Numerous books and articles flooded the marketplace between 1970 and 1980, chronicling the event and attempting to make sense out of a senseless tragedy.⁴⁸ Although the official reports and court hearings answered some questions, new questions arose due to contradictory testimony and conflicting investigative conclusions. The legal side of the shootings ended on January 4, 1979, when survivors and family members of the dead received monetary compensation from an out-of-court settlement. The plaintiffs received \$675,000 in compensatory payment along with a statement of regret from the defendants.⁴⁹ While the defendants' statement acknowledged "in retrospect the tragedy

⁴⁷ Neil Young, *Ohio*, Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, 1970. This timeless song remains one of the most powerful and popular relics of May 4. Young wrote and recorded the song shortly after the incident and Warner Brothers Records rush released the cut in the wake of the shootings. An angry, moving musical statement of the times, "Ohio" continues to be a fixture on classic rock radio.

⁴⁸One of the best sources on Kent State from 1970 to 1980 is the work of J. Gregory Payne, currently a professor in the Department of Communications at Emerson College in Boston, Massachusetts. His work is also one of the most accessible sources available for a general readership on the shootings and the aftermath. See J. Gregory Payne, *Mayday: Kent State* (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 1981). The book, long out of print, is available in its entirety at www.may4archive.org. This website, along with the KSU May 4 archive on the web, are indispensable and balanced sources for anyone interested in May 4. Payne's work, written in conjunction with his work as historical consultant on the NBC-TV docudrama about Kent State, receives further investigation in chapter six.

⁴⁹For summaries of the legal cases involving the Kent State shootings, see Gordon, *Four Dead in Ohio*, 93-220; Joseph Kelner and James Munves, *The Kent State Coverup* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980); and Thomas R. Hensley, *Kent State: Impact of Judicial Process on Public Attitudes* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981). A good brief outline overview of legal cases is also available. See Kent State University

of May 4, 1970, should not have occurred” and that they “deeply regret those events and are profoundly saddened by the deaths of four students and the wounding of nine others,” no acceptance of responsibility accompanied the settlement. On the one hand, the defendants could state that they had apologized for the shootings, an achievement in and of itself. At the same time, Governor Rhodes’ attorney Charles Shanklin claimed, “the Governor is not guilty of anything . . . nor are any of the defendants.”⁵⁰ Thus, the Governor and the Guardsmen stated their sorrow over the incident, but accepted no responsibility for it. Everyone won and everyone lost. By agreeing to settle the case, the defendants hoped that “the agreement to end this litigation would help assuage the tragic moments regarding that sad day.” Governor Rhodes and 27 National Guardsmen affixed their signatures to the statement.⁵¹ The U.S. District Court in Cleveland divided the \$675,000 settlement among the plaintiffs, with survivor Dean Kahler receiving the largest amount due to his paralysis caused by the shootings.⁵² The responsibility for payment fell to the State of Ohio rather than the individual defendants. The plaintiffs accepted the settlement in an effort to curtail any further emotional trauma for their families and themselves. They also feared that even if they won in the courtroom, there was no guarantee of compensation befitting the injuries.

After nearly a decade of endless allegations, contradictory testimony, conflicting

News and Information Office, “Legal Chronology May 5, 1970-January 4, 1979” in the Kent State May 4th Archives. Hereafter cited as “Legal Chronology.”

⁵⁰*Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, 5 January 1979; quoted in Gordon, *Four Dead in Ohio*, 203.

⁵¹“Legal Chronology,” 19.

⁵²*Ibid.* The money settlement was divided as follows: Dean Kahler - \$350,000, Joseph Lewis - \$42,500, Thomas Grace - \$37,500, Donald MacKenzie - \$27,500, John Cleary - \$22,500. Alan Canfora, Douglas Wrentmore, Robert Stamps, and James Russell each received \$15,000 each. The families of the four slain students also received \$15,000 each. The remaining monies, totaling \$75,000, went for attorney fees and expenses.

evidence, and untold emotional cost, the legal side of Kent State ended. No one accepted responsibility for the tragedy, although it is unlikely any verdict would have satisfied all parties involved. No judicial decision or reward could bring back Jeffrey Miller, Allison Krause, William Schroeder, and Sandra Scheuer. As Alan Canfora states, “it wasn’t about the money. Yes, we wanted Dean [Kahler] to be taken care of, but we also wanted someone to accept responsibility for what happened. That part of it never came.”⁵³ The succinct, disturbing observation of editorial writers at the *New York Post* some four years earlier summed up the eventual settlement in a succinct and disturbing statement—“Kent State will remain an open and disturbing case indefinitely.”⁵⁴

Open and disturbing is exactly what Kent State remains nearly thirty-five years after the shootings and some twenty-five years after the legal settlement. Nagging questions continue to haunt survivors, observers and scholars alike. Why did the Guardsmen turn and fire on the students when photographic evidence, eyewitness accounts, and governmental investigations all found them in no real apparent danger? Who fired the first shot? Was there an order to fire? Did the troops conspire to shoot at specific protesters during their ten minutes on the practice field? Or did the Guard’s perception of imminent danger set the stage for tragedy? None of these questions has been answered to the satisfaction of all interested parties. For the most part, the Guardsmen remain silent to this day. Those who have talked have remained consistent in their testimony about perceived danger. Survivors of the incident, such as Alan Canfora and Dean Kahler, remember certain attributes of the event but disagree on other points. In other words, the pursuit of a “definitive” account of what happened on May 4, 1970 never materialized, and no new credible revelations about the shootings emerged after 1979. By the time the tenth anniversary rolled around in 1980, open wounds of anger and

⁵³ Alan Canfora, interview by the author, 2 May 2000.

⁵⁴ *New York Post*, 29 August 1975.

hurt remained intact, with no sense of closure in sight.⁵⁵

An overview of May 4 accounts and studies since 1970 reveals a wide array of unanswered questions and divergent interpretations. With the numerous discrepancies and holes in information that surround the shootings, this problem should not be surprising. The accounts and literature of the past three decades reveal three distinct interpretations of the Kent State shootings, with multiple variations within each theme. The first view, argued by some survivors and writers like Bill Gordon, presents the shootings as cold-blooded, pre-meditated murder that involved key figures in both the federal and state governments. The connection with governmental leaders varies depending upon the source consulted. The second interpretation argues that the KSU students incited a riot and disrupted the campus. Thus, the Guardsmen were simply defending themselves against an unlawful, unruly mob. Defenders of this view fall into two camps: those who see the shootings as an unfortunate incident and others who believe the Guard “should have killed more.” This argument includes most of the Guardsmen themselves and a large segment of persons surveyed in the aftermath of the incident.⁵⁶

A third view, defended within this study, sees May 4 as a tragedy that demands understanding within the context of its time. The tragedy stemmed from the growing domestic unrest over the war in Vietnam and the violent rhetoric from both governmental leaders and protestors alike that characterized the era. Inexperienced National Guardsmen sent without adequate rest, fatigued from violent encounters with testy Akron Teamsters, only to find themselves dispatched to Kent rather than the safety of their homes. Top it off

⁵⁵Thomas R. Hensley, Professor of Political Science, Kent State University, interview by author, 4 May 1997; Wischmann, “Four Dead in Ohio,” 30-33, 70-72; Bills, “Introduction” in *Kent State/May 4: Echoes Through a Decade*, 6-61.

⁵⁶Best, “Tragic Weekend,” 27-28.

with poor communication between the various law enforcement agencies (including the Guard leaders) and campus officials and you have a prescription for disaster. While the latter interpretation best fits the available evidence, it fails to feed the insatiable need of the masses for simplicity . . . and conspiracy. Thus, with few exceptions, it is the first view of a cold-blooded murder and conspiracy that holds sway in many popular accounts of Kent State. It feeds on the cynicism and anger of the post-Vietnam mindset, draws from the stockpile of speculation fueled by unanswered questions, and attempts to turn a senseless tragedy into a well-executed military slaughter of unarmed students. More importantly, it makes for great human drama.

Because of its status in many accounts of Kent State, an examination of the assertions and nuances within the conspiratorial view is necessary. In this ideological framework, theorists allege the Guard planned the shootings (the practice field huddle serving as the decision point) and then relied on federal and state authorities to back up this decision by stalling any and all investigations. William Gordon asserts that members of the Guard fired intentionally when they reached the crest of the hill and then conspired to cover each other in the event of any investigation. He contends that the gunmen, particularly those in Troop G, engaged in a cover-up from the outset, switching names on uniforms, exchanging weapons to confuse investigators as to who fired, and then created stories of snipers, armed students and a converging crowd to justify their actions.⁵⁷ Gordon, who served as a liaison to the victims' families during the criminal and civil cases in the 1970s, bases his claims on contradictory testimony from the Guardsmen, Guard leaders, and government officials. Alan Canfora takes the conspiracy argument further, contending that the plot extended to the highest levels of the federal government,

⁵⁷Gordon, *Four Dead in Ohio*, 49-75. Gordon's argument is very similar to the stands taken by Peter Davies almost twenty years earlier, and several survivors contend that Gordon's allegations about Guard actions are nothing new. For a comparison, also see Davies, *The Truth About Kent State*, 29-60.

particularly the White House. Canfora refers to alleged phone conversations between President Nixon and Governor Rhodes the weekend before the shootings, suggesting that Nixon possibly gave Rhodes permission to use lethal force to quell the Kent situation. According to Canfora, such an action is consistent with Nixon's "law and order" mentality, his hatred of campus protestors, and his own personal paranoia.⁵⁸

Such contentions rest on heavy doses of speculation, but there is little tangible evidence to support the claims. The evidence that does exist raises more questions than it answers. While evidence exists that reveals the Nixon White House engaged in attempts to stonewall a federal grand jury investigation of the incident, no proof has surfaced that links Nixon to a premeditated plot with Rhodes to have students killed.⁵⁹ Rhodes stated

⁵⁸Alan Canfora, interview by author, 20 January 1999.

⁵⁹Gordon, *Four Dead in Ohio*, 108-115; Alan Canfora, interview with author, 2 May 1999. The background of the White House stonewalling episode requires some explanation. Both Gordon and Canfora refer to a *Washington Post* story dated 5 May 1978 that reported on a White House memo that stated that Nixon personally opposed a federal grand jury investigation of the shootings. Gordon reveals that this original memo "appears to have vanished," although a memo from John Erlichman to John Mitchell dated 18 November 1970 survived. The latter memo served as a reminder to Mitchell of Nixon's initial order. These memoranda arose from an 17 November 1970 statement by Assistant Attorney General Jerris Leonard regarding the special state grand jury that had just finished its two-month investigation. The state grand jury report, dated 16 October 1970, condemned the KSU administration, faculty, students, and police department for the tragedy. The Guardsmen appeared to be exonerated, as the report stated that the soldiers "fired in the honest and sincere belief . . . that they would suffer serious bodily injury had they not done so." As Gordon points out, this conclusion contradicted the conclusions of both the Justice Department investigation and the Scranton Commission. The state grand jury handed down 25 indictments that included KSU students, one professor, a few dropouts and assorted riffraff, but no Guardsmen. These indicted individuals became known collectively as the "Kent 25." Assistant Attorney General Leonard told reporters that the Justice Department would study the findings of the state grand jury and decide whether to bring federal charges against the Guardsmen before year's end. Nixon, for reasons known only to him, did not want any federal grand jury investigation, and the memos sent to his underlings reveal this fact. Attorney General Mitchell dragged his feet on the announcement of a federal grand jury. On 13 August 1971, Mitchell announced there would be no need for a federal grand jury. Gordon and Canfora both believe this was the result of Nixon covering up something of importance. See Gordon, *Four Dead in Ohio*, 95-115 for a thorough, albeit fragmented, account of the

that he did talk to Nixon on the weekend of May 1-3, 1970, but later claimed that he did not speak with the White House. Rhodes made both statements under oath, so the assertions leave the question unanswered. Nixon himself never admitted to speaking with Rhodes, either in private correspondence or in his post-presidency memoirs. If one argues that Nixon's penchant for lying and Rhodes' superhuman ability to cover himself made such a conspiracy possible, it remains conjecture. When one builds an account on what is unknown, lack of evidence becomes evidence.

Likewise, Gordon's view of a Troop G conspiracy depends on unknown factors as proof, the very foundation of all conspiracy theories. All evidence available refutes such a claim, and no ensuing accounts and testimony by the Guardsmen who fired that day reveals a conspiracy to fire.⁶⁰ Nonetheless, allegations die hard, especially when they

steps toward the convening of a state grand jury and the decision not to convene a federal grand jury. As stated above, Peter Davies, in his book *The Truth About Kent State: A Challenge to the American Conscience*, argues along similar lines. Davies, writing in 1972, came to similar conclusions as Gordon, but in a clearer narrative devoid of the same lapses into an "X-Files" sized conspiracy.

⁶⁰William A. Gordon, interview with author, 28 December 1998. Gordon's conspiracy theory also includes a mysterious figure named Terry Norman. Norman, a Kent State student, can be seen in photographs of the incident wearing a gas mask and brandishing a camera. He was stopped on his way off campus and found to be carrying a gun, although investigation revealed that the weapon had not been fired. Norman later disappeared without a trace, and Gordon contends that Norman was a governmental plant, who very well served as a triggerman to instigate the shootings. While official records indicate that Norman was indeed a campus informant for the FBI and other federal and state agencies, no evidence exists to support claims that he was involved in the shootings. The evidence that does exist leads to contradictory conclusions. When the author asked Gordon about his evidence, he was told that "it is obvious that Norman was involved in some way, but we don't know how as of yet." Gordon's work contains some valuable insights into the investigations of May 4, but for every brilliant observation he makes, he undercuts himself with lapses into conspiratorial histrionics. On the one hand, he does a brilliant job of investigating Norman's background and admitting that, although an informant, Norman did not fire his gun. Gordon calls him "someone who was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. On the other hand, he implies some greater role for Norman, but relies on unanswered questions and speculation to do so, and then fails to state what that greater role might have been. See Gordon, *Four Dead in Ohio*, 77-79, 243-248. For a more coherent account of Norman's possible role in the shootings and the

surround such a chaotic, tragic incident in a polarized period of American history. While tales of conspiracy and cover-up feed the imaginations of students and scholars who seek a linear, sensible past, they fail as legitimate historical inquiry. Anything is possible when investigating an incident like May 4, but there is a great difference between what *could* have happened and what actually occurred. Yet, conjecture is the mother of media invention, and the more confusion surrounding an incident, the greater the temptation to fill in the gaps. To the uninformed spectator, the line between evidence and conjecture blurs, especially in image-saturated media presentations.

Not surprisingly, the first newspaper reports of the shootings contained numerous errors and inaccurate information. The chaos at the scene and the difficulty in getting accurate information transformed inaccurate information into headlines and rumors into details. The first press run of the *Kent-Ravenna Record-Courier* the day of the shootings carried the erroneous headline “2 Guardsmen, 1 Student Dead in KSU Violence.”⁶¹ The initial headline run by the Associated Press reprinted the mistake and served as the first of many incorrect details about the incident. Although later editions of the story corrected the headline to “4 Kent State Students Killed in Clash Today,” first impressions based on accounts riddled with errors continued and persist to the present day.⁶² Former

enigma that surrounds him, see Lesley Wischmann, “Four Dead in Ohio,” *American History Illustrated* (May 1990), 70-71.

⁶¹*Kent-Ravenna Record-Courier*, 4 May 1970.

⁶²*Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 5 May 1970. The *Plain Dealer* issued a report the day after shootings that shed light on the false account that two Guardsmen died at the scene. Apparently, two Guardsmen collapsed during the incident and were sent to a nearby hospital in Ravenna. Hospital officials reported that the two men were “suffering from shock apparently brought about by the battle with the students.” Nevertheless, the impression that Guardsmen died at Kent State persists. In the midst of an informal discussion with a family member about the focus of this research, the author was told that “none of that bad stuff would have happened at Kent State if those students hadn’t killed some Guardsmen.” The revelation that no Guardsmen died at Kent was met with shock and disbelief. This conversation took place in February of 1999, nearly thirty years after the shootings.

Kent State journalism student Bill Armstrong contends that this errant report from a trusted daily newspaper like the *Record-Courier*, combined with the collapse of the Kent phone system after the shootings, set a bad precedent.⁶³ The myth of dead Guardsmen on campus contributed to a degeneration of the already poor relations between town and gown. It also fueled the rumor mill and further widened the gulf between students and their elders, not only in Kent, but also around the nation. Once the accounts make the headlines, corrections or retractions do not change the perceptions triggered by the initial stories. As the saying goes, “accusations are page one while retractions are page eight.”

One of the more prevalent accusations in early accounts was the suspicion that a sniper triggered the firing of the Guard. As noted previously, the sniper theory served as one of the primary defenses on the part of the Guardsmen themselves. The initial newspaper reports from the scene mentioned that a search was underway “for a female sniper who is said to have started the shooting at Kent.”⁶⁴ Despite the fact that the official investigations of the shootings by the FBI, Ohio Highway Patrol and the Scranton Commission found no evidence of sniper activity, the rumor persisted. Other unsubstantiated statements endured as well, such as claims of armed students stoned out of their minds on illegal substances, finding their way into the popular discussion where they remain to the present day. An *Associated Press* release, dated May 15, 1970, added

⁶³The phone system collapsed due to attempts by students to contact parents and vice-versa. While such a shutdown seems understandable in hindsight, it fed the appetite for rumor and conspiracy. Many students believed that the government had shut down the system in an attempt to isolate them, possibly in anticipation of a major military crackdown. Citizens of Kent saw the collapse as a sign that radicals were preparing to overrun the city. More importantly, the failed phone system prevented accurate reports from on-site journalists from reaching their editors. A simple technological glitch thus became another cause of fear and confusion.

⁶⁴*Kent-Ravenna Record-Courier*, 4 May 1970. This statement was part of the story that replaced the initial May 4 account in earlier editions that included the erroneous headline picked up by the Associated Press.

fuel to the fire that student radicals possibly brought the shootings on themselves. This press release ran in numerous newspapers around the nation, including the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times*. The report stated that a search of 3,316 dorm rooms on campus after the campus closed after the shootings “turned up a shotgun, a damaged pistol and many knives.” The unnamed author of the story then mentioned the accusation of sniper fire before the Guard’s volley, but stated “it has not been determined whether the four [slain students] played any role in the protest.” Portage County prosecutor Ronald Kane displayed the items to reporters, stating that the items were removed from dorm rooms by Ohio Highway Patrol, arguing, “the facts will speak for themselves,” a misguided statement to say the least. The exhibit included “a .20-gauge single shot shotgun and a damaged weapon described as a .25-caliber pistol, scores of knives ranging from machetes to penknives, five air pistols, four slingshots, [and] 10 blank-firing starters’ pistols.” Adding to the intrigue of the search, Kane also displayed “five marijuana plants growing in pint-size milk cartons and a laundry bag containing pornographic pictures.” In addition to the pot and porn, officials discovered “quantities of pills and capsules . . . that ranged from hallucinogens to vitamin pills and antibiotics.” They also found “a baton twirler’s torch baton and carrying case, a bottle labeled benzine, the burned-out stubs of a highway flare, and a rock wrapped in red cloth.” While the confiscated items sound like the typical findings of any university dorm search of the time, Kane presented the items as something greater. “It appears to me,” he stated, “that some of the students were obviously not here to get an education.”⁶⁵

Stories like the May 15 Associated Press report fed the impressions that the Kent shootings resulted from an attack led by drug-crazed, armed student radicals. Such newspaper accounts, presented in the muddled aftermath of a confusing incident, helped

⁶⁵*Associated Press Release*, 15 May 1970; quoted in Ottavio M. Casale and Louis Paskoff, editors, *The Kent Affair: Documents and Interpretations* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1971), 31. Hereafter cited as *The Kent Affair*.

solidify conclusions in the minds of many uninformed readers. The predisposition of the reader, combined with erroneous information, often creates an impression that fails to change despite corrected reports and new evidence. Newspaper accounts of the time provided the foundation and framework upon which all succeeding reports begin, including televised stories on the various anniversaries of the shootings since 1970.⁶⁶

Of the newspapers covering the incident, only one major publication, the *Akron Beacon Journal*, got the basic information about the dead and wounded correct from the outset. In the days following the shootings, the *Beacon Journal* had twenty-seven journalists on the story.⁶⁷ Jeff Sallot, one of the Akron reporters on the scene to cover the incident and its aftermath and who later served as one of James Michener's researchers for his 1971 book, remembers the Kent State shootings as one of his hardest assignments as a reporter. Although he later covered the genocide of Rwanda and the rise of nationalist movements in Russia, the Kent shootings stand out. In a sense, Sallot believes that his experience on May 4 helped equip him to deal with the "disinformation" he encountered in Rwanda and the former Soviet Union. "It was hard to separate personal emotion from professional duty to be a witness [to the May 4 shootings]," Sallot recalls. Journalists have an obligation to be witnesses "almost in a biblical sense" and to "report it [the incidents] accurately." This is a difficult proposition to uphold under ordinary condition, much more a chaotic situation like May 4. Sallot contends that the Guardsmen fired at the students "in anger," but he points out that he came to this conclusion after the

⁶⁶For an overview of newspaper editorials and follow-up stories following the shootings, see Casale and Paskoff, eds., *The Kent Affair*, 47-83.

⁶⁷Albert Fitzpatrick, Retired Assistant Vice President for Minority Affairs, Knight-Ridder, Incorporated, "Legacies of Protest: Covering May 4th: Journalistic Reflections," a panel discussion on the 25th Anniversary of the Kent State Shootings, Kent, Ohio, 2 May 1995, videocassette, Kent May 4 Archive, Kent State University Library, Kent, Ohio. Hereafter cited as "Covering May 4th videocassette." The *Akron Beacon-Journal* won a Pulitzer Prize for its coverage of May 4 and its aftermath in 1971.

fact. Sent to Kent State to cover the noon rally, he believed the story was over when he saw the Guard disperse the crowd over Blanket Hill past Taylor Hall. Because he had a deadline to meet, Sallot slipped inside a campus building to call his editor when the shootings occurred. Fortunately, he stayed on the phone line as the chaos subsided, allowing him to get the story right, or at least as right as an account can be in such a tumultuous environment. “No story is any good unless you can get it out,” Sallot states.⁶⁸

The *Akron (Ohio) Beacon-Journal* remained the primary newspaper of record in the days immediately following the shootings. The paper’s attempts to report the facts of the case while sorting through the rampant rumors of the incident resulted in excellent coverage with minimal errors. At the same time, many of the paper’s readers disliked the coverage given by the *Beacon-Journal*’s reporters, accusing the paper of supporting the students and filing inaccurate reports. Newspapers around the nation that attempted to withhold judgment until the facts were known found themselves targets of verbal gunfire from both right and left. Such unthinking reactions to a tragic incident reveal the incessant human need to pass judgment despite lack of information. Frequently, the letter writers interpret the shootings within their existing worldview, jettisoning any notion that undermines or contradicts that predisposition. The polarized responses to the shootings reflected the divisions within the United States at the time. Law and order advocates believed that the students brought the tragedy upon themselves while antiwar activists and civil libertarians saw the shootings as another example of governmental oppression. With few exceptions, a survey of letters to the editor from the newspapers of Akron, Cleveland and Kent-Ravenna in the days and months following the shootings reveals that most of the writers supported the National Guard rather than the students.⁶⁹

⁶⁸Jeff Sallot, Former reporter for the *Akron (Ohio) Beacon-Journal*, now a Diplomatic Correspondent for *Globe and Mail* (Canada), “Covering May 4th.”

⁶⁹*Akron (Ohio) Beacon Journal*, 5 May-31 December 1970; *Cleveland (Ohio) Plain-Dealer*, 5 May-31 December 1970; *Kent-Ravenna (Ohio) Record-Courier* 5 May-

Not only newspapers received a torrent of letters. Governor Rhodes's office received more mail over May 4 than any other issue of his first eight years. Rhodes's chief aide John McElroy claimed that the governor received about 6,000 letters after the shootings. According to McElroy, 85 percent of the writers believed that the National Guard acted in a proper fashion, and a majority of those stated that the Guard should have shot more. The Ohio National Guard claimed that they received 7,000 letters commending the Guard and 433 notes that disapproved of their actions. According to General Del Corso, the Kent State incident generated the heaviest amount of mail to the Ohio National Guard in its history. KSU President White's office received more than 5,000 letters about May 4 by the end of 1970. The letters span the spectrum of public opinion, with a considerable number of writers condemning the shootings and the reaction of university administration to the incident. Some writers proposed wild conspiracy theories that tied the shootings to everyone from the Roman Catholic Church to the world's Jewish population.⁷⁰

The *Akron (Ohio) Beacon Journal* ran a story on May 24, 1970 entitled "Kent State: The Search for Understanding" that attempted to bring together the evidence that existed at that point. Amazingly, the details of the article stood up to the scrutiny brought on by the accounts that emerged during the criminal and civil trials of the next ten years. The story stated that the shootings represented "a study in escalation" with "a governor who reacted to confrontation with heat instead of light. These elements made the Kent shootings unique among other college disruptions of the time. At the same time, the factors that ended in tragedy at Kent were "widespread in America," including large-scale student resentment of the Vietnam War, a well-meaning but aloof university administration, suspicious townspeople, a small band of "young radicals who have given

31 December 1970. For a sampling of letters to these newspapers among others, see Casale and Paskoff, eds. *The Kent Affair*, 95-115.

⁷⁰Casale and Paskoff, eds., *The Kent Affair*, 91-95.

up on peaceful dissent,” and a National Guard devoid of proper leadership and psychological training. All of these factors culminated in “a situation in which two boys and two girls are killed, all before they grew old enough to even vote.”⁷¹ The writers of this story also listed the evidence of the case as known at that point. They reached these conclusions after compiling items culled from over 400 students, Guardsmen, public officials and Kent citizens, as well as photographs and official reports. “The evidence they [the reporters] found prompts these conclusions:

The four victims did nothing that justified their deaths. They threw no rocks nor were they politically radical. No sniper fired at the National Guard. No investigative agency has yet found any evidence to support such a theory. The guardsmen fired without orders to do so. Some aimed deliberately at students; others fired in panic or in follow-the-leader style. It was not necessary to kill or wound any students. The Guardsmen had several other options which they did not exercise, including firing warning shots or marching safely away. There is no evidence to support suggestions by university and city officials that four members of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) planned and directed the trouble. No reasonable excuse could be found for three violent and illegal acts by the students—breaking downtown department store windows, burning the university ROTC building and throwing rocks at the Guardsmen before the shooting. All these created turmoil and ill feeling.⁷²

What makes the *Beacon Journal* story all the more impressive is that the conclusions drawn by the study only two weeks after the shootings mirrored the findings of the official investigations and studies of the next decade. The storywriters determined that there was no sniper, the Guard leadership failed to handle the situation appropriately, and that rumors undermined the perceptions of the general public. The fact that a major newspaper filed such a report and reached such conclusions less than a month after the shootings represents

⁷¹“Kent State: The Search for Understanding,” *Akron (Ohio) Beacon Journal*, 24 May 1970.

⁷²Ibid.

investigative journalism as its finest. At the same time, the fact that additional investigations, books, and studies of May 4 over the past three decades have unveiled no evidence to counter this initial story is both an amazing and disturbing fact.

In the weeks following the shootings, national periodicals filed reports on the incident. Unlike daily newspapers, the weekly publications sifted through the rumors and accusations before publishing their accounts. Another important difference among the newsweeklies was their attempts to place the Kent State incident within a broader national context. In this sense, periodical coverage of May 4 focused on how the shootings mirrored existing cultural fissures and debates over youth culture and more importantly, the divisive nature of the war in Vietnam.⁷³ Not only did the stories present the background and known evidence of May 4, several periodicals conducted polls and surveys in an attempt to gauge the public perception of what happened at Kent State. The most famous poll appeared in the May 25, 1970 issue of *Newsweek* and its findings demonstrated the disparate views among the public at large. Writers presented the findings of a Gallup Poll taken on May 13-14 that revealed 58 percent of those surveyed saw the students as bearing the primary responsibility for the shootings. On the opposite end, only 11 percent of those persons surveyed placed any blame on the Guardsmen and a surprising 31 percent had no opinion.⁷⁴ These findings give an element of credence to William Gordon's assertion that the Kent State shootings "were the most popular murders

⁷³For samples of national news weekly coverage in the weeks following the shootings, see *Newsweek*, 18 May 1970 and 25 May 1970; *Life*, 15 May 1970; *Time*, 18 May 1970; and *U.S. News and World Report*, 18 May 1970.

⁷⁴*Newsweek*, 25 May 1970. The Gallup pollsters noted the high number of "no opinion" responses. They explained that such a large percentage suggested "the no opinion column might harbor some people with qualms about the guard's behavior who were reluctant to say so outright. It also seems likely that some of those polled were suspending judgment about who was most to blame until the conflicting accounts of the shooting could be cleared up."

ever committed in the United States.”⁷⁵ Add to these findings the best-selling, albeit fatally flawed Michener book, and the unresolved questions that remained after the criminal and civil trials, and the primary written accounts of Kent State through the years leave the matter open to wide variances of interpretation. It is unlikely that a single study or account will ever serve as the accepted version of events, especially with so many parts of the puzzle still missing after more than three decades.

As this overview indicates, the Kent State shootings aroused emotions that went beyond the scope of evidence. A tragic event surrounded by unanswered questions stoked existing sentiments, creating a historical incident that became symbol. Those persons who lived when May 4 occurred remember the anger and turmoil aroused by thirteen seconds of gunfire. Observers interpreted the shootings within their various socio-political worldviews, bringing the weight of previous experiences and perceptions to bear on their attitudes. More than a few Depression-era Americans tended to see the incident as another example of a society out of control, led by un-American radicals who seemed bent on destroying the very society they claimed to defend. Many baby boomers, particularly those within the ranks of political activism, saw Kent State as another example of failed American ideals, sabotaged by imperialism and greed. The same forces that laid waste to Vietnam now turned their guns on American citizens on American soil. The war “had come home” in the eyes of many young activists.⁷⁶ The confusion surrounding the shootings made journalistic coverage a difficult task, leading to erroneous reports that further shrouded the causes and results of May 4. Frequently, observers interpreted what happened at Kent that warm spring afternoon as confirmation

⁷⁵*Newsweek*, 18 May 1970; Gordon, *Four Dead in Ohio*, 19.

⁷⁶For examples of how Kent State symbolized the spread of American imperialism to the homefront in the eyes of some student activists, see Adam Garfinkle, *Telltale Hearts: The Origins and Impact of the Vietnam Antiwar Movement* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995) and Tom Wells, *The War Within: America's Battle Over Vietnam* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1994).

of their pre-existing attitudes about what was happening in America. Kent State became a symbol of an era, and those who remember it all regard it as such, even if they disagree on what that symbol represents. Unanswered questions, a lack of accountability and responsibility from the parties involved in the shootings, and a sense of incompleteness helped shape the Kent State shootings not only for those who lived through it, but also for the generations who came after them. These elements merge most visibly when newspapers, newsweeklies, and television producers present memorial stories on the anniversary of May 4.

The post-Baby Boomer generations, particularly those persons who were either too young to remember Kent State or were born after the tragedy, learned about the incident through different channels. By the 1970s, television and other visual media served as the predominant purveyors of cultural memory. Television news served as the first line of information dispersion, a role that grew exponentially with the advent of news magazine shows like *60 Minutes* and *20/20* as the decade progressed. If May 4 seemed like a confusing event subject to divergent interpretations to those who lived through the time, how would it be disseminated and understood by those who learned of it through secondary, frequently extra-literate, sources? Television journalism, documentary film, and docudrama serve as the vessels of information distribution and popular historical understanding, particularly for those individuals who do not remember May 4. Popular perception of the Kent State tragedy cannot make sense without an understanding of how mass media, especially powerful visual media like television and film, present and interpret May 4 to succeeding generations.

On the eve of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the shootings in 1995, the *Daily Kent Stater* reported on a new survey of students conducted by the Psychology Department. The survey of more than 500 KSU students attempted to compare and contrast student opinions in 1995 with those of KSU students in 1970. Forty-nine percent

of the students in 1995 believed that the National Guard committed murder, as compared to forty percent in 1970. Stuart Taylor, professor of psychology, noted the surveyors “found that students’ perception of the May 4 shooting depends on their political bias, but not as much as it used to be in the 1970s.” Even students who considered themselves conservative politically had opinions that varied widely, both in 1970 and in 1995. The key element in perspective in 1970 was where the student was when the shootings occurred. “If a conservative student was sitting in class or at home watching the incident on television, they thought the guard was justified in shooting,” Taylor said. “If you look at the conservatives present at the protests, that opinion shifts dramatically.” When one Kent State student was asked about the May 4 shootings in 1995, she told a reporter that she believed the Guard was guilty of murder, but that “they were acting on orders from the government” and “were just doing what they were told.” The student offers no insight into which government official gave the order to fire or why such an order occurred. An event like May 4 is “hard for us as students to understand” because they were not there when it happened. “The students then had a better opinion because they observed what was happening first hand. Now we’re just looking at what we’ve been told.” Another student made a similar observation, stating that “most students now don’t know how to deal with what happened, and we blame who they tell us to blame.”⁷⁷ Little do these students know that even those who “were there” cannot agree on what happened and why it happened as it did.

Observers today are just “looking at what we’ve been told” and blaming “who they tell us to blame.” These innocent statements from the mouths of two Kent State students in 1995 demonstrate how human beings come to process and accept the details and ramifications of an important historical event. They claim not to understand what happened and contend that they are just saying what they have been told to say.

⁷⁷*Daily Kent Stater*, 3 May 1995.

Evidence plays little influence in shaping their opinions. Still, they speak openly and emotionally about the shootings. As historian and documentary filmmaker Peter Rollins notes, “it is minds like these that are Silly Putty in the hands of a filmmaker.”⁷⁸

⁷⁸Peter C. Rollins, interview by author, 3 May 1998.

Chapter III

Television Journalism and the Kent State Shootings

More people in America get the news from an individual network news reporter than from any other one source. All of us, in both networks and stations, must see with complete clarity the urgency of this information-disseminating function, and come to an unqualified determination to do the job.¹

Increasingly, it would appear, the quality of the information in the news stories is of less importance than the dramatic impact of the stories and the performances of the news anchors and the few star (or “bigfoot”) correspondents whose faces and voices appear with regularity during the newscast. The messenger, not the message becomes the news.²

In his book *Television Myth and the American Mind*, Hal Himmelstein describes the current state of television journalism. Before any discussion of television news and its role in shaping public perception of an event, one must first find a working definition of “news.” Himmelstein cites Gaye Tuchman’s definition that “news is what the television news department covers and airs on a given day.”³ While this definition fails to satisfy the more critical observer, it says a lot about the difficulties surrounding the constructing of important information into news presentation form. Moreover, television journalism entails more than a presentation of “the story.” Numerous other factors come

¹Frank Stanton, “The Critical Necessity for an Informed Public,” *The Journal of Broadcasting*, II (1957), 195; quoted in Alfred W. Owens, II, *A Correlation Between the News Reports by WJW-TV and the Scranton Commission Report of the Events at Kent State, May 1-5, 1970*, (M.A. Thesis, Kent State University, 1971), 2. Hereafter cited as Owens, *News Reports*.

²Hal Himmelstein, *Television Myth and the American Mind* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994), 249. Hereafter cited as Himmelstein, *Television Myth*.

³Ibid, 247.

into play, including framing of the story, presentation of the information, and the journalists themselves. The journalist becomes, more times than not, the focus of the story. Combine the emphasis upon the reporter with the inherent, frequently subconscious, biases of the reporter and/or story editor, and the news story becomes more than just a report of “what happened.” Even though the Federal Communications Commission states that the primary function of American broadcasting is “the right of the public to be informed,” the standards of surrounding the dissemination and sharing of that information consist of multiple, often contradictory, layers. The definition of news continues to change, influenced by the conflicting messages of popular philosophy. If two people cannot agree on the meaning of “reality,” how is it possible to present information of value to the viewing public? This dilemma falls prey to the criticism leveled often at historians, that “winners write the history books.” One could say just as easily that those groups and persons in power within news organizations decide what is of value and what falls within the definition of news. Failure to consider bias, be it conscious or subconscious, combined with the inadequacies of instant information and the power of the image, makes dissection of television news a problematic and frustrating task.

Visual accounts of an incident require the same, if not more, scrutiny as written sources. Just because a source includes the additional complications of audio-visual elements does not mean that it is not also a text. As media theorist Douglas Kellner contends, “media cultural texts are neither merely vehicles of a dominant ideology, nor pure and innocent entertainment.” He observes that media texts are not monolithic in their messages. “Rather, they are complex artifacts that embody social and political

discourses whose analysis and interpretation require methods of reading and critique that articulate their embeddedness in the political economy, social relations, and the political environment within which they are produced, circulated, and received.”⁴

The complex relationship between artifact and viewer contains a menagerie of factors that demand careful analysis to all scholars of media culture. Consideration of bias, limitations of source material, and framing (i.e. how a story is crafted before presentation, including the editing process) make dissection of visual media a complicated, often frustrating, process. Media culture defies uniformity due to its highly complex nature and the multiplicity of responses it engenders among those who consume its products. While some consensus exists, there are always multiple interpretations of an event due to individual media accounts of that event.⁵ While some will argue that all sources of information regardless of mode contain this problematic variable, visual media operates on a more complicated level because it *is* visual, adding the important elements of sight and sound to the account. Television in particular gives viewers the sense of “being there,” as if they are experiencing an event firsthand. All too often, viewers fail to comprehend the manipulative audio-visual factors, intentional and unintentional, swirling about them as they watch a news report. Failure to consider potential bias, oversimplification, or incomplete/erroneous information adds further complications to the viewed/viewer relationship. Television accounts of any event are limited to what the

⁴Kellner, *Media Culture*, 4.

⁵Radio faces difficulties similar to visual media, and attempt to present an event, often as it is happening, make the reports important to shaping perception. The KSU campus radio station, WKSU, remained on the air before, during, and after the tragedy. For a discussion of radio, particularly WKSU, and the Kent State shootings, see Paul W. Gregor, “Media Coverage of Events at Kent State University in May of 1970: An Oral History with Dr. John C. Weiser” (M.A. Thesis, Kent State University, 1995).

camera can reveal and what the editor deems important, frequently resulting in an incomplete, stylized, and trivialized presentation that convolutes as much as it informs.

The changing nature of national network news programming around the time of the Kent State shootings also demands consideration. All three major networks expanded their news divisions after President Lyndon Johnson began sending American troops to Southeast Asia in 1965, with each network spending more than \$1 million dollars per year on war coverage alone by 1967.⁶ This increase in network funding of their news divisions paralleled the expansion of evening news broadcasts from fifteen to thirty minutes, a change initiated by both CBS and NBC in 1963 with ABC following suit in 1967. Criticism of television news coverage of the Vietnam War remains a cottage industry to this day, but considering the technological limitations of the era and the position of news divisions as the “underfunded stepchildren” of the networks, the news presentations could have been much worse. The effects of television news coverage of events cannot be overestimated, particularly since by the time of Kent State in 1970, a majority of Americans got most of their information on world events from television.⁷

Television news provides scholars with what one observer calls the “first audiovisual rough drafts of history.”⁸ These audiovisual rough drafts are replete with

⁶Chester J. Pach, Jr., “And That’s the Way It Was: The Vietnam War on the Network Nightly News,” in *The Sixties: From Memory to History*, ed. David Farber (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 92. Hereafter cited as Pach, “Network Nightly News.”

⁷Ibid, 111.

⁸Philip M. Taylor, “Television: The First Flawed Rough Drafts of History,” in *Television Histories: Shaping Collective Memory in the Media Age*, ed. Gary R. Edgerton and Peter C. Rollins (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 247. Hereafter cited as Taylor, “Rough Drafts.”

numerous difficulties when considered as primary source materials. The primary factor that mitigates much of the problem with television news stems from “industrialized pressures that militate against the creation of an accurate window on the world.”⁹ Westerners, and Americans in particular, derive their worldview, albeit unconsciously, through “a liberal western tradition whereby certain standards in news dissemination have come to be expected—impartiality, accuracy, reliability, and truthfulness.”¹⁰ The problem with this assumption is that most of our understanding about world events lies outside of our direct experience, making us dependent on newsgathering organizations to provide us with perspective and understanding. Yet newsgathering agencies, faced with the growing expenses of reporting, “operate according to financial, technological, and corporate constraints.” Because the dispatching of reporters to a scene demands serious financial considerations, news agencies must weigh the “significance and relevance of the story for the home audience” when making such decisions.¹¹

Once in place, reporters require access to the scene and adequate visuals to present a story. Scenes of confrontation and crisis, particularly wars abroad and unrest at home, become the primary focus of much news reporting. The problem of the medium itself, with its many inherent limitations, further complicates the process. Television reporting of an incident “is merely an audiovisual representation of that reality, which by its very nature is a mediated version of events.” In this sense, the ghost of Marshall McLuhan, with his mantra of “the medium is the message,” certainly comes to mind.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid, 248.

¹¹Ibid.

Time constraints also play an important role in how a story becomes news. The limited time given to any one news story in an evening broadcast (usually three minutes or less) prevents adequate presentation of the complexity that lies behind any one event. This was the case particularly in the days before “around the clock” cable news networks and news magazine programs that changed the nature of news programming during the 1980s. Most incidents do not become news unless some type of conflict erupts, often replete with violent confrontations. Events may only become “newsworthy” if a news agency has a reporter on the scene. Philip Taylor argues that “whereas analysts of news coverage once used to talk about ‘bad news’ being the principal criterion of newsworthiness, now they talk about the ‘dumbing down’ of the news.”¹² Lack of context, oversimplification, and a tendency to go for stories that “capture the public imagination” or elicit an emotional reaction rather than reflect important international and national developments makes the use of television news reports as historical documents a very difficult task. Still, the limitations of a source do not imply uselessness. Every source, both primary and secondary, comes with a large amount of baggage that must be considered. Visual media sources are no different in that regard, but they come with their own set of criteria.

Another question that demands consideration is not only what “newsworthy” information is reported on network newscasts, but also how the audience responds to what is presented. This factor is a much more problematic task. One researcher of television journalism of the 1960s era notes that “studies have revealed that most viewers have trouble remembering anything from news programs they just finished watching.”

¹²Ibid, 250.

Why is this characteristic so prevalent among the inhabitants of TV land? “Perhaps it is because, as one scholar has observed, television ‘is designed to be watched intermittently, casually, and without full concentration. Only the commercials command and dazzle.’”¹³ Television news coverage, like the medium itself, is a buffet where each viewer moves from one entree to another, compiling a meal that suits his or her preference. Conversely, if one is that rare viewer who watches a program or report intently, the meaning derived from the process is channeled through the filters of individual values and attitudes. Understanding arises from one’s own conceptions of reality and context. Nevertheless, “images do have powerful effects, however much the reaction varies among individual viewers.”¹⁴ The Kent State shootings, laden with visual images, reveal the powerful influence of audiovisual media in shaping popular perceptions and historical understanding.

If the processes of deciding what information qualifies as news and how the nature of the medium itself affects viewers create numerous complications, presenting a chaotic event like the Kent State shootings becomes an even greater challenge. As discussed in previous chapters, the details surrounding May 4 are riddled with inconsistencies, incomplete information, and contradictory accounts. If print journalists, despite concerted efforts to dissipate the haze of May 4, failed to get the story “right,” how would television journalists fare in their attempts to report the tragedy? No national television network journalist witnessed the shootings firsthand. While a torrent of national news personnel flooded Kent after the incident occurred, their reports often

¹³Pach, “Network Nightly News,” 111-112.

¹⁴Ibid, 112.

reflected the confusion and contradictions of the shootings, placing their information within the same problematic context as their print counterparts. Despite the various court trials of the 1970s, many questions surrounding the shootings remained (and remain) unanswered and new questions arose, making understanding of the Kent State incident an even more challenging proposition. At the same time, the more distant the shootings became in the popular consciousness, the greater the tendency to skirt over the numerous complexities of the tragedy. As coverage of the shootings on the various anniversaries demonstrates, television news presentation of May 4 in the ensuing decades continues this challenging presentation trend. Many of the same questions remain firmly entrenched in accounts of the Kent State shootings, although specific perspectives and assertions once recognized as problematic and questionable are now presented as legitimate “facts.”¹⁵

Some of this trend arises from factors of time and distance. As an event becomes more distant in the public mind, accounts and memories change and fade, blurring the distinction between rumor and allegation on the one hand and information supported by tangible evidence on the other. The chaotic event known as May 4 becomes a textbook example of the conflict and consensus inherent to popular historical understanding. The Kent State shootings stand at the point where memory and history intersect, and it is an intersection crowded with the tools of visual media, particularly television. How did the

¹⁵This problem is not limited to visual media accounts. Jerry M. Lewis and Thomas R. Hensley have documented countless errors in American history high school and college textbooks as well. The mistakes range from the number of wounded and killed to inaccurate representations of why Governor James Rhodes sent the Guard to campus. See Thomas R. Hensley and Jerry M. Lewis, “The May 4th Shootings at Kent State University: The Search for Historical Accuracy,” in *Kent State and May 4th: A Social Science Perspective*, Second Edition, ed. Thomas R. Hensley and Jerry M. Lewis (Dubuque, IA: Kendall /Hunt Publishing Co., 2000), 51-59.

television coverage of May 4 in its immediate aftermath influence later interpretations? How are televised accounts of May 4 in the decades that followed the tragedy similar and how are they different from the initial reports? Finally, how have television news stories of Kent State helped influence popular historical understanding of the tragedy? The conclusions discovered support the view of the editor of the *Akron Beacon Journal* in 1971 on the first anniversary of the shootings. When discussing the unanswered questions surrounding the shootings, problems amplified by journalistic coverage, he observed that “Kent State’s story has not ‘two sides’ but thousands.”¹⁶

Part of the difficulty arises from the lack of national news correspondents on the scene at the time of the shootings. Only CBS correspondent Ike Pappas was on campus when the gunfire occurred. Even then, Pappas was on the other side of Blanket Hill in the Commons area; both he and his cameraman overwhelmed by the tear gas fired at the student throng by National Guardsmen. Still, his accounts of that day’s events and the immediate aftermath of the shootings provide the foundation of national news coverage of Kent State. Pappas’s experiences and reports for a national news audience form a central focus of this section. Following an overview and examination of the coverage by CBS on May 4 and May 5, 1970, this section discusses the content and analysis of a sampling of television news programs and their coverage of the Kent State shootings since 1970.

Ike Pappas served as a correspondent for CBS News during the 1960s and 1970s, reporting firsthand many of that era’s more memorable events. Pappas started his storied career with United Press International while a student at Long Island University. After

¹⁶Quoted in D. Ray Heisey, “Sensitivity to an Image,” in Bills, *Kent State/May 4*, 196.

World War II, he joined WNEW-Radio News in New York after working as a *Stars and Stripes* correspondent in Germany while serving in the Army. At WNEW, he provided the dramatic coverage of the murder of alleged assassin Lee Harvey Oswald by Jack Ruby in Dallas, Texas in November 1963. Standing only inches from Ruby and Oswald at the time of the shooting, Pappas' account has become one of the most famous broadcasts in the history of American broadcast journalism. Pappas garnered a reputation as a tough, "no-nonsense" reporter willing to report from dangerous situations. He gave firsthand accounts of the pursuit of Cuban communist leader Che Guevara in Bolivia, the terrorist bombing of La Guardia Airport and the Seven Days War in 1967. Based in Chicago, the network frequently dispatched Pappas to newsworthy spots throughout the Midwestern United States. One such location was Kent State University on the first weekend of May 1970.¹⁷

Pappas recounts receiving a phone call from CBS news bosses in the Chicago bureau on the morning of Sunday, May 3. News of the ROTC fire and the arrival of the National Guard made Kent a hot spot on the national scene, and since Pappas was in Chicago, he was sent to cover the story. Being the only reporter available at the time, Pappas characterized the trip to Kent as a "roll of the dice." Following on the heels of the weekend unrest, CBS bureau chiefs viewed the scheduled noon rally of May 4 as a potentially newsworthy story. Arriving on the evening of May 3 with free-lance camera operator Luther Joseph, Pappas witnessed firsthand the confrontations between students and Guardsmen that capped a weekend of unrest. As stated previously, Pappas was the only reporter from a national news network on the scene the day of May 4. His report of

¹⁷"Ike Pappas," *Barber & Associates*, www.barberusa.com/media/pappas_ike.html. Accessed 20 July 2002.

the rally came from what Pappas called a “narrow aspect,” rife with limitations of perspective. Pappas and Joseph arrived on campus before the scheduled noon rally. As students began gathering on the Commons, Pappas recalled that most of the rally “participants” were little more than spectators and passers-by, many of them students roaming about between classes.

Pappas contended that, despite the volatility of the situation, he heard no statements about the Guard possessing live ammunition. “Hardly ever is live ammunition used [in such a situation],” Pappas stated. He never even gave the consideration “a passing thought.”¹⁸ After the bullhorn announcement ordering the students to disperse failed, the Guardsmen strapped on their gas masks, unsheathed their bayonets, and began launching a barrage of tear gas on the crowd. As the Guard moved forward toward the students, Pappas realized, in classic journalistic lingo, that “we have an event here.”¹⁹ Rather than following the Guard as they pushed the students over the crest of Blanket Hill, Pappas went into a nearby building to phone his bureau chiefs in Chicago. The phone call took considerable time as Pappas described the situation at hand. Just as he exited the building, he heard the gunfire from over the hill. Convinced that the shots were nothing more than blanks, Pappas raced over to his camera operator Joseph, who was still standing in the Commons area. When Pappas asked him what had happened on the other side of Taylor Hall, Joseph stated that he was not sure. The aging camera operator had been overcome with tear gas and could not make it over the hill to the scene

¹⁸“Covering May 4th,” videocassette, Kent May 4 Archive, Kent State University Library, Kent, Ohio.

¹⁹Ibid.

of the incident. Thus, the sole national news crew on the scene at the time of the Kent shootings was unable to witness, much less film, the shootings themselves.²⁰

Pappas and Joseph managed to report on the prelude and the aftermath, complete with footage. Unfortunately, Joseph's inability to be over the hill due to the tear gas meant that CBS missed the chance to be the only national news network to film the tragedy. "We got the aftermath," Pappas recalled, "but not at the moment" as they had to wait until Joseph recovered enough to begin filming again. The crew managed to record the scenes of shock and anger that followed the shootings, including the return of the Guard to their positions near the burned out ROTC building, the confrontation between the Guard, faculty marshals, and the eventual dispersal of the crowd. Even then, they had to scramble in order to get the story together for that night's CBS news broadcast. That evening's report from Pappas did not include the footage of the shootings that Joseph managed to film, albeit from the other side of the hill. The footage itself was not broadcast until the May 5 newscast.

The Pappas report from Kent State set the tone for other national news coverage of the incident. Since CBS was the only national network with a correspondent on the scene when the shootings occurred, it follows that both NBC and ABC failed to address the building tensions in Kent with the same level of interest. This decision reaped important dividends for both Pappas and CBS, allowing them to present the first "on the scene" reports from the campus after the shootings occurred. An overview and analysis of Pappas' reports from Kent on May 4 and May 5 provide a glimpse into how CBS presented the story to its audience. These reports also provide insight into how the initial

²⁰Ibid.

presentation of an incident, including incorrect and unconfirmed information, exerts a powerful influence on how that event is interpreted over time.

The CBS report from campus that day showed the chaos at the scene, beginning with the initial confrontation between the students and the Guard. CBS anchor Walter Cronkite began his newscast that evening with the shootings at Kent State. His introduction of Pappas' story sets the tone. "Good Evening. Four students at Kent State University in Ohio are dead, two of them coeds. They were shot during protests against the American presence in Cambodia. Ike Pappas reports."²¹ Cronkite's opening provides some idea of what was to follow. His characterization of the noon protest as a rally "against the American presence in Cambodia" is an incomplete explanation of why the students had gathered on the Commons that day. While the Cambodian incursion served as the impetus for the initial rally the previous Friday, by the time the Monday gathering happened, students were as motivated by the presence of the Guard as they were driven by anger over the military operations in Cambodia. This view of the rally remains a common misconception to the present day, failing to account for the layers of purpose behind the protests of May 4.²²

As footage of students ringing the Victory Bell in the Commons rolls, Pappas' distinctive baritone voice described the scene. "A bell on the campus commons called students together again today for another rally. It should have been a warning signal for

²¹"*CBS Evening News* for Monday, May 04, 1970," Vanderbilt Television News Archive, videotape. Hereafter cited as *CBS Evening News*, May 4, 1970, Vanderbilt; "From the *CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite*, May 4, 1970," in Casale and Paskoff, 11.

²²Jerry M. Lewis, Emeritus Professor of Sociology, Kent State University, interview by author, 28 January 1999; Wischmann, "Four Dead in Ohio," 32-33.

what was to follow. After two days of rioting over ROTC and Cambodia, the university had banned rallies and the National Guard stood by to enforce the ban.”

The beginning of Pappas’ account reveals several interesting points. Building upon Cronkite’s opening statement, he begins with dramatic, foreboding words that harkened back to Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, coupled with the visual imagery of students ringing the bell. The dramatic effect is inescapable, particularly when one knows what is to follow. It is then that the first problems of detail and context arise. Pappas characterizes Kent State as a campus racked by “two days of rioting over ROTC and Cambodia.” This statement is incomplete at best. As presented earlier, the student protests over the weekend stemmed from multiple causes, the Cambodian Incursion being only one of them. Yet the Water Street vandalism of the previous Friday evening arose more from the bars closing early than from any political objective. Some protesters made the actions into political statements, but its origin was not political at all. At the same time, the student actions of that weekend, including the burning of the ROTC building, would hardly qualify as “rioting” to viewers familiar with more rowdy confrontations. When compared to other examples of student protest at places like Berkeley and Columbia, or even the Music and Speech Building confrontations at Kent in the spring of 1969, the actions of that weekend were hardly riotous. Still, in the view of many Kent citizens at the time, as well as the Guard leadership, the burning of ROTC represented what could be the beginning of larger, more violent actions. Still, Pappas reported the information as it was presented to him at the time—the mark of a good correspondent. Unfortunately, these representations left an indelible mark on public perception of what happened at Kent State.

Pappas' statement about the banning of all campus rallies also leaves the viewer with an incomplete account of the confusion surrounding the assembly ban among Kent State students. While it is true that the Guard "stood by to enforce the ban," that was not their primary reason for being on campus and as presented in previous chapters, the decision to disband all rallies arose from its own set of confusing circumstances. Thus, the opening statements of the Pappas report fail to set the context of the scene accurately. Granted, Pappas could only report the information given to him at the time. While it is true that such omissions arise from the nature of news reporting and its need to condense information into manageable portions, it is also valid to contend that an incomplete account of the origins of the shootings contributes to greater misunderstandings of what is to follow.

The film footage then shifts to the Guard's attempts to disperse the students via bullhorn announcements and the reading of the Riot Act. In an example of rapid editing, the visual then jumps to the Guard, now clad in gas masks with their bayonets unsheathed, launching tear gas in the direction of the crowd. Pappas narration continues. "The warning was issued several times but the students were angry and they stood defiant. Guards then were given the order to move out, but first students were peppered with tear gas fired from rifle-like launchers."²³ The Guard is then shown moving toward the students, Pappas describing the scene as the hill in front of Taylor Hall erupted in chaos. "In moments clouds of tear gas covered the center of the campus. The students fell back over a hill, answering the Guardsmen with rocks." Again, Pappas' account contributes to false impressions. Due to the windy conditions that day, most of the tear

²³*CBS Evening News*, May 4, 1970, Vanderbilt; Casale and Paskoff, 11.

gas dissipated in the breeze. This tear gas failure prompted the Guard to move in the first place. As presented by Pappas, viewers are left with the impression that the students were so numerous and enraged that tear gas was not enough to disperse the crowd and this failure prompted the Guard to move. The statement about students “answering the Guardsmen with rocks” is a bit general in its description. While some students hurled projectiles at the Guard, the actual number of students involved and the number of “hits” are disputed by all available eyewitness accounts. The footage that underlies this narrative adds to the drama of the event, as the surreal scene of Guardsmen, tear gas, and fleeing students creates a powerful image.

At this point, another abrupt edit occurs and the viewer sees and hears (albeit from a distance) Guardsmen firing their weapons. “Suddenly, from over the hill, there was rifle fire. Four students, two of them females, were shot to death. At least another dozen were wounded. Assistant Adjutant General Frederick Wenger said that snipers fired into the ranks of the troops, and the troops fired back.”²⁴ The problem here is not with Pappas’ report, as he is presenting the information as given to him by Guard leadership. The problem arises from faulty information from the Guard leaders themselves. As stated above, when the Guard pushed the crowd over the crest of the hill, Pappas went to find a campus phone to contact his bureau chief. His camera operator, Luther Joseph, one of the few people on the commons affected by the tear gas, did not follow the Guard over the hill. He managed to turn on the camera just prior to the shootings, but because of the distance and the angle, the free-lance camera operator was

²⁴*CBS Evening News*, May 4, 1970, Vanderbilt; Casale and Paskoff, 11.

unable to capture the full scope of the incident. Pappas only returned to the Commons after hearing the shots.

The complications caused by this set of circumstances alter the coverage immensely, both in narrative content and in visual presentation. Note that Pappas mentions nothing of the fifteen-minute standoff between Guardsmen on the practice field and students in the Prentice Hall parking lot as he was not present when this occurred. There is no discussion of where the Guard stood in relation to the students when they fired their weapons as he did not witness the gunfire. There is no mention of the sense among students that the confrontation was over once the Guard began moving up the crest of Blanket Hill as if returning to their original positions. Because Pappas was not at the actual scene of the shootings when they occurred, he cannot offer a first-hand account of what happened. Like a good reporter, he relies on information given to him by Assistant Adjutant General Wenger, most notably the allegations that the Guardsmen fired in response to sniper fire. Note that Pappas states that Wenger referred to “snipers” plural, not a single sniper as the Guard leadership contended to other reporters on the scene and in the days that followed. If Pappas had been at the scene as the tragedy unfolded, no doubt his presentation of the shootings and the reasons behind them would have been considerably different. His reports in the days that follow will demonstrate this ciphering of accounts and evidence.

The CBS coverage then shifts to an interview excerpt with KSU student John Dramis, who was among the students milling about the Prentice Hall parking lot when the Guardsmen fired. Dramis’ account is riveting in its presentation. He recounts that

There were guards at the top of the hill, just gathered around, like a big circle, just gathered together. They never said anything. All at once, they

just put their rifles up in the air, from what I could see on my side—they started shooting blanks, or that’s what everybody said, they were shooting blanks. One kid standing by me said that a bullet came down and ricocheted by his leg, and everybody just started running and got real scared. I walked back up the hill, and there was four—I could see three kids laying in the driveway down there, with blood, and girl friends were standing over them, crying and everything, and everybody was saying they were shooting blanks, but one kid came up, told me he saw a kid get hit right through the head. I saw them bring the ambulance and they brought him away, and everybody said they had blanks, but some of them had real bullets. They just looked like they fired up in the air and I looked around and this guy’s laying, dead.²⁵

Dramis’ statements demonstrate the confusion among the students when the Guardsmen began to fire. The question of whether the Guard was using live ammunition or blanks contributed to the chaos. Based on Dramis’ statements moments after the shootings, students thought that some Guardsmen fired blanks while others used live rounds. The account is included without comment and is interspersed with powerful visuals of the post-shooting confusion. More than anything else in Pappas’ report, the statements of John Dramis reflected accurately the uncertainty of the scene.

At this point, Pappas shifts the focus of the report. “The National Guard suffered its injuries, too, today. Several men were hurt by thrown rocks—one suffered what appeared to be a heart attack.”²⁶ Pappas’ statement is accompanied by footage of ambulances and stretchers at the scene. No doubt, in his attempt to present an impartial and balanced account of what he witnessed, Pappas includes this information about Guard injuries. What strikes the viewer are the rather bloodless visuals that accompany the information. Four students are dead and numerous other injured, but none of them are shown to the viewer. What is seen are tired and agitated Guardsmen, several of them

²⁵*CBS Evening News*, May 4, 1970, Vanderbilt; Casale and Paskoff, 11-12.

²⁶*CBS Evening News*, May 4, 1970, Vanderbilt; Casale and Paskoff, 12.

on stretchers and receiving medical attention. There is no mention of the extent of injuries suffered by the Guard, although the statement of one Guardsman suffering a heart attack is accurate, even if the attack stemmed from heat exhaustion rather than any actions of the students. The importance of mentioning the injuries suffered by Guardsmen unwittingly undermines the harm inflicted upon the students.

Pappas concludes his report with an overview of the incident and the consequences brought about by the shootings. It is television drama at its finest. He states

This, then, was the climax of three days of rioting on the campus; the students, demanding that ROTC be removed from the campus, Saturday burned down the ROTC headquarters. But the shootings today have caused a shock wave of reaction, not only in this usually quiet college town but across the state. Governor James Rhodes called in the State Police and the National Guard to conduct investigations. The FBI was also called. The university closed its doors late this afternoon; the town of Kent was sealed. Officials feared for more disturbances tonight. Veterans of this kind of campus turbulence say they have never seen students angrier. Ike Pappas, CBS NEWS, Kent, Ohio.²⁷

The accompanying images show the campus as the rally dispersed and students began loading up their personal belongings in preparation to leave due to the decision to close Kent State. Again, Pappas refers to “three days of rioting,” an overstatement of the actual events that led to the confrontation on May 4. At the same time, his characterization of Kent as a “usually quiet college town” is also inaccurate, at least when the occasional eruptions of student activism of the previous year are taken into consideration. Statements like these create the impression that the events of that weekend, culminating in gunfire and death, were without precedent on the campus of Kent State. Granted, the shootings of students made this incident quite different from anything that had occurred

²⁷*CBS Evening News*, May 4, 1970, Vanderbilt; Casale and Paskoff, 12.

before, but it was not a complete anomaly either. The presence of the Guard on campus and the tragedy that followed arose from circumstances that had been brewing for some time, particularly since the disruptions one year earlier.

After Pappas's report concluded, Cronkite added another observation about why the Guardsmen fired their weapons. "The commander of the Ohio National Guard said that his men fired only after they ran out of tear gas and the students advanced on them."²⁸ These two claims made by the Guard leadership, both of them false, could be interpreted by viewers as justifications for why the Guard opened fire on the students. Although ensuing investigations proved both statements to be untrue, their inclusion in the initial reports of the incident give them important status when attempting to understand popular perception of why the shootings happened. Sentiments expressed in statements from local townspeople and in "Letters to the Editor," both locally and nationally, reflected the view that students posed a direct threat to the Guardsmen just prior to the shootings, with some of the letters mentioning Pappas' initial news story on the evening of May 4.²⁹ Combined with the errant United Press International headline that Guardsmen were among the dead at Kent State, the CBS report, albeit unwittingly, contributed to the initial impressions of what happened. Such initial views, even when they are incomplete or erroneous, provide the foundation of understanding for many Americans. Even when journalists correct their first reports of a story, or present new findings that embellish the initial accounts, the follow-up stories rarely generate the same

²⁸*CBS Evening News*, May 4, 1970, Vanderbilt; Casale and Paskoff, 12.

²⁹For a sampling of Letters to the Editor and editorials in the wake of May 4, see Casale and Paskoff, 23-115.

amount of attention. Although Pappas did the best job he could do with the information given to him at the time, for better or worse, these first accounts leave the greater impression.

CBS followed up their initial story on the Kent shootings the following day. The report on May 5, 1970, presents new findings and new assertions from both the Guard and the students. Cronkite began the story with an opening that framed the report that followed.

After the four Kent State students were shot to death yesterday by National Guardsmen, a Guard spokesman said that an Ohio highway patrol helicopter had spotted a sniper on a nearby building, but today a highway patrol official said there is nothing in the log about such an incident, and it would have been there if it had happened. For the story today on the Kent State campus, here is Ike Pappas.³⁰

The CBS report on May 4 included the accusations by the Guard leadership that sniper fire instigated the Guard's actions. This follow-up report by Ike Pappas focused on these assertions, and Cronkite's introductory statement indicated that the allegations of sniper fire were now being questioned. Pappas' story includes interviews with wounded student Douglas Wrentmore and Ohio National Guard commander Sylvester Del Corso. He begins his report with a recounting of the previous day's events, including the closing of campus after the shootings. Visual footage shows the vacant campus with its flags at half-staff before shifting to scenes from the previous day's mayhem.

Pappas' May 5 report of the shootings themselves now contains much greater detail. "National Guardsmen opened fire with semi-automatic weapons. The Guard says 16 or 17 weapons fired some 35 rounds. Four were killed: two young men, William Schroeder of Lorain, Ohio, and Jeffrey Miller of Plainview, New York, and two young

³⁰*CBS Evening News*, May 4, 1970, Vanderbilt; Casale and Paskoff, 12.

women, Sandy Lee Scheuer of Youngstown, Ohio, and Allison Krause of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. A dozen others were wounded.”³¹ Pappas’ statements about the Guard’s use of semi-automatic weapons and the number of rounds fired represent the first televised report to include this particular information. He also identifies the fallen students by name as well, information that was not available for the May 4 installment. Pappas also mentions the actions of student Tom Miller, although he does not give his name. “After the shooting one young man dipped a black flag of revolution in the blood and waved it about as a symbol of the students’ anger and frustration.”³² His characterization of Miller’s actions is accurate. According to survivor Alan Canfora, a close friend of Miller, his actions of dipping his flag and jumping up and down in the blood of the fallen Jeff Miller indeed stemmed from anger and frustration.³³

Pappas then shifts his report to an interview with Douglas Wrentmore, one of the wounded students. He prefaces the footage by saying that “some Guard commanders said their men were threatened by a sniper; but the student said he saw no excuse for the shootings.” Pappas questions Wrentmore about the Guard’s allegation of sniper fire.

WRENTMORE: Well, as far as I can figure out, it seems to be almost completely unjustified.

PAPPAS: I didn’t hear that. Did you say completely unjustified?

WRENTMORE: Yes.

³¹*CBS Evening News* for Monday, May 05, 1970,” Vanderbilt Television News Archive, videotape. Hereafter cited as *CBS Evening News*, May 5, 1970, Vanderbilt; “From the *CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite*, May 5, 1970,” in Casale and Paskoff, 12.

³²*CBS Evening News*, May 5, 1970, Vanderbilt; Casale and Paskoff, 13.

³³Kosnac, “Kent 25,” 42.

PAPPAS: Can you elaborate on that?

WRENTMORE: Well, if there was a sniper, as some people say, he would have been on top of one of the buildings. He wouldn't have been shooting from the crowd. And they fired into the crowd, not at the top of the building at a sniper.

PAPPAS: Doug, what do you think about what's happened to Kent State, what's happened to you?

WRENTMORE: Well, I don't feel too bad really, 'cause I got out real lucky, but those kids that got killed, like, there's nothing you can do, you know. I don't know. I don't want to see it happen again, it's just such a bad thing.³⁴

Pappas' interview with Wrentmore presents a student voice to the national viewing audience for the first time. While newspaper articles on the shootings presented student accounts, an interview that allows the viewer to see and hear a wounded student creates a more powerful effect. Wrentmore's perspective undermines the accounts of the Guard leadership, whose insistence of sniper activity served as the justification for the decision to open fire on the students. Wrentmore presents an argument later echoed by both the Scranton Commission and FBI reports—that no sniper existed. Even then, as Wrentmore points out, if a sniper were present on campus at the time of the shootings, he would have been perched atop one of the building surrounding the scene. The firing of weapons into the crowd undermines the sniper thesis. As presented in the previous chapter, Ohio National Guard regulations stipulate the specific means for dealing with a sniper. Shooting into a crowd is not one of those options.³⁵

³⁴*CBS Evening News*, May 5, 1970, Vanderbilt; Casale and Paskoff, 13.

³⁵Douglas Wrentmore is one of the lesser-known victims of the May 4 shootings. His interview with Ike Pappas represents his most visible contribution to the visual history of Kent State. James Michener also interviewed Wrentmore for his 1971 book on the incident, describing the young man as "well behaved, intelligent . . . the kind of student a good university hopes to enroll." Wrentmore, like Sandy Scheuer, did not participate in the noon rally, and was on his way to class when the gunfire erupted.

The Pappas story then cuts to an interview with Guard commander Sylvester Del Corso. Pappas asks him if “in the event the men would run out of gas again, and something like this would happen and they’re being rushed by students, is there again this danger of being shot?” Del Corso’s reply gives some insight into the mindset of the Guard leadership the day after the shootings. “Yes, when an individual’s life is at stake, they’re—troops are there to perform a mission, and there is certainly danger of an individual being shot.” Realizing that his statements could lead to serious misinterpretation, Del Corso tries to clarify his meaning. “Not that we want to shoot anybody, but it’s just inconceivable that an individual would attempt to rush a trooper with a bayonet and a loaded weapon and expect him not to do anything, to permit them to beat him up or kill him.”³⁶ In the footage, Del Corso appears nervous and uncomfortable, noticeably irritated with Pappas’ line of questioning. His statements pose serious questions in light of investigations and conclusions that followed, but at the time, his explanation of Guard responses to a situation like May 4 seemed plausible, particularly to those viewers who embraced the need for law and order. The problem stems from Del Corso’s statement about the inconceivable notion that anyone would attempt to rush a Guardsman carrying a bayonet and a loaded weapon. As investigations and testimony showed later, the students were unaware that the Guard’s M-1 rifles were loaded with live ammunition. Even then, no student ever rushed the Guard, rendering Del Corso’s

Crossing the Prentice Hall parking lot en route to a 1:10 pm English class, he heard the crack of guns and fell to the ground. A bullet penetrated his right knee, fracturing his tibia. After his interviews for Michener, Wrentmore disappeared from further articles and accounts of the tragedy. Unlike Canfora and other May 4 survivors, he has distanced himself from the incident and prefers his privacy. For more on Douglas Wrentmore, see Michener, *Kent State*.

³⁶*CBS Evening News*, May 5, 1970, Vanderbilt; Casale and Paskoff, 13.

account inaccurate to say the least. Yet at this time, one day after the shootings, the details surrounding the decision to fire remained contradictory and chaotic. Taken together, the statements by Wrentmore and Del Corso provide a stark contrast of perception between student and Guardsman.

After the comments from General Del Corso, Pappas includes comments from KSU student Fred Kirsch, who was also witnessed the shootings. Kirsch's statements, like those of fellow student Wrentmore, dispute the contentions of the Guard leadership. "The general claims that there was a sniper up in a building," Kirsch states. "Well, there wasn't a sniper in the crowd then, so why did they shoot into the crowd. They shot into the crowd. They didn't shoot over their heads." Kirsch then corrects himself, taking into account the number of Guardsmen that fired. "Maybe some of the Guardsmen were shooting over heads, who knows. But they were coming at me, and the ground around me was being thrown up by—by bullets."³⁷ Kirsch's view of what happened, a perspective shared by Wrentmore and most of the students in the Guard's line of fire, brings the contradictory statements by the Guard leadership as to why the troops fired into focus. Pappas raises the question again, asking whether the Guardsmen fired because they feared the crowd, with its flying rocks, or because they believed a sniper was firing on them. "The National Guard said the men fired because they were being threatened with rocks. 'We consider rocks a lethal weapon,' said one commander."

So did the Guard fire because of the rocks or because of a reported sniper? General Canterbury was asked on camera if a sniper prompted the shootings, a contention made numerous times the day before. "[CBS reporter] Robert Schakne asked Guard

³⁷*CBS Evening News*, May 5, 1970, Vanderbilt; Casale and Paskoff, 13.

General Robert Canterbury if he had a sniper report.” Canterbury, visibly flustered by the question, replies, “I do not know.” Schakne continued to push the issue:

Now, general, I don’t want to press the point too hard—these are difficult circumstances—but I’m sure many people will be asking what possible justification there can be for firing bullets into a crowd of people, many of whom may be innocent bystanders, if in fact they have not necessarily fired on your troops?

CANTERBURY: I think the only justification is where your own life is endangered.³⁸

Notice that Canterbury avoids answering the question posed to him by Schakne. By contending that the justification for shooting “is when your own life is endangered” begs the question. Was a sniper present? If so, why did the Ohio Highway Patrol deny that their helicopters had spotted a sniper. If there was a sniper in or on one of the buildings overlooking the Guard’s position, why did they fire into the crowd instead of aiming for the spot where the alleged sniper had his position? The Guard’s original argument that they were responding to sniper fire is beginning to erode, and they now shift their defense to the students’ use of lethal weapons (rocks and projectiles) that endangered the lives of the troops. The failure of the Guard leadership to present a unified front when confronted with their reason for shooting into the crowd reveals the chaos surrounding the tragedy.

Pappas concludes his May 5 report with a conclusion that appears prophetic when considered in light of the investigations that followed.

What the investigators have to determine, then, is whether indeed there was a sniper, and whether the Guard was justified in firing its weapons, or whether, as some people here believe, the Guard panicked under the pressure of a rock-throwing attack and fired its weapons indiscriminately into the crowd, killing four students. Ike Pappas, CBS NEWS, at Kent, Ohio.³⁹

³⁸ *CBS Evening News*, May 5, 1970, Vanderbilt; Casale and Paskoff, 14.

³⁹ *CBS Evening News*, May 5, 1970, Vanderbilt; Casale and Paskoff, 14.

It is this concluding statement in the CBS report that stands as a highlight of the network coverage of May 4. Within twenty-four hours of the tragedy, Pappas has uncovered problems with the Guard leadership's account of what happened. Unlike the haphazard report of the day before, Pappas' May 5 coverage reveals that many of the contentions of the previous day are beginning to disintegrate in the face of conflicting reports, eyewitness accounts, and official statements. As the Scranton Commission, FBI investigation, and Ohio Highway Patrol reports confirmed in the months that followed the tragedy, the statements of sniper fire and endangered Guardsmen do not hold up when all evidence is considered. The problem lies in the power of first accounts and the dissemination of faulty information as evidence becomes known. All too often, initial reports shape popular perception to such an extent that even when faced with new evidence that undermines the preliminary presentation, observers retain the false or incomplete information that appeared first. As all official and popular accounts since 1970 demonstrate, none of the charges leveled by the Guard leadership stand in light of the available evidence.

Another important element of the CBS coverage of May 4 is the inclusion of footage showing the build-up and the aftermath of the shootings, including visuals of the Guard firing their weapons. Although Luther Joseph's camera is on the Commons, on the other side of the hill from where the actual shootings occurred, it is the best presentation of the incident shown on a national news broadcast. As stated previously, the footage itself was not shown until the May 5 broadcast, and these visuals provide a disturbing visual accompaniment to the interviews with Wrentmore, Del Corso, and Kirsch. The sound of the gunfire, the scattering students, and the sights and sounds of the

chaotic scene that followed leave an impression on viewers that written accounts fail to capture with the same measure of intensity.

Pappas continued to cover developments in the Kent State incident for the remainder of the decade. As investigations and court trials reopened the wounds of the tragedy, CBS continued to lead the way in coverage of May 4. Although NBC and ABC followed the incident with in-depth coverage of their own, Pappas' presence on campus the day of the shootings gave CBS credibility that surpassed its competitors. His credibility allowed him access to the victims' families, as demonstrated by his segments one month and one year after the shootings that included profiles of the fallen students and interviews with their parents, friends and other students.⁴⁰

Speaking on campus at a forum on journalism and the Kent State shootings twenty-five years after the tragedy, Pappas remembered the incident as one of the most important events that he covered in his long, prestigious career as a reporter. He stated that the Kent State incident reflected the mood of the nation at the time, and that reactions to the shootings and his coverage of them demonstrated the social and political divides ("good vs. bad, right vs. left") that racked the United States in 1970. Pappas argued that, as best he could determine, the Guard fired out of fear and fatigue rather than a desire to kill students and "make an example" out of Kent State. He believed that a "handful of subversives" were the root cause of the entire tragedy, and that unfortunately, the court trials brought no conclusions or closure to May 4. Over the years, the Kent State incident just "faded away" from the public memory of most Americans. He also stated that he

⁴⁰See "*CBS Evening News*, June 04, 1970," and "*CBS Evening News*, May 04, 1971," both available through the Vanderbilt Television News Archive.

received many letters from viewers that commented on his reporting. “It was split right down the middle,” he recalled, as some viewers thought that he was too sympathetic to the students while others argued that he sided too much with the Guard.⁴¹ When asked about the role of media in presenting Kent State through the years, Pappas stated that, like it or not, networks are influenced by ratings. He asserted that the television viewing public prefers entertainment to “real news,” and that cable news networks and the internet now provide the best opportunity for solid journalistic coverage. The bottom line, Pappas stated, is that nowadays “TV does a lousy job covering the news.” Headlines and titillation rather than “factual reporting” drive modern television journalism.⁴²

Since the tragedy of May 4, 1970, television news programs have focused very little on Kent State except when the anniversary of the shootings comes around. With the advent of cable news networks and the rise in prime time television news programs, anniversaries of important historical events provide perfect fodder for the television viewing audience. While most of the network and cable news outlets make mention of the Kent State shootings every May, special attention is devoted to the tragedy every fifth year. The tenth anniversary in 1980, the twentieth anniversary in 1990, the twenty-fifth anniversary in 1995, and the thirtieth anniversary in 2000 witnessed increased coverage by the national media. As the number of media providers grows with each passing year, the number of journalists and camera operators reporting from Kent State increases.

⁴¹“Covering May 4th,” videocassette.

⁴²Ibid.

Non-network, cable news outlets such as C-Span also have a presence on campus to record and broadcast the events surrounding each commemoration.⁴³

When this author visited Kent State for the thirtieth anniversary commemorations in 2000, he witnessed an influx of international, national and local media correspondents as they descended on the KSU campus. Satellite trucks lined the streets of Kent State, with reporters and camera operators roaming both town and campus talking to anyone who seemed willing to discuss the events of the day. CNN carried the commemoration activities live via satellite, and a line of cameras stretched nearly half a mile around the base of Blanket Hill to cover the commemoration activities. The thirtieth anniversary of the Kent State shootings truly represented media spectacle at its finest.

As the years passed, the coverage of May 4, as with any other historical event, changed with the times and reflected the culture of the period when it aired. What makes these programs useful to the historian is twofold. First, how does the writer of the story set the context of what happened on May 4, 1970? Is adequate information provided to set the tragedy within the proper historical framework, or is it thrown out into the public arena in a haphazard fashion? Second, what incorrect (or disputed) information continues to find its way into later accounts of Kent State? A survey of programs, broadcast from 1985 to 1997, reveals that despite countless investigations and revelations

⁴³For an interesting discussion of the historical significance of the Kent State shootings, "KSU Shootings, 25th Anniversary Observance," C-Span Network Coverage, "KSU TV Coverage, 1995," videocassette, Box 95A—Film and Video, Kent May 4 Archive, Kent State University Library, Kent, Ohio. This roundtable discussion moderated by KSU Professor Emeritus Laurence Kaplan, features former U.S. Senators George McGovern and Eugene McCarthy, and R.W. Apple, Washington Bureau Chief, *New York Times*.

on the Kent State shootings, many of the original mistakes and misconceptions remain firmly in place.

In 1986, ABC introduced a prime time news program entitled *Our World*. The show aired on Thursday evenings, and represented a departure from the traditional news program format. Each episode of *Our World* focused on the events of a particular year in history, using archival film and video footage as the foundation of its premise. One of the episodes aired that season examined the tumultuous year of 1970, including the Kent State shootings. The *Our World* segment, entitled “Spring 1970,” discussed the cultural war that gripped the United States in the early months of that year.⁴⁴ Opening with a quote from Black Panther activist Stokely Carmichael (“Violence is as American as cherry pie”), the program examined the role of student protest in shaping perceptions of the Vietnam War. Journalist Linda Ellerbee, who served as one of the co-anchors of the program, gave an overview of the Vietnam War Moratorium, the student-driven movement that set out to shut down campuses for one day out of each month in protest of the war. The segment includes numerous film clips of student protest with no specific information on the source, location and date of the scenes presented.⁴⁵ According to the writers of this program, the Moratorium folded in April of 1970, due in part to the

⁴⁴*ABC News-Our World*, October 26, 1986, videocassette, Box 95—Film and Video, Kent May 4 Archive, Kent State University, Kent, Ohio.

⁴⁵The practice of using undated, generic stock footage is a long-standing tradition of journalists and documentarians. Frank Capra used such a method for his acclaimed *Why We Fight* series in the 1940s. Capra relied on many Hollywood reenactments as well, a practice that is still used today. Unlike Capra’s era, most filmmakers make note that they are not using original footage. Although a trained eye can sometimes spot the source of footage, often leading to frustration and charges of falsehood, such practices must be considered with an element of sympathy. Sometimes footage of an actual event is unavailable, so one uses whatever he or she can access without sacrificing content.

perception that “people do not want to take to the streets any more.”⁴⁶ The storywriters contend that beginning in May of 1970, “protesting the protesters” became the new trend, citing Merle Haggard’s chart-topping hit song *Okie from Muskogee* as just one example of the changing tide of public sentiment. Film images of New York City “hardhats” attacking antiwar protesters on May 10 and President Nixon’s donning of a hardhat in support of the action ten days later provide visual support for the assertions. What signaled the change? In the view of the writers of this particular episode of *Our World*, the Nixon administration’s decision to enter Cambodia changed everything, providing renewed spark for the antiwar movement while simultaneously giving energy to the prowar “Silent Majority” of America. The Kent State shootings became the centerpiece of this new phase of homefront discontent.⁴⁷

The segment then focuses its attention on the eruption of student protest on the Kent State campus after Nixon’s announcement of the Cambodian incursion on April 30, 1970. With images from the weekend of May 1 shown, Ellerbee states that the unrest reached its climax when “students burned the ROTC building” on campus. The arrival of the National Guard is presented, with footage of Guardsmen standing in position around the burned-out shell of the KSU ROTC building. Kent student and shooting victim Joseph Lewis appears, contending that the arrival of the Guard escalated the anger among Kent students. “I was not a bum,” Lewis states, making direct reference to President Nixon’s characterization of campus protesters as “bums.” National Guardsman Lawrence “Larry” Shafer also makes an appearance, arguing that Governor James

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid.

Rhodes' dispatching of the Guard to campus was a mistake. Rhodes sent the Guard to "enforce law and order," Shafer says, "and we weren't trained for that. We were trained for combat."⁴⁸ Ellerbee's report then jumps to the confrontation on May 4 that led to the shootings. She states that the Guard took action to disperse the noon rally as all campus rallies were forbidden.

Utilizing a mixture of still photographs and film footage of the Guard moving against the students, the report describes the moments that led up to the fatal shots. The story intersperses interview footage with Lewis, Shafer, and Barry Levine, May 4 victim Allison Krause's former boyfriend, to provide insight as to why the Guard turned and fired their weapons. Shafer asserts that he was "hit by a brick" as the Guard moved over Blanket Hill, leading him and his fellow Guardsmen to believe that their lives were in danger. Barry Levine states that when the Guard began to retreat back towards Taylor Hall that some students saw it as a "small victory," and started celebrating, believing that the confrontation was over. Shafer then says that when the Guard reached the crest of the hill that "there was a single shot." His demeanor appears confused when he recounts what happened next, saying that it was hard to tell what was going on around him, and that possibly what he heard was "warning shots." However, Shafer recalls seeing the Guardsmen next to him firing his weapon, so he assumed an order to fire had been given. "I fired into the air," Shafer contends.

Joseph Lewis says that when the shots began, he and the students around him thought that the Guard was firing blanks. Lewis moved towards the Guard's firing line, reaching a point about thirty feet in front of Shafer, his hand extended in a "single-finger

⁴⁸Ibid.

salute.” Shafer states that he thought Lewis was coming at him and fearing for his safety, the Guardsman shot him. “I was eighteen, arrogant, and foolish,” Lewis says, noting that everything happened so quickly that no one was certain what was happening at the time. Ellerbee then mentions the toll of May 4, showing pictures of the four students killed as strains of Graham Nash singing “Teach Your Children Well” play in the background. She ends the segment with a quote from Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas that “people are emotional, not rational” and that the tragedy of Kent State stemmed from many sources. The activities of groups like Weatherman led to overreaction by federal and state governmental authorities, which in turn further fed the paranoia of all parties involved. It was that fear and overreaction that created the environment for tragedy.⁴⁹

The *Our World* segment stands as one of the better television news treatments of the Kent State shootings. From a non-historical standpoint, it is great television, brimming with all of the drama and emotion that makes for powerful audio-visual storytelling. Countering the tendencies of other presentations, the Ellerbee story places the shootings within an historical context, albeit oversimplified in nature. Still, the inclusion of the Student Moratorium, the role of the Cambodian announcement, and the growing influence of the Silent Majority/law and order view of student protesters as subversives provides enough context to show that the tragedy of May 4 resulted from a multitude of political and cultural factors. What makes this broadcast even more intriguing is the persistence of debatable assumptions some sixteen years after May 4. Even though the evidence as to who started the ROTC fire on May 2 remains in dispute, the program states without hesitation that students were responsible for the inferno. No

⁴⁹Ibid.

mention is made of the confusion surrounding the legitimacy of rallies on the KSU campus nor of the discussions that led to the Guard's belief that they were responsible for the dispersal of all student gatherings. The report devotes no attention to the fifteen-minute standoff on the practice field between Guardsmen and students that preceded the shootings. The distance between the Guard and the students at the time of the shooting is ignored. The failure to investigate these important elements and clear up as many misunderstandings as possible is unfortunate, but also indicative of the nature of dramatic presentation.

At the same time, the story deserves commendation for its attempt to place the shootings within a broader historical context. Unlike some of the more recent television examinations of May 4, it does not substitute style for substance. Ellerbee's segment informs rather than titillates, and considering that it was broadcast in 1986, in the midst of major revisions of the Vietnam War in public discourse, it stands the test of time quite well. The presentation presents a powerful combination of visual footage and narrative to present a solid, albeit flawed, overview of the shootings within an historical context.⁵⁰

⁵⁰Another excellent presentation aired on the twentieth anniversary of the tragedy. CBS aired a segment about May 4 on its *Night Watch* program hosted by Charlie Rose. Rose had May 4 victim Dean Kahler and Kent Professor Jerry M. Lewis as his guests. The group discussed the complexity of the shootings and their aftermath, including the many persistent falsehoods about what happened. They concluded the panel with an exchange about the commemoration of the Kent State shootings and its relevance for the United States today. According to Lewis, the most important elements of May 4 that Americans should remember include: (1) knowing what happened and why it happened by separating rumor from fact; (2) understanding the legal complexities of an event like May 4, and how it changed the legal system; (3) recognizing that events like the Kent State shootings take on a culture of their own, forever solidifying themselves in the popular consciousness. Lewis contends that media coverage and film portrayals of the Kent State incident serve as important sources in shaping post-Baby Boomers understanding of what happened. See "*CBS Night Watch with Charlie Rose, May 4,*

The same conclusion cannot be reached when considering some of the other network television stories on May 4, particularly on the morning news and entertainment programs. Programs such as NBC's *Today*, CBS's *Early Show* and ABC's *Good Morning America* often present segments on anniversaries of notable historical events. The Kent State shootings provide a perfect opportunity for coverage, as it represents not only an important historical event, but it is laden with human-interest story potential. Most notable is a segment aired on the twentieth anniversary of the tragedy, shown on NBC's *Today* show.

This particular presentation demonstrates the change in television journalism and its approach to a story since 1970. The segment focuses less on historical context and emphasizes emotional content. Central to the presentation is a mixture of film footage and still photographs interspersed with interviews, both on tape and in the studio. The 1990 *Today* segment begins with host Bryant Gumbel introducing the report, referring to the Kent State tragedy as an event that "exemplified the split in the nation."⁵¹ The report opens with a discussion of the disputes surrounding the construction of a May 4 Memorial and footage of students gathering at the dedication of the finished structure. There is an abrupt cut to footage from May 4, 1970 (interestingly enough, it is footage from the CBS Pappas coverage) and gives a brief overview of the events that culminated in gunfire. There is no discussion of the unrest of the weekend prior to May 4, leaving an impression that the Guard simply materialized on campus and confronted the students at

1990," videocassette, Box 95—Film and Video, Kent May 4 Archive, Kent State University Library, Kent, Ohio.

⁵¹ *NBC Today*, May 4, 1990, videocassette, Box 95A—Film and Video, Kent May 4 Archive, Kent State University Library, Kent, Ohio.

the noon rally. The twenty-minute confrontation between students and Guardsmen, the push over Blanket Hill, the stand-off on the football field, and the Guard's seeming retreat back towards Taylor Hall are not mentioned. The story jumps from the initial confrontation on the Commons to the Guard decision to fire into the crowd with no explanation or description. The clip ends and shifts to an interview between Gumbel and Guard leader Lt. Col. Fassenger. Fassenger described the scene to Gumbel after being asked why the Guard fired on the students. "I heard a sound and lots of Guardsmen said they heard a sound," Fassenger said. "A lot of Guardsmen and a lot of people described it as a gunshot. I didn't know what it was."⁵²

After the Fassenger comments, Gumbel welcomed shooting victim Dean Kahler and author Bill Gordon. The presence of Kahler is understandable due to the life-changing paralysis he suffered, but Gordon's involvement is more questionable. He had just published the first edition of his book *Four Dead in Ohio* and Gumbel acknowledges him as an "expert" on the Kent State shootings. Gumbel opens the discussion with an erroneous statement, stating that the Guard showed up on the Kent campus because "students were protesting Cambodia." As every study of Kent State in the previous two decades revealed, this was *not* the reason that Governor Rhodes sent the Guard to campus. Apparently, Gumbel missed the memo. He also states that no one was ever held accountable for the tragedy. This is true, but only to a point. As discussed above, the out-of-court settlement in 1979 included a statement of regret on the part of the Guard along with financial compensation for the victims and their families. One can regard this action as a statement of accountability, although there was never an acknowledgment of

⁵²Ibid.

guilt in a court of law. Gumbel then asks Kahler what he believed happened that early day in May 1970. Kahler contends that the only rioting that went on that day was caused by the Guard's action against the students. He calls it a "military riot" that erupted after the students' "anger subsided." When Gumbel asks Kahler who bears responsibility for the tragedy, he lays the blame on President Nixon, Vice President Agnew, and Governor Rhodes. Nixon and Agnew's angry rhetoric against campus protesters provided the justification needed for Rhodes to send the Guard to Kent in the first place. According to Kahler, the Guardsmen themselves were nothing more than "pawns."⁵³

Gumbel then moves the questioning to Bill Gordon, asking him whom he believed should bear the responsibility for what happened on May 4, 1970. Gordon states that no one wanted to blame the Guard initially, but the many unanswered questions led to questions of conspiracy on the part of a select group of Guardsmen (the thesis of Gordon's book). He says that most files relating to the incident have been released with little new information becoming known. Gordon then contends "there was a cover-up" on the part of the Guard, that an officer on the scene gave an order to fire. The Guard, Gordon argues, deserves the blame for what happened. Although Nixon, Agnew, and Rhodes bear some responsibility for the tragedy, Gordon states "Nixon did not commit murder." Gumbel asks Kahler if he agrees with Gordon's assessment. Kahler replies that Nixon did commit murder and deserves much of the blame, Gordon's objections to the contrary. Gordon interjects that while Rhodes and Nixon were guilty of "a lot of loose talk," they did not pull the triggers that day. He concludes by stating that until the Guardsmen decide to talk, there will never be complete resolution to the Kent State

⁵³Ibid.

tragedy. Gumbel ends the discussion and cuts to a commercial before Kahler, now visibly frustrated, has a chance to reply. The segment ends.⁵⁴

There are problems within this presentation that are symptomatic of many recent television news segments on May 4. First, the presentation raises questions about the incident that mislead the uninformed viewer. The editing of the story removes key contextual elements of the story, leaving viewers with an incomplete sense of why the shootings occurred. While this decision stemmed undoubtedly from time constraints, it shortchanges the audience. Second, Gumbel seems more interested in generating controversy and uncovering some grand conspiracy than in moderating a discussion between his two guests. His constant references to accountability and “who is to blame,” while an important element of May 4, become the focus of the segment at the expense of other important factors. With the accountability question as the foundation, Gordon monopolizes the segment, taking advantage of the opportunity to promote his book. His allegations of a Guard conspiracy, discussed in an earlier chapter, dominate the discussion. Kahler’s presence is an afterthought, despite his status as an eyewitness and survivor of the shootings. If one knew nothing of the Kent State incident, this story would lead to many false conclusions. It seems as if a peaceful student protest led to an unforeseen calling of the Guard, who fired into the crowd within minutes of arriving on the scene.

Television coverage of the Kent State shootings represents an important link in the popular understanding of a tragic incident. Better understanding requires a revisiting of the questions posed earlier. How did the television coverage of May 4 in its

⁵⁴ Ibid.

immediate aftermath influence later interpretations? As demonstrated by the CBS accounts from the scene of Kent State in the aftermath of the tragedy, Ike Pappas' coverage reveals the conflicting elements that pervaded the initial reports. The confusion and conflicting information surrounding the shootings in their immediate aftermath left lasting impressions on understanding. Although Pappas' May 5 report began the process of bringing the numerous internal contradictions to the forefront, the persistence of initial framing and presentation left an imprint on audience perception and comprehension. While the questions raised by Pappas on May 5 predicted many of the findings uncovered by the Scranton Report and other investigations, the persistence of erroneous information over thirty years later reveals the power of initial reports about an incident. Regardless of later revelations and new information that undermine the premises of original presentations, viewers tend to remember what they saw first and when confronted with doubt, hold firm to their first impressions. This tendency not only reflects the power of initial reporting, but also reveals the importance of predispositions and belief systems in viewer comprehension and interpretation. "Silent Majority" viewers who witnessed the first stories from Kent State tended to regard the incident through the lens of the forces of "law and order" confronting raging, subversive college radicals. Persons who questioned the validity of the war in Southeast Asia and regarded dissent and protest as necessities in the face of injustice saw the shootings as another example of an imperialistic "Amerika" bringing its tactics to the homefront. Dogmatic attitudes on both ends of the socio-political spectrum always interpret events around them within their pre-existing paradigms regardless of evidence to the contrary.⁵⁵

⁵⁵For an example of this interpretive dichotomy, compare the views of Kent State

How are televised accounts of May 4 in the decades that followed the tragedy similar and how are they different from the initial reports? The first reports, particularly Pappas' first-hand accounts of what happened, revealed chaos and contradiction. Reports that followed in the proceeding decades, to the surprise of some, continue this trend. Despite over twenty books, numerous investigations, and nine years of court trials that exposed the many complex elements surrounding the shootings, little more consensus exists after thirty years than existed after thirty days. Part of this continuity arises in part from the nature of visual media, particularly the evolution of television journalism since 1970. The battle for viewers and advertising dollars, along with the need to fit a story into the time constraints imposed upon the medium, undermines the ability of television journalism (with few exceptions) to present a tumultuous event within an adequate historical context. The *Today* program on NBC in 1990 demonstrates these problems.

A desire to grab viewers with a quick, emotional presentation that runs no more than five to seven minutes leads to skewed understanding. Prime-time journalistic magazine programs such as *60 Minutes*, *20/20*, and *Dateline* do a better job of presenting complexity and context because of longer segment times, but their content is often overshadowed by flashy graphics that overwhelm the senses. C-Span and other networks are most effective in presenting solid programming on events like Kent State, but many viewers tend to shy away from such channels in favor of more stimulating fare. Although opportunities to present the Kent State shootings abound through a growing number of available outlets, it has not resulted in greater understanding.

in Peter Collier and David Horowitz, *Destructive Generation: Second Thoughts about the Sixties* (New York: Free Press, 1996) with those found in the essays included in *Kent and Jackson State, 1970-1990* (Woodbridge, CT: VietNam Generation, Inc. & Burning Cities Press, 1995).

Finally, how have television news stories of Kent State helped shape collective memory and understanding of the tragedy? This element presents the greatest challenge for the scholar of media and history. How can one separate the influence of visual media presentations from the multiplicity of other factors that hold sway over collective and individual understanding of an event? The most viable answer lies within a recognition of the power of visual media in modern American society. As more Americans rely on television news outlets as their primary sources of understanding the world around them, the influence exerted by those outlets rises exponentially. This trend takes on a new importance as cable news networks become more influential, with American choosing news sources that espouse and uphold their particular political viewpoints. The presence of CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC correspondents at the thirtieth anniversary commemoration of Kent State, combined with the amount of coverage to the anniversary devoted by these networks, exemplifies this shift. A perusal of each network's coverage reveals very different presentations of detail and unique "slants" regarding what happened on May 4. The only consistency of coverage lies in its collective inconsistency. It appears the more we know about the Kent State shootings, the less we know for sure.

Chapter IV

Documentary Film and the Kent State Shootings: The Early Years

The historical documentary filmmaker's vocation is not precisely the same as the historian's, although it shares many of the aims and much of the spirit of the latter . . . The historical documentary is often more immediate and more emotional than history proper because of its continual joy in making the past present through visual and verbal documents.¹

The mutual skepticism that sometimes surfaces between the historian and the historical documentary filmmaker is understandable and unfortunate. Each usually works with different media (although some professional historians now make films and videotapes); each tends to place a dissimilar stress on the respective roles of analysis versus storytelling in relaying history; and each tailors a version of history which is designed for disparate though overlapping kinds of audiences. These distinctions are real enough. Still the scholar and the filmmaker, the professional historian and the amateur, complement each other more than is sometimes evident in the expressions of suspicion, defensiveness, and even on occasion, scorn, that are too often apparent in published remarks.²

Film documentaries provide an intriguing framework for understanding popular historical interpretation of an era or an event. The process of how an event moves from memory to history reveals the important elements that converge to create popular historical understanding over time. Yet there is a long-standing hostility

¹Ken Burns, quoted in Gary R. Edgerton, "Ken Burns's Rebirth of a Nation: Television, Narrative, and Popular History," in *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media*, ed. Marcia Landy (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 308.

²Gary R. Edgerton, in Landy, 311.

among professional historians towards visual media as an important source of historical understanding. Many scholars view film and television as perpetrators of “cultural amnesia,” and impediments to a proper understanding and lasting sense of history. One popular view argues that visual media, particularly television, “produces forgetfulness, not memory, flow, not history.” Defenders of this position assert, “if there is history, it is congealed, already past and distant and forgotten other than as television archive material, images that can be repeated to be forgotten again.”³ As historian Steve Anderson states, most of these arguments stem from the postmodern theories of Frederic Jameson, who saw visual media as the creators of a “‘derealized’ sense of presence, identity, and history.”⁴

Jameson postulated the thesis that there is no “history” in the postmodern age. Style, pastiche, and nostalgia are its replacements, providing a false sense of the historical by “randomly cannibalizing styles and images of the past.”⁵ This rather cynical view of visual media (and of history and culture in general), although popular with some academicians, falls victim to its own analytical concepts. One can argue that the views of Jameson and other postmodernists are themselves nothing but a pastiche of existentialism and nihilism mixed with an unhealthy dose of technophobia. While technology does play an important role in shaping society and culture, thereby influencing the construction of popular historical understanding, this upheaval is nothing new. Every era in the history

³Steve Anderson, “History TV and Popular Memory,” in *Television Histories: Shaping Collective Memory in the Media Age*, ed. Gary R. Edgerton and Peter C. Rollins (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 19.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid, 20.

of the human race has witnessed social and cultural upheaval for various reasons, some of them technological in origin (e.g. the printing press, military weaponry). How is the so-called postmodern condition any different, except its cause arises from different types of technological innovation, thus shaping a socio-cultural response that conforms to its influences. The postmodern assertion that all knowledge and claims of "truth" are nothing more than cultural constructs, while useful in understanding how cultures understand the world around them, collapses under the weight of its own premise. If all claims to "truth" are nothing more than constructs, is not this assertion also a construct, and thus questionable in and of itself? In order to reject claims of objective reality, one must accept that that argument is problematic as well.⁶ Jameson's view of visual media as another tool of "late capitalism," devoid of any value in understanding history, fits well within older prejudices against film and television. The question is whether these

⁶For a good introduction to postmodernism and the role of technology, see Frederic Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (London: Verso, 1998) and Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation (The Body, in Theory: Histories of Cultural Materialism)* trans. Sheila Glaser (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995). Jameson's arguments contain a Marxist slant, emphasizing the role of corporate capitalism in controlling means of communication thereby serving as the arbiters of reality construction. Baudrillard takes a similar stance. He argues "reality" no longer exists, and has been replaced by simulacra via the process of simulation, creating what he calls the "hyperreal." Baudrillard, like Jameson, explains the influence of cultural materialism in postmodern society. This cultural materialism has created subcultures and materialistic trends (fashion, music, art, etc.), that are based on nothingness. All so-called cultural trends are purposeless, but they have engulfed the whole of western society in numerous ways. Both Jameson and Baudrillard contend the seduction of materialism has led to apathy toward the issues, caging each one of us in our own hyperreality. While these arguments provide good fodder for classroom discussions on the problematic nature of reality, excessive reading of such works leads one in a mind-numbing circle. If reality no longer exists then why write simulations that will add to that non-existence. In the words of author Ray Bradbury, "there is a fine line between brilliant and banal."

arguments justify rejection of visual media as means of understanding and transmitting historical information. Further examination finds this argument wanting.

Regardless of the philosophical underpinnings, many professional historians dismiss the influence of visual media such as film documentaries when studying cultural memory and popular historical understanding. A wide gap exists between makers of historical documentaries and academic historians. This unfortunate gulf undermines the labors of both parties, preventing cooperative efforts and mutual projects to present history in all of its complex glory. Part of this disparity arises from a lack of understanding and no shortage of elitism within both camps, each group determined to protect what it sees as its own professional “turf.” Even without the Jamesonian slant, academic historians too often view documentary films as just a mass-marketed version of “bad history,” replete with oversimplifications and skewed interpretations. These concerns sometimes deserve merit, but the more typical consequence is a complete dismissal of the role and influence of documentary film in constructing popular historical understanding. At the same time, many documentary filmmakers regard professional historians as relics of the past, entrenched in their academic cocoons, detached from public discourse. While more than a few academic historians embody such a caricature, such an attitude is an overgeneralization that reveals more about the biases of filmmakers than the value of professional scholarship.

Both academic historians and documentary filmmakers would do well to recognize the power of audio-visual images in shaping understanding of history by the general public. As film historian Taylor Downing asserts, “historians frequently undervalue the ‘power of the image’ to capture the mood, atmosphere and attitude of a

moment in time.”⁷ Film sources provide a “feel” of time and place, and they provide a “topical and often revealing interpretation of that event, which is, in its own way, a historical document itself.” This places tremendous responsibility upon the filmmaker to use these images “accurately and sensitively.” Granted, not all documentarians succeed in this task, but Downing contends, “when used intelligently and effectively it [film and visual images] can have the impact of 1000 words.”⁸ Many of the concerns over the use of television and film sources in historical investigation stems from the same trepidation some historians have toward the use of oral history sources as means of understanding historical events. The possibility of faulty or blurred memory and the easy use of oral history sources to present a slanted or selective view of events make such concerns valid. At the same time, written sources possess identical shortcomings. Diaries, letters and newspapers, recognized as legitimate sources by academic historians, demand the same amount of critical examination and careful use when conducting historical research. The critical use of documentary film as both source and product of historical inquiry offers the possibility of important insights not available through standard written sources. It also offers the possibility of greater access to a wider audience. More incoming college freshmen are likely to have seen a program on the History Channel than to have read the latest academic history titles lining the book review pages of historical journals. The greater part of wisdom demands that documentary filmmakers develop an appreciation for the work of professional historians. Likewise, academic historians can benefit from

⁷Taylor Downing, “History on Television: The Making of *Cold War*, 1998,” in Landy, 298.

⁸Ibid.

fostering an understanding of the important role that film, particularly documentary, in shaping popular historical understanding.

Documentary films, much like traditional written history sources, reflect the views and attitudes of their times. A survey of documentary films allows a scholar to diagram and map the changes in collective memory over a prolonged period, serving as audio-visual sources of cultural anthropology.⁹ In the case of the Kent State incident, documentary films that deal with the tragedy validate this thesis, presenting a textbook case of the role of visual media as historical text. Unlike television journalism, documentary film faces fewer time restrictions in presenting its subject materials. This freedom permits greater opportunities for detail and contextualization. Documentary film also targets a narrower audience, many of them having a pre-existent interest in the subject matter. Such factors allow the filmmaker to tackle an event from specific angles, emphasizing particular elements often overlooked in television journalism. Within the same context, filmmakers utilize the components of the film medium itself to present a text, also known as “film language.” The stylistic and structural elements of film provide important keys to interpreting and understanding documentaries that go beyond dialogue and direction.¹⁰

Many scholars raise important questions about documentary films of this nature. When filmmakers state blatant intentions or their films contain a non-suspended bias, do

⁹Himmelstein, 279.

¹⁰Key elements of film that go beyond the standard construction of the medium itself include narrative, characters, point of view (POV), *mise-en-scene* (what is put into a scene or shot), image composition, editing and sound. These elements receive consideration in the overviews of each documentary. For definition of all terms used in this study, refer to the “Glossary of Film Language” in Appendix I of this work.

their statements relegate the film from documentary to propaganda? While this question seems reasonable on the surface, the delineation between documentary and propaganda is not as clear as some contend. One of the biggest arguments in recent years centers on this distinction. The problem arises when one considers the definition of propaganda. If propaganda is, as defined commonly, “the spreading of ideas or information deliberately to further one’s cause or damage an opposing cause,” then any attempt to separate documentary from propaganda becomes difficult if not impossible.¹¹ While propaganda is something motivated by an ideology or agenda, many documentary films have the same underlying motives. When viewing documentaries, it is necessary to assume that there is an agenda present. The primary criterion for documentary film is that the agenda is stated upfront or obvious in its presentation, allowing the viewer to agree or disagree. At the same time, critics level the same charges of propaganda at many written historical sources. Recent historiography reveals a dramatic shift away from attempted suspension of bias, reflecting the influence of postmodernism and “identity history” within the profession. If such trends demand consideration with traditional sources of historical inquiry, aligning documentary film within such a context should pose no problem for scholars.

In the decades since the Kent State shootings, over twenty documentary films have been made that focus on various aspects of the incident. The creators of these films include student filmmakers, independent producers and mainstream documentarians. Some of the films received wide distribution while others were limited to screenings in art theaters or, in a few notable instances, classrooms. This wide array of documentaries

¹¹*The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (New York: Pocket Books, 1974), 557.

encompasses a multitude of approaches and styles. A number of the films investigate the causes and effects of the tragedy, attempting to understand why such a horrific happened. Other documentaries discuss the shootings themselves and the psychological toll they took on the campus, community, and nation as a whole. A few films use the May 4 incident as a foundation for comparing and contrasting attitudes of college students toward social and political issues over time. As with other historical sources, these May 4 documentaries reflect the specific interests and goals of their creators. The emphases and foci of these films have changed through the years, providing insight not only into the goals of the filmmaker, but also giving viewers a glimpse into the shifting understandings and views of Kent State over three decades.

A survey of Kent State documentaries since 1970 reveals two particular periods or categories that span the decades. In the decade following the shootings, most Kent State documentaries served two primary purposes—as a means for demanding intensive federal investigations of the shootings and as visual evidence to justify potential litigation. The films between 1970 and 1979 provided a forum for interested parties to demand justice they believed had been denied the victims and their families. After the court cases ended in 1979 with the now-famous out-of-court settlement, the documentaries took on a different tone, attempting to present the incident within some type of historical context. The documentaries of recent times, particularly since 1990, tend to arrive on anniversaries of May 4, usually every five years. These newer films contain all of the positive and negative elements inherent to the medium--the compression of time (although it is nothing like the restrictions placed on television journalism), access to source material, budgetary constraints, and most importantly, balancing historical

accuracy with entertainment value. This author witnessed the complexity of making such a project firsthand in 1999 while serving as one of the historical consultants on a documentary made by Single Spark Productions for broadcast on The Learning Channel on May 4, 2000, the thirtieth anniversary of the shootings. I saw firsthand the challenges of conveying an important historical event within a limited broadcast timeframe without sacrificing accuracy or falling prey to dramatic embellishment.

The next two chapters focus on the evolution of Kent State documentary films over the past three decades. Four films serve as the framework of analysis: Richard Myers' 1970 film *Confrontation at Kent State*; the 1972 film *Kent State: May 4, 1970* with actor E.G. Marshall; 1989's *Letter to the Next Generation*; and finally, the 2000 Single Spark presentation *Kent State, May 4, 1970: The Day the War Came Home*. The study incorporates comparison and contrast of each documentary with available written sources and testimonial accounts of May 4. In addition to this traditional historical approach, questions of film language, editing, and the use of sound, including music, also factor into the analysis. While one can argue that other films merit investigation, these four presentations best embody the trends, methods, and results of Kent State documentaries over time.¹² The chosen films demonstrate the various approaches taken

¹²Kent State speech professor Drew Tiene made a documentary film about the May 4 shootings in 1995, but this film never received wide release. Its use has been restricted to classrooms only. This is unfortunate, as it is one of the better films on the Kent State shootings. Tiene's film is particularly good in showing, through interviews with survivors and eyewitnesses, the central areas of agreement and disagreement about May 4 twenty-five years after the shootings. See *May 4, 1970*, prod. and dir. Drew Tiene, 60 min., 1995, videocassette, Box 95—Film and Video, Kent May 4 Archive, Kent State University Library, Kent, Ohio. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation also broadcast an excellent film called *Kent: Class of 1970* in 1976. The film consists of interviews with six individuals (three students, two Guardsmen, and the photographic icon Mary Ann Vecchio) who were on campus when the fatal shootings occurred. The

by documentarians since the shootings, allowing for comparison and contrast of May 4 films and their role in shaping popular historical interpretation and understanding.

The first decade of Kent State documentaries reflects the confusion and anger of the times. As information and new evidence about the shootings found their way into the public discourse, filmmakers faced tremendous challenges in creating presentations of an incident still very fresh in the public's mind. The motivations of documentary makers during the 1970s arose from three primary objectives. First, filmmakers attempted to show the mood of Kent, KSU, and the nation in the wake of the shootings. They strove to understand what happened on May 4 by presenting the facts of the case as they were known at the time. Finally, they hoped to use film as a means of demanding further investigations of what happened and who should bear responsibility for the tragedy, thereby bringing justice to the shooting victims and their families. The early documentaries represent a part of the struggle of the victims' families to get justice from the courts, and of the efforts of many interested groups to convene either a Federal grand jury or a congressional investigation of the tragedy. Two of the early films demonstrate each of these motives clearly—*Confrontation at Kent State* (1970) and *Kent State: May*

general thesis of the film is that May 4 had two major consequences—it became an icon of a generation while simultaneously killing the student movement. With the exception of this film and several other small projects, the Kent State shootings fell out of favor with filmmakers until its twentieth anniversary in 1990. Since that time, there have been five documentary films made, including programs made for The History Channel, the Discovery Channel, VH-1, and the Learning Channel. The reasoning behind the resurgence of May 4 as a topic of filmmaker interest stems, it seems to this author, from two primary sources. The growth of cable television and the demand for programs of historical events makes the Kent State shootings an attractive topic, particularly due to the wealth of photographic evidence available. Also important is the graying of the baby boom generation, who much like their WWII parents, find solace and meaning for their lives by focusing on important events and people that shaped their generation. It is a unique mixture of corporate broadcasting demand and nostalgia.

4, 1970 (1972). Both films, although approaching the incident from different perspectives and using different methods of technique, remain striking testimonials to the power of filmmaking.

In the spring of 1970, Richard Myers was teaching film in the Art Department of Kent State University. An independent filmmaker who started making films in 1960, Myers' presence on the KSU campus when the shootings occurred led him to tackle the incident using the tools of his trade. Myers took a unique approach when he decided to make a film about what happened on May 4. Rather than put together the standard documentary, he took to the streets of Kent itself only weeks after the shootings, seeking to get a feel for "town and gown" attitudes regarding the tragedy. The final product, *Confrontation at Kent State*, serves as an impressive and moving document that captures the anger and confusion of the times. Filmed in black and white with unique editing and sound effects, Myers' film takes the audience into the heart of Kent society, presenting a campus and community wrestling with the implications of what happened. *Confrontation at Kent State* is less a documentary film than a "document" film, incorporating the best elements of personal testimonials and powerful images.

The premise of Myers' film is simple but effective. He took to the streets of Kent with a camera operator in tow and interviewed students, faculty, townspeople, and even a member of the National Guard. He asked each person the same question—"Do you think that the shooting of the students at Kent was justified?" The answers, ranging from angry to incoherent, serve as the focus of the film.¹³ Myers' work is a triumph of artistic

¹³*Confrontation at Kent State*, prod. and dir. Richard Myers, 60 min., 1970, videocassette, Box 95—Film and Video, Kent May 4 Archive, Kent State University Library, Kent, Ohio.

filmmaking, as he utilizes a mixture of interviews, narration over still photographs, and excerpts from radio and television news reports. Despite the dated appearance of the film, particularly in the areas of editing and sound, it still leaves an impression on modern viewers. The film's power is intact over thirty years later. Myers made the film not only for aesthetic reasons, he also donated all proceeds from the sales and rental of this film went to student medical and legal aid funds.¹⁴

By presenting the views of Kent students and residents within months of the shootings, Myers' film provides a forum for the divergent opinions and impressions of a tragedy fresh on the minds of a community. Unlike many standard documentaries, *Confrontation at Kent State* provides no logical relationships between the individuals. Although a few of the interviewees state their names and professions, most of them are nameless figures. However, the diverse subjects, either intentionally or unintentionally, serve as "types," representing the many socio-political elements of the era. The film captures a feel for the era not found in most cinematic presentations on the Kent State shootings. The unscripted interviews with people on the streets of Kent demonstrate the polarized tensions between town and gown often mentioned in documents and analyses of the time.

While the film contains a structure of sorts, it is not classical narrative structure in the traditional sense. The key to this documentary's success stems from its editing and sequencing. Myers arranges his film effectively, interspersing the interview footage with still shots and film footage from the weekend prior to May 4. He also makes impressive

¹⁴"Biographical Sketch" from "May 4th Collection: Richard Myers, Films, 1970-71," speccoll.library.kent.edu/4may70/invmay4.html

use of sound, making it an important component of the style and structure of the narrative. This characteristic is even more striking when one notes the complete absence of any form of musical accompaniment in the soundtrack. Some sequences roll across the screen in total silence; other segments include WKNT radio commentary or interview audio to accompany the images. Many times the sound bears no relation to the image, such as the voice of an interview subject underlying still photographs or moving footage of campus protesters. Myers also uses rapid visual editing techniques, incorporating jump cuts that disrupt the continuity of the images. The camera is always in motion in most shots, due more to the use of a bulky camera with no stand rather than an intentional creative decision by the filmmaker. Myers' frequent use of freeze-frame images, most of them occurring at unexpected points in the film, creates a sense of discontinuity and uneasiness for the viewer. This approach is quite noticeable, particularly when the image freezes within the frame while the audio of that image continues. The images also shift to the appearance of a photographic negative when the frame freezes, giving the frozen subject an otherworldly, inhuman façade. Sometimes this method detracts from the effectiveness of the film. Other times, it leaves a disturbing impression that resonates with the audience.

The film's opening incorporates clips from WKNT radio coverage of the shooting and its aftermath. As the credits roll, Myers shows a montage of still photos of the incident before a jump cut to Barry Levine, the boyfriend of May 4 victim Allison Krause. Levine, shrouded in darkness with only his face illuminated, gives his account of what happened. Myers never moves his camera as Levine describes the movements of the Guard, the attitude of the students, and the fateful moments after the shootings as

Krause died in his arms in the Prentice Hall parking lot. Levine's account mirrors the testimonies of other students at the scene, although he includes some statements that provide more insight into the anger the students felt as the Guard launched the tear gas and began marching towards them on the Commons. Some of his statements leave a powerful impression on the viewer, particularly when contrasted with statements from the Guard leaders and some of the Guardsmen themselves. Levine contends that the "gas bred hate and indignation" among the students, and he believes that the students felt trapped as the situation unfolded. This statement alone raises important questions, as many of the Guardsmen themselves stated it was they who felt trapped by the students. Levine also recalls the crowd yelling at the Guard, whose gas masks obscured their humanity from the students—"you couldn't see a human face behind all the green." The rest of his interview discusses the shootings themselves and why he thought they occurred. He states that while students threw rocks and objects at the Guard, he never saw a Guardsman hit by a projectile. The students threw not to injure the troops, but rather "out of hate and indignation."¹⁵

As Levine's comments end, Myers jump cuts to a still photo of the crowd throwing spent tear gas canisters at the troops. A new montage of photographs taken as the confrontation unfolded fills the frame, accompanied by an unidentified voice describing the shootings themselves. The still sequence moves awkwardly in and out of the frame as the voice of the eyewitness recalls what happened, creating an uneasy feeling for the viewer. The sound of the Victory Bell ringing signals the still photo of the Guard firing into the crowd, accompanied by the thirteen seconds of gunfire captured by

¹⁵Myers, *Confrontation at Kent State*.

WKNT radio microphones at the scene. The unidentified narrator resumes his account, stating that while he did not recall the Guard turning, he remembered the gunfire. He claims that about eight Guardsmen fired into the crowd, and he believes that they were the same men who lined up to face the crowd on the practice football field. Because the narrator remains anonymous, he serves as a disembodied, omniscient figure to bridge the Levine comments with those from the Kent residents and students that follow.¹⁶

The remainder of the film consists of the “person on the street” interviews. There are over twenty separate interview subjects during the course of the presentation, and these include only those persons shown on camera. The interview comments fit within three categories—angry townspeople who blame the students, shocked students who feel betrayed by their community and their country, and a mix of both groups who view the tragedy as an anomaly with more than enough blame to go around. There is no clear distinction of opinion between age groups. Some older Kent citizens express anger towards the Guard and the governor while some younger interviewees blame the students for provoking the Guard to fire.

An examination of every interview subject would fill an entire volume, but there are several comments that stand above the rest. One older man, a security guard at a Kent business, damns both Governor Rhodes and the National Guard for the tragedy. “I’ll tell ya, the National Guard had no training to take care of demonstrations,” he states. “What they should have done, they should have brought in the Highway Patrol which as has education, you know what I mean, to take care of anything like that.” The Guard should not have been placed in such a situation. It was their presence and lack of training

¹⁶Ibid.

that started the confrontation that escalated to the point of shooting. When pressed by Myers to place blame for the incident, the man speaks plainly. “I put the blame on the National Guard and on the governor! The governor is to blame!” Myers asks for clarification by asking if he means Governor Rhodes. “Right! He is to blame because he ordered the guards [sic] in there! The Guard shouldn’t have shown up! If they hadn’t showed up, there wouldn’t have been this trouble!” The sentiment expressed by this older citizen of Kent stands in stark contrast to the general attitude of the townspeople commonly presented in studies of May 4. While his views may be in the minority, they reveal a sense of frustration and anger from a non-student directed at the Guard and Governor Rhodes rather than the students. Myers frames the interview subject so that his security guard uniform is visible, a decision that gives the man a sense of authority with the viewer. Unlike other interview subjects who voice support for the Guard, this man never makes eye contact with the camera and appears uneasy when expressing his opinions. His “law and order” appearance and no-nonsense language make for a memorable segment in the film.¹⁷

At the same time, not all younger persons interviewed in *Confrontation at Kent State* support the students. Most notable are three twenty-something women who express a sentiment that is shocking in its bluntness. The first young woman, carrying shopping bags, praises Governor Rhodes’ decision to send the Guard to Kent. The riotous actions of the students demanded action from government officials and law enforcement. The Guard’s decision to fire stemmed from fear for their safety at the hands of violent students throwing chunks of concrete and cursing at the frightened troops. “I don’t think

¹⁷Ibid.

anybody can take that,” she states. Myers then interrupts the interview with an audio-visual montage of still photographs showing the ROTC fire and marching Guardsmen as the soundtrack rolls radio news reports. The reports mention that no one gave the Guard an order to fire and that the allegations of sniper activity were under investigation. Myers includes a montage of John Filo photographs as an unidentified voice describes how the Guard’s “volley came all at once” creating a scene of “total confusion.” The sequence ends with the famous Filo photograph of Mary Ann Vecchio kneeling over the body of Jeffrey Miller as the narrator mentions that there was no sniper on campus.¹⁸

After a jump cut, Myers asks two young women leaving a store in downtown Kent about their feelings on the student deaths on campus. As their children stand at their feet, these two young women excoriate the students for their un-American, violent actions. One woman laments the fact that “they [the Guard] didn’t kill more.” The students were warned to move out and they should have listened. Myers asks if a failure to comply justified shooting at a crowd. “If that’s what it takes,” the young woman replies. Violent confrontations on other campuses around the nation revealed the need for direct action against the radical students. Without it, she claims, Kent State’s campus “could be another Berkeley.” Halfway through her comments, Myers freezes the frame on the woman’s small children, creating a haunting disconnect between the woman’s angry statements and the innocent looks on the faces of her young children. Myers returns to live action as the second woman interrupts her friend, saying that her husband is in the military. She expresses anger over what she believes is ignorance among American student radicals about what is going on in Southeast Asia. She tells Myers that

¹⁸Ibid.

she supports the American action in Vietnam, but not in Cambodia. “We’ve been in Cambodia,” she says. The problem is that the American government should be truthful about where our troops are and what they are doing, “but not all the way.” If American leaders were more forthcoming, tragedies like Kent State would never happen.¹⁹

After the interviews with these two women, Myers incorporates a dizzying sequence of live footage and still photographs over a soundtrack of radio coverage and testimonials. As the frame comes alive with shots of the tragedy and its aftermath, Myers inserts an audio montage of statements from townspeople and students. The last statement heard as the audio sequence ends is the voice of an angry student—“I think it was murder.” At the point this final statement is heard, Myers moves to a still photograph of a Guardsman standing in front of the burned-out ROTC building, leaning on his rifle...and smiling. This final combination of sight and sound ends the film on a chilling, disturbing note. It also leaves no doubts as to the sentiments of the filmmaker. The Kent State shootings were murder and someone must be called into account for it.²⁰

Thirty-five years after its initial release, *Confrontation at Kent State* remains an important historical source on the Kent State shootings. Not only does it provide insight into the mood of Kent after the shootings, it is also an impressive work of art. Myers’ erratic pacing combined with his awkward editing style and primitive approach (whether intentional or due to technological limitations) could be seen as liabilities. Instead, these elements make the film both memorable and compelling. Myers jumps back and forth between shots of the interview subjects and film footage taken the weekend leading up to

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

the shootings. There is no linear narrative structure. Instead, the film jumps back and forth visually from interview subjects to still photos to film footage. The camera is the one constant throughout the film, serving as a detached, seemingly objective, observer to all that unfolds. Myers' camera work, characterized by its jerky movements and frequently unnatural framing of its subjects, creates a surreal audio-visual experience. There are no smooth transitions from one scene to another. Abrupt jump cuts dominate the presentation, providing a visual companion to the erratic, conflicting views of the interview subjects themselves. It is a powerful visual testament to a trying period in American history.

By contrast, *Kent State: May 4, 1970*, released in 1972, is more in line with the format of traditional documentary. Clocking in at 23 minutes, the film includes narration by famed actor E.G. Marshall. Director Joseph Clement based his presentation on a script by producer Alva I. Cox, but the bulk of the information comes from the research of Peter Davies. Davies had a reputation as a feisty promoter of the need for justice in the Kent shootings, and his book *The Truth About Kent State*, published one year later, provides the framework of the film. As in Davies' book, *Kent State: May 4, 1970* encapsulates the supporting evidence and arguments about the need for the convening of a federal grand jury and/or criminal investigation into the events surrounding the tragedy.²¹

²¹For an overview of Peter Davies' position on the May 4 shootings, see Peter Davies, *The Truth About Kent State: A Challenge to the American Conscience* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1973) and Peter Davies, "Kent State Questions" *New York Times*, 4 May 1976. Davies remained an outspoken advocate of the victims and their families throughout the 1970s.

The way that a filmmaker markets and advertises his or her film to the public is an important link in understanding the goals of a documentarian. This presentation is no exception. When the film debuted with a screening at Kent State on October 23, 1972, advertisement flyers posted on campus described the intention of the filmmakers. “The film recreates the events at Kent State University following President Nixon’s announcement of the invasion of Cambodia which resulted in the death of four students and injury of nine others.”²² The advertisement included a quote from producer-writer Alva I. Cox about the style of the film. “Mr. [E.G.] Marshall narrates the film from the locations of the major events of the week-end. The audience sees clearly where the action took place, where the National Guard and the students were, and what was happening prior to the shootings.”²³

In their advertisement flyer, the producers of *Kent State: May 4, 1970* described the importance of photographs and film footage in the making of their presentation. “The film has been made possible because so many photographers recorded the action. Using the photographs, it has been possible to recreate the events accurately. The film allows the pictures to speak for themselves.”²⁴ Alva Cox stated the primary objectives in making the film in direct terms. “*Kent State: May 4, 1970* is an important historical document. It raises serious questions about the trend in American society to repress dissent with military force. Kent State is only one example of many of the misuse [sic] of

²²Flyer advertising screening of *Kent State: May 4, 1970*, Kent State University, October 1972, Kent May 4 Archive, Kent State University Library, Kent, Ohio. Hereafter cited as Flyer 1972.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid.

police power in a free society—Jackson State, Orangeburg, Attica, police killings of the Black Panthers and Brown Berets, and indiscriminate arrest of peaceful [sic] demonstrators in Washington.”²⁵ The flyer for the film states plainly its use as a means to achieve justice for the families and victims of May 4. “*Kent State: May 4, 1970* raises issues which are of a continuing concern in a free society. They are also part of the struggle of the families of the dead and wounded to get justice from the courts, and of the efforts of many groups to have either a Federal grand jury or a Congressional investigation of the incident.”²⁶ The film received distribution through publisher McGraw-Hill, allowing it to reach an even wider audience than Myers’ film, particularly through its screenings in schools and universities around the nation.²⁷

Clement’s film demonstrates the power of documentary film to encapsulate a large amount of information in a coherent, powerful fashion. The filmmakers make the most of a brief running time, using an effective audio-visual mix of still photography, news coverage from WKNT Radio in Kent, and a soundtrack filled with the sound effects and a musical score by musician Dave Brubeck. Brubeck composed an oratorio entitled *The Truth is Fallen* “in memory of the dead and wounded at Kent State and Jackson State.”²⁸ The film begins with an establishing shot of the Kent State campus as it

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷*Kent State: May 4, 1970*, prod. Alva I. Cox and dir. Joseph Clement, 23 min., McGraw-Hill Films, 1972, videocassette, Box 95A—Film and Video, Kent May 4 Archive, Kent State University Library, Kent, Ohio. Hereafter cited as Clement, *Kent State*.

²⁸Flyer 1972.

appeared in 1972. Clement positions his camera near the pagoda just south of Taylor Hall, the very place where the Guardsmen stood when they opened fire. The strains of Dave Brubeck's oratorio underlie the image as the camera pans across the east side of Taylor Hall in the direction of the Prentice Hall parking lot. The opening shot creates a feeling of ease, but the tranquil scene is shattered as the sound of gunfire erupts on the soundtrack. At the moment the gunfire begins, Clement cuts to still photographs of the shootings and their immediate aftermath, as E.G. Marshall reads the famous excerpt from the Scranton Commission that called the shootings "unwarranted, unnecessary and inexcusable." The music intensifies as the film title appears on the screen before cutting to Marshall standing in front of Taylor Hall. Marshall explains the location where he stands, describing how two years earlier, that very spot was the scene of a great tragedy.²⁹

In the first minute of his presentation, Clement reveals techniques that he will use throughout the remainder of the film. Like *Confrontation at Kent State*, this film cuts between the present and the past using live action shots and still photographs. However, unlike Myers film, *Kent State: May 4, 1970* employs a classical narrative structure. Utilizing flashbacks with introductions by Marshall, Clement presents a chronological account of the events leading up to the tragedy as well as the shootings themselves. One of the unusual facets of Clement's film is the lack of personal interviews. Instead of incorporating a large amount of emotionally charged, first-hand accounts, Clement prefers to tell the story of May 4 through visuals and sound. The vast amount of photographic evidence available makes this decision reasonable and effective. The still photographs, combined with the radio accounts from the scene and the narrative

²⁹Clement, *Kent State*.

sequences of E.G. Marshall, create a seamless narrative structure that filmmakers like Ken Burns emulated with great success in later decades.

After his opening sequence, Clement jump cuts to a sequence including photographs of the May 1 student rally where protesting students buried a copy of the U.S. Constitution. Marshall is shown standing at the site of the Victory Bell on the University Commons before the shot shifts to still photographs of the May 1 rally and the ceremonial burying of the U.S. Constitution. Clement uses excerpts from WKNT radio coverage of the gathering, concluding with sound bites of Nixon's announcement of the Cambodian incursion from April 30. This reverse chronology of events serves the sequence well, as Nixon's explanation of the American incursion into Cambodia underlies the shots of students burying the Constitution, demonstrating the connection between the two events.³⁰

After another jump cut, the viewer sees Marshall walking along Water Street in downtown Kent, describing it as the scene of unrest on the evening of May 1. As sounds of crowd unrest fill the soundtrack beneath Marshall's narration, Clement strings together a montage of photographs of that evening's disorder. The film includes much of the information uncovered by the Scranton Commission, including the arrival of motorcycle gangs, the bonfire and the forced curfew. Cox's script discusses the actions of the crowd on Water Street, including the throwing of projectiles and the ensuing vandalism of downtown businesses. The filmmakers resist the temptation to implicate particular groups in the actions of May 1, preferring to focus on the collective unrest rather than the alleged participants. Considering the conflicting reports of student radical and "outsider"

³⁰Ibid.

involvement, this represents a wise decision. Yet this constructive device supports the stated agenda of the filmmakers. By shifting the focus away from the KSU students who were involved in the Water Street activities, it supports the sympathetic attitude of the filmmakers toward the students as innocent victims. The ensuing sequence showing photographs of Kent students helping local merchants clean up the damage on May 2 further distances the students from the mayhem of the previous night and the tragedy that was to follow.³¹

Kent State: May 4, 1970 then jumps forward to the arrival of the National Guard on the evening of May 2. Marshall's narration accompanies still shots of the Guard arriving in Kent, describing how the vandalism of May 1 pushed Mayor Satrom to call Governor Rhodes and ask for outside assistance to prevent further outbursts. Clement then shows Marshall standing near the Victory Bell on the University Commons as he sets the stage for the burning of the ROTC building on Saturday night, May 2. A montage of still photos, accompanied by crowd sounds and fire engines, serves as the audio-visual support of Marshall's description of the ROTC fire. The filmmakers mention the mysterious circumstances of the fire often ignored by journalistic accounts. The ROTC fire appeared to be under control when students began moving off campus towards Main Street, but after confrontation with local police forced the students back, they found the building engulfed in flames. Again, the confusion surrounding the burning of ROTC deserves such a treatment, but like the account of the May 1 unrest, this disconnect between students and the fire supports the agenda of the filmmakers. While they do not lapse into conjecture concerning the fire, this presentation of events make the

³¹Ibid.

students appear less guilty. Thus, the accurate representation of conflicting accounts supports both the historical evidence and the filmmakers' goals, although the effect of such a presentation varies according to the previous knowledge and pre-existent bias of the viewer.³²

Clement and Cox's recreation of the events of May 3 begins with still photos of Governor Rhodes' press conference at the Kent Firehouse. It is a powerful sequence, with WKNT audio of Rhodes' more confrontational comments as a soundtrack. The photographs of Rhodes chosen by the producers are less than flattering as well, making him appear all the more villainous. Clement follows the Firehouse sequence with an overview of interaction between students and Guardsmen during the day. The viewer sees stills of students fraternizing with the Guardsmen on campus accompanied by the strains of Country Joe McDonald's antiwar anthem "I Feel Like I'm Fixin' to Die Rag." The montage stands as one of the few positive scenes in the film, serving as a narrative reprieve between the unrest of the weekend, the confrontation between the Guard and students in the evening, and the shootings of the next day. The presentation of that evening's confrontation with the Guard on Main Street follows the accounts of Peter Davies and the Scranton Commission. The sound of chanting crowds shattered by gunfire accompanies still photos of Guardsmen pushing students at bayonet point. The stage is set for Clement's account of May 4 itself.³³

Following a brief montage of photographs from May 4, Marshall is shown standing on Blanket Hill, overlooking the Prentice Hall parking lot. The sounds of

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid.

students chanting accompany the familiar photos of the noon rally. Viewers see a rapid-fire sequence of photos showing the Guard moving on the students as the sound of the order to disperse echoes beneath the images. As still photos of the Guard launching tear gas and moving on the students unfold, there is a panning shot of students on the crest of Blanket Hill. The panning shot stops on a single female figure on the hill, moving in for a close-up of Allison Krause, caught up in the “emotion of what was happening to her.” There is then a jump cut to Marshall standing by the pagoda, describing the march of the Guard over the hill toward the football practice field as a “prelude to murder.” The confrontation between the Guard on the practice field and the students in the parking lot receives detailed discussion through an effective use of a sequence consisting of short-take jump cuts of still photographs. The average image frame time in this sequence is two seconds per shot. As the photo montage shows the Guard retreating over the hill, Clement jumps to a shot of Marshall standing on the terrace of Taylor Hall describing the scene, including the positions of students and Guard just before the shooting erupted.³⁴ The documentary then includes dramatic footage never before shown to the public.

The inclusion of the 8mm silent film footage shot by student Chris Abels from his Tri-Tower dormitory represents a major breakthrough in visual testimony of the shootings. Although Abels was a considerable distance from the shooting site, his film shows the actual positions of the Guard and the students at the time of the shootings. Even though the footage is grainy, the film undermines the accounts given by the Guardsmen as to the positions of the students at the time of the shootings. The film shows students moving away from the Guard, with no student in close proximity to the

³⁴Ibid.

Guard when they begin firing. The footage shows the students scattering in all directions, falling to the ground, hiding behind trees and cars, and running for cover. There is no sound to accompany the Abels footage, creating a surreal viewing experience. It is one example of the power of silence. In the midst of a lively film soundtrack, this is the first footage shown in total silence. It is a jarring sequence that is so damning of the Guard accounts that Clement shows it more than once. After a rapid montage sequence of sight and sound that covers the shootings themselves, Clement replays the Abels footage, first in slow motion and then enlarged and in slow motion. As the footage nears its conclusion, viewers hear the thirteen seconds of gunfire underlying the images of fleeing students. Marshall's voice ends the sequence with a haunting and accusatory statement—"mission accomplished."³⁵

Clement ends his film with a montage of photos showing the aftermath of the shootings. Marshall, shown standing near the pagoda, poses a series of questions to the audience, questioning them as to why no one has been held accountable for the tragedy at Kent State. The implication that the Guardsmen committed murder and that the truth as revealed by the photographic and filmic evidence presented here demands justice for the victims and their families. With Dave Brubeck's oratorio playing in the background, the camera slowly zooms in to a close-up of a bullet hole in the sculpture near Taylor Hall. The following statement then scrolls the frame: "This film has been part of the continuing investigation of the Kent State incident. A Federal Grand Jury was convened on December 11, 1973, more than three years after the event. On March 29, 1974, the jury handed down 8 indictments against members of the Ohio National Guard for their

³⁵Ibid.

role in the tragedy at Kent State.” This addendum, added to prints of the film released after early 1974, provides the final assessment of the filmmakers’ motives in creating this documentary.³⁶

Clement’s film is the first documentary film that attempts to present the first weekend of May 1970 in a chronological context, culminating with the shootings themselves. Unlike other films of bygone eras, *Kent State: May 4, 1970* has aged very well. Although the editing style and look of the film belie its age, the presentation of evidence and conflicting accounts surrounding the shootings remain valid over thirty years later. Combined with Davies’ meticulous research and striking photographic evidence, this film undermines the accounts of the Guard concerning the reasons for firing into the crowd. Although the film failed to achieve its stated objectives, as court cases yielded no conclusion and no Guardsman or government official accepted responsibility for the tragedy, it succeeds as an example of the powerful connection between documentary and propaganda. The filmmakers have an agenda, but they are open about their motives. At the same time, their evidence stands the test of reliability even after three decades. *Kent State: May 4, 1970*, more than any other Kent State film of the era, represents the use of film as a persuasive tool in demanding a thorough investigation of the tragedy. Despite its early production date, this documentary film is one of the most consistently accurate presentations of the events at Kent State from May 1-4, 1970.

³⁶Ibid. The original cut of the film ended with the close-up of the bullet hole in the metal sculpture outside of Taylor Hall.

Chapter V

Documentary Film and the Kent State Shootings: The Latter Years

The 1980s saw little interest in the Kent State shootings among documentary filmmakers. After the court trials and litigation ended in 1979, interest in May 4 waned. Part of this disappearance stems from popular culture trends during the 1980s. Gone were the cynical, despondent messages of film and television in the 1970s, replaced with a mixture of baby boomer nostalgia and Reagan-era, pro-American conservatism. To many Americans, the Kent State shootings represented the turmoil of the Vietnam Era. As many baby boomers began to wax nostalgic over their youthful years, they focused more on the positive and sometimes shallow relics of the era. A renewal of interest in sixties music, television and movies overwhelmed many of the significant (and troubling) aspects of that time.

The renewed social and political conservatism of the Reagan era also played a role, as politicians and filmmakers began looking back at the “years of hope and days of rage” as an anomaly in American history. Vietnam was no longer presented as a military failure demonstrating the flaws of Cold War containment policy. “America could have won in Vietnam if the politicians had let the military do its job” became a common theme in American discourse and popular culture, as did the cartoonish characterization of antiwar activists as longhaired, pot-smoking, hippie freaks. As is common in popular

discourse, the events of the past became filtered through the social and political views of the present, leaving an imprint on popular historical understanding.¹

President Ronald Reagan saw himself as the embodiment of a new America that sought to “be great again,” proud of its past, and focused on its future. That focus and future gave no quarter to political radicalism, civil unrest, or failed military ventures. While running for the presidency in 1980, Reagan characterized the revised view of the Vietnam War. Speaking to an audience at the National Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention in Chicago in August 1980, Reagan proclaimed, “it's time we recognized that ours was, in truth, a noble cause [in Vietnam]. We dishonor the memory of 50,000 young Americans who died in that cause when we give way to feelings of guilt as if we were doing something shameful...”²

Kent State, if mentioned at all, served as little more than another reminder of a terrible time in American history where the nation lost its moorings. The era known as “the sixties” became another corporate moniker to market and sell nostalgia to the masses. As with most nostalgia, the more unpleasant events and aspects dimmed while the more positive (and often more shallow characteristics) such as popular music and television programs, charged to the forefront. However, when the Berlin Wall collapsed

¹Many films of the 1980s reflect this theme of a war lost due to incompetent politicians and subversive elements at home. The focus shifted from viewing the Vietnam War as a mistake to seeing the conflict as a form of “lost cause” fought valiantly by America’s soldiers, who became the focus of new Hollywood films. Sylvester Stallone’s “Rambo” film trilogy chronicles the disillusionment of a returned veteran abandoned by his government and fellow citizens. The Chuck Norris “Missing in Action” films also reflected this theme, focusing on large numbers of MIA American soldiers allegedly held in Vietnam after the war ended. For a contemporaneous critical perspective on this shift in popular entertainment, see Michael Parenti, *Make-Believe Media: The Politics of Entertainment* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992).

²*New York Times*, 19 August 1980.

in 1989, signaling the beginning of the end of the Cold War, a subtle shift took place in popular culture and discourse. If America was victorious in the Cold War as many now believed, then maybe it was time for a renewed examination of the entire period, including the Vietnam era. Combined with the growth of cable television and a renewed interest in historical programming, the 1990s witnessed an upsurge in demand for historical documentaries. This shift occurred on the eve of the twentieth anniversary of the Kent State shootings, and signaled a new wave of interest in May 4.

Kent State documentaries since 1990 take a much different approach to the shootings and the Vietnam era in general. Whereas documentaries in the decade following the incident focused more on film as an instrument for justice, recent projects reflect the influences of time and distance. May 4 documentaries since 1990 wrestle with larger issues and strive for greater understanding of the Kent State tragedy within the historical context of the time, as events begin to pass the threshold between memory and history. While sources produced shortly after an incident have the benefits of freshness and “on the scene” information, they frequently fail to comprehend the greater context of an incident. As the years pass, new evidence emerges that enforces or undermines previous interpretations of an event.³ By 1990, most evidence about the Kent State

³This statement holds true, but only in theory. A careful perusal of historiography reveals the persistence of false or incomplete interpretations of events and eras. Too often, the entrenched biases and agendas of a scholar remain in place even when tangible evidence calls their interpretations into question. 1960s America is a textbook example of this problem, particularly as a new generation of historians begins investigating the era without the experience of having “lived through it.” More than one scholar has taken this historian to task for coming to different conclusions about the significance and importance of the sixties in memory and history. “If you didn’t live through it, you can’t write about it” is a mantra tossed about often to post-baby boomer historians with an interest in the Vietnam era. If that thesis is true, then historical inquiry is a dead issue...literally.

shootings was available to the general public, including the FBI Report on the incident. William A. Gordon used these newly released sources in his 1990 book on May 4. There was also a controversy brewing on the Kent State campus itself over the design of a proposed May 4 memorial. This dispute gained national attention and served as a reminder to the public of the shootings and their historical importance, as well as the controversies surrounding the “meaning” of the Kent State tragedy.⁴ Once again, Kent State entered the public discourse, and documentary filmmakers took notice.

As the twentieth anniversary of Kent State approached, a new generation of filmmakers began investigating the shootings. One such person was Jim Klein, a former student activist turned filmmaker. The shootings at Kent State represented one of the most significant events in his youth. Klein was a twenty-one year old college student attending Antioch College in Ohio in May 1970. He recounts a group of his fellow students gathered around a television watching Ike Pappas’s CBS news reports from the KSU campus that evening. “I don’t remember being shocked. To me, it was just a culmination of violence—the verbal violence of Nixon and Agnew and the physical violence of the cops and the National Guard.”⁵ Klein’s reflections mirror many of the memories of other students of the time. “My reaction was ‘They’ve finally gone and

⁴The phenomenon of public memorials is an area that merits more investigation. For an excellent film documentary over memorials and public memory, see *Public Memory*, prod. Amy Gerber and Suzanne Stroh, dir. Amy Gerber, 68 min., FlatCoatFilms, 2003. For a brief but thorough overview of the May 4 Memorial controversy, see Alan Canfora, “The May 4 Memorial at Kent State University: Legitimate Tribute or Monument to Insensitivity?” in Susie Erinrich, ed., *Kent and Jackson State 1970-1990* (Woodbridge, CT: VietNam Generation, Inc. & Burning Cities Press, 1995), 89-100.

⁵*Chicago Sun-Times*, 4 May 1990.

done it. We've reached the last step. They're shooting us now."⁶ Klein says that he became a student activist because he believed that young people of his generation stood at the precipice of history. They had the opportunity to change the direction of the nation, an America that he and many others believed was off-course. Enraptured by what he saw as the beginning of a new age in American life, Klein's decision to become a filmmaker stemmed from the same impulse to contribute to social and political change. By 1989, Klein had received accolades for his film work, including two Academy Award nominations for Best Documentary. His films openly espouse Klein's social activism and liberal political leanings, and his next project reflected those same values. He decided to make a film that attempted "to contrast the values of today's college students with the ones of [his] generation, a collective student body that came perilously close to fomenting a revolution."⁷ Klein never intended to make the Kent State shootings the focus of his film, but after dropping initial plans to make the picture at Ohio University, he chose Kent State instead. "It is a very average school, but it was hard to leave the shootings alone. They haunt Kent the way the 60s haunt America."⁸ What started as an investigation contrasting "Vietnam-era idealism and Reagan-era apathy" became an exercise of historical contrast between generations with the Kent State shootings as the centerpiece.

Klein's finished film is less a documentary about the shootings as it is an examination of how May 4 is remembered and understood by different generations of

⁶Ibid.

⁷*Yellow Springs (OH) News*, 4 May 1990.

⁸*Cleveland Edition*, 3-9 May 1990.

college students. The shootings serve as the film's narrative focal point, allowing for a comparison and contrast of two very different eras and attitudes. To present the contrast between Kent students of 1969 and 1989, *Letter to the Next Generation* uses a combination of archival footage and contemporary interviews with KSU students and professors. Such a project posed potential pitfalls for Klein, but his skill as a documentary filmmaker manifests itself in every aspect of the film. Skillful editing, effective use of image and sound, and dizzying intercuts between archival film and interview footage make the film successful as a documentary. It is also an important example of how documentary film can serve as a means for understanding how changing attitudes affect popular historical understanding.

Klein constructs his narrative via intercuts between past and present, utilizing blackouts and dissolves to connect the footage. He opens his film with an overhead shot of the Commons area, the sound of birds filling the soundtrack. The frame then fades into a sequence showing a guided tour of the Kent State campus for prospective students. The guide takes the students to key places on campus, before moving to the site of the May 4 shootings. Klein intercuts brief shots of May 4 memorabilia as the guide's voice describes the site to the students. "I don't know if ya'll heard about the May 4th incident that happened in 1970." After giving a brief overview of what happened that day, the tour guide tells the group that May 4 is "something we do remember, but it is also something that we are trying to move on in a way."⁹ The camera pans left to show the east side of Taylor Hall as the tour guide's voice gradually fades out, and the frame fades

⁹*Letter to the Next Generation*, prod. Jim Klein and Susan Wehling, dir. Jim Klein, 78 min., Heartland Productions, 1990, videocassette, Audio-Visual Collection, Kent State University Library, Kent, Ohio. Hereafter cited as Klein, *Next Generation*.

to black. Sounds of protest are heard as Klein rolls the first of the film's opening credits—"a film by Jim Klein." A montage of still photos of the confrontation and shooting on May 4 roll across the screen, accompanied by the sound of students chanting, "1-2-3-4, we don't want your fucking war." Klein ends the montage sequence with a close-up still of a Guardsman brandishing a handgun. The frame fades to black again, with the chants of student protesters morphing into the sound of cheerleaders chanting "defense" at a KSU basketball game, circa 1989. The cheers continue as Klein fades the shot to black again, with the title credit written in white, cursive letters fades in over a black frame—"Letter to the Next Generation."¹⁰

Klein's opening reveals the technique he will use throughout the duration of the film—the intercuts between past and present. There is no narration in the film's opening as he chooses to use only the sounds of on-screen figures or edited sound features from audio archival sources. Like Joseph Clement's 1972 film, Klein makes the most out of still photographs and sound to set the tone and construct the story of May 4 for his audience. These images and sounds stand in stark contrast to the images of Kent State in 1989. It is this contrast in image and sound that Klein utilizes as a non-verbal device to demonstrate the split between his generation and the newer generation of students. As Klein shows a sequence sights and sounds from the modern Kent campus, the camera maintains a distance from its subjects, creating a sense of disconnect between viewer and subject. His narration begins, framing the perspective for the viewer. "I believed my generation would make a better world, reshape the future, [and] I knew I was making a

¹⁰Ibid.

difference” Klein states. “There was passion and personal commitment. That felt good! Being involved felt like the most important thing you could be doing.”¹¹

Klein constructs his film around interviews with Kent students and faculty on campus in 1989. He visits a number of classrooms, listening to discussions over the May 4 incident and its significance. Faculty members, including sociology professors Jerry M. Lewis and Tom Lough, who were both at KSU when the shootings occurred, provide their own insights throughout the film. Klein also interviews Kent students in their “natural surroundings,” including dorm rooms, fraternity houses, local bars, and what seems to be the center of student culture, the tanning salon known as “The Electric Beach.” With few exceptions, the students chosen for interviews and presented to the audience as representative of the modern college mindset are self-interested and detached completely from the Kent State of 1970. After each interview sequence, Klein intercuts film and photo excerpts of Kent student activism from the late 1960s and early 1970s, further demonstrating the disconnect that he believes exists between the generations.

Several examples demonstrate his approach to his subjects and the framing of the film. Klein visits the classroom of sociology professor Tom Lough. Lough came to Kent State in 1967, participated in antiwar activities on campus, and even was indicted for incitement to riot after the shootings occurred in 1970. Before visiting Lough’s class, Klein questions him about the difference between Kent students in 1970 and the students of 1989. Lough states, “The students I’m teaching today were two years old in 1970. They are more comfortable than students in the sixties.” Klein asks him what kinds of questions the students ask him about that era. “Not many,” Lough replies. The film then

¹¹Ibid.

shifts to Lough's class, where the classroom discussion topic for the day is utopian societies. Lough tells the students that

If you let others set the standards for you, you're playing the game by their rules. You have to accept the system as given and you never will try to change it, you just try to make yourself comfortable within it. This is what the professional does. This is what I do. I make myself comfortable within a rotten system, and I get off the hook by telling others to change it as best they can.

Klein pans his camera around the classroom, showing the faces of the students in the class. No one argues with Lough about his comments. No one says anything at all.

They continue to take notes with no visible reaction. Klein is shocked.

Klein also interviews and visits the classroom of Professor Jerry M. Lewis. Dr. Lewis served as one of the faculty marshals the day of the shootings in 1970, and since that time, has acted as one of the primary scholars on May 4. He also teaches a class on the Kent State incident, discussing the historical context and significance of the event, along with an introduction to methods of protest. Before showing scenes from Lewis's class, Klein presents a sequence of news footage about the Vietnam War and discusses the events of the weekend prior to the shootings. He describes Kent State as a politically active campus, where student protest rallies attracted the "masses" and set the stage for confrontation. "Looking back today, it's sometimes hard to believe that all this really happened," Klein narrates.¹² This statement is important to note, because if Klein himself finds it hard to comprehend all that happened that spring day in 1970, why is he surprised to find that the next generation of students has difficulty understanding the tragedy, much more the events that surrounded it. After a short clip of Lewis giving his class a tour of the shooting site and some brief interviews with other faculty members, Klein cuts to

¹²Ibid.

May 3, 1989. He shows the annual candlelight vigil for the victims of May 4, including the march around campus before a jump cut to the memorial activities of May 4, 1989. Civil Rights activist Julian Bond speaks to the crowd gathered on the Commons, urging them to “get involved.”

In 1970, we were just ten years away from 1960, the year that black American college students revised the then dormant notion that young people, people your age, college students, people *just like you* could, through social and political action, reshape and remake an apartheid society, and redefine the acceptable notions of protest. The times we face today are not noticeably different.¹³

As Bond speaks, Klein begins talking to some students standing on the hillside watching the rally. He asks them what they think of the event speakers. “They’re too liberal,” one young man responds. “These people are dead. Let them lay in their graves peacefully.”

Interviews with some of the students in Lewis’s May 4 class reinforce the lack of connection that modern Kent students had with their forebears of 1970. In a sequence of short takes, Klein presents a sample of student views as they discuss the difference between Kent State then and now. “People don’t want to fight any more.” “We aren’t apathetic; we are just concerned with other things.” The nameless students express a sense of helplessness with the social and political systems of their day, stating that all one can do is attempt to be happy and not worry about things that are beyond his or her control. An interview with KSU ROTC instructor Captain Rodger Richardson reinforces the views of the students. Richardson was both a Kent student and ROTC member at the time of the shootings in 1970. When asked by Klein to compare the students of 1970 with his current student contingent, Richardson echoes the sentiments expressed by other student interviewees.

¹³Ibid.

RICHARDSON: There isn't the altruism any more that there used to be. You know, we want our VCRs and we want our Sony Walkmans. I didn't know anyone who wanted a BMW. Now everybody wants a BMW.

KLEIN: Why?

RICHARDSON: So why? It's hard to say why. In those days there was a financial aspect, but people just ignored it. You know there was an old joke—now I didn't smoke dope, but there was a joke that 'dope would get you through times of no money better than money would get you through times of no dope.' Well, forgetting the dope and money aspect, the sentiment is, if you've got love and friendship, that'll get you through.¹⁴

The rest of Klein's film focuses on what he sees as typical college life at Kent State circa 1989. He decries a generation without heroes, disconnected from the world at large and seemingly adrift with no sense of passion or desire to take risks. Theirs is a different reality from the world of 1970. Klein attributes much of this shift to several factors. This generation of students came of age in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Their earliest memories consisted of Americans taken hostage in Iran and they remember the anger and confusion that ensued. The rise of Reagan in 1980 shaped their impressions of their world, their country and themselves. Klein contends that this generation bought into the "Reagan mythology" of "good American values" where the individual is supreme. Their goals in life are to graduate with honors, get a good job (preferably in the high-paying corporate world), start a family, maintain good friendships, and build a comfortable life for themselves. Unlike Klein's generation, which he claims was shaped by civil rights struggles, the promise and death of JFK and the Vietnam War, the next generation has lost its sense of hope. They do not see the system as changeable nor do they care about their fellow citizens.

¹⁴Ibid.

Klein also believes that media presentations (and misrepresentations) of the 1960s contribute to this loss of connection between the generations. “I don’t think these students realize what things were like before the sixties, how much has changed” he contends. “Jerry Rubin, the music biz, *The Big Chill*...these don’t represent experiences of people I know.” Yet these experiences dominate mass media presentations of that era and these helped shape the impressions of a generation. First impressions are important, and mass media focuses more on the extremes and/or the “shallow” aspects of the sixties rather than the revolutionary changes that accompanied and followed that era. Despite his gloomy portrayal of the present generation, Klein holds out hope that things are going to change in the near future. His visits near the end of the film with Kent students involved in groups like the Progressive Student Network give him a sense that they may represent “small stirrings of things to come.” Selfish individualism and a life built on the “American conveyor belt” of faceless corporate careers can bring no sustained satisfaction. Klein ends the film by asking “what about the next generation?” The closing credits roll to the strains of Tracy Chapman’s song *Live for Today*.

The thesis of *Letter to the Next Generation* becomes obvious as the film unfolds: the 1960s generation of students believed they could change the world, but students of today just want to party and get a degree so they can feed their own selfish interests. Put more bluntly, Klein believes that the Sixties rocked because his generation had a cause and lived it. The Eighties suck, this new generation does not appreciate what his generation did for them, and they have no vision or purpose. For a historian, the oversimplifications of these thematic assumptions are easy to recognize. It makes for

great filmmaking but also represents the problems inherent to a filmmaker being too close to his subject, his vision skewed by an unconscious sense of superiority.

Klein makes the misguided assumption that every college student in his generation participated in political causes and social activism. It is a faulty premise that more than one former activist has made when writing about or describing the era of his or her youth.¹⁵ Klein compounds the flaw by presenting the attitudes of the students interviewed in his film as representative of an entire generation of college-aged American youth. Such a myopic, skewed approach undermines the central theme of the film. Just as countless young people experienced the 1960s in a very different way than did Klein, many students in 1989 did not share the worldview or experiences of the subjects presented in *Letter to the Next Generation*. For example, Klein ignores the May 4th Task Force, a visible and active student organization that not only helps organize the annual memorial activities, but also is engaged in social and political action both on and off campus.¹⁶ He discusses the Progressive Student Network at Kent State only near the end

¹⁵For an excellent study on the pitfalls of attributing one's own experience to an entire generation, see John Downton Hazlett, *My Generation: Collective Autobiography and Identity Politics* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1998). Hazlett studies the autobiographical writings of 1960s activists. He argues "the idea of generation has affected autobiographical writing in this century" and that by "exchanging 'I' for 'we,' autobiographers from the sixties claim to speak on behalf of all members of their generation." Alleged "straightforward accounts" are actually constructions of a specific personal and political agenda that represent an effort to define both the identity of both a generation and an individual writer. There are numerous problems with such an approach, Hazlett asserts, because "the extent to which each perspective accurately represents that generation's beliefs, values and goals will continually be contested by competing texts and narratives." Klein's film is a cinematic example of that prevalent (and flawed) approach.

¹⁶Kent State shooting survivor Alan Canfora, when asked about Klein's film, referred to it as a "gloomy, self-righteous caricature" of Kent State students of the time. Alan Canfora, interview by author, 3 May 2000.

of the film, undermining their relevance to the campus at large. Compared to the fraternity members, party animals, and bar patrons that dominate the film, the inclusion of students with a sense of social and political awareness seems like an afterthought. Klein's unquestioned belief in "generational representation," both on the part of his subjects and himself, distorts his methods and by default undermines the finished product.

Part of Klein's problem is that he approaches the students of Kent State circa 1989 like an anthropologist studying a lost tribe in the darkest jungles of the Amazon. His tone, both in sight and sound, belies his frustration and disconnection with the students he meets. Klein seems to locate every disconnected, self-indulgent student he can find to serve as his interview subjects. This tactic, while supportive of his own self-image and beliefs, fails to account for the diversity of a college campus. One is likely to get a very different impression of college students if he only interviews fraternity and sorority members pursuing degrees in business administration and leaves out the art majors reading poetry at the local coffee house. Klein chose students and faculty that supported his preconceptions and ignored those persons who would undermine his thesis. It is both effective filmmaking and hopelessly skewed history.

Letter to the Next Generation demonstrates the power of the Kent State shootings as a symbol of an age. Klein's juxtaposition of two eras through creative editing of sound and image leaves an impression on the viewer. However, the tragedy at Kent State serves as little more than a point of reference in the film. The interpretation of the shootings follows the views presented in existing scholarship of the time. Klein sees the shootings as a focal point of a tumultuous era in American history that helped shape an

entire generation. The Kent students from 1989 that dominate his film have a much different view, straddling the line between apathy and antipathy. Many of them just wish that the shootings would go away and they fail to understand why the university, community, and people like Jim Klein continue to keep it alive. This attitude reflects not only on the lack of appreciation of history on the part of the students; it also demonstrates how events that occur outside of one's lifetime fail to resonate in the same way they resound with those who were alive and experienced an incident. Although Klein did not intend to make this point directly, his film shows how one generation's defining moment often becomes another generation's historical footnote. It leads one to speculate that author William Gordon was right when he said, "nobody cares about Kent State any more."¹⁷ Or was he?

The assertion that events like the Kent State shootings no longer command the attention of the public proved to be a premature sentiment as the thirtieth anniversary of the tragedy approached in 2000. The first week of May 2000 saw no less than five documentary programs devoted in totality or in part to the Kent State incident. Three of the programs, two of them shown on the music and entertainment channel "Vh-1" and the other featured on the syndicated television show "RealTV," represented interesting takes on May 4. The "Vh-1" features focused primarily on the popular culture representations and mementos of the incident. As a part of the popular series "Behind the Music," Vh-1 profiled Neil Young's popular song "Ohio" in their episode devoted to the events of 1970. The program contained interviews with former Kent State students including shooting survivor Alan Canfora and pop musician Chrissie Hynde of the popular rock

¹⁷William Gordon, interview by author, 28 December 1998.

group “The Pretenders.” “RealTV,” a program devoted to first-hand film and video accounts, discussed the photographic and film evidence of the shootings along with new interviews with photographer John Filo among others. While these programs offered no new information to the discussion of May 4, they demonstrated the continued interest in the Kent State shootings and acknowledged the event’s historical importance.¹⁸

However, two other documentary programs made efforts to present May 4 within a broader historical context, attempting to present the shootings in a manner understandable to the viewing public without resorting to speculation and the incessant temptation to fill in the missing gaps. The History Channel’s “20th Century with Mike Wallace” series presented an excellent overview of the Kent State tragedy, including its causes and effects. Because CBS News produced the program, it included the aforementioned coverage of May 4 by correspondent Ike Pappas. It also featured overviews of student political action at Kent State prior to 1970 and discussed the court trials of the decade that followed the incident.¹⁹ Single Spark Productions of Santa Monica, California also made a documentary for The Learning Channel entitled *Kent State: The Day the War Came Home*.²⁰ The layered course of action behind the making of this film, including the extensive research and interviews, began in the early spring of

¹⁸See Vh-1, *Behind the Music: 1970*, prod. MTV Productions, 2000, videocassette; and *RockStory: Rebels with a Cause*, videocassette, Box 95A—Film and Video, Kent May 4 Archive, Kent State University Library, Kent, Ohio; RealTV, “The Kent State Shootings,” originally broadcast May 4, 2000, videocassette, in possession of author.

¹⁹The History Channel, *20th Century with Mike Wallace: Kent State*, prod. CBS News, 47 min., 2000, videocassette, Box 95A—Film and Video, Kent May 4 Archive, Kent State University Library, Kent, Ohio.

²⁰*Kent State: The Day the War Came Home* is the American title for the film. The film is known outside the U.S. as *13 Seconds: The Kent State Shootings*.

1999. Little did this author know that he would become a part of the documentary-making process.

While seated at a large table in the May 4 Archive at the Kent State University Library, Professor Jerry M. Lewis, whom I had interviewed several days earlier, approached me with four other people. He introduced me to the four individuals, telling them “this young man is doing some intense work on May 4 and media” and stated, “he knows as much if not more than anyone else” about the shootings. Jim Hense, one of the group members, told me of Single Spark’s plans to work with Canadian company Partners in Motion to make a new Kent State documentary for the Learning Channel. After chatting for a few moments, Lewis took the group around the archive and showed them everything available to them for researching their project. As the group left the archive to continue their campus tour, Dr. Lewis asked if he could speak to me for a moment. Lewis told me that he recommended me to Hense as a consultant on the project. He stated that he thought I would bring a fresh, objective approach to the work, as my research was recent and I was only two years old when May 4 happened. Lewis said that he and Greg Payne were also serving as consultants, but that both of them were “so close” to May 4 and neither of them were historians. He believed that I would provide good balance and historical insight to the project. Surprised and more than a bit nervous, I accepted the invitation and began a yearlong email correspondence with Jim Hense as the project moved from drawing board to finished product. The experience demonstrated the difficulties inherent to making a documentary film for a wide audience, including everything from managing programming constraints of content and time to dealing with copyright limitations on footage and music.

In my correspondence with Jim Hense, we discussed many aspects of the Kent State shootings and the many unanswered questions surrounding the incident. The big question surrounding why the Guard fired remains a mystery, and we talked about the many conspiracy theories about why the tragedy occurred. The problem with many of the books and films about Kent State arose from their authors' tendency to fill in the gaps, bridging the known events with conjecture that undermined the historical importance of the shootings. I told him that the most effective documentary would present what is known without wading off into the deep waters of conspiracy and conjecture. The best way to do this film would be to present the evidence as known from the numerous perspectives of participants, including both the students and the Guardsmen. If these views contradicted one another, so be it, as that is part of what makes an event like Kent State important. Hense agreed and said that the producers agreed with my assessment on the tone and direction of the film. He also stated that the producers had reached interview agreements with several of the Guardsmen who fired, including Lawrence Shafer, but he was uncertain as to how much new light they would shed on what happened. The filmmakers also conducted interviews with many of the survivors of May 4, including Alan Canfora, Chic Canfora, Dean Kahler, and others. They planned to utilize the latest creative visual technology to incorporate interviews, archival film and photographic footage, and music of the era. The producers hoped to present the most thorough and historically accurate film ever made about Kent State. Upon completion, Hense told me that he believed I would be pleased with the results. His positive assessment about my response was accurate for the most part. *Kent State: The Day the War Came Home* is an excellent documentary film about the events of May

1-4, 1970. For the most part, the production avoids conjecture, allowing students, Guardsmen, and faculty to speak for themselves, while leaving most conclusions as to why the tragedy occurred up to the audience itself. It is a powerful, informative film that won a multitude of awards, but like any presentation of its kind, it is hardly comprehensive.²¹

The Day the War Came Home stands out from other Kent State documentaries in a number of ways. The Canadian company Partners in Motion oversaw the project in conjunction with the California-based Single Spark Pictures. Director Chris Triffo is a popular Canadian documentary filmmaker and most of the production team hailed from Canada as well. This composition is important as it gives non-American insight into the tragedy, creating a unique perspective on the Kent State shootings. The determination to present the story with all of its conflicting accounts intact demonstrates the attitude and approach of its creators. Upon receiving an Emmy Award for the film in 2001, Chris Triffo stated that the Kent State incident “was a story that we felt had never been told in this way before. Being from Canada, this allowed us to relay the events impartially.”²² The use of three historical consultants including this author also allowed the filmmakers to balance the contradictory accounts and information surrounding May 4, making for a different methodological approach. In addition to its script construction, the filmmakers

²¹Jim Hense, email correspondence with author, 1 February 1999-30 April 2000. The film won numerous awards both in Canada and in the United States including the Emmy Award for Outstanding Background/Analysis of a Single Current Story-Programs in 2001. The film also won nine awards in Canada and received third place in the category of Best Social Documentary at the Houston International Film Festival in 2001.

²²“Partners in Motion Brings Home an Emmy,” press release, 6 September 2001, partnersinmotion.com.

utilized modern film techniques and cutting-edge editing to present the May 4 tragedy in a way that appeals to present-day audiences. The visual style of the film incorporates vast amounts of audio-visual source material intercut with recent interviews. There is a staggering amount of information presented in less than fifty minutes, so much so that the documentary demands multiple viewings in order for a viewer to process the entire program.

The film's opening sequence reveals the visual and editing style that distinguishes it from previous May 4 documentaries. Triffo begins the film with a rapid montage sequence of still photos of May 4, the Vietnam War, and President Richard Nixon. As the sound of military music fills the soundtrack, the viewer hears audio fragments of interviews with students, Guardsmen, and Kent townspeople. Short cuts of newspaper headlines combine with alternating black and white and color footage to create an overwhelming, disturbing effect as the film's title fades on to the screen.²³ Triffo uses this helter-skelter editing style throughout the entire film. He overwhelms the viewer with rapid-fire visual sequences, alternating balanced and unbalanced framing of scenes and subjects, and creative cuts between black and white, negative, and color still photos or film footage. The film incorporates a broad mix of image texture and color, jumping back and forth between clear and grainy shots. It also uses film speed for dramatic effect, oscillating between normal and slow motion. The only times when the camera shots remain stationary in *The Day the War Came Home* is during the face-to-face interview segments with students and Guardsmen interspersed throughout the film. These features of film editing mirror the methods of modern television and film programs of today,

²³Triffo, *The Day the War Came Home*.

exemplified as they are by constant movement and change of both image and sound. This approach maintains viewer attention, pulling the observers into the drama unfolding before them. More than any other documentary on May 4, Triffo's film uses image composition, sound, and editing to provide non-verbal commentary on the action.

The Day the War Came Home, like Joseph Clement's *Kent State: May 4, 1970*, examines the Kent State shootings within the context of the entire weekend, beginning with Nixon's announcement of the Cambodian Incursion on April 30. The film mirrors Clement's work in other ways as well. After the aforementioned opening montage, Triffo cuts to a shot of the Kent State campus today. The narrator describes KSU as a "quiet and unassuming" campus today that thirty years earlier was the site where the United States engaged in "a four day war with its youth."²⁴ As the camera pans the various sites of the May 4 confrontation, Triffo jump cuts to still photos and film footage of the National Guard on campus in 1970. After the words "Higher Education" appear in the frame, the film shifts to film footage of student protesters in the late 1960s as the narrator says "1970. America was changing whether it wanted to or not." The narrator describes college campuses as the "fertile ground for new political ideas and renewed awareness." Kent State mirrored these changes in its own way, as KSU students "embraced the new outlook with excitement."²⁵ This last statement is an important observation, demonstrating the dramatic interpretive changes over the past thirty years about the political activism at Kent State. Gone is James Michener's depiction of Kent State as a "sleepy little campus" where the confrontations of May 1-4, 1970 represented

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid.

deviation from the status quo. Although Triffo and writer Iain Maclean lapse into the whole “new generation” explanation for the rise of antiwar sentiment, their recognition that student activism existed prior to 1970 properly contextualizes the shootings. Their incorporation of interview segments with Kent student activists Alan Canfora and Laura Davis describing their personal and political awakenings in the late 1960s personalizes the assertion as well.

After a brief sequence of civil rights and antiwar march footage, the frame fades to black, with the words “April 30, 1970” appearing in white on the screen. Triffo shows color television footage of Nixon’s announcement of the Cambodian Incursion, cutting between normal and unbalanced framing. As Nixon tells the American people about the decision to enter Cambodia, Triffo cuts to a slow motion, unbalanced shot of Nixon nervously dabbing the perspiration off his upper lip. The film jumps to an interview with Kent sociology professor Jerry M. Lewis, who explains the importance of Nixon’s announcement on the events that followed at Kent State. Lewis states that Nixon’s statement to the nation demonstrated two things—“one, the war was spreading and more importantly, we were continuing our involvement in the war.” Nixon’s promises of “peace with honor,” already viewed with skepticism by antiwar activists, ring even hollower than before. Triffo then cuts to a mixed montage of war footage, newspaper headlines, and photos and footage of antiwar marches as Creedence Clearwater Revival’s “Fortunate Son” accompanies the images. The narrator states that campuses across the nation “greeted [Nixon’s announcement] with outrage.” Students Canfora and Joseph Lewis state that many students at Kent State became more determined than ever to “take serious actions” to stop both the Vietnam War and the invasion of Cambodia. Following

these brief interview excerpts with Canfora and Lewis, Triffo moves the action to Friday, May 1.²⁶

After “Friday, May 1, 1970” dissolves from the frame, the film shifts to black and white still photographs of the antiwar rally of that day. The soundtrack features a mix of acoustic guitar and the sounds of student protesters. Since Nixon had declared war without congressional approval, the students buried a copy of the U.S. Constitution, an act showed via a montage of still photos. After an interview snippet of student Barry Levine, the “companion” of May 4 victim Allison Krause, describing the rally, the narrator states that the May 1 gathering was the “first of a series of student demonstrations to take place that weekend.” With a foreboding tone, the viewer hears that this rally would be “the only one that ended peacefully.” The black and white footage accompanying this statement then distorts and turns a shade of red, providing visual representation and foreboding of the violence to follow. Triffo ends the segment by cutting to Canfora discussing how word spread around campus about a “militant gathering in downtown Kent” for that evening.²⁷

The filmmakers then examine the unrest in downtown Kent that night using still photographs of the event. While a dirge of organ music plays on the soundtrack, the narrator describes how an “unidentified group” started a bonfire on Water Street. Alan and Roseann “Chic” Canfora describe the scene as it appeared when they arrived as students emptied out of the bars into the streets chanting and spray painting antiwar slogans on the outside walls of businesses. Alan Canfora states that the businesses

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

vandalized were “political targets” in the eyes of the students. Public utilities, banks and other businesses seen as symbols of corporate power and political corruption bore the brunt of the vandalism. Chic Canfora acknowledges that some of the participants had no political motivations, but rather “saw it as a chance to get rowdy and get crazy.” After Alan Canfora mentions that someone in the crowd threw a beer bottle at a passing police car, the montage of still photos accelerates, accompanied by the sounds of crowd noise and guitar-driven rock music. The narrator talks about rumors circulating of SDS activists participating in the unrest on Water Street. As a photo of Kent Mayor LeRoy Satrom appears in the frame, the narration describes the mayor’s decision to declare a state of emergency and order the bars closed. Hostilities escalated as Kent Police began pushing the crowd back toward the university, and Alan Canfora mentions that fourteen people were arrested and many others tear gassed by law enforcement that night.²⁸

The sound of a film projector accompanies the description of Satrom’s decision to contact Governor Rhodes for outside assistance. The still photo of Satrom shifts from black and white to negative before cutting to a photo of the mayor and Governor Rhodes standing together. False rumors of SDS radicals taking over parts of the KSU campus along with fears of further violence prompted Satrom’s call to Rhodes. Canfora asserts that Rhodes’ decision to send the Guard fit within his “law and order” mentality, and points out that Rhodes called out the National Guard more often than any other governor in the nation at that time. As color film footage rolls of Governor Rhodes and members

²⁸Ibid.

of the National Guard, the narrator states that Mayor Satrom was told that the Guard would be on stand-by in case further trouble erupted in Kent.²⁹

There is some confusion surrounding the chronology of events in this segment of the film. While most testimony of the events on Water Street states that both the bonfire and vandalism occurred only after Mayor Satrom closed the bars, the film reverses this order of incidents and confuses the sequence. Combined with the compression of events due to time constraints, this segment creates potential perplexity for viewers not familiar with the Water Street unrest. Yet the section explains clearly the motivations behind Satrom's decision to contact Rhodes for outside assistance, including the rumors of SDS activity and fears of further unrest expressed by Kent citizens and business owners. What makes the segment even more effective is Triffo's creative manipulation of still photographs and film footage using negative imaging and grainy texture. This editing method creates a mood of uneasiness and instability, providing visual compliment to the chaotic, foreboding narrative content. The Water Street segment, despite its chronological confusion, demonstrates the ability of film to present historical context through image composition and framing.

Triffo begins the May 2 section of the film with black and white film footage of the vandalism on Water Street. As students helped local merchants clean up the mess, the narrator states that downtown business owners were concerned about a repeat performance of the previous night's unrest. Rumors of "outside radicals" trickling into Kent fuelled the paranoia and anger of the townspeople. Triffo incorporates film footage of Kent police stopping motorists with interview excerpts of Kent business owner Jim

²⁹Triffo, *The Day the War Came Home*.

Myers. Myers describes the mood of the town the morning after the Water Street vandalism as a mixture of anger with the students and fear that the destruction would continue without drastic action by state and local officials. Satrom, prompted by the swirl of rumors, made the call to Governor Rhodes. As the narrator announces this decision, Triffo jump cuts briefly to a quote in bold print from an unidentified newspaper that reads, “Every time somebody sneezes, they call out the Guard.” Military music rises in volume on the soundtrack as Triffo jump cuts to still photos of National Guardsmen and Myers’ reiteration of the need for outside assistance. The Ohio Highway Patrol and the Ohio National Guard were the “natural choices” for such assistance. “The Guard got here first,” Myers states, “and we were grateful when they arrived.”³⁰

The filmmakers’ overview of the clean-up efforts in downtown Kent and Mayor Satrom’s call for the Guard serves as a compelling link to the ROTC fire segment that follows. This segment stands as one of the more powerful and effective sequences in *The Day the War Came Home*. The narrator describes how ROTC represented a traditional target for student protesters, and that KSU activists marked the campus facility for symbolic destruction. The sequence features the same mix of intercuts between black and white still photos and color film footage of the ROTC fire itself, the crowds of students at the site, and the arriving fire department personnel and National Guardsmen. As the narrator describes the gathering of students around ROTC as darkness fell, Triffo shows a quick shot of the fire itself, panning the shot from bottom to top as the footage takes on negative exposure. Joseph Lewis and Alan Canfora describe the student attempts to set the building ablaze, stating that the initial fire was small and limited to one

³⁰Ibid.

corner of the facility. Don Dixon, a member of the Kent Fire Department, states that as the firefighters arrived, the students attacked them by cutting hoses and throwing projectiles as a means of “making a statement.” A montage of quick cuts of the burning building, the crowd, and Kent fire personnel rush through the frame as the sounds of an angry crowd are heard on the soundtrack. The firemen abandoned the scene due to the crowd resistance and the fact that the fire was out, or at least so small that it posed no real threat. Campus security dispersed the crowd away from the building. When the students left the area, Canfora contends that “the fire was out” at that point, but after roaming about the campus “for a while,” he and others returned to find the building engulfed in flames. The filmmakers do not address the question of why the fire reignited the building nor do they investigate the possible responsible parties. As the scholarship on the Kent State incident shows, the mystery surrounding the ROTC fire remains one of the more confusing aspects of the weekend. Rather than speculate on possible scenarios, Triffo and writer Iain Maclean leave the question open, a wise and effective decision that demonstrates the chaos and conflicting views of the fire and its origin.³¹

Canfora and Lewis describe the shock of the gathered students as they watched the building burn to the ground. Professor Jerry M. Lewis says he remembers hearing the sirens and the sight of “soldiers riding on the fire trucks” as they returned to campus. The National Guard arrived in Kent moments after the fire began raging out of control, and the filmmakers mark their arrival with still photos of Guardsmen riding on fire trucks and taking positions around the burning building accompanied by the sound of marching troops on the soundtrack. Triffo then jump cuts back to interview footage of Canfora,

³¹Ibid.

who remarks, “just as President Nixon invaded Cambodia with U.S. troops, the National Guard invaded the Kent State campus.” As Canfora finishes the sentence, the frame reveals a black and white still photograph of a line of Guardsmen standing near the burning ROTC building. The camera pans in, focusing on one Guardsman who has turned to look back at the photographer. There is a visible hint of a nervous smile on his face as the frame fades to black.³²

At this point of the segment, Triffo shifts the attention away from the students and on to the arriving Guardsmen. He states that many of the troops arrived in Kent after “mediating a volatile truckers’ strike” and included a mix of civilian and student Guardsmen. Three Guardsmen agreed to interviews for this documentary and the narrator names them as a new montage of Guard still photographs moves through the frame. The arriving Guard troops included Kent State student Robert Bosser, Staff Sergeant Rudy Morris, and Staff Sergeant Larry Shafer. Each of the men describes the scene when they arrived in Kent. Bosser says that as the Guard approached town, they could see the glow of the ROTC fire illuminating the night sky. “I thought they were burning the whole damn city down,” he recalls thinking at the time. Dirge-like music fills the soundtrack as Triffo shows footage of the Guardsmen and students at the burning building, and the viewer hears the sound of cheering as ROTC collapses in a blazing inferno. Morris states that Guard leaders told the men to disperse the crowd, and all he remembers of the scene is that it was “dark and noisy.” Guardsmen pushed students back toward the KSU dormitories, and student Barry Levine recalls that the students believed now that martial law had come to Kent State. They would “deal with it the next day,”

³²Ibid.

Levine says, as a black and white photograph of Guardsmen outside of a KSU dorm distorts and changes to a negative exposure before the frame fades to black.³³

The Sunday, May 3 segment opens with color film footage of students and bystanders looking at the ruins of the ROTC building, an action the narrator describes as "the new landscape of their campus." Triffo includes an interesting military drum cadence as accompaniment, with some of the drumbeats utilizing sound effects to make them sound akin to gunshots—a nice use of sound effects as a foreboding device. Chic Canfora describes seeing "150 pup tents" and tanks at the KSU football stadium, signs of "a military takeover of our campus." Guardsman Bosser characterizes the scene as a paradoxical mix of "military vehicles and almost a party-like atmosphere."

Soothing acoustic guitar music complements still photos of students mingling among the Guardsmen as Barry Levine describes an incident that is now an iconic event in May 4 lore. He and Allison Krause conversed with one of the Guardsmen who had a flower in his rifle barrel. As his commander approached and took the flower out of the rifle, Allison grabbed the flower from him, asking him "what's the matter with flowers? Flowers are better than bullets." Krause's statement developed into a catchphrase among the survivors and mourners of the Kent State incident and became a motto of the greater student antiwar movement. The narrator states that the "relaxed atmosphere would not last long," setting the stage for the confrontations that followed later that evening. Triffo ends the scene with a pan shot of a still photograph of a Guardsman with a flower in his rifle barrel. He is flashing a peace sign as the frame fades to black.³⁴

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid.

The filmmakers then shift the focus again, this time to the arrival in Kent of Governor Rhodes. The sound of a camera shooting photos accompanies a montage of still photos showing Rhodes in downtown Kent and at the ruins of the ROTC building. May 4 scholar J. Gregory Payne describes Rhodes' arrival as a symbolic representation of the "law and order" mentality that served as the centerpiece of his senatorial primary campaign. Triffo cuts from Payne to film footage of Rhodes' statements to the press at the Kent Fire House. As the governor likens the protesters to the brown shirts and communist elements and declares, "They are not going to take over campus," the screen fills with a montage sequence of campus footage and newspaper headlines. The scene cuts back to a reporter questioning General Sylvester Del Corso about how long the Guard will remain in Kent. Governor Rhodes interrupts Del Corso, telling the reporter the Guard will stay "until we get rid of them [the student radicals]."³⁵

Alan Canfora states that Rhodes could have been a calming influence on the situation, but instead threw fuel on the fire and made the situation worse with his angry rhetoric. Footage of Rhodes talking to Guardsmen at KSU fills the frame as Payne describes how Rhodes' statements at the Fire House enflamed the Guard and convinced many of them that a state of martial law now existed. Triffo jump cuts to Guardsman Morris, who says that he did not hear any of the governor's comments that day, making the accepted notion that Rhodes incited the Guard a problematic charge at best. Notice how the filmmakers present the perspectives of both sides regarding the role of Rhodes' Fire House press conference without comment. Payne and Morris both contend passionately that his view is correct, and Triffo leaves the question in the hands of the

³⁵Ibid.

audience. This is an unusual tactic for documentary film, but it reflects adequately the conflicting accounts of various aspects of the Kent State incident.³⁶

The remainder of the segment discusses the events of Sunday evening that culminated in the first violence of the weekend. The filmmakers explain the decision by university officials to distribute leaflets banning all demonstrations, but that poor distribution meant that most students never saw it. As the narrator mentions this confusion regarding the leaflets, the screen dissolves into a faded still photo of Guardsmen confronting students on May 4, another visual manifestation of foreboding. After an interview segment detailing the return of victim Dean Kahler to Kent, his father stating that the town was under military occupation and looked “like Korea,” Triffo shifts to the Sunday night confrontation on the corner of Main and Lincoln streets. A still photo of the confrontation fades to negative exposure before segueing into a montage of photos and film footage of the scene.³⁷

The ensuing account of the Sunday night altercation on the corner of Main and Lincoln Streets that resulted in the first confrontation between students and the Guard is the weakest segment of the film. Although the filmmakers present the tension and anger of the scene, they omit many important elements that led up to direct action by the Guard. While the narration mentions the sit-in in the street and the student demands to see university administrators, there is no discussion of a student grabbing a police bullhorn announcing that Mayor Satrom had agreed to meet with them and the false claim that President White was on his way to the scene. The six specific demands the students

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid.

wished to give to White and Satrom are neglected. The filmmakers do not mention the moving of the campus curfew from 1 AM to 9 PM that caused many of the students to go off campus. There is no reference to student activists' attempts to go to President White's house, only to be tear-gassed by Guardsmen. The script fails to clarify the physical positions of the Guard (on campus behind the students) and Kent police (in front of the students between them and downtown). However, the segment manages to convey the growing animosity between the Guard and the students that erupted in violence. The narrator details the altercations between students and Guardsmen as the chaotic action shifted back on to campus, including injuries to both Guard and students, including the bayoneting of one protester. Guardsman Bosser remembers being hit with "bricks, wood, and bags of excrement" as the Guard pushed the students back on to the KSU campus. Much like the Water Street segment with its chronological weaknesses, the Sunday evening account succeeds in establishing the events of Sunday night as the crucial turning point of the weekend. As Greg Payne states in his interview segment, Vietnam and Cambodia receded as the primary motivators behind the protests; the focus now shifted to the Guard's presence on the Kent State campus. As the segment ends, Triffo presents a haunting visual image that creates a sense of logical inevitability. Viewers see a composite shot of a color photo of a Guardsman's bayonet in the bottom half of the frame merging with the black and white photo of Mary Ann Vecchio's silent scream in the top half of the frame.³⁸

The final segment of *The Day the War Came Home* presents the events of Monday, May 4 that culminated in gunfire and the closing of the university. Not

³⁸Ibid.

surprisingly, this last section brings the film to its dramatic peak. The filmmakers bring all of their audio-visual skills to play, presenting waves of chaotic montage sequences that match the bedlam of May 4 itself. Triffo opens the section with the words “Monday, May 4” in the frame as foreboding music plays in the background. A montage of still photos of Guardsmen standing vigil around the ROTC building fills the frame as the narrator describes the air on campus as “clearly one of military occupation.” Students going to morning classes or walking about campus could not escape the presence of the Guard. In an interview snippet, shooting victim Alan Canfora describes an encounter with one Guardsman. Canfora had two black flags when he went to campus that morning, and a Guardsman asked him what he was carrying. When Canfora told him that they were flags, the Guardsman allegedly replied, “Today, we are going to make you eat those flags.” Canfora, stating that he was young and cocky, told the Guardsman not to “get too close or I’ll ram them down your throat.” Triffo jump cuts to film footage of students ringing the Victory Bell on the Commons as the sounds of protest permeate the soundtrack. Guardsman Shafer comments that as the rally began, the Guardsmen “really didn’t know what we were doing.” Sounds of angry protest accompany the rapid-fire still and moving images of the events on the University Commons as the tension increases between Guard and protesters. Chic Canfora and Barry Levine comment that when the Guard began their march against the students, no riot existed. “There was nothing but chanting and waving,” Levine contends. Guardsman Shafer argues that when the Guard fired its tear gas and moved toward the students, it was “an exercise in futility.”³⁹

³⁹Ibid.

Triffo increases the speed of the intercut photos and footage, jumping back and forth between color and black and white, stills and film imagery, and shifting the shots in and out of focus. For added dramatic effect, the filmmakers incorporate Creedence Clearwater Revival's haunting song "Run Through the Jungle" into the sequence. Joseph Lewis recalls the surreal atmosphere as the Guard pushed over the hill. The Guard was taking the situation much more seriously than were the students. "It was a picnic [sic], carnival-like atmosphere" in the eyes of the students, Lewis says. The sounds of Creedence are replaced with military music as the Guard is shown taking its position on the football practice field. Guardsman Morris acknowledges that this maneuver was a "strategic mistake" that left the troops surrounded on three sides. Despite this obvious dilemma, Joseph Lewis recalls the Guard announcing to the crowd that they had them surrounded, "a ludicrous statement." All three Guardsmen state that they or someone near them were hit by flying projectiles, including bricks. Dean Kahler and Chic Canfora argue that such accusations are ludicrous. Kahler says that the students were too far from the Guard to hit anyone with bricks while Canfora states that both sides were throwing rocks and spent tear gas canisters at each other as the photographic evidence shows.⁴⁰

Triffo then examines the famous "firing line" formed by some of the Guardsmen on the practice field. There is no incidental music in this sequence, as the filmmakers replace it with atonal sound effects that match the visual images of the Guard with their rifles pointed at the students in the Prentice Hall parking lot. Guardsman Morris states that the decision to kneel and aim their weapons at the students was another bad move on their part. Some of the Guard believed that such an action would act as a deterrent to

⁴⁰Ibid.

confrontation and force the more vocal participants to back down. It caused just the opposite effect. As Barry Levine observes, the students had “no conception that there were bullets in those rifles,” so the Guard’s decision to kneel and aim reeked of desperation. Alan Canfora believes that he was one of the primary targets of the firing line due to his high visibility throughout the confrontation, waving his black flag and yelling at the Guardsmen. It is at this point that several of the Guardsmen huddled together in the middle of the practice field, a gathering seen in many photographs of the incident. “The Huddle,” as many survivors call it, led to rampant speculation as to the subject of that gathering. Some observers believe that the Guardsmen conspired to fire on the students at this point, but both Shafer and Morris deny this allegation. Morris asserts that the men were simply discussing how to get out of what was an increasingly precarious position. There was no conspiracy among the Guardsmen to move to the crest of the hill and then unload their rifles on the protesters, or that is what both Shafer and Morris contend in their filmed interviews. As a transitional device to the Guard’s retreat from the practice field, Triffo returns to a still photograph of the firing line before fading the frame to black.⁴¹

Military music returns to the soundtrack as the words “Blanket Hill” appear in white within the darkened frame. A montage of still photos showing the Guard as it retreated toward Taylor Hall follows, as students and Guardsmen discuss their recollections of the scene. Barry Levine remembers cheers arising from the students, who thought the Guard’s retreat meant that the tactic had failed and the confrontation was over. Alan Canfora states that the students followed the Guard as they moved up the hill,

⁴¹Ibid.

but stayed at a safe distance fearing the possibility of being stabbed with bayonets. All of the protesters contend that no students were within thirty feet of the Guard as they retreated, a contention supported by the photographic evidence. Yet Guardsman Morris says that as the Guard reached the crest of the hill, one of his fellow soldiers was hit in the leg with a chunk of concrete. As before, the filmmakers allow both sides to describe the scene as they remember it and offer no commentary. The students say that no one was close enough to the Guard to hit them with any projectiles, particularly something as dense as concrete. Conversely, the Guardsmen remember being hit with all manner of objects as they walked up the hill. Amidst the contradictory accounts offered by the participants, the soundtrack changes from military music to strange sound effects. A montage of photographs shows the Guardsmen as they reached the crest of the hill. Student Joseph Lewis, standing approximately thirty feet from the troops, recounts that as the Guard arrived at the crest of Blanket Hill, “suddenly and without warning the lead group turned and aimed.” Regarding this move as a meaningless gesture, Lewis, “being young and foolish,” responded with a gesture of his own. At the moment student Laura Davis says that the scene was “like a film playing in slow motion” for her, the viewer sees still photos of the Guardsmen turning at the crest of the hill.⁴²

Guardsman Morris states that he “heard the word ‘fire,’” although in retrospect, he believes someone actually said “hold your fire” or “do not fire.” Guardsman Shafer recalls the man to his right firing his weapon. Triffo then jump cuts to a still photo of the Guardsmen firing their weapons—an image accompanied by the sound of gunfire. The clear black and white image changes to a grainy shade of red and shifts out of alignment

⁴²Ibid.

within the frame before another jump cut to slow motion film footage of a student turning her head to the right as if to see what is happening. Triffo employs another jump cut to a newspaper headline bathed in grainy red tones that reads “Nightmare at Kent State,” the camera panning quickly from left to right across the words. After this powerful visual sequence, another jump cut reveals Guardsman Morris saying that within milliseconds of the first shot, the volley of fire began. Shafer says that he fired his weapon into the air while Morris states that he aimed at a target (which was likely Joseph Lewis). Student Dean Kahler recalls hitting the ground after hearing the gunshots, and the sight of the grass moving convinced him that the guns were loaded. Morris says that all he can remember was the sight of hundreds of people falling to the ground, and knowing that many of them were being hit. As he says these words, the camera cuts to a close-up of Morris, his voice beginning to tremble as tears well up in his eyes. Alan Canfora talks about being shot through the wrist as he attempted to hide behind a tree while Kahler describes a bullet hitting him just below the shoulder blade, severing his spine as he lay prostrate on the ground.⁴³

At this point in the sequence, Triffo borrows an important element from Clement’s 1972 film by showing the Chris Abels film footage of the shootings. The footage is shown several times in a row, the first time at normal speed followed by a close-up view in slow motion. The filmmakers use the Abels film as a dramatic device that provides visual commentary to the comments of both Guardsmen and students. As the Abels footage plays, Guardsman Shafer remarks how he fired his weapon because he “felt in jeopardy,” fearful that the students would overrun the line. Shafer makes these

⁴³Ibid.

remarks while the slow-motion footage shows no students anywhere near the firing line, resulting in obvious dissonance between image and word. Guardsman Morris remembers his mind racing as the shots rang out. He kept saying to himself “this is wrong...this is not right.” The filmmakers superimpose a still shot of the firing line over interview footage of Morris as he says “this is not right” three times in a row, allowing the viewer to experience the anxiety of the situation. Morris remembers hearing an order from behind to “cease fire,” and Alan Canfora recounts an eerie calm for a split second as the shootings stopped and the Guard made its way back to the Commons. Thirteen seconds of gunfire and 67 bullets later, four students lay dead and nine others injured.⁴⁴

The scene shifts to still photos of the Guard turning and marching back to its position around the burned-out ROTC building, as the viewer hears the sounds of screaming and crying students. Guardsman Morris says that as the troops returned to the Commons, they “had no clue as to how many people were hurt... [but] our fear was that it was awful.” As he finishes this statement, Morris begins to tear up and the frame jump cuts to still photos of the aftermath. Joseph Lewis remembers thinking he was going to die and saying an act of contrition as students came to his assistance. Survivors describe their shock and anger as they began to understand what just happened, recounting the sight of dead and wounded friends. Survivors discuss the four students killed at Kent State, accompanied by still photos of each fatality, their distance from the Guard when shot, and the nature of their injuries. There are brief profiles of the four students, describing their personalities and their roles (or lack thereof) in the demonstration.⁴⁵

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid.

Neither Sandra Scheuer nor William Schroeder participated in the rally. Scheuer was shot on her way to class while Schroeder, an ROTC student, was a spectator caught in the crossfire. The filmmakers include the sequence of photographs taken by John Filo, including the iconic image of Mary Ann Vecchio kneeling over Jeffrey Miller's body. Barry Levine tearfully describes Allison Krause's last moments as she dies in his arms on the Prentice Hall parking lot. Soft music accompanies the discussion of each student, with the faint sound of angry students yelling at the Guard. Although the backgrounds of the four fatalities do not receive extensive examination, Triffo and Maclean include enough information to personalize the "four dead in Ohio." Four minutes of powerful film allows Krause, Miller, Scheuer and Schroeder to become more than just names in a story and faces in faded photographs.⁴⁶

Triffo jump cuts to photographs and accounts of the scene as the Guard returned to the Commons. The escalating anger and tension following the thirteen seconds of gunfire manifests itself through intercuts between photos and interviews. The filmmakers construct a sequence of film footage of the Guard marching across the Commons and in their positions around the ROTC building. The narrator states that General Canterbury told faculty marshals to clear the Commons within fifteen minutes or he would send out the Guard again. Black and white film footage decelerates to slow motion as the viewer hears the voice of faculty marshal Glenn Frank begging the students to leave the scene to avoid a "slaughter." Student Laura Davis states that after a few moments, Frank's message got through to the angry crowd and they began to disperse. The Portage County

⁴⁶Ibid.

prosecutor closed the campus as news of the tragedy made its way to families of the students.

The film accurately depicts the confusion as word of the shootings hit the newswires. Families of students frantically attempted to make contact, an incident that resulted in the collapse of telephone service to Kent. Triffo cuts to new interviews with Elaine Holstein, the mother of Jeffrey Miller, and Doris Krause, Allison Krause's mother. Holstein describes that she learned of her son's death by calling his home after hearing that shots were fired at Kent State. When she asked to speak with Jeff, his roommate told her "he's dead." Krause only learned of her daughter's death by calling the Portage County Hospital where a hospital employee told her that Allison was DOA. The film then cuts quickly to footage from Richard Myers' 1970 documentary where Kent residents talk about how the students "got what they asked for" and that they were "only sorry they didn't kill more." Joseph Lewis describes how his family received numerous phone calls from persons stating how they hoped that he would die. Laura Davis remembers her father stating that the Guard should have shot all of the students for their defiant actions, including his own daughter. This sequence provides important insight into the emotional reactions elicited by the shootings. The sentiments expressed in this portion of the film mirror the responses chronicled in Myers' film, and the inclusion of footage from *Confrontation at Kent State* effectively demonstrates the divisions of the time.⁴⁷

The concluding segments of *The Day the War Came Home* provide brief descriptions of the immediate and long-term effects incited by the Kent State shootings.

⁴⁷Ibid.

Triffo discusses the shootings at Jackson State in Tennessee ten days later, where Highway Patrol fired against student protesters, killing two and injuring twelve. The shootings at Kent and Jackson State resulted in the first and only National Student Strike in American history.⁴⁸ The narrator then gives a short synopsis of the activities of the Scranton Commission and the court trials that followed throughout the 1970s. Despite indictments leveled against eight Guardsmen, no one was ever convicted for the shootings at Kent State. The sequence ends with a close-up shot of the plaque at KSU honoring the dead and injured. While the filmmakers attempt to show the fallout of May 4 deserves commendation, it falls short of the complex legal and political battles caused by the shootings. While some information must be sacrificed to accommodate a 47 minutes running time, the absence of any discussion concerning the court trials and the campus battles over how to memorialize the tragedy represents a glaring, unfortunate omission.

The film's final segment examines the question of why we look back and remember the Kent State incident over thirty years after it occurred. The disparity of answers epitomizes the continuing conflict of meaning and interpretation still present today. Professor Jerry M. Lewis says that May 4 is important to remember because it is a lesson in the abuse of power, and discussion of the use of power and force is necessary if a democracy is to survive. Chic Canfora contends that the National Guard still owes an

⁴⁸This claim is correct, but not completely. The National Student Strike had its greatest effect in the week following the May 4 shootings when over 100 colleges and universities closed. The Jackson State shootings occurred in part because of students protesting the incident at Kent State. It is interesting (and sad) that the Jackson State incident has not received the same amount of attention as Kent State. For an excellent account of what happened at Jackson State, see Tim Spofford, *Lynch Street: The May 1970 Slayings at Jackson State College* (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 1988).

explanation as to why they fired on the students. Guardsman Morris says that he does not know why it happened, but knows that many of the Guard feared being overrun by the students. Even then, he cannot condone the shooting itself. Alan Canfora believes that May 4 happened because of poor leadership by the Guard, who either lost control of the situation or gave an order to fire. Guardsman Shafer concurs with Canfora, stating, “no one knew who was in charge.” The final words spoken in the film come from Guardsman Morris, who says that the Guard on May 4 was a “mish-mosh” of men and officers resulting in diminished control of the situation. “We were put together in such a way that we were destined to fail,” says Morris, “and Lord knows...how we failed.” Morris’s image fades to a list of the names of the dead and wounded at Kent State, followed by a slow-motion montage of photos and footage of memorial vigils, marches, and the day of the shootings themselves. The final image shown before the closing credits is the Filo photograph of Mary Ann Vecchio.⁴⁹

The Day the War Came Home is the best documentary film on the Kent State shootings thus far. With all of its positive elements as a historical documentary, the film has its fair share of shortcomings. The filmmakers leave out any investigation of the student unrest at Kent State in the years prior to 1970, particularly the actions that culminated in the Speech and Music Building episode in spring 1969. While they place the shootings within the greater context of campus activism on a national scope, they overlook the specific actions of SDS and like-minded groups at Kent State itself. It leaves viewers with the impression that KSU had no visible contingency of political activists until Nixon’s announcement of the Cambodian Incursion on April 30, a gross

⁴⁹Ibid.

understatement at the very least. As discussed in earlier chapters, Kent State had a history of student activism going back a decade, although it pales in comparison to the actions at more visible campuses like Cal-Berkeley or Columbia. The origins of the Kent State tragedy transcend the weekend of May 1-4, 1970, and it deserves more investigation and description than the filmmakers provide.

As discussed above, the presentation of the events on both Friday night and Sunday night muddles the order of events and omits important details that are important to understanding the context of the Kent State shootings. The filmmakers' botching of the chronology of the Friday night Water Street unrest is a mystery, as all May 4 studies agree on the order of that evening's events, if not its instigators and participants. The roles of the "Kent 4" and of outside agitators remain open to speculation, but Triffo and Maclean's failure to connect Mayor Satrom's decision to close the bars with the escalation of vandalism and confrontation is a puzzling mistake. The bonfire and early stages of altercation between students and Kent police combined with rumors of outside agitation to lead Satrom to shut down the taverns of Water Street. The filmmakers miss this important connection, and it is an unfortunate but non-fatal oversight on their part. Likewise, the Sunday night violence at the corner of Main and Lincoln gets short shrift from the documentarians, compressing the time between the beginning of the student sit-in and the decision to push the crowd back on to campus. This narrative decision leaves out the reading of the Ohio Riot Act to the students gathered around the burned-out ROTC building and the dispersion of the crowd that followed. That initial dispersal served as the primary cause for students to move to the corner of Main and Lincoln. Once on the scene of the street sit-in, the filmmakers leave out any discussion of where

the Kent police and the Guard positioned themselves in relation to the students. A standoff that lasted over two hours appears much shorter in time, and the filmmakers do not mention all of the specific demands made to law enforcement officials by the students as conditions for ending the standoff. They also leave out the late arrival of Mayor Satrom to the scene or the reasons university officials declined to meet with the students. While some of these creative decisions arise from time limitations, they represent regrettable omissions that would have made the film even more powerful.

Despite these shortcomings, the filmmakers successfully present a great amount of material within a narrow running time without sacrificing historical context. In spite of its weaknesses, most of them due to time constraints, the film succeeds both as history and as art. From an artistic angle, Triffo's film incorporates the latest filmmaking techniques in visual editing and sound. The visual editing style creates a sense of foreboding, and the rapid intercuts of short takes propels the rhythm of the narrative. There are few long takes in the film with the exception of the interview segments, none of which lasts more than ten to fifteen seconds. The frame never remains stationary, as the shot moves continually from one short take to another connected via a dynamic mixture of jump cuts, fades, wipes and dissolves. The seamless editing between still photos and film footage, varying in texture and color, speed, and focus serves as the primary narrative device in the film. While such an approach could hinder a documentary of this nature, it succeeds by capturing through its audio and visual elements the chaos and tension of the weekend. The narration, minimal in scope when compared to other May 4 documentaries, represents a secondary characteristic of the film's structure. The film would have been just as effective if it had used no narration at

all, and relied on the interview excerpts alone to complement the various visual and sound montage sequences. The argument that this approach represents a triumph of style over substance fails to account for the solid historical research that behind the audio-visual elements themselves.

From the historical research angle, the film stands the test primarily due to its insistence on allowing the conflicting interpretations of May 4 to remain unresolved. As the written accounts of the Kent State shootings over three decades reveal, the amount of unknown information and room for conjecture remains a primary characteristic of the event. Unlike other May 4 treatments such as Clement's 1972 documentary, Triffo's film attempts to incorporate a multitude of perspectives, giving both students and Guard opportunities to speak. The filmmakers do not attempt to "fill in the blanks" where accounts and available information conflict with one another. Instead, the film focuses on the historical significance of the tragedy, replete with its legion of uncertain elements. The continuing absence of closure itself represents an important part of that historical significance, and any attempt to answer questions without solid evidential justification would undermine the film's effectiveness. There is no attempt by director Triffo and writer Maclean to lay specific blame at either the students or the Guard. Viewers sympathetic to either side will not have their attitudes changed by seeing this documentary, but the filmmakers' attempts to suspend bias as much as possible allows for a greater consideration of the experiential and perspectival complexities of those who lived through May 4. If anything, *The Day the War Came Home* demonstrates the ambiguous facets inherent to any historical event and the attempts to understand it. The

study of history is never a precise undertaking. Clearly defined heroes and villains make for good drama, but they are not always characteristic of historical inquiry.

The Kent State shootings represent a historical event that has captured the creative minds of documentary filmmakers for over thirty years. Each film has its positive and negative characteristics, and as a whole, they embody a plethora of ideologies and interpretations. Both the Myers and Klein films use May 4 as a dramatic device to investigate broader questions, allowing viewers to consider the tragedy and the era surrounding it as means to understand what the shootings revealed about American society then and now. The Clement and Triffo films represent two cinematic attempts to investigate how and why the Kent State incident happened based on evidence and accounts available at the time. Taken as a collective, these four films (and the many others not examined here) demonstrate how history is transmitted and understood over time. They also reveal the important role of documentary film in both the revelation and creation of popular historical understanding, and the insights available to historians willing to take audio-visual sources seriously.

Chapter VI

Docudrama and the Kent State Shootings

Motion pictures have shaped our minds and now television is shaping the minds of our students.¹

It's about something that should not be buried. It's part of American history, and American history cannot be buried. I don't know if the movie will do anything to keep it from happening again, but I hope that it will at least spark some interest in people's finding out what happened.²

"If it isn't on television, it doesn't count" or so stated an SDS leader to a crowd of supporters before they attempted to stop a train carrying Vietnam draftees in NBC's 1998 miniseries *The 60s*.³ One cannot overestimate the influence of television on all aspects of American culture since its rise during the 1950s. As discussed in previous sections, television influences the nature of popular historical understanding on multiple levels. The ability of images to shape attitudes in a more powerful way than words or verbal accounts cannot be disputed. Television gives the viewer the sense of being an eyewitness to an event, although the medium presents that event from a narrow

¹Peter C. Rollins, "Film, Television and American Studies: A 1998 Update," *Hollywood as Historian: American Film in a Cultural Context*, ed. Peter C. Rollins, revised edition (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 246.

²Actor Michael Horton, quoted in J. Gregory Payne, *Mayday: Kent State* (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishers, 1981), text available online at www.may4archive.org/may4movie.shtml, accessed 3 May 1997, 17 June 2000, 22 June 2004. Hereafter cited as Payne, *Mayday*. Horton played one of the young Guardsmen at Kent State in the NBC docudrama.

³*The 60s*, prod. Jim Chory, dir. Mark Piznarski, 172 min., 1999, videocassette, NBC Home Video.

perspective often devoid of context. If this is a problem for television journalism, it causes even greater problems in programs where historical events serve as the setting of a dramatic presentation, a cinematic form frequently known as docudrama.

Docudrama represents the marriage of historical event and dramatic interpretation. The results range from acceptable to disappointing, with the occasional success. The problem with docudrama is that it seeks to be both historical and dramatic. While most students of history recognize that there is nothing more dramatic than life itself, docudrama makers often feel the need to embellish the “drama” side of the equation, frequently at the expense of historical accuracy. Drama in the minds of many filmmakers relies on human relationships and emotional connections. What do the viewers want...a history lesson or a dramatic, emotional story with characters they connect with them? If a choice is necessary, the historical angle becomes secondary and sometimes expendable in a business where ratings and dollars (or box office returns) determine content. At the same time, docudrama can communicate important elements of time and place and generate important debate about history even when the details become embellished and dramatized.⁴

Docudrama assumes a variety of forms, although the most common type of docudrama makes an historical event or era the focus of the production. While some scholars label films such as *Pearl Harbor* (2001) and *Alexander* (2004) as docudrama,

⁴For a discussion of how historical film and docudrama serve an important role as historical text, see Robert Brent Toplin, *ReelHistory: In Defense of Hollywood* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002). Toplin contends that the polarized debate between historians and media theorists masks the important questions about historical film. He calls for balance on the part of filmmakers, giving a place to dramatic embellishment as long as it does not fall prey to “troublesome excesses.”

these productions better fit the category of “historical epic.” Although some scholars view a distinction between historical epic and docudrama as problematic, there are elements that differentiate the two forms. Historical epics take a particular event from history and weave it into the dramatic narrative, but the event or era serves more as a setting or background for plot development, often romantic in nature, rather than the focus of the film itself. Docudramas, unlike historical epics, make the historical event itself the primary centerpiece of the plot, weaving dramatic elements within the incident without taking any emphasis away from the event. In other words, historical epics make historical events secondary to the action while docudrama makes (or claims to make) the historical event the primary focal point of the action. Docudrama filmmakers frequently advertise their films with statements like “based on a true story,” “the definitive account,” or the ever popular “the untold story”—with mixed results. Most often, the medium of television makes use of the docudrama format. When discussions began about making a film on the Kent State shootings, television was the obvious vehicle for such a dramatic presentation.

As the decade of the 1970s began winding down, scholars and scriptwriters alike began looking back at the previous decade with a mixture of curiosity and disappointment. Despite the fact that much of the 1960s social agenda and even its countercultural elements now mixed within American politics and culture with little or no notice, there was still a sense of melancholy. What started out as a possible revolution, the beginning of the “age of Aquarius” among America’s youth (or so the story goes), ended in violence and dismay, destroyed by the trifecta of the Manson Murders, Altamont, and of course, the Kent State shootings. The counterculture became co-opted

by corporate America who killed the dream by draining it of its substance, leaving only the tie-dyed shirts, bell bottoms, long hair, and Rolling Stones reunion tours as a visual residue of a failed revolution. Maybe. Maybe not. While such lamentations line the pages of many an account by former activists, they sound more like the disheartened cries of the postwar “Lost Generation” of the 1920s than the cogent analysis of a complex historical epoch.⁵

The fact is that many elements of “the revolution” of the 1960s succeeded. What many analysts miss is the fact that a revolution rarely unfolds in the ways its proponents plan or expect. That does not mean that no revolution happened, however. It did. The counterculture became culture. Many participants in anti-Establishment movements and groups became part of the Establishment itself. Some call such integration a sell-out while others see it as liberation of the Establishment itself. Whatever the case, much of what looked and sounded revolutionary in the 1960s now seemed like everyday life by the end of the 1970s. In order for a revolution to succeed, it must cease to be revolutionary and be accepted as mainstream. That is exactly what happened to some aspects of the “sixties” as the 1970s crawled along.

There were many questions left unanswered about those troubling events that surrounded the end of the sixties and the early years of the seventies. As previously noted, the court cases and investigations into the shootings at Kent State were over by 1979. Still, May 4 was an event that continued to trouble many Americans. Questions

⁵For an excellent example of this thesis, see Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, rev. ed. (New York: Bantam Books, 1993). For dissent from this view, see James J. Farrell, *The Spirit of the Sixties: The Making of Postwar Radicalism* (New York: Routledge, 1997); and Terry H. Anderson, *The Sixties*, second ed. (New York: Pearson Longman, 2004).

remained unanswered, and no one was willing to accept responsibility for the carnage. The lawsuits ended with a financial settlement paid to the survivors and families of the dead, but the Kent State incident still felt unresolved. As the tenth anniversary of the tragedy neared, television once again began turning its attention to the shootings, along with the many other events that made the 1970s one of the more interesting periods in recent American history. Television loves anniversaries. The ability to step back and re-examine important historical events after various points of time elapse represents the warp and woof of television programming. The Kent State shootings were no exception. The question was how television could present May 4 to an American audience in a way that raised the important questions, touched the emotions of the viewer, and generated solid ratings for advertisers. Obviously, something had to be done to commemorate the anniversary of this tragic event as only modern America can do it. Someone had to make Kent State into a “made-for-television” event. That someone was Inter Planetary Productions in association with Osmond Productions (of Donny and Marie fame) who planned to film the project as a four-hour, two-night “miniseries” presentation for NBC.⁶

The 1970s were the golden age of the miniseries. Alex Haley’s *Roots*, which appeared on the ABC network in 1977 to rave reviews, ranked as one of the highest rated programs of the era and the natural result followed its success—imitation of the format. The May 4 shootings looked like the perfect project for a multi-evening, miniseries treatment, so Inter Planetary Productions pushed for just that. They referred to the project as a docudrama, that aforementioned type of film laden with problematic implications.

⁶Payne, *Mayday*.

For several years, J. Gregory Payne, then a professor of communications at Occidental College in Los Angeles, now at Emerson College in Boston, had been obsessed with May 4. An undergraduate reporter for the University of Illinois campus newspaper in May 1970, Payne went to Kent several days after the shootings. This initial visit became the impetus for additional research, including a dissertation, a stage presentation, and numerous articles and presentations on May 4.⁷ Payne's long-term interest in the shootings stemmed from his belief "that the glaring inconsistencies and unanswered questions from various 'official explanations' of the shootings simply had not been brought to the attention of the American public." He believed that "once these issues were widely publicized . . . thousands more would demand that the truth and justice be served." When Payne's friend, independent filmmaker Kevin Irvine, showed him the article about the impending Kent State docudrama in the October 19, 1979 issue of *Variety* magazine, Payne recognized an important opportunity to expose the inconsistencies and unanswered questions about May 4 to a large television audience. With the filmmakers hoping for a May 4, 1980 airdate to capitalize on the tenth anniversary of the shootings, Payne believed such a film could be an important contribution to the understanding of Kent State. Still, he had mixed feelings about the project as described in the article.⁸

Payne states that he "was most excited by the prospect that millions of people could scrutinize the bizarre story of the incident for themselves. Yet, Kevin and I were worried about the inherent limitations of entertainment television programming." Payne

⁷*Hunstville (AL) Times*, February 1981.

⁸Payne, *Mayday*.

had many questions about the nature of the project due to the limits of television itself. “Would the tragedy be portrayed in its complex entirety? Too often challenging pieces are abridged for television’s mass audience. Producers and network moguls, fearing that viewers won’t comprehend a complicated storyline, provide simple answers for difficult problems.” Payne worried that the results might create more problems than they solved. “We [Payne and Irvine] realized that the sensationalized production would shed no new light on the incident; and perhaps only confirm most of the audience’s prejudices.”⁹

Payne began making phone calls to other interested parties of May 4. Peter Davies expressed many of the same reservations voiced by Payne and Irvine. “Neither of us were convinced,” Payne recalled, “that commercial television would dare to reveal all that was known about the incident.”¹⁰ The families of the four slain students expressed views ranging from skepticism to support when asked about the project. Sandra Scheuer’s father Martin assumed that Payne’s phone call about the film stemmed from his own involvement, an incorrect assumption. Payne states that after talking to the four families and gauging their reactions to the miniseries, he “resolved to make every effort to get involved in *Kent State*.”¹¹

Several phone calls to Inter Planetary Productions resulted in a meeting with Max Keller, Chairman of the Board with IPP. Payne explained his long-time involvement with May 4, including a dissertation, numerous speeches, and his authorship of the play

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

Kent State: A Requiem.¹² He discussed his in-depth studies of the Kent State incident and his concern “that historical integrity be preserved” in the film. A working relationship ensued, culminating with Payne serving, at Keller’s request, as historical consultant for the project. Payne’s primary responsibility was to read the script for the film, offering criticism and “pointing out any inaccuracies to the author.”¹³ Payne also expressed concerns over the source material the writers planned to use when creating the script. James Michener’s heavily criticized book, along with a “novel” about the shootings, was at the top of the source list. The initial script sent to Payne dispelled his concerns.

The author of the script came with glowing credentials. Gerald Green, screenwriter for the highly acclaimed miniseries *Holocaust*, penned the original draft. This first version, according to Payne, “captured the divisiveness” of the incident without becoming a “whitewash of the facts.”¹⁴ Payne noted that Green successfully captured the animosity between town and gown and accurately “elucidated the roles various politicians played in precipitating the confrontation.” He also applauded the writer’s representation of the ROTC Fire and the many unanswered questions surrounding the

¹²*Kent State: A Requiem* is a stage play presentation of the Kent State shootings written by Payne. He tells the story through the voices of the four slain students at Kent State. A moving production, it is the best dramatic presentation of May 4 thus far, providing excellent balance between drama and historical accuracy. It continues to be performed, usually on anniversaries of the incident. This author witnessed a performance at Kent State in 2000. For more information on this production, see Payne’s website at www.may4archive.org/requiem.shtml.

¹³Payne, *Mayday*.

¹⁴J. Gregory Payne, “‘Does Television Change History’: Docudrama Panel, The Second National Conference on Television and Ethics, Emerson College, Boston, Massachusetts, March 6, 1987,” www.may4archive.org/conference.shtml, accessed 3 May 1997, 18 June 2000, 24 June 2004. Hereafter cited as “Docudrama Panel.”

blaze. Payne sent a letter to Max Keller expressing his satisfaction with the script, believing this action would end his involvement in the project. Little did he realize that his involvement was only beginning.

Payne learned through contacts at NBC that the network programming executives had some problems with Green's script. NBC executive Dennis Consedine stated that persons within the network thought the script was "too political and lacking dramatic content." Apparently, depicting a weekend full of violent engagements capped off by Guardsmen shooting at college students was not dramatic enough for the network. Payne's concerns escalated when he learned that "NBC executives preferred a more human focus and had considered developing a romantic theme between some of the principal characters."¹⁵ IPP executive Max Keller assured Payne that he remained committed to "presenting the facts." At the same time, Keller stated that suggestions coming from NBC reflected a hope to "expand some of the characterizations in an effort to attract audience empathy and identification." Central to the changes was a demand that "the Allison Krause-Barry Levine relationship be 'spiced-up.'" NBC sent the script back to Green and asked him to rewrite the draft, incorporating the "character elements" they requested. When he refused to rewrite the draft, the first of a series of revisions began.¹⁶

Payne, increasingly disturbed by the network's demands for dramatic license, recoiled when he received the revised script in early July 1980. He noted, "historical preciseness had been sacrificed in favor of the emphasis upon relationships." The revised

¹⁵Payne, *Mayday*.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

script took liberties with the involvement of the four slain students, erroneously placing them at events where they were not present. Schroeder and Scheuer were shown at the May 1 Cambodian protest rally even though none of the four students attended the gathering. The film places Krause, Miller, Scheuer and Schroeder at the burning of the ROTC building. Schroeder was not on campus that entire weekend, yet the script showed him observing the inferno, replete with foreboding observations. The revised ROTC Fire scene suggested strongly that crazed KSU students instigated the action, a view riddled with inconsistencies among the eyewitness accounts. The script presented university and city officials as unwitting victims of the weekend's actions, skirting over the existing tensions between students and townspeople. No mention was made of the greater socio-political climate in the nation that surrounded the events of May 1-4, 1970. This omission made the hysterical pronouncements of Governor Rhodes, his dispatching of the Guard to Kent and the confrontational attitudes of the students seem spontaneous and out of place. Despite evidence to the contrary, the writers presented the bulk of the Guardsmen, including those who fired into the crowd, as college-aged youths without adequate training for such a situation. Disturbed by these errors and embellishments, Payne sent Keller a nineteen-page, single-spaced list of criticisms and errors in the revised script, including the aforementioned items.¹⁷ He believed that historical accuracy was giving way to dramatic license in an extreme fashion that undermined the entire film.

What seemed to be arising was . . . [a] temptation to go beyond the truth for dramatic effect. When this occurs, fact and fiction are often undifferentiated, creating many variations of factualizing fiction and fictionalizing fact. The problem that I saw was, how does the audience know? How do you know, if you're watching, if the four students were

¹⁷Ibid.

actually at the ROTC fire, which was a very significant event, of if they weren't? How would we know if the four students were at various rallies, or were not at various rallies, as the movie sometimes suggests? I thought these were crucial questions. If you put people in certain places it seems to suggest, at least to the audience, that what they got was justified in terms of what occurred.¹⁸

Payne asserts that his haggling with the producers arose from the determination to “present an objective rendition of the facts; it would be left to the [viewers] to assess blame for the shootings.” He also wanted to avoid any allegations of bias in favor of the Guard, a charge he saw as warranted given the script changes in place at the time. Keller understood Payne’s concerns, but he reminded the consultant that *Kent State* was not a documentary film (although documentaries have similar problems in presenting an objective rendition of an event as discussed in previous chapters). Keller told Payne “the ‘dramatic license’ to distort actual events...was needed to provide ‘balance’ that would keep the audience interested,” an argument that Payne justifiably found troubling. Several days later, Payne received a call from Dorothy Fox of IPP who demanded “detailed substantiations” to his many problems with the script. His complaints failed to persuade the filmmakers, and director James Goldstone along with new writer Richard Kramer wanted to know where Payne got his information. Although he acquiesced to their request, Payne told Fox that “if anyone needed to substantiate sections of the screenplay it should be those who suggested the new, dramatic interpretation of the Kent State shootings.”¹⁹

One week before the film began shooting in Gadsden, Alabama, Payne realized that no set script yet existed. Despite several rewrites, the updated scripts failed to correct many of his concerns. At the request of the producers, Payne assembled a “chronological fact sheet” of the events in Kent from May 1-4, 1970 and sent them to

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid.

writer Richard Kramer in Alabama.²⁰ Upon receiving Payne's information, the production team responded that the film could not contain all of the outlined material. They reminded Payne that the film "was to be a dramatic portrayal of the events," a stance that he again rejected as an unacceptable position. With the situation at an impasse, Dorothy Fox explained to Payne that some of the primary figures in the production staff viewed him as a "radical" bound and determined to distort their attempts to create a "balanced" presentation. After several days of correspondence between Fox and the film's producers, they decided to invite Payne to Alabama to oversee the project. Although the producers told him that he would only need to be on location for several days, Payne arrived the first week of August 1980 and did not return home until September 25. Because of his conversations with the family members of the victims and others, Payne wanted to ensure that the Kent State tragedy received an accurate portrayal. He believed his presence on location would assure that the script rewrites maintained the demand for dramatic television without sacrificing historical accuracy.²¹

Payne left for Alabama with five full suitcases of May 4 research materials and two days' worth of clothes. "En route to Birmingham I pondered the 'radical' reputation that was preceding me. I, too, saw the situation as radical, but from a different perspective. For a government to follow the course of inaction exhibited by ours in the aftermath of the Kent State shootings was, I hoped, a radical departure from the norm." Payne was determined to make sure the "broad political context" surrounding the shootings figured prominently in the film. "Without it," he reasoned, "viewers might not remember the bitter divisiveness—the worst among Americans since the Civil War." After arriving in Alabama, Payne began working with writer Richard Kramer to correct

²⁰See "Chronological Fact Sheet," *J. Gregory Payne Papers*, Box 67, Kent May 4 Archive, Kent State University Library, Kent, Ohio. Hereafter cited as *Payne Papers*.

²¹Payne, *Mayday*.

some of the problematic content. Payne believes that his “friendly working relationship” with Kramer later helped “insure that areas of greatest historical importance were given their proper focus.” He also met with persons from the NBC movie department and discussed his problems with the script, discovering that they shared many of his reservations about the rewrites.²²

The script’s portrayal of the ROTC fire was one of Payne’s biggest concerns. He expressed dismay that the film gave the impression that the students caused the inferno that burned the building to the ground. “While official investigators found that many students had left the area after the initial attempt to set fire to the building failed, the script had the students remaining in the area, thus insinuating that they eventually started the blaze.” Payne also protested the decision to place the four eventual victims of May 4 among the crowd at the ROTC fire, an erroneous depiction that he believed would give the impression that “if students were in an area where the National Guard were, they were asking for trouble.” His arguments failed to persuade the filmmakers, who asserted that the four principal characters must be seen watching the fire “in order to build audience empathy for them.” Their only concession was to present the four students watching the fire from a considerable distance, thereby demonstrating their lack of involvement in the burning of ROTC. The scene remained a sticking point between Payne and the filmmakers up to the very point it was filmed, including a rewrite the weekend prior to filming. “Dramatically, we had to have it [the students close to the ROTC building],” actress Ellen Barkin recalls, “so we took a little dramatic license to put the kids there when they actually weren’t.”²³ The debates surrounding the ROTC scene demonstrate the constant difficulty in maintaining a balance between historical accuracy and dramatic

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid. For details of conflicts between actors and filmmakers, see *Payne Papers*, Box 67, Kent May 4 Archive.

license. The scene as filmed addressed some of the debated points, but unintentionally created new problems, as would other important dramatizations throughout the finished program. The filming of the shootings themselves, with a few embellishments and discrepancies, met with Payne's approval.²⁴

Throughout the duration of filming, Payne continued to haggle with the filmmakers over dramatic license. The finished film, rehearsed and filmed in about thirty days, went through nine different script changes. Yet Payne's presence on the set helped prevent many inaccuracies from finding their way into the story, but he was unable to eliminate all discrepancies in a way that satisfied all interested parties. He reluctantly coalesced on some points regarding the specific actions and locations of students and Guardsmen in order to assure that the areas of primary historical importance were presented accurately. "You must remember," Payne stated, "we were working with a network that was trying to look for profits. Our goal was to adhere to some type of historical accuracy."²⁵ Notice how the frustration of dealing with a network bent on profits and dramatic license combined with financial and filming deadlines drove Payne to strive for "some type of historical accuracy." Most television audiences want emotional involvement engendered by traditional cinematic devices, not intellectual diatribes about historical interpretation.

With this in mind, the film fictionalized many of the relationships of the primary characters in the film, particularly the four persons killed at Kent State. The embellishments did not stop there. According to Dr. Jerry M. Lewis, professor of Sociology at Kent State who was on the Commons that day, "there is only one important scene without serious error--the Sunday night sit-in. All the others have factual errors

²⁴Payne, *Mayday*.

²⁵Payne, "Docudrama Panel."

that seriously challenge the validity of film.”²⁶ Although Lewis’s argument deserves attention, his view that the errors “challenge the validity of the film” is rather extreme in light of the nature of docudrama. Some dramatic embellishment works within the context of a dramatic presentation without sacrificing vital historical content. The greater question for viewers is whether the dramatic license taken by filmmakers undercuts the historical value of a film. *Kent State* demonstrates the difficulty of maintaining such balance.

The film opens with an effective montage. Shortly before the montage begins, a statement appears in the frame to set up what follows. “On May 4, 1970, four students were killed at Kent State University. Their deaths ended a decade that began in innocence and ended in despair.” The music and film montage begins as the words fade from the frame. Director James Goldstone incorporates original footage of key events from 1960s America. Beginning with the election of John F. Kennedy, the opening sequence includes clips of major events and individuals from the era. The sequence visually takes the viewer back to the sixties, progressing from shots of children playing with hula-hoops, JFK and his family, teenagers dancing, JFK’s funeral procession, and The Beatles’ arrival in New York. The sequence shifts from black and white footage at this point, with the remainder of the montage comprised of intercuts between black and white and color footage. Brief excerpts of Robert F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, bombs dropped on Vietnam, LBJ, antiwar marches, the riots at the Democratic Convention in Chicago, Nixon’s first election victory and napalmed Vietnamese civilians fill the frame in rapid succession. The musical accompaniment is Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young’s famous anthem “Teach Your Children.” The song is quite dark lyrically, interspersing an upbeat chorus with an undertone of melancholy in the verses. Goldstone

²⁶Jerry M. Lewis, “*Kent State--The Movie*,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 9 (Spring 1981): 16.

uses the lyrical content of the song as aural commentary to the visual imagery. As the lyrical content becomes darker, so do the images. At various transition points in the song, the filmmakers jump cut to brief color shots taken from the reenactment of the May 4 confrontation in the film of Guardsmen gearing up on the KSU campus, facing off with the students and firing the fateful shots. These brief dramatized snippets are devoid of any musical accompaniment, creating an awkward and foreboding effect on the viewer. Not only does the intercut sequence serve as a harbinger of things to come in the film, it also provides historical context through visual and sound editing. It is also the only historical context given by the filmmakers, with the exception of dialogue between characters in various scenes throughout the film. The opening montage closes with an excerpt from Nixon's April 30 announcement on national television of the invasion of Cambodia. It is an effective sequence and a promising beginning to the presentation.²⁷

The story proceeds chronologically from Nixon's announcement of the Cambodian incursion, using datelines at the beginning of each scene to contextualize the story. The use of datelines gives the film a documentary feel, as does the use of unknown actors in the major roles. Although actors Ellen Barkin, Keith Gordon, and Will Patton went on to higher profile roles in ensuing years, they were virtual unknowns at the time. Even then, Barkin and Patton play composite stock characters in the film. None of the actors who portray the four students killed on May 4 (Gordon as Jeffrey Miller, Jane Fleiss as Allison Krause, Talia Balsam as Sandy Scheuer, Jeff McCracken as Bill Schroeder) was a famous face, a decision that allows the viewer to view them from the context of the greater story rather than focusing on what a particular well-known actor is doing in the film. The filmmakers introduce each of the four students gradually and

²⁷*Kent State*, exec. prod. Philip Barry, Max Keller, Micheline Keller, dir. James Goldstone, 120 min., 1981, videocassette, Inter Planetary Productions and Osmond Communications, MCA Home Video. Hereafter cited as Goldstone, *Kent State*.

without specific identification, their identities becoming clear only as the story unfolds. While the creative decision to place the four students in places and scenes they never were allows for dramatic effect, it gives a false impression of their involvement in the events leading up to the shootings. Schroeder's presence in a Water Street bar on Friday night and the ROTC fire the next night represents one such unnecessary creative decision, as does Krause's and Scheuer's attendance at the fire.²⁸

The four principal actors turn in good performances, although the development of each character ranges from accurate to oversimplified to outright misleading. Each actor does the best he or she can do given the limitations of the script. Jeff McCracken gives a fine performance as Schroeder, conveying effectively a young man torn between his love of country and misgivings about the Vietnam War. It is a portrayal supported by accounts of those who knew Schroeder best, including his friends and family. He also bears a striking resemblance to Schroeder, a characteristic that contributed greatly to his casting. Keith Gordon gives a good portrayal of Jeffrey Miller despite some serious characterization problems in the script. The screenplay underplays Miller's political activism, focusing on his counterculture views and musical aspirations, creating an incomplete portrayal of a complex young man. Letters from Miller to his mother and memories of his friends demonstrate his political involvement extended beyond the weekend of May 1-4, a fact misrepresented in the film. Miller goes from being a rather naïve, apolitical "hippie" on May 2 to a screaming protester on May 4 with no explanation given to explain the change. Despite these shortcomings, Gordon captures the playful idealism of Miller, making his mindless death all the more emotional and traumatic for the audience.²⁹

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹*Newsday*, 12 February 1981. Jeffrey Miller's mother Elaine Miller Holstein says that the Kent State docudrama "lacked political depth" and "the characters were superficial." She says that Keith Gordon was not like her son for the most part. "They

Likewise, Talia Balsam's portrayal of Sandy Scheuer suffers from the same script weaknesses. The film also presents Scheuer as having few political opinions, a creative decision that adds to the dramatic impact of her death but oversimplifies the true nature of her character. Scheuer, like many of her campus contemporaries, expressed political opinions without engaging in active protests. However, this does not make her apolitical, at least not to the extent the script implies. The filmmakers also include a blossoming romantic relationship between Miller and Scheuer, best represented by a scene where the two characters discuss their personal ambitions as well as the growing tension on campus over a spaghetti dinner. Although the scene allows the audience to see the human side of two important characters, the inclusion seems awkward and unnecessary.³⁰

Unlike the other three main characters, the depiction of Allison Krause fails in almost every aspect. Jane Fleiss does her best with the role, but the script completely misrepresents her character. The writers present Krause as a rather timid individual who seems more concerned about appeasing her boyfriend (another poorly conceived role) than engaging in political activism. The character comes across as a weak-willed individual with little sense of her own identity who only tinkered with political causes—a representation that is the complete opposite of Krause as described by friends and family members. Fleiss, unlike the other three actors, also bears no physical resemblance to Krause, further compounding the problems. She is a fine actor, but she cannot compensate for the missteps of the screenwriters. In their attempts to present Krause as a

portrayed Jeff as a sweet, warm, awkward kid, but he was not that one-dimensional." Her son was more committed to the "cause of peace" that the film suggested. Family members of the other three slain students said very little to the media about how their children were portrayed. Allison Krause's father Arthur Krause only stated that the film missed the point.

³⁰Goldstone, *Kent State*. Although there are no accounts in any literature of a relationship between Scheuer and Miller, Alan Canfora contends that the two students knew each other and even showed interest in starting a relationship. Alan Canfora, interview by author, 22 January 1999.

sympathetic character caught in an unfortunate situation, the writers downplayed the strong personality traits remembered by those who knew her best. This is a needless decision on the part of the writers, especially when a presentation of Krause as the strong young woman she was would not dampen the tragedy of her death in any way. Not only would such a portrayal be more accurate historically, it would demonstrate the diversity of the students that confronted the Guard at Kent State when the shootings occurred.³¹

The Guard characters themselves are all composite characters, fulfilling a dramatic variation of the stereotypical “good cop/bad cop” dichotomy. The younger recruits endure hazing from the older Guardsmen, particularly in the scenes where the troops prepare to leave Akron for Kent. The veteran Guard members demonstrate the most anger and resentment at being called in to quell potential rioting at Kent after spending days clashing with angry Teamsters. Kramer’s rewritten script shows the inexperienced nature of the youthful members of the Guard dispatched to Kent while presenting the older Guard veterans as veterans of riots and confrontations. As the Guard packs up for its trip to Kent, there are several encounters between young and old troops over the nature of their duty, their call to Kent, and their views of student protesters. Rather than presenting the entire Guard as antagonistic towards campus protesters, the script shows the members of the Guard as divided along generational lines, much like the oversimplified images of the surrounding society at that time.

In response to Greg Payne’s criticism of script drafts presenting the Guard as primarily a youth-laden group, the filmmakers accurately portray the Guard as a mix of young and old. A predominantly youthful Guard composition, while adding dramatic effect by serving as a symbol of intragenerational conflict, would have been an inaccurate depiction. At the same time, constructing the situation as symbolic of a “war between generations” is likewise false. The troops who went to Kent were a mixture of veterans

³¹Goldstone, *Kent State*.

and youth, and thanks in part to the work of Payne, the filmmakers chose to present the Guard as such. While the decision to make all of the Guardsman composite characters seems questionable to some scholars and survivors of May 4, the film does a reasonable job in demonstrating the varied composition of age, attitude and experience among the troops dispatched to Kent. The characterizations are not perfect and some of the acting “pedestrian” at best, but *Kent State* succeeds in its presentation of the Guard as a mixed, tired, and combustible configuration of individuals without absolving or damning them.

As discussed above, docudrama is a type of filmmaking that stands or falls within the context of how the incorporation of dramatic license undermines the historical accuracy of the story. The tendency of the filmmakers to embellish the telling of Kent State for more dramatic effect manifests itself in reenactments of key events. Several disputed scenes deserve examination in order to show the problems created by “made-for-TV” history. One of the most persistent disputes surrounded the film’s aforementioned portrayal of the ROTC building fire on Saturday, May 2. As a survey of May 4 literature reveals, the origins of this fire are unknown, with rumors providing the primary foundations of most perspectives on the incident. Greg Payne argued that the scene should demonstrate the confusion of the night without accusing any particular party. Obviously, the filmmakers did not agree with that assessment, as the movie gives the impression that either torch-wielding students or outside agitators started the blaze.

The scene opens with students gathering around the Victory Bell on the Commons, spouting every antiwar, sixties-era cliché known to humankind. The students act as a collective, acting obediently to orders given by what Payne calls a “mysterious figure in a plaid shirt” (it is actually dark green) standing near the Victory Bell. The crowd is crazed and organized from the start. As they move toward the ROTC building, students begin tossing projectiles at the structure and breaking out windows, but there is no attempt to start a fire. The scene presents the events that preceded the fire with

relative accuracy, despite the caricatured “plaid shirt man” and the over-the-top spirit of the students. At this point, the segment deteriorates rapidly. Suddenly out of nowhere, a dozen torch-wielding figures converge on the building and toss their torches into the structure. “Who are these guys,” one of the students asks, “and why are there no cops here?” To add to the dramatic effect, the film shows students singing the Doors’ “Light My Fire” as the building burned to the ground. This never happened, yet it is one of the more powerful scenes in the film, and it leaves a strong impression on the viewer. When the Kent firefighters arrive, students attempt to stop them from battling the blaze by assaulting them and cutting their fire hoses. After a brief encounter between the two groups, the firefighters back off and the fire rages out of control. The students begin dancing and cheering around the burning building before lapsing again into stunned silence as National Guardsmen arrive to the strains of Neil Young’s *Ohio*.³²

The scene includes close-up segments of shocked students watching the inferno from the hillside, including dialogue from the four individuals who died on May 4. By all accounts, none of the four students was at the ROTC fire, but the filmmakers place them in the scene for greater dramatic and emotional effect. Bill Schroeder, watching the building as it burns, says “you can’t torch everything you don’t like. The whole world would be on fire.” It is a powerful statement given the fact that he was not on campus that weekend. Jeffrey Miller and Sandra Scheuer arrive together as the building burns. Allison Krause, along with her boyfriend Barry Levine, hears the sounds of the gathering outside her dorm room. They arrive just in time to see the building ignite as Krause clings to Levine, stunned at what they are witnessing. All four students stand a considerable distance away from the student mob, demonstrating their lack of involvement in the fire itself, a compromise decision between Payne and director Goldstone.

³²Goldstone, *Kent State*.

The inaccuracies present in the ROTC fire scene go beyond the bounds of acceptable dramatic license. The filmmakers compress the events surrounding the fire, a tolerable and often necessary device in a docudrama presentation. The problems arise from their omission of the gap in time between the initial attempt to burn the building, the movement of the students to the edge of campus, and their return to ROTC where they found it ablaze. Time compression is understandable, but in this instance, it removes important events key to proper contextualization of the event. The depiction gives the false impression that the burning of ROTC occurred quickly and with some semblance of organization on the part of the students. The film also shows faculty marshals attempting to keep the students from attacking the firefighters and burning the building although existing accounts debate the exact role of faculty members at the scene.

The placement of the slain students in all of the key scenes (the May 1 protest, the Water Street incident, the ROTC Fire, and the Sunday night confrontation) adds to the dramatic effect by connecting all four students to each stage of the weekend. Greg Payne regards their presence as ill advised and misleading, as well as the implication that Kent students instigated the ROTC fire. He laments such decisions, stating, “there’s a feeling among network executives that you’ve always got to provide answers to the audience.”³³ In other words, since audiences hate open-ended accounts, filmmakers resort to oversimplified or faulty explanations at the expense of “real world” chaos. Alan Canfora disagrees with Payne’s misgivings, stating that the inaccuracies of the scene “should not take away from the overall accuracy of the ROTC fire event. It did burn under very mysterious circumstances.”³⁴ One can only wonder how two knowledgeable people hold such different interpretations about the dramatic license of such an important scene, but it

³³Payne, “Docudrama Panel.”

³⁴Canfora, “Docudrama Panel.”

is probably a reflection of preconceived beliefs (or unshared information) about the incident.

Although the final script hints at the involvement of persons other than KSU students in setting the fire, the scene suffers from what one may call “excessive balance.” By striving to avoid accusations of bias, the filmmakers wind up completely satisfying no one. They only add additional and unnecessary confusion to an event already rife with eyewitness inconsistencies and conflicting accounts.

Another debated scene in the film is the portrayal of the student sit-in that occurred on Sunday evening, May 3, to protest the presence of the Guard and the imposition of a 1 A.M. city curfew in response to the burning of the ROTC building the evening before. After a peaceful standoff between police and students that lasted approximately one hour, demonstrators asked for a meeting with Mayor Satrom and University president Robert I. White. Police officials agreed, but only if the students would vacate the street and return to campus. As they entered the campus gates, the students were told the curfew had been moved up to 11 P. M., giving them little time to find shelter. Within minutes, the Guardsmen were moving in, firing canisters of tear gas and unleashing their bayonets. Some students threw rocks, and a few of them engaged the troops, receiving bayonet wounds as a result. The extent of the injuries is in dispute, as is the number of students that received wounds. The Scranton Report says only “two students were bayoneted [sic] and sustained minor cuts.” *Thirteen Seconds: Confrontation at Kent State* (1970) by Cleveland journalists Joe Eszterhas and Michael D. Roberts, also mentions the event, but its reference is to a blank page in the Scranton report.³⁵

Nonetheless, the film depicts the severe bayoneting of a radical protester by a Guardsman during the chaos, a controversial scene that evoked strong emotional

³⁵Lewis, “*Kent State—The Movie*,” 16-18.

responses from viewers. Jerry M. Lewis called this depiction “the most effective scene in the movie.” However, he is quick to clarify that “on the basis of sources, the bayoneting [sic] (it looked like 3-4 inches into the thigh) is clearly a piece of fiction, yet given the credibility of television, this scene is fixed in the minds of *Kent State* viewers as fact.”³⁶ Ensuing accounts of Kent State validate Lewis’s claims of the time. Alan Canfora states that the film portrayed the bayonet incident “very well.” The scene “served to clarify a misconception about Kent State,” he argued. “Many people are not aware that students were stabbed by the bayonets on the evening before the shootings in what was the first day of a two-day reign of terror by the National Guard.” Canfora asserts rightly that viewers deserve to witness the excessive nature of the force used by the Guard in pushing the students back on to campus.³⁷ Still, bayonet injuries and minor cuts are not the same thing as a severe stabbing. The scene packs quite a punch, and one can only speculate as to its effect on scholarship, although Lesley Wischmann’s 1990 account of Kent State mentions the brutal bayoneting of students as fact (with no citation).³⁸

Some observers may say contention over the brutality of the attack is immaterial, arguing that the fact Guardsmen showed no hesitation in attacking protesters is the most important element of the scene. While such an argument has its merits (chaotic, riotous atmospheres are not very conducive to levelheaded accounts), the point remains that this scene, more than likely, arose from attempts to push the emotional buttons of the viewer rather than a desire to portray the incident based on available, albeit conflicting, data.

With the many questionable creative decisions surrounding the production, the reenactment of the May 4 confrontation and shooting deserves careful examination.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Canfora, “Docudrama Panel.”

³⁸Wischmann, “Four Dead in Ohio,” 30.

Despite some inexplicable incorporation of dramatic license, the May 4 scene is both effective and powerful. Unlike the rest of the film, most of this scene utilizes a hand-held camera feel to it, giving it a greater sense of realism than other segments. Although the filmmakers compressed the scene due to time constraints, the general movements of the Guard and students accurately follow the details of the eyewitness accounts...with several glaring exceptions. As the Guard begins pushing the crowd over Blanket Hill, one student is shown taunting a Guardsman at close range with a black flag. Survivor Alan Canfora debunks the scene, saying, "it would have been foolish to do that and no one did." Canfora says that the protesters "were very aware that students had been cut by the bayonets the night before" so everyone kept a reasonable distance from the Guard.³⁹ As the Guard approaches the crest of Blanket Hill near the pagoda, they stop and collect themselves before continuing their march. While it fits the context of the scene as filmed, showing some of the youthful recruits removing their masks to catch their breaths, this pause never occurred. As Lewis and other May 4 scholars contend, if the Guard had hesitated at the top of the hill before marching on to the football practice field, the entire incident may have ended at that point.⁴⁰ All eyewitness accounts recount the Guard never ceased marching as they topped the hill even though their only orders were to disperse the crowd over the hill, a fact conveyed effectively in the film.

The greatest problem with the climactic scene is the problem of geography and campus layout, something that most viewers would not know. Since Ohio officials refused to allow the film crew at Kent State itself, they shot the film at Gadsden State College. While most of the scenes do not suffer because of this location, the May 4 incident is an exception. Although the film presents the movements of students and Guardsmen accurately, it alters the direction of key locations, including the Prentice Hall

³⁹Lewis, "Kent State—The Movie," 17-18

⁴⁰Ibid.

parking lot and the football practice field. Greg Payne worked with the set designers to make the location look as much like the area where the shootings occurred, but it still falls short.⁴¹ Despite the location problems, time compression, and slight use of dramatic license at various points in the scene, the recreation of the May 4 rally, shootings and aftermath follows the details of eyewitness and historical accounts. It is the most effective scene in the entire movie, and it leaves an emotional mark on the viewer.⁴²

There are many positive and negative elements surrounding portrayals of participants and incidents depicted in *Kent State*. Lewis writes that the film portrays the main characters (the four slain students and geology professor Glenn Frank) and their movements on the day of the shootings in a relatively accurate manner.⁴³ Most of the other characters (the enlisted Guardsmen, faculty, and radical protesters) were composites. Also noticeable in the film is the generally apolitical nature of the students, especially in the opening scenes. This is a questionable portrayal considering the historical circumstances of the shootings and the events surrounding them, both in the preceding days and years. Despite the opening montage, lack of historical context due either to creative decisions or time constraints, is one of the primary difficulties with

⁴¹The parking lot and practice field are exactly opposite from their locations at Kent State in 1970 and to those who know anything about the shootings, the difference hurts the film and its potential to show accurately the positions of students and Guard before, during and after the fatal shots. However, this problem does not undercut the power of the presentation or the point of the tragedy.

⁴²I showed this film to a group of upperclassmen history and social studies majors in a Film and History class at Oklahoma Panhandle State University in spring 2003. Every student reacted with anger and sadness to the final scene. When questioned about the most effective parts of the film, all students noted the May 4 rally scene. One student mentioned a feeling of hopelessness during the scene and wondered aloud whether students at Kent State that day felt something just like that.

⁴³Lewis, "*Kent State--The Movie*," 17-18

docudramas such as *Kent State*. A miniseries or TV movie lacks the ability in most instances to provide the greater context of a particular event. Instead, they are simply broadcast into the living rooms at face value, small shards of “here-and-now” competing for the attention of a diverse viewing public. On TV, everything is now, from live coverage of a bombing raid in Iraq to reruns of *Green Acres* on Nick at Nite’s “TV Land.” Time ceases to exist in the world of television. As Marshall McLuhan stated, “TV as a today show is a continuous present. There are really no dates.”⁴⁴ Such an element contributes to the difficulty of interpretation of a TV film like *Kent State*. Even Alan Canfora agrees on this point, despite his praise for the movie. “One inaccuracy in this docudrama is the lack of a historical context,” Canfora observes. “You see at any point that similar incidents occurred all across the country during the first two weeks of May 1970.” He points out that students around the nation attacked some thirty ROTC buildings during that time. “When you look at *Kent State*, you get the opinion that this happened only at one school when in fact that’s not true.”⁴⁵

Unless the viewer were alive at the time of the incident and remembers seeing television coverage of the shootings (or just happens to be someone with a reading knowledge of Vietnam-era America), they will have no clue about historical context. The careful attention to 1970 youth clothing styles in the film might lead some modern viewers to recognize it as a docudrama about an important historical event. Then again,

⁴⁴Marshall McLuhan, *Essential McLuhan*, ed. Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrove (New York: BasicBooks, 1995), 294.

⁴⁵Canfora, “Docudrama Panel.”

they might just as easily mistake it for “Greg Brady--The College Years.”⁴⁶

The film received a mixed reaction from critics when it aired on February 8, 1981. Most reviews either panned the film as a skewed presentation or saw it as a powerful statement about a divisive time in American history. There were few voices in the middle. Howard Rosenberg of the *Los Angeles Times* saw the film as a missed opportunity to clear up the questions surrounding Kent State. “If truth did become a victim of the 1970 Kent State tragedy, as many have charged, the same can be said of Sunday night’s three-hour TV movie depicting it.” Rosenberg’s article details the problems many of the cast members had with the script as well as Greg Payne’s efforts to make the presentation more historically accurate. He criticizes the writers’ reliance on James Michener’s work as a primary source and laments the lack of historical context, particularly the omission of the tumultuous aftermath. Payne, while acknowledging the

⁴⁶For an excellent, critical assessment of the weaknesses in the film, particularly failings of historical context and the consequences of unfortunate omissions, see the scathing review in *Newsday*, 9-12 February 1981. The writer is James Simon Kunen, author of *The Strawberry Statement*. “There’s nothing wrong with the picture; it’s the *cropping* that’s bad,” Kunen states. “Too much is left out. The ‘docu-drama’ is all verisimilitude and no truth.” Kunen contends that the filmmakers focused more on “making sure the actors wore the right clothes” than placing the shootings within the greater context of the Vietnam War and its impact on American society. “There is no history, no politics, in *Kent State*. The students are portrayed as opposing the war simply because they *are* students, and thus the myth of the ‘generation gap’ is perpetuated. They speak of no reasons for attending the fateful demonstration, which could as well be a picnic or a ‘happening.’ In place of politics we are given rock music, as NBC celebrates only that part of the ‘youth culture’ which the entertainment industry could understand, package, and sell.” Kunen believes that this absence of context undermines the film’s usefulness as “absent any historical or political context, it [the shootings] can only be remembered as an unfortunate, meaningless event, like a plane crash, from which the only lesson to be derived is: Accidents happen. There is more to be learned from Kent State than that, and it’s important for Americans to learn it.” Kunen sees the film as an example of how television docudrama fails when it attempts to present important historical eras and events. “*Kent State* exemplifies how the small screen can be minutely accurate while obliterating the big picture.”

flaws, defends the film, stating that a film like *Kent State* cannot avoid the effect of “political tastes.” He believes that such influences, while significant, should be held at bay as much as possible. “I don’t think you can depict history on the whims of political tastes,” Payne asserts.⁴⁷ Such a statement fails for many reasons. Historians know that political tastes influence popular historical interpretation, for better and worse. Attempts at balance on the part of filmmakers or writers often result in criticism from all sides of the political spectrum. Suspension of bias often becomes a bias in and of itself.⁴⁸

Television audiences tuned out as well. Trimmed from a four-hour, two-night miniseries into a single night three-hour film, it finished 61 out of 64 programs for that particular week in the Nielsen ratings. It came in third place for its time slot behind a rerun of the Burt Reynolds film *Hooper* and the miniseries *East of Eden* starring Jane Seymour.⁴⁹ Released on home video, it fared little better. Video copies are difficult to locate as the only company producing the film today is based in Canada. Seeing it on

⁴⁷*Los Angeles Times*, 9 February 1981. See also *Cleveland Plain-Dealer*, 17 February 1981, and the aforementioned *Newsday* article by James Simon Kunen. Besides Kunen’s article, the best overall critique of the film is the aforementioned Lewis, “*Kent State--The Movie*.” For an insight into Payne’s view of the film in the years following its completion, see J. Gregory Payne, “‘Mediated Reality’ of Kent State: The Friction Between Fact and Fiction,” in Susie Erinrich, ed., *Kent and Jackson State 1970-1990*, Second edition (Woodbridge, CT: VietNam Generation, Inc. and Burning Cities Press, 1995), 159-172.

⁴⁸Not all reviews of the film were negative. Many of the survivors of May 4, including Tom Grace, found the film a flawed by worthy effort. *Variety* applauded the film despite the flaws of its script, stating, “the last emotion-charged 20 minutes effectively wipe out any misgivings about dramatic intensity.” See *Variety*, 8-15 (?) February 1981. Also see reviews and editorials in the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, 8 February 1981; *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 9 February 1981; *Buffalo (NY) Courier Express*, 9 February 1981; *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 6 February 1981; *Huntsville (AL) Times*, 8 February 1981.

⁴⁹Jerry M. Lewis, “*Kent State—The Movie*,” 18-19.

television today is rare, even with the onslaught of cable networks in need of programming. As a result, few people know that the film exists.

In a panel discussion about the influence of television (and other visual media) on the understanding of history, Greg Payne explained the connection between historical interpretation and the problems caused by media culture.

Trying to reconcile history is a very, very old problem. In writing *Tom Jones*, Henry Fielding indicated that he “was not obliged to reconcile every matter to the notions concerning truth and nature.” When we look at television today and its pervasive impact on American culture, it’s extremely important to assess the importance of . . . docudrama, depending on which interpretation you provide. Because as Gerber and Connolly write, television tells its stories to people of all ages and all groups at the same time. Television presents its message, and unlike books and movies, is used by most people non-selectively.⁵⁰

Docudrama encounters problems not only due to its internal composition, but also from its mode of presentation and dissemination. One of the problems stemming from docudrama is that it “is not so amenable to historical criticism and interpretation” due to its use of dramatic license. This aspect poses problems for historians tackling the use of docudrama as historical source, compounded by the realization that “good drama can often be bad history and accurate history may be undramatic.”⁵¹ Whereas history does not always show exactly what happened in a particular circumstance, television demands

⁵⁰Payne, “Docudrama Panel.”

⁵¹William I. Gorden, A. Bennett Whaley, Edmund P. Kaminski, and D. Ray Heisey, “Docudrama from Different Temporal Perspectives: The ‘I Was There’ Challenge to *Kent State*, unpublished research paper, *Jerry Lewis Papers*, Box 20A, Folder 31, Kent May 4 Archive, Kent State University Library, Kent State University, Kent Ohio, 18. This study is an excellent, quantitative analysis of the responses given by diverse viewers after they viewed the Kent State docudrama. While the researchers’ expectations of docudrama are unrealistic, their observations and analysis demonstrate one approach to dealing with conflicts between docudrama and traditional historical sources.

certainty. Scholars realize that the chaotic atmosphere of Kent State and other such incidents disrupts hopes for absolute certainty in scholarly historical investigation (if such a thing is even possible). On the other hand, television cleans up the rough edges, streamlines the drama, and fills in the gaps. This would not be a real tragedy if these audiences accepted such presentations as mere entertainment--dramatic, semi-fictionalized, accounts of an actual event-- but that is not the case. In the postmodern world of media culture, the center has failed to hold. Lines between dramatic reenactment and actual occurrence have become cloudy. Therefore, it should come as no surprise when scenes from docudramas bearing such publicity slogans as "based on a true story," "the definitive account," and "the untold story," find their way into the popular understanding of a particular historical era or event. At that point, those events are just as "real" and "true" in the mind of the observer as if they had come from the diary of a participant or eyewitness.⁵² As Dr. Clifford Christians noted at a 1987 panel on television and history, "information plus education equals public opinion."⁵³

Docudrama, since it attempts to be both historical artifact and art form, blurs the line between the two standards. Defenders of docudrama as art form contend, "docudrama meticulously and decently used can be an instrument for public enlightenment and for reopening questions that desperately need to be examined." This perspective emphasizes docudrama as a means "to bring new perspective to important social issues we've analyzed in terms of news and documentaries." Christians asserts,

⁵²Thomas R. Hensley, Professor of Political Science, Kent State University, interview by author, 4 May 1997.

⁵³Christians, "Docudrama Panel."

“it’s a way to fire the moral imagination, to amplify the public debate.”⁵⁴ However, the view of docudrama as art form presents only one side of the story. Critics of docudrama, including journalists and historians, contend that it represents a “corruption” of news and fiction, a “license to lie” and a “harvest of shame.”⁵⁵ Boston columnist Jack Thomas believes that docudrama as a format presents problems for the mass of non-discriminating viewers in TV land. “Docudrama have [sic] the potential to educate as well as to entertain,” Thomas observes, “but they also represent a threat to the truth because viewers have no way of knowing where documentary and dramatization end or begin. Of all the indignities heaped upon us by television, none is more dangerous than the business of restaging the past, of blurring fact and fiction so that we lose our sense of what is true and what is not.”⁵⁶

What are some of the important lessons that can be learned from docudramas like *Kent State*? What are the implications on historical understanding that TV and docudrama present for historians? One important point is that films like *Kent State* offer historians food for thought as they demonstrate how historical accounts are developed in the television age. Many historians fail to take this matter seriously, thus explaining the looks of shock and disgust when history survey students mimic historical accounts they have seen on television miniseries and films. If historians are to provide insights in the age of instant information, they must acquaint themselves with popular culture interpretations and presentations of historical events, however distasteful the prospects.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Quoted by Payne in Ibid.

The world of today is world of technology, marketing, and symbolism, what Douglas Kellner calls “media culture.” Paying careful attention to media culture allows the historian to understand many of the forces that “make” history in the minds of early 21st century Americans. Examination of the docudrama of *Kent State* reveals many interesting features of how early-1980s popular media dealt with the topic of sixties counterculture and student protest. The presentation of Kent State students as primarily apolitical coincides with the media tendency, begun in the 1970s, to portray the counterculture as “cultural style.” Kellner states that

The films, rock music, and counterculture of the 1960s in turn had their own figural and discursive effects, disseminating countercultural images and ideologies as audiences appropriated the images, style, fashion, and attitudes into their own lives. In particular, films like *Easy Rider* and *Woodstock* not only strengthened the countercultural convictions of its audiences, but incorporated new recruits into the counterculture by promoting its style, fashion, and rebellious alternative culture. On the other hand, reducing 1960s activism and rebellion to cultural style made it easy to incorporate and co-opt the counterculture within mainstream U. S. culture and the images of *Easy Rider* and *Woodstock* facilitated this process of cooptation and exploitation which eventually led to the death of the counterculture as a genuinely oppositional culture.⁵⁷

The students presented in the film fit this mold very well. While many historical narratives discuss the overt political nature of Kent State, the docudrama downplays this aspect of the story. Instead, the focus is on human drama, personal relationships, and the disillusionment of tragedy. As previously noted, the lack of adequate historical context contributes to such a presentation. Yet this lack of context is a new context in and of itself, a demonstration of how media has viewed and portrayed the “sixties generation” since the early 1970s. Hippies, counterculture, and the New Left (when it is mentioned at all), are presented as simple variations of style rather than ideological differences or the product of genuine convictions. An understanding by historians of this tendency

⁵⁷Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics Between the Modern and the Postmodern* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 105-06.

precipitates communication with students who do not remember or did not experience the activist, political aspect of the “sixties.” It also allows the film to be viewed as a product of its time, reflecting certain elements of media culture in the early 1980s.

Another valuable lesson learned from films like *Kent State* is how the barriers between “reality” and televised presentation have eroded, creating a hybrid culture that makes the traditional understanding of truth problematic. While critics of docudrama accuse it of perpetuating falsehood, this charge also applies to any depiction of a historical event, literary or visual. Traditional sources are as perspectival as visual accounts of eras and events, deserving of equal scrutiny from historical scholars. The discrepancy between written and visual sources is not as great as many critics contend. At the same time, it is important to recognize the influence that visual media accounts have on popular historical understanding.

A 1986 study conducted by Payne and Robert Baukus, which surveyed eighty undergraduate students from Boston area colleges (twenty-six males and fifty-three females with an average age of 21) who viewed the Kent State docudrama, makes this point quite clear. Seventy-seven of these students stated that they had “very little or no previous knowledge” of the Kent State incident before viewing the film. Payne and Baukus reported that the students found five scenes particularly compelling--the opening scene showing a meeting on the Kent State Commons, the Friday night vandalism on Water Street, the ROTC fire, the Sunday night sit-in demonstration and bayonetings, and the shootings. They also discovered something very interesting when they surveyed the written responses of the students.

In terms of the historical authenticity of the docudrama, all of the reported scenes were perceived by the viewers to be both very realistic and true to life. The scenes about the characters’ personal lives were perceived as accurate, but they were unsure if these scenes were added for dramatic embellishment; they probably felt that was the case. In the scenes concerning the students protesting, the subjects felt the docudrama’s depictions were historically correct and not embellished for dramatic

purposes. To sum up our results at this point, *the viewers felt that what they were seeing in the docudrama actually occurred in history.*⁵⁸

As Payne observes, “a media event as it actually happens is less important than the event as it is represented on television” or any other form of visual media. “Because the broadcast is what the audience reacts to,” he contends, “to them it is the truth. It becomes history.”⁵⁹

⁵⁸Dr. Robert Baukus, “Docudrama Panel.” Emphasis added by author.

⁵⁹Payne, Ibid.

Conclusion

Visual media plays an undeniable role in shaping the popular understanding of the Kent State shootings. As an event that occurred at a crucial point when television and film became increasingly important means of communication, the tragedy exhibits the power of visual technology on popular understanding of history. Television news broadcast the initial information into American homes, providing a “first draft” of history replete with contradiction, misinformation and unanswered questions. Documentary films served as vehicles for greater understanding and perspective through the years, but also demonstrated the difficulty in wrestling with the conflicting viewpoints of an incident still replete with active political implications. Docudrama personalized the shootings and emphasized the human toll of the tragedy, but raised new questions about the validity of dramatic license when presenting a historical event. The revolution, contrary to popular opinion, was televised, or more accurately, mediated through visual means.

The close proximity of the events to the present day (the hazy line between “memory” and “history”) compounds the problems of making sense of May 4. It is only after the passage of three and a half decades and the influence of scholars who do not remember the era that new voices have entered the discussion. The difficulty remains in place over the bitter conflict over the “meaning” of the 1960s including the significance of the Vietnam War and the “counterculture” in shaping the era. The current battle in academe and popular culture over the “ownership” of the 60s, intertwined with the “nostalgia factor” of the baby boom generation has abated somewhat. Yet this scholarly generation gap remains considerable, manifesting itself with each new study of 1960s

America. The distaste for the Vietnam War by some scholars on the one hand and the dislike of campus protesters and anti-Vietnam protest in general still influences the scholarship and the various presentations of the Kent State shootings. The determination to find hidden meaning and order in the midst of a chaotic situation (the search for the proverbial smoking gun) continues to color accounts of the shootings. The lack of new evidence and information about why the tragedy occurred frustrates new studies of Kent State. Paradoxically, this ambiguity maintains interest in May 4, as the lack of new evidence perpetuates speculation and fuels new scholarship. Visual media accounts represent a majority of the new works on the Kent State shootings and historians must consider them when undertaking new research. These accounts simultaneously undermine and create popular historical understanding, with mediated reality providing new worldviews derived from diverse and often contradictory sources. Without reflection on the roles of news coverage, film documentaries, and docudrama in creating popular historical perception of media-age events, the Kent State shootings as understood by the general public make no sense.

Historians must recognize the implosion of history and popular culture generated by mass media. Too many in academia view contemporary students as lazy, illiterate, unrefined slackers. In the traditional sense of understanding, they are correct. However, such observations ignore the possibility that the older, established boundaries rest on shaky assumptions. “The slackers are not passive products of media effects, but active participants in a media culture who use media to produce meaning, pleasure, and identity in their lives,” Douglas Kellner observes. “The ubiquitous T-shirts often have logos or images derived from media culture, and TV and music are constant backgrounds” in the lives of media cultured individuals.¹ Such understanding removes the traditional communication gaps that often occur between a teacher and the well-versed media

¹Kellner, *Media Culture*, 140.

cultured student in the classroom.

In light of visual media accounts of historical events like the Kent State shootings, the implications for historical inquiry are obvious. In order to communicate with the media culture, historians must account for the persuasive elements of film and television. This is especially true when historical scholars write about or teach about American history since the proliferation of visual media, particularly from World War II to the present. Awareness of the positive and negative factors media culture creates is necessary if historians are to dialogue successfully both with new generations of students and the general population. Agreement with or approval of these circumstances is not the question. Only when this recognition occurs can historians handle mediated historical events like the Kent State shootings in a workable manner. The following quote sums up the situation.

What does it mean that we live in a visual world and therefore must become literate about it? Can we continue to assume that our audience cannot make a basic distinction between news and documentaries, melodrama and docudrama? If not, is that something we ought to be teaching each other in the educational setting? It does indicate to me that in terms of education, information and public opinion, we must call on those in the schools and in the political order to contribute to that overall model as well.²

Philosophers such as Jean Baudrillard contend that such a “postmodern, poststructural” dilemma means the death of history. Historians should see such an idea as a challenge rather than a eulogy. Acceptance of the challenge sets the stage for what looks to be an intriguing, difficult, but rewarding, future. Traditional historians must begin to accept visual media sources as a viable form of historical text and equip ourselves and our students with the necessary tools to assess their influence and value. Media culture (television, documentary, docudrama and the omnipresent internet) is not going to disappear, and historians must deal with the residue of what modernism and

²Dr. Clifford Christians, “Docudrama Panel.”

technology hath wrought. Whether this transition will be successful or not remains to be seen.

Whatever emerges from the challenges of media culture to historical inquiry, the Kent State incident stands as an important historical event in a tumultuous period of American history. A nation racked by war and dissent turned into a domestic battleground. Fear, anger and unnecessary actions, particularly on the part of Governor James Rhodes, resulted in a needless confrontation that escalated into bloodshed. Thirteen seconds of gunfire took the lives of four young individuals and left an indelible mark on an era. The losses and lessons of Kent State must endure in our collective memory so that such a calamity never happens again. That achievement alone would serve as the greatest, most lasting memorial to the victims of May 4, 1970.

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APPENDIX I

Film Language Glossary

ANGLE: The position of the camera or point of view in relation to the subject being shown. Seen from above, the subject would be shot from a “high” angle, which makes the object appear smaller, and therefore, subservient to the viewer; from below, it would be depicted from a “low” angle, or “from below,” allowing the screen image to appear larger, and therefore, more ominous and powerful.

BEAT: A smaller dramatic unit within a scene; a scene within a scene; a change in direction of scene content.

CLIMAX: The point at which the complication reaches its point of maximum tension and the forces in opposition confront each other at a peak of physical or emotional action.

CLOSE-UP: An image in which the distance between the subject and the point of view is very short, as in a “close-up of a person’s face.”

COMPLICATION: The section of a story in which a conflict begins and grows in clarity, intensity, and importance.

COMPOSITION (visual): A harmonious arrangement of two or more visual elements within a frame, one of which dominates all others in interest.

CONTINUITY EDITING: An editing style that follows a linear and chronological movement forward, as if the image is simply recording the action. Because it creates the illusion of reality, it is often called invisible editing.

COVERAGE: The camera angles a director needs for dramatizing values in a scene and for effective editing. For example, a full shot, over-shoulder shots, close-ups.

CUTTING: changing from one image to another, a version of this linkage is sometimes referred to as a montage.

CUTAWAY: A cut to a person or action that is not the central focus of attention, perhaps to a spectator. Sometimes used by editors to delete unwanted footage.

DENOUEMENT: A brief period of calm following the climax, in which a state of relative equilibrium returns (**RESOLUTION**).

EXPOSITION: Information that the audience needs to know to understand a story. Introduction of a conflict, character(s), theme(s)

EDITING: The **SELECTING** of significant event details and the **SEQUENCING** of such details into a comprehensive whole.

EYELINE MATCH: The editing or joining of different shots by following the logic and direction of a character's glance or look.

FORMALISM: A critical perspective that attends mainly to the structure and style of a movie or group of movies.

FRAME: The perimeter or borders of a TV/film picture; a single photographic unit of film. Also a verb: to enclose or encompass subject matter.

GENRE: A critical category for organizing films according to shared themes, styles, and narrative structures; examples are "horror films" and "gangster films."

IDENTIFICATION: The viewer's emotional involvement with (usually) the protagonist in drama; the viewer becomes the protagonist.

IDEOLOGY: An analytical approach that attempts to unmask the stated or unstated social and personal values that inform a movie or group of movies.

INTERNAL CONFLICT: A psychological conflict within the central character. The primary struggle is between different aspects of a single personality.

LEITMOTIF: A motif or theme associated with specific person, situation, or idea; usually reprised for dramatic effect. Leitmotif is some intentionally repeated element (sound, shot, dialogue, music, etc.) that helps unify a film by reminding the viewer of its earlier appearance.

LONG SHOT: An image in which the distance between the camera and the subject is great.

MISE-EN-SCENE: The arrangement of the so-called theatrical elements before they are actually filmed; these include sets, lighting, costumes, and props.

MONTAGE (Visual Montage): A term that originally referred to the editorial assembling of film segments. Montage today describes a rapid succession of images that convey a single concept or drive home a specific idea or assertion; rapid-fire imagery. (Aural Montage) A succession of quick, repetitive words or phrases meant to drive home a specific idea or assertion.

NARRATIVE: The way a story is constructed through a particular point of view and arrangement of events.

POINT OF VIEW (POV) SHOT: The position from which an action or subject is seen, often determining its significance. Also the subjective camera angle that becomes the perspective of a character. We look at the world through his or her eyes.

POLYPHONY: The combination of two or more melodic lines (horizontal vectors), which, when played together, forms a harmonic whole (Vertical vectors).

PROGRESSION: The traditional climbing action of drama, a growth in dramatic tension. Increasingly close camera angles represent camera progression.

PRIMARY MOTION (Event): motion in front of the camera.

REACTION SHOT: A shot that shows a character "reacting" rather than acting. The reaction shot is usually a close-up of the emotional reaction registered on the face of the person most affected by the dialogue or action.

RHYTHM: In visual composition, the pleasing repetition of images. In drama: repetition of phrases, actions, or musical themes for increased dramatic effect.

SCENE: A space within which a narrative action takes place; it is composed of one or more shots.

SCREEN DIRECTION: The consistent pattern of movement from angle to angle: left to right or right to left. This direction may imply ideas and motives of the filmmaker, including the tendency to present "positive" images from left to right and "negative" images from right to left.

SEQUENCE: A series of scenes or shots unified by a shared action or motif.

STYLE: A director's personal pattern of treating material, including staging of camera and performers, script elements, and music.

SECONDARY MOTION: Camera motion, including pan, tilt, pedestrian, crane or boom, dolly, truck, arc and zoom.

SCENE: A clearly identifiable, organic part of an event. It is a small structural (action) or thematic (story) unit, usually consisting of several shots.

SEQUENCE: The sum of several scenes (or shots) that compose an organic whole.

SETTING: The time and place in which the film's story takes place, including all of the complex factors that come packaged with a given time and place: climate, terrain, population density, social structures and economic factors, customs, moral attitudes, and codes of behavior. Also, see Exposition

SHOT: A continuously exposed and unedited image of any length. It is the smallest convenient operational unit in film. It is the interval between two distinct video transitions, such as cuts, dissolves, wipes.

SOUND EFFECTS: Any number of uses of sound other than music or dialogue.

STOCK CHARACTERS: Minor characters whose actions are completely predictable or typical of their job or profession.

SUBJECTIVE TIME: The duration we feel; also called psychological time. A qualitative measure.

TAKE: The recording of an image on film, usually used in writing as a temporal measure, such as a “long take” or a “short take.”

TIMING: The control of objective and subjective time.

TRACKING SHOT: The movement of the image through a scene, photographed by a camera mounted on tracks. A dolly shot creates the same movement with a camera mounted on a mechanical cart, while a hand-held camera is mounted on a cameraperson’s shoulder.

VISUALIZATION: The mental visual image of an event in a single shot. (see Conceptualization)

VOICE-OVER: The voice of someone not seen in the narrative image who describes or comments on that image.

ZOOM SHOT: The movement of the image according to focal adjustments of the lens, without the camera being moved.

Compiled from Timothy Corrigan, *A Short Guide to Writing About Film*, Third Edition (New York: Longman, 1998), 171-172; James Monaco, *How to Read a Film*, Third Edition (New York: Oxford Books, 2000); Peter C. Rollins, “Visual Language and the American Dream of Commercials: A Tip Sheet for Students on Fundamentals of Visual/Aural Language,” ENGL 5293--American History on Film handout, Oklahoma State University, 1998; and from the Film Studies Website at film.vtheatre.net

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