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# *The Battle of Kent State*

*What can we learn from it?*

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I still recall, as if in a dream, the television report from Kent State University. When I heard the rifles popping, I couldn't believe my ears. The inconceivable had happened in America. The movie "Z" seemed to have become a reality. Men wearing the uniform of the United States were firing a volley at unarmed students as if they were military enemies. When the firing stopped, within a few seconds, four students were dead. Many more were injured. The riot, such as it was, was over; but the echoes of the shots fired at Kent State were heard around America, and, within hours, almost every college campus in America was engulfed in demonstrations. The reaction of the majority of college students of America was probably expressed in the words of my own son, a sophomore at the University of Florida. "Dad," he said, "they're out to kill us". One result of the Kent State incident was a further polarization of the different groups at odds in America.

It seems to me that there are two basic questions which emerge from the incident at Kent State. One question is, "How could such a tragedy occur?". The other question is, "How can we prevent such disaster in the future?" In answering the first question, "How could such a tragedy occur?", a person trying to be objective has to conclude, "We all contributed to this event". The tragedy occurred, because Americans in different interest groups have not communicated with each other, because we have made such meager attempts to understand one another. The tragedy occurred because we have coddled our college students somewhat, permitting them to throw rocks at governmental forces and to capture college buildings. The tragedy occurred because national leaders have permitted the thinking in America to polarize without taking steps towards moderation and understanding. The tragedy occurred because Americans are inclined towards violence, because we have a cowboy's fascination for guns. The tragedy occurred because learning to live with a war few think justified has sapped the American conscience and increased our sense of insecurity. All of these factors, and still others, contributed to that one critical moment when the guardsmen pulled the trigger for all of us, broadened the chasm between our dissatisfied students and the older generation, and further traumatized an already sundered nation.

Let us probe further into some of the events and into some of the human feelings that are a part of the violence at Kent State. At Northwestern University, recently, a student waved an American flag upside down. A hefty man in work clothes tried to grab the flag. "That's my flag", he cried, "I fought for it. You have no right to it. We're fed up with your movement. You're forcing us into it. We'll have to kill you. All I can see is a lot of kids blowing a chance I never had". This irate

workman was not at Kent State pulling the trigger, but wasn't he? If the student carrying the flag upside down did not actually invite something so extreme as his own death, was he not baiting those to whom the flag is sacred? Is he not, at least in part, responsible for the welling up of anger in those who see things differently than he does? Was this student not guilty of arrogance, inviting, as it were, some kind of response? Were not this Northwestern student and this irate workman factors in the events at Kent State, when the details of their interaction were known in every village in America?

Surely, there were also those on the national level who helped to develop the mood that exploded at Kent State. Did not certain of our administration leaders go out of their way to address college students as bums, waiting until after the Kent State incident to limit their remarks. Has not the Vice-President of the U.S., apparently, with the full approval of his President, given speech after speech around the nation designed to appeal to far rightists and to fan their prejudice against the intellectuals and against dissenters. Has not Mr. Agnew, in fact, used words and phrases which are designed to play on the emotions and to ignite passions?

On the one hand, we have had a small, widely-spread band of student radicals intent on burning and anarchy. The larger group of non-radical students has not attempted to control these extremists. On the other hand, we have had a national administration which has turned a deaf ear to the legitimate complaints of our young people, and, in the face of their pleas for peace, has ordered an enlargement of the war in Asia. Certainly, the invasion of Cambodia could not have done less than arouse the moderate students who have rallied around the cause of peace. The Chief of the Washington Bureau of Time Magazine says in the May 18th issue, "There is about Nixon's presidency, the feeling of theater. When the performance is over, and the lights go out, there is an eerie nothingness . . . no heart, no feeling of movement or national momentum". Until the Kent State incident, the President simply had not listened to our young people. He, apparently, did not understand that they desperately did not want to go to Asia to die nor to engage in a war they thought unjust. Still *Nixon is not alone in this sin*. How many of us have listened to our young people? How many of us have really heard what they are saying? After all, we elected Nixon. He represents us to our younger generation. His intransigence is to them a sign of our apathy. Our apathy only makes the students more desperate. It contributes to their need to bait us, to hold the flag upside down, to say that change will not come about except by demonstrations, by confrontation, or by burning.

So, the cycle comes around. Who is to blame for what happened at

Kent State? Let no one be so ignorant, whether he is young or old, Republican or Democratic, white or black, as to say that *he* is not partially responsible.

### *The "Enemy"*

Immediately after the shooting at Kent State, one thousand of the University's faculty members met in nearby Akron. They met in Akron, because Governor Rhodes had ordered that there could be no meetings at the University. The faculty passed this resolution, "We hold the guardsmen, acting under orders and under severe psychological pressures, less responsible for the massacre than are Gov. Rhodes and Adjutant General Del Corso, whose inflammatory statements produced these pressures". (Newsweek, May 18th).

Gov. Rhodes had, indeed, set the tone for the massacre when he appeared on campus and attributed the violence against the ROTC building to students "worse than the brownshirt and the Communist element . . . the worst type of people that we harbor in America . . .". In brief, the guardsman who shot into the crowd of students before them understood that they were firing into the ranks of the worst type of people that we harbor in America. Now it is true that a few of the students had fire-bombed the ROTC building which Newsweek describes as old and worn-out. These few students were guilty of a felony, and these students cannot escape a significant part of the responsibility for the death of some of their fellow students. Let us look at all the statistics, however. There are 19,000 Kent State students; the anti-war rally on campus drew a total of 300 or 1½% of the student body; an appearance by Jerry Rubin of the Chicago Seven drew 5% of the student body. Patently, all of the Kent State students were not, in Governor Rhodes' words, "the worst type of people"; but if Governor Rhodes didn't make that distinction clear, how could a National Guard General or Lieutenant understand this distinction?

It is also true that some of the students were pelting the soldiers with rocks. Those few, having resorted to violence, cannot escape significant responsibility for the death of their fellow students; but all accounts of those killed in the battle show that the victims were no closer to the soldiers than 75 feet. Some of them were on their way to classes, and two of the four were girls. Further, no guardsman had been injured seriously enough to warrant hospital treatment of any kind. The point is that, granting the provocation of the guardsmen by a few students, the guardsmen accepted the fact that *all* of those on the other side were the incarnation of evil. If a

few students marched with the flag upside down in Chicago, then, all students were traitors in Ohio. If a few students burned the ROTC building, then, all students were arsonists; therefore, it does not matter which students you kill. They are all *the enemy!* As one guardsman said at Kent after the killings, "It's about time we showed the bastards who's in charge". This guardsman is not worse than some of the townspeople, however, one of whom said, "You can't really help but . . . think, they've been asking for it and finally got it". Sadly enough, I sat in the living room of a member of our congregation and a Jewish friend of his expressed the same kind of sentiment. "The kids are asking for it. They deserve it", he said.

After the Kent State Incident, the campuses of our nation went wild, and, as you know, many of our colleges were forced to shut down. The militant students now could claim justification. "You see", they said, "the 'pigs' are just what we said they were, murderers." The militants, however, are guilty of the same error as the guardsman who generalized his accusations. All students are not arsonists, because one of them is. All guardsmen are not brutal because some of them fired into the crowd at Kent State. In this direction of generalization and blanket accusations lies ultimate disaster for America. The person who disagrees with you and who belongs to another group is not, ipso facto, the enemy. He may be frightened as you are. He may be as misunderstood as you are. He may be repentful as you might be.

### *The Danger of Using Violence*

What happened at Kent State will intensify as a tragedy unless each of us can understand that he also contributed to the events that took place there. If the prejudiced rightists persist in saying the students only got what they asked for, if the militant students persist in saying that all police forces are fascist, if the moderates stand idly by while the polarization engulfs us all, then, America has only one way to move — towards the far right and the police state. History makes its lessons clear; the first ones to lose out when a nation becomes frightened are the dissenters. When Gov. Rhodes banned all meetings on the Kent State Campus, he was acting in the tradition of all get-tough leaders who heed the popular request for law and order. Democracy cannot stand in the face of anarchistic taunting and exploits. Let the militant student beware! If the police state does arrive in America, it will be the violence of the militant that will precipitate it. Progressive change, within a democracy, can come only through the ballot. If the militant wants another kind of battleground, then Kent State should be a graphic lesson for him. The militant

cannot win the battle of destruction. Through violence, he can only win his own death and the death of many innocents.

In this week's "Time" magazine there is a hard-hitting editorial which takes the position, "Violence is essentially a confession of ultimate inarticulateness . . . A contempt for language makes people impatient with the orderly processes of thought . . .". Americans are increasingly unwilling to talk and disposed to violent action. America is, indeed, a trigger-happy nation. Ten thousand die by the gun inside our country each year. We don't want to talk and discuss and meet and compromise. We want to burn and blast our way to dominance. To prevent the triumph of Fascism in our country, that is government by armed force, our students will have to try another tactic than burning and destruction. On the other hand, if our country isn't to continue its drift into narrowness and insensitivity, a drift our students perceive perhaps better than the rest of us, then, we had better listen more respectfully to what our dissident groups are saying. We had better institute some changes through the democratic process to make our country more responsive to basic human needs.

If the Kent State incident can bring a larger number of Americans to their senses, then it will not have been in vain. If the incident impels us to constructive action in the areas of war and peace, racial relations, reconstruction of our cities, and poverty, then it can be turned into a springboard for progress. If *each group can control its own extremists* and enter into dialogue with determined patience, there is hope for the healing of wounds. If not, if the Kent State incident is just one more step on the road to generalization and polarization and violence, then we had better say kaddish<sup>1</sup> for the America we have known.

When I had finished preparing my remarks early this morning, I could not have known that more University students would fall today — this time in Mississippi. Perhaps, the young people are right. Understanding does not truly come until we experience something at first hand. Perhaps, each of us must see the manifestation of brutality to believe that it exists. Perhaps, each of us must release his hostility by the throwing of a brick or the shooting of a pistol. If this be true, if men cannot learn from each other's experience, then, the abyss awaits us all.

Our Jewish tradition, however, encourages us to go in another direction. It teaches us "Don't follow a multitude to do evil". It teaches, "In the place where there are no men, be thou the man". If enough people are willing to take a rational stand, irrespective of what seems to be the prevailing mob or majority opinion, there is hope for us yet.

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<sup>1</sup> The prayer for the dead.