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‘Four Dead in Ohio’ 50 Years Later

A Remembrance by Steve Horton

The shootings at Kent State University that occurred 50 years ago sent shock waves across American campuses, including Michigan State University where I was a freshman.

To recap what happened: On May 4, 1970 an anti-war demonstration was taking place on that Ohio campus. The National Guard was also there, having been called in to keep order in case the rally turned violent. The combination turned lethal when guardsmen opened fire, killing four students and wounding nine others.

The students who were shot included those protesting against the expansion of the war into Cambodia, including a bombing campaign, announced by President Richard Nixon a few days earlier. However, among the dead was a young man walking to his class, and a co-ed watching the event from a distance. Of those wounded, one suffered permanent paralysis.

In the aftermath, there would be an investigation of what prompted the soldiers to begin firing into the crowd of unarmed college students. Nothing concrete was determined, other than some of the soldiers saying they feared for their safety. Whatever

the cause, justified or not, over a period of 13 seconds, 67 rounds were fired by 28 of them.

The incident further divided already sharply divided Americans—most of the differences centered on the Vietnam War. The two sides were labeled ‘hawks’ and ‘doves’ for convenience sake—the former being supporters of presidential policy, first that of Lyndon Johnson and then Nixon, and the latter group comprised of those who had opposed the escalation of the war and its continuation.

Other political and social gaps existed as well, among them being the long-standing issue of civil rights, the disparity between the affluent and the poor, law-and-order versus youthful protest, and traditional cultural norms being challenged by an emerging counter-culture.

These differences of opinion had been magnified by the presidential election that took place the year before in 1968. As with any vote, there were winners and losers. The Congressional candidate I had campaigned for between my junior and senior years in high school being part of the latter. And is often the case, the divisions and ensuing debate continued even after the election.

In the immediate aftermath of the shootings at Kent State, accusations were made. Explanations given. Each side blamed the other, with many people supporting the National Guard’s action and others condemning it.

There was little debate, though, on many of the college campuses. Many were closed for a time due to student strikes. Classes cancelled, and a lot of demonstrations held to show support for the Kent State protestors and express outrage at the shootings.

Events at Michigan State mirrored some of that response. A rally was quickly called, scheduled to take place on the lawn near the Auditorium. With the rally being a short walk from the dormitory where I lived, I headed over to see what was going on.

I remember standing at the back edge of the crowd, listening to one of the student speakers. His fiery rhetoric was similar to addresses I'd heard at earlier protests. That fall, in October 1969, there'd been a peace rally in Lansing that saw thousands of people—many of them MSU students—walking along Michigan Avenue from the campus to the State Capitol. A month later, over a half-million demonstrators converged on Washington, D.C. to support a change in the war policy. That December there were follow-up efforts centered on local communities.

All of it had become overwhelming. You could cut the anger between opposing sides with a knife—although it might not have been prudent to have such a sharp instrument nearby.

While sympathetic to the grievances and wanting the war to end, I'd become weary with this activity. I'd come to doubt any of it was having much influence. Nixon was the president, the war had taken on an added dimension, and the Silent Majority had spoken loud and clear.

I felt a growing sense of futility about politics. The bright hopes I'd harbored with the candidacy of Bobby Kennedy, my embracing his message of bringing the war to an end, but also of bridging the gaps in society, followed by my involvement in Wes Vivian's run for Congress had noticeably dimmed.

After a few minutes, I turned and walked away—retreated, if you will, from participation and engagement.

I don't recall all of the other protest-related activities, except that a number of professors cancelled face-to-face classes for the remainder of the quarter—including my anthropology course. Also, a group of students set up tents beside the Red Cedar as a protest against business-as-usual.

Given my mood, I kept an arm's length, attending my other classes and continuing my normal routine. Looking back, the word I'd use is self-absorbed; my mind and interest on other, more personal matters which, at 18 or any other age, can happen.

It wouldn't be until after I'd left college, and through the means of writing and eventually as a journalist, that I resumed a more active involvement in current events. A difference—and a major one—is that I've reported on the world around me rather than actively participated in the arena; a stance that, in itself, is one of detachment. And, truth be told, one that can be frustrating as it leaves me more a spectator than a mover-and-shaker.

Yet, the conveyance of facts and quotes, via a news story, can be a powerful tool of enlightenment. And commentary—the use of description, explanation, and analogy to make a point or champion a cause—can be as much a statement of principle and as effective as waving a placard, chanting a slogan, or working on a campaign. My small part, combined with that of others, to produce a better result; to be engaged in this time and place and hopefully make a difference.

At least that's my rationalization.

With my current writings, I often look back. The reason is not to navel gaze, though that may happen, but rather to use a past event (personal or shared history) to better understand a current situation or debate, and,

in doing so, possibly illuminate the way forward.

A tall order. Usually not met. Still, that's the goal.

Such is the case with remembering the Kent State University shootings. Not to retry the case, nor point a finger of accusation or defense, nor or assign blame or innocence, but to see if any lesson can be learned that will instruct our here-and-now.

During the past fifty years, I've learned that not every hope is met, yet hope can be renewed. That not every possibility will be realized, yet new possibilities await if we embrace them. That while much is lost (as a poet once said) much is gained and what is gained can be brighter and more enduring.

Still, the past is the past and all we have is today—to do the best we can with what we have and be grateful for the opportunity—and, if granted a tomorrow, try to make that a good day, too.

And care about others and their well-being, not just our own. And to know the value of humor as a means to deflate pretension; that of others and our own.

Fifty years ago, four young people died at Kent State University. They had been students like me, of the same age, with lives that seemingly lay before them; their respective hopes a guiding star in the distance. But all that they might have been, all that lie ahead, was extinguished in a sudden burst of gun fire; a flash of lightening that took away all of those possibilities.

I remember that those soldiers were young as well, also of similar age, sent to the campus on orders, not intending to shoot anyone, and that those times were trying and the gaps between us wide and seemingly unbridgeable.

I recall also that I stood on the edge of the crowd during the ensuing rally at Michigan State, then turned and walked away. I've always regretted my choice. Not for political

reasons or that it showed a lack of support for a certain cause—all of those reasons and issues have long since passed. But for the lack of empathy it showed.

Better to have stayed, shed a tear, and mourned the loss of “four dead in Ohio.”

But if not then, at least now.