

# **Learning to Live with U.S. Foreign Policy and its Discontents: The Politics of Public Memory at Kent State, 1970-2001**

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**School of Sociology, Politics, and International Studies,  
University of Bristol  
Working Paper No. 09-08**

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Paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the International Studies Association, New Orleans, March 2002.

## **Learning to Live with U.S. Foreign Policy and its Discontents: The Politics of Public Memory at Kent State, 1970-2001**

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### **Abstract:**

On May 4, 1970, thirteen students were shot, four fatally, by Ohio National Guardsmen on the campus of Kent State University (KSU). The shootings took place in the context of several years of student protest against the U.S. war in Vietnam and U.S. imperialism and militarism. Images from the shootings became emblematic of an era and had meaning and effects beyond the confines of Kent State, Ohio, or even the U.S. Since the shootings in 1970, there have been numerous controversies both within the KSU community and between it and other communities over the memorialization of these events. In the process, the University in particular has worked to construct a public narrative of these events that both acknowledges their occurrence and simultaneously renders them politically mute. We examine the way in which the University (among others) has managed the public memory of the shooting – i.e., what the struggles were about, how the events were framed, how the participants were represented – to effect this political neutering. Part of the answer involves constructing a memory of ‘May 4<sup>th</sup>’ or ‘Kent State’ in which international politics -- and specifically U.S. foreign policy in Southeast Asia – is effectively read out. The paper is a contribution to recent efforts to draw the attention of international relations scholars to the significance of memory, both public and popular, for the analysis of world politics.

**Learning to Live with U.S. Foreign Policy and Its Discontents:**

## The Politics of Public Memory at Kent State, 1970-2001<sup>1</sup>

Jutta Weldes and Mark Laffey

*How do I explain this to a European when it sounds to him so much like Prague?  
Former Oberlin College student, May 6, 1970*

*They should have shot all the troublemakers.  
Seabury Ford, Special Prosecutor, October 24, 1970<sup>2</sup>*

### Introduction: Four Dead in Ohio

On April 30, 1970, U.S. President Richard Nixon announced the invasion of Cambodia. The announcement prompted a wave of protests across the U.S., as students in particular challenged a shift in policy that seemed to reverse Nixon's stated intention to bring about the 'Vietnamization' of the 'Vietnam War', and to promise instead a widening of the ground war in Indochina (McCormick, 1995: 156-161, 176-178). Four days later, on May 4, Ohio National Guardsmen on the campus of Kent State University (KSU) opened fire on students protesting the invasion. Thirteen students were shot, four of them fatally. Images of the shootings and of the dead students flashed around the world, and were widely reported in newspapers and on television.<sup>3</sup> 'Kent State' and 'May 4<sup>th</sup>' rapidly took on an iconic status, as representative of an era wracked by imperial war in South East Asia and civil unrest in the U.S. and elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> The cover of *Newsweek* on May 18, 1970, displayed John Filo's Pulitzer Prize-winning photo of Mary Ann Vecchio screaming as she knelt over the body of Jeffrey Miller, accompanied by the

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<sup>1</sup> For comments and suggestions, we are grateful to David Welch, Iver Neumann, Gavan Duffy, and David Sylvan.

<sup>2</sup> In Bills (1988b: 24, 30).

<sup>3</sup> The events of May 4th at Kent State were also recorded and disseminated in popular culture. In the immediate aftermath of the shootings, the rock band Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young rush-released the single 'Ohio', a song that ends with the repeated refrain 'Four dead in Ohio'. Subsequently included on new pressings of their hit album *Deja Vu*, 'Ohio' too eventually reached a worldwide audience.

<sup>4</sup> On Vietnam as an imperial war, see e.g. Cumings, 1992, esp. 87-88; Aron, 1974; Kolko, 1988. On the U.S. as an empire, see e.g., Williams, 1972; Johnson, 2000. For an application to cultural studies, see Kaplan and Pease, 1993.

headline ‘Nixon’s Home Front’ (see Figure 1). This photo quickly became iconic as well, registering nation-wide shock at the shooting of white college students by the U.S. state.



Figure 1: Photograph by John Filo. Online at <http://digitaljournalist.org/issue0005/filo.htm> [visited 4 August 2008]

In the three decades since 1970, efforts to commemorate and memorialize the shootings at Kent State have generated continuing controversy. Public or official memory of these events remains contested for the simple reason that it has proven extremely difficult to achieve agreement on what ‘May 4<sup>th</sup>’ and ‘Kent State’ mean. Similar to other controversies, such as the row over the Smithsonian’s attempt to provide an historically accurate account of the U.S. decision to drop nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki (e.g., Bird and Lifschultz, 1998), in representations of ‘May 4<sup>th</sup>’ dominant narratives and public myths of America confront both an

event and popular memories of it that challenge and unsettle them. In this paper, we examine the politics of public memory at Kent State as a window onto the production of the everyday cultural conditions that make state action possible (Weldes, 1999a; 1999b) -- that is, of the commonsense about world politics, 'What the world is and how it works for all practical purposes' (Hall, 1988: 44).

If how people act in the world depends partly on their interpretations of it, a crucial question for students of international relations concerns *how* people come to interpret the world in particular ways. By their nature, the local consequences of foreign adventures like the wars in Indochina and the invasion of Cambodia make possible - indeed, they invite - representations of world politics that challenge the sharp boundaries between inside and outside, between politics here and politics there, characteristic of the realist political imagination (Walker, 1993; see also Blaney, 2001). Tracing out the connections between past U.S. involvements in Indochina, for example, and in world politics more generally, and the origins of the social forces to which foreign policy ostensibly only responds, renders simple assumptions of 'us' and 'them' problematic (e.g., Schurmann, 1974; Campbell, 1993).<sup>5</sup> It requires considerable ideological labour to contain such challenges, should they emerge, and to deny the implications of the integral relations between politics here and politics there: the *shared* responsibility, however unequal, of people located in different places for the events of world politics. From this point of view, foreign policy, understood as a representational practice, is a political performance not confined to the state. Indeed, it is in part through such representational practices that the distinction between inside and outside is produced (Ashley, 1988; see also Campbell, 1992). We

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<sup>5</sup> Similar challenges are evident in recent struggles over the meaning and significance of 'globalization' (e.g., Panitch, 1996; Rupert, 2000) and in efforts to make sense of the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon (e.g., Rashid, 2001; see also Niva, 1999).

explore these issues through an examination of the ongoing conflicts between KSU and various other groups and communities over the meaning of 'May 4<sup>th</sup>' and 'Kent State', and in particular disputes about commemoration and memorialization. Significantly, over time the shootings have come to be understood as being less about the role of the U.S. in world politics and more about KSU as an institution and the appropriate character of political protest in a democratic society. For us, the key questions concern how such processes of meaning production work, what they tell us about how U.S. citizens come to see the world and their place in it, and the implications for U.S. policy in the future.

For over thirty years, competing groups and institutions have struggled to put forward their own histories of 'May 4<sup>th</sup>' as *the* true account of what took place and why. Official histories prior to 2000 distanced the University from the shootings and downplayed links to events in Indochina. Challenging such accounts, unofficial histories and popular memories stress the links to U.S. foreign policy. The 'power to create recognized versions of history and culture - to give authoritative accounts - is largely a property of political, cultural and educational [as well as economic] institutions....' (Jordan and Weedon, 2000: 170; see also O Tuathail, 1996: 651-652). The capacity of KSU's administration to define what 'May 4<sup>th</sup>' meant and its implications for 'Kent State' is far greater than that of the motley band of past and present students, faculty, activists, and the casualties and their families, who seek to define 'May 4<sup>th</sup>' and 'Kent State' in a different way. The University's preferred representation of May 4<sup>th</sup>, which stresses the local, accidental, and tragic character of the shootings, is increasingly dominant. Analysis of the evolution of public memory at KSU shows how local institutions work, often for reasons of their own, to reproduce taken-for-granted assumptions about world politics.

But institutional power alone cannot determine how events are represented and

understood. Public memory must negotiate the terrain of popular memory that, while it is shaped by official representations, is not determined by them (on memory and popular commonsense, see Gramsci, 1971; Hall, 1986a, 1986b). In 2000, on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the shootings, KSU reversed previous policies, embraced 'May 4<sup>th</sup>' as marking the university's 'special place in American history', and made it central to the university's mission and marketing strategies. Despite this belated attempt by KSU to end the controversy, protests continue. As we will show, the failure to transform KSU's official history of May 4<sup>th</sup> into commonsense stems from the university's persistent failure to acknowledge the very thing stressed in popular memory and in our analysis: the integral relations between imperialism abroad and repression at home. Analysis of the struggles over the meaning of 'May 4<sup>th</sup>' and 'Kent State' thus highlights the significance - still largely ignored by IR scholars - of popular memory for how we understand world politics (but see Shaw, 1997; Ferguson and Turnbull, 1998; Ballinger, 1999; Masco, 1999).

The paper is organized as follows. In the first section, 'Proliferating Memorials, Contested Memories', we chronicle some of the many and varied disputes over whether or not, and if so how, 'May 4<sup>th</sup>' is to be remembered and memorialized, in order to identify some of the major representational issues that have arisen. The second section, 'Context and Chronology', briefly rehearses the events of May 1-4, 1970 and their relation to the Vietnam War and U.S. foreign policy in order that we can then demonstrate, in section three, 'Narrating May 4<sup>th</sup> at Kent State', some of the different ways in which these events have been narrated. Section four, 'Managing Public Memory', identifies the discursive and narrative strategies through which some implications and meanings of 'May 4<sup>th</sup>' have been marginalized and others highlighted. Section five, 'Rebranding the Corporate University', charts the university's recent embrace of

'May 4<sup>th</sup>' and locates the reasons in the political economy of higher education. In the conclusion, we draw out the wider implications of the argument.

### **Proliferating Memorials, Contested Memories**

The events of May 4, 1970, have come to epitomize the social conflict and polarization engendered by U.S. involvement in Indochina: both at home and abroad, 'Kent State's story was America's story' (Bills, 1988b: 58).<sup>6</sup> The shooting of U.S. students by their own government, and the fact that the students were white,<sup>7</sup> captured public attention and, at least for some, seemed to require a response. One might say, in this sense, that 'May 4, 1970' came to anchor a 'landmark narrative'— or rather, a set of contesting narratives -- designating a 'category of social problem and accompanying warrants for claimsmakers' preferred policies' (Nichols, 1997: 324). The intervening years have seen repeated efforts to commemorate and memorialize these events.

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<sup>6</sup> Not everyone agrees. In 1978, the historian James Sheire argued 'that the [May 4th] shootings had no lasting political effect, that the social impact was too difficult to measure, and that the only enduring significance might be of a symbolic nature' (quoted in Bills, 1988b: 58). On the strength of his report, the Historic Sites Survey Division of the National Park Service (U.S. Department of the Interior) declined to declare Kent State an historic landmark. History has not borne out this judgment. The thirtieth anniversary of the shootings in 2000, for example, produced an avalanche of news stories announcing the continuing importance of 'Kent State' and 'May 4th' in American public memory. CNN, for instance, described Kent State as 'forever linked with' the 'Vietnam War era' (Tuchman, 2000), while the Beacon Journal Online reported that high school and college courses 'treat [the] Kent State shootings as [a] turning point for [the] U.S., not unlike [the] Boston Massacre' (Byard, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> These were not, of course, the only students killed by the U.S. state during the 1960s and 1970s. 8 black students were killed and at least 39 injured during demonstrations at South Carolina State College at Orangeburg in 1968, at Jackson State in Mississippi in 1970, and at Southern University in Louisiana in 1972. However, as Miriam Jackson has noted, 'no one paid much attention, nationally, to the latter set of campus shootings – after all, was it unusual for blacks to be shot, particularly in the Deep South?' Instead, 'Kent State has gotten the lion's share of attention because mainstream America – and the American government – could not display with such impunity the same degree of indifference toward victimized white students that they had traditionally displayed toward victimized black students. National indifference about the killings at Orangeburg, Southern University, and Jackson State has, thus, translated into national ambivalence about the events at Kent State' (1988: 179). And race is not the only issue here. Class too is relevant to the Kent State shootings. As Darlene Hine reminds us, we need to consider 'which whites had the more expendable lives. After all, students at the University of California at Berkeley and at Columbia University, New York, had dissented, rallied, trespassed, and transgressed for years, but no state police authority had dared shoot the sons and daughters of the white elite' (1996: 159). Of course, issues of class are never clear-cut. On 'Bloody Friday' (8 May 1970), 200-300 construction workers armed with lead pipes and crowbars charged a peaceful antiwar demonstration in New York city, viciously beat up many protesters, sending more than 70 to the hospital, all under the eyes of, and with occasional help from, the local police (Foner, 1980: 19).



At least two features of the history of attempts to remember ‘May 4<sup>th</sup>’ should be noted at the outset. The first is the striking proliferation of commemorations and memorializations, whether merely attempted or actually realized (see Table 1). The second is the seemingly inevitable controversies surrounding each such effort. From the beginning there were controversies over the memorialization of May 4<sup>th</sup>, over who ‘owned’ May 4<sup>th</sup>, over who should organize the commemorations (Bills, 1988b: 33-4), and, most importantly, over the meaning of the events themselves.

This surprisingly long list of surprisingly limited and sometimes unsuccessful memorials was produced over an extended period of controversy and conflict. As Scott Bills has noted, ‘this assemblage represents years of increments sponsored by numerous individuals and organizations, spawned by differing issues and viewpoints, rather than a single uniform impulse toward reflection and remembrance’ (1988a: xii).<sup>8</sup> We discuss a few of these conflicts in order to raise some of the major representational issues animating the contestation over the meaning of May 4<sup>th</sup>.

Table 1: Memorials to May 4<sup>th</sup> (see, for example, ‘May 4 Memorials’ on the Kent State University Homepage.)

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<sup>8</sup> In this context it is fascinating to note that while decades of calls for a reasonable memorial to the slain students went unheeded, a slew of imposing memorials exist to Ohio Governor James A. Rhodes, who ordered the National Guard to Kent State in 1970 and who, according to some, bears direct responsibility for the shootings. Most of the proliferating memorials to Rhodes were constructed or dedicated before his death in 2001. They include, for example, the Rhodes State Office Building (Hawthorne, 2000: 1); a statue on the Ohio Statehouse lawn dedicated in 1982 (Ohio Outdoor Sculpture Inventory); the James A. Rhodes Health and Physical Education Building, ‘JAR Arena’, at the University of Akron dedicated in 1983 (‘James A. Rhodes Arena’); and the James A. Rhodes Airport in Jackson, Ohio (AirNav.com). In 2001 it was proposed to the Ohio legislature that a section of Route 68 in Clark County, Ohio, be renamed the James A. Rhodes Memorial Highway (‘Fiscal Note & Local Impact Statement’). In 1999 he still described young people protesting U.S. military involvement in the Vietnam War uncomprehendingly as ‘people who thought something was wrong with America’ (McCarthy, 1999: 1); in the memorial service held for Rhodes after his death in 2001, the four dead students were not mentioned (Douglas, 2001: 3).

DATE	MEMORIALIZATION OR COMMEMORATION
1971	Center for Peaceful Change. The Center, which engages in teaching, research and public service concerning non-violent social change, is a 'living memorial'.
1971	Candlelight walk and vigil. 11 pm candlelight procession on May 3 to parking lot where students were killed, and all-night vigil.
1971	First memorial program on May 4. Held every year, with special large programs on the 20 <sup>th</sup> (1990) and 30 <sup>th</sup> (2000) anniversaries.
1971	Metal marker in Prentice Hall parking lot. Stolen 1974, replaced by faculty 1975.
1973	<i>The Kent Four</i> , pipe sculpture by Alastair Granvilloe-Jackson.
1974	May 4 <sup>th</sup> Resource Room, first floor, University Library.
19??	Memorial windows, by Theodore L. Abel, in Resource Room.
1978	<i>Abraham and Issac</i> , sculpture by George Segal rejected by KSU administration.
1978	Classes cancelled on afternoons of May 4.
1978	Statement about May 4 <sup>th</sup> added to all university catalogues.
1990	May 4 <sup>th</sup> Memorial scholarships, one in name of each slain student.
1990	May 4 <sup>th</sup> Memorial. First officially sanctioned physical memorial.
1999	Prentice Hall parking lot markers for each student killed.
	MEMORIALS NOT AT KENT STATE UNIVERSITY
1970	<i>Bridge over Troubled Water</i> , sculpture by Don Drumm, Bowling Green State University, Ohio.
1972	Memorial to Kent State-Jackson State, Minnesota State University at Mankato.
1980	<i>In Memory of May 4, 1970, Kent State: Abraham and Isaac</i> , sculpture by George Segal, Princeton University, New Jersey.

Several memorials and commemorations were instituted on or around the first anniversary of the shootings. 1971 saw the institution of the Candlelight Walk and Vigil, which has continued to this day. The candlelight procession begins at 11pm on May 3, wends its way around the campus, and culminates at Prentice Hall parking lot, where the four students were killed. This is followed by an all-night vigil in which individuals, in shifts, remain in the four

spaces until 12:24pm on May 4 (marking the time of the actual shootings). Those conducting the vigil are encouraged to learn something about the student in whose place they stand. At 12:24, those holding the vigil return to the main site of the May 4<sup>th</sup> program, which begins with brief biographies of the four dead students. This ‘quasi-religious’ vigil, silent and solemn, has always been the University administration’s preferred mode of remembrance (Jackson, 1988: 177). (We return to this issue below.) The Candlelight Walk and Vigil are noteworthy for three reasons. First, they have continued since 1971, despite the fact that most of the KSU students who now participate were not even born in 1970. Second, they make the four dead students central to the commemoration. Third, this commemoration – as with many of the others -- was not initiated by the University. Instead, it was first organized by KSU Professor Jerry Lewis, in conjunction with a group of students, and then taken over by the Center for Peaceful Change.<sup>9</sup>

It highlights as well another of the controversies surrounding the memorialization of May 4<sup>th</sup> -- the perceived reluctance of the University itself to offer a proper memorial. The first physical memorial – albeit a very small one – was also erected in 1971. Again, however, it was not by the University. In this case, B’nai B’rith Hillel commissioned a metal marker, inscribed with the names of the slain students, which was placed in Prentice Hall parking lot, where the students had been killed. When the plaque was stolen on May 3, 1974, it was not replaced by the University. Instead, it was replaced in 1975 by a stone marker paid for by a private collection from amongst, and organized by, the University’s faculty. In 1971 the University did sponsor the first annual May 4<sup>th</sup> Memorial Program. In 1975, however, the administration announced its

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<sup>9</sup> Similarly, most of the other memorials and commemorations listed in Table 1 were neither initiated nor organized by the University administration or the local community of Kent. For example, the May 4<sup>th</sup> Resource Room in the University Library – which serves as a public reading room and contains material about May 4<sup>th</sup>, about campus unrest during Vietnam era, and about US involvement in Southeast Asia -- was initiated by a graduate student, Paul Keane, supported by Raj Basi, director for the CPC, and paid for by an alumnus (see Dyal, 1988: 201, n. 5). The

decision to withdraw from the annual events on the grounds that five years was long enough to mark the shootings, prompting charges of administration insensitivity. The organization of the May 4<sup>th</sup> memorial program was then taken over by the May 4<sup>th</sup> Task Force, composed of veterans of the 1970 demonstrations as well as KSU students, and has continued unabated ever since.

Prior to the dedication of the May 4<sup>th</sup> Memorial in 1990, the most important gesture by the university -- albeit a limited one that illustrates some ongoing difficulties -- was the establishment of the Center for Peaceful Change (CPC) in 1971. The Center's mission was to teach courses, conduct research, and provide public service related to non-violent social change. According to Dennis Carey, its long-time director, the CPC was a 'phoenix reaction' that, by offering a 'living memorial,' 'free[d] those who survived to get on with life while not seeming to forget the loss' (1988: 161). Even this seemingly rather innocuous gesture caused controversy. For example, to fulfill its teaching mission, the CPC was also to offer an undergraduate major. But what to call it? The Ohio State Board of Regents would not accept 'Peace studies' -- the title initially proposed -- on the grounds that this was too radical! As a result, the program was called 'integrative change', a largely meaningless title 'sufficiently vacuous to reassure the most conservative of Board members' (*ibid.*: 164; see also Begala, 1988). From the beginning, then, the memorialization of 'May 4<sup>th</sup>' at 'Kent State' pitted conservative narratives of social cohesion against more critical narratives of peace and justice.

The establishment of the CPC raises another persistent issue: who or what was to be memorialized? It is generally agreed that the CPC was conceived as 'a living memorial'. But was it 'a living memorial to the slain students', as is claimed in some places (e.g., 'Center for

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Resource Room contains four Memorial Windows created by KSU graduate Theodore L. Abel, who presented them

Peaceful Change'), or was it 'a living memorial to May 4, 1970' ('Center for Peaceful Change, Records') or 'to the events of May 4, 1970' ('Center for Applied Conflict Management'), as is claimed in others? The two constructions are not the same. The former commemorates the four slain students, drawing attention to their untimely and unnecessary deaths at the hands of the state. The latter, commemorating the 'events', focuses attention only onto the 'tragedy' that was 'May 4<sup>th</sup>', obscuring from view not only the individuals who were killed, but also the fact of the killings themselves.<sup>10</sup> Commemorations organised by students and activists such as the Candlelight Walk and Vigil have always focused on the students, using the biographical to highlight the larger institutional, social and political contexts of their deaths, in particular the war in Indochina. For the May 4<sup>th</sup> Task Force, the links between 'Kent State', 'Jackson State', and issues of race and justice at home and abroad have always been an integral part of what 'May 4<sup>th</sup>' represents: their slogan, for example, is 'Long live the spirit of Kent and Jackson State' (May 4<sup>th</sup> Task Force homepage). In contrast, until recently the University has largely ignored the individuals in favour of a fuzzier and more anonymous narrative of forces simply beyond anyone's control: the shootings are just an awful accident, not a product, however distant and mediated, of willed policy. As one analyst put it: 'the remembrance is mainly concerned with the episode itself. ... [i]t seems like the four persons who were killed have been forgotten' and that, in all 'the talks of commemoration,' there was remarkably little mention of Allison Krause, Jeffrey Miller, Sandra Scheuer, and William Schroeder' (Johansen, 1995: 22). As we discuss

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to the University.

<sup>10</sup> Similar constructions are evident in discussions of the events of 'Bloody Sunday' in Northern Ireland on January 30, 1972, but we have no space to discuss them here.

below, however, the relative neglect by KSU of the students and their families ended in the 1990s.<sup>11</sup>

Two further controversies over early, unsuccessful attempts at commemoration are worth mentioning here. The first is the so-called ‘Gym controversy’ of 1977-1978. This dispute was prompted by University plans to build a gymnasium annex on part of the site of the May 4<sup>th</sup> shootings. Furious opponents launched an extended protest, including an occupation of the proposed building site (e.g., Schwartz, 1988; Grim, 1988; Jackson, 1992). For these protesters, the annex would serve to cover up the ‘truth’ about May 4<sup>th</sup>. Among their many objections was the fact that the new building would obscure the distances involved in the shootings. As determined by the FBI and made public in the President’s Commission on Campus Unrest (hereafter the Scranton Commission Report), many of the students shot – and all of those killed – were quite a distance from the Guard, and often not facing the guardsmen at all. The student closest to the firing line was 60 feet away (Kelner, 1995); Jeffrey Miller was 85-90 yards (nearly 82 meters) away when he was killed by a shot in the mouth; Dean Kahler, who was left paralyzed, was 95-100 yards (about 90 meters) away when he was shot in the back; Allison Krause was killed at 110 yards (100 meters) by a bullet that went through her arm and penetrated her left side; William Schroeder was killed at 130 yards (nearly 120 meters) by a shot in the back; and Sandra Scheuer was also 130 yards away when she was killed by a shot through the

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<sup>11</sup> The University has persistently evaded and rejected attempts to erect memorials to the four slain students. Repeated attempts to have buildings on Kent State’s campus renamed in honor of the slain students have failed. In contrast, at least two major Ohio public buildings have been dedicated to Governor Rhodes. The University did finally agree to install 2 permanent and more extensive memorials – the May 4th Memorial and the Prentice Hall parking lot markers. But these memorials were not dedicated until 1990 and 1999, respectively, and only after persistent pressure from student activists and the slain students’ families. Although the May 4 Memorial was, again, dedicated not to those killed but to the ‘Events of May 4, 1970’, criticism of this failure forced KSU President Schwartz in 1990 to grant four May 4<sup>th</sup> Memorial Scholarships, one in the name of each slain student, and to add a plaque with the names of the victims ‘near’ the memorial a few days before its dedication. The stone marker in the Prentice Hall parking lot has the students’ names on it.

side of her neck (Scranton Commission Report, 1970: 273). Leaving the physical context of the shootings intact and accessible was particularly important to proponents of memorialization – the victims, their families, and many students and activists -- because in showing the distance between the dead students and the Guard, it rendered suspect the Guard's claims to self-defense. In this case, however, the proponents of memorialization, or at least remembrance, lost. The annex was built. Although John Begala has claimed that 'It was dumb, if not "wrong," to build there' (1988: 135), obscuring the site may have worked in Kent State's favor by limiting the imagined reconstructions of the shootings by visitors to the site. Nonetheless, as a result of the potential damage to Kent State's reputation from this controversy, the administration set up the May 4<sup>th</sup> Commemoration Committee in 1978. Of its many suggestions, however, only a few were implemented in 1978, including the inclusion of a statement in all university catalogues about May 4<sup>th</sup> and the (voluntary) cancellation of classes each year on the afternoon of May 4 – the decision is left up to individual instructors (Dyal, 1988: 202-203).

A second controversy also took place in 1978. George Segal was commissioned by the Cleveland-based Mildred Andrews Fund to produce a commemorative sculpture as a gift to the university. His sculpture, entitled *Abraham and Isaac*, depicted the father, Abraham, who had been ordered to slay his only son, Isaac, to prove his belief in God, standing over his son holding a knife. Segal explained his choice as follows: 'There is a strong connection in my mind between the image of Abraham and Isaac and the killings at Kent State. It's an attempt to introduce difficult moral and ethical questions as to how older people should behave toward their children' ('Abraham and Isaac'). Initially, Kent State officials agreed to accept the work if Segal would etch on the base fourteen lines from Genesis explaining that the father spares the son ('George Segal: American Still Life'). Later, however, KSU President Brage Golding rejected the

sculpture as too controversial. He claimed it was ‘inappropriate to commemorate the deaths of four students and the wounding of nine on the campus with a statue which appears to represent an act of violence about to be committed’ (quoted in Bills, 1988b: 53-54). Michael Schwartz, who succeeded Golding as President, endorsed the decision, claiming that ‘the piece was violent in nature and did not convey the message we were trying to capture’ (Cody, 1990). *In Memory of May 4, 1970, Kent State: Abraham and Isaac* was accepted by Princeton University in 1980.

The May 4<sup>th</sup> Memorial, dedicated in 1990, had the potential to lay to rest claims that successive KSU administrations had done too little to remember the slain students. The virtue of having a permanent memorial, argued the *Daily Kent Stater* in 1984, was that it ‘would finally put the tragedy of May 4 behind the University and put to rest the conflict over how the tragedy should be remembered.’ Even May 4<sup>th</sup> activists like Alan Canfora, one of the students wounded in 1970, noted with the announcement of the May 4<sup>th</sup> Memorial that healing had begun and that the University had finally done the right thing (in Bills, 1988a: xvi-xvii). The May 4<sup>th</sup> Memorial Committee was created in March 1984. It decided that the Kent State shootings remained ‘a visible milestone in a war that belongs to another generation’ and that any memorial should emphasize that May 4<sup>th</sup> ‘sensitized Americans to regimented lines of communications and authority. May 4<sup>th</sup> changed forever how future demonstrations – peaceful and otherwise – must be perceived, analyzed, understood, and settled non-violently.’ They also pronounced that ‘all society was the victim on May 4<sup>th</sup> – students, Guardsmen, townspeople, and faculty. The four dead paid the ultimate price’ (quoted in Bills, 1988a: xiii). Because there were many different viewpoints about May 4<sup>th</sup> and no definitive explanation for the shootings, the committee concluded that

in order to memorialize these events effectively, a site which reflects the diverse constituencies and meanings would be most appropriate. This reflective site should



present the visitor with the opportunity to *inquire* into the many reasons and purposes of the events that lead to the killing and wounding of students on May 4, 1970 and to encourage a *learning* process to broaden the perspective of these events. The site should encourage visitors to ask what differences were confronting this community and this nation at that time and to *reflect* on how those differences may have been resolved peacefully. (ibid.: xiv)

Thus was born Kent State's May 4<sup>th</sup> slogan: 'Inquire, Learn, Reflect'. Of course, a memorial defined in these terms encourages 'personal reflection rather than political activism' (ibid.: xiv). Seeking to allocate praise or blame, the committee noted, was an 'unproductive and divisive practice' (ibid.: xv). Instead, the memorial, which 'commemorates the events of May 4, 1970 ... provides visitors a retreat for interpretation and reflection' ('May 4 Memorial'). The granite memorial is surrounded by 58,175 daffodils, 'the number of the country's losses in Vietnam.' 'Inquire, Learn, Reflect,' is engraved on the memorial, 'affirm[ing] the intent that the memorial site provide visitors an opportunity to inquire into the many reasons and purposes of the events, to encourage a learning process, and to reflect on how differences may be resolved peacefully' (ibid.).

The hoped-for healing never took place. In 1988, after the University failed to raise the money needed for the memorial, the Trustees passed a resolution limiting the cost of the memorial to about \$100,000 (down from an estimated \$1.3 million). As a result, only 7 per cent of the proposed memorial was ever built. According to some critics, this indicated 'the continued insensitivity of the Kent State University administration to the significance of May 4, 1970' ('Summary: The May 4<sup>th</sup> Memorial Controversy'). The opportunity to do something real and meaningful had been frittered away. For example, 'Mike and Kendra's May 4, 1970 Web Site' offers a scathing comparison of the University's successful effort to raise \$6 million for a fashion museum and school of fashion design with their failure to raise the \$1.3 million needed for the memorial. A major reason for the continuing controversy over May 4<sup>th</sup>, then, is the failure to

carry out the memorial as planned and the perceived lack of commitment by the University to a serious memorial.

A second, and perhaps more enduring, problem is the University's persistent attempts to render May 4<sup>th</sup> in a politically acceptable way. As Scott Bills argued, by 1985, 'the process of depoliticizing May 4 events had steadily acquired greater legitimacy' (Bills, 1988a: xv). In the remainder of this paper, we explore the discursive processes through which this rearticulation has taken place, through analysis of the conflicting representations of 'May 4<sup>th</sup>' and 'Kent State' put forward in public and popular memory. What discursive practices have made this history of partial, aborted, and contested memorials possible? In particular, why has it proven so difficult to represent 'May 4<sup>th</sup>' and 'Kent State' in a way that enables the production of a memorial, perhaps a large-scale memorial to the four dead students, capable of bringing to an end the continuing controversy? To answer these questions, we begin with a brief rehearsal of the events of May 1-4, 1970. While any such chronology is itself a product of interpretation and selection, laying out some of the events of May 1970 provides a basis for comparing and contrasting different narratives of them. As we will show, at the core of these disputes are a set of issues that revolve around the failure of the University to address the issues most central to popular memories of May 4<sup>th</sup>, issues of foreign policy and justice, and the implications for a more critical analysis of the U.S. and its role in the world. Instead, from the point of view of the University, 'May 4<sup>th</sup>' is not about foreign policy and justice at all; instead, it is about KSU and the responsibilities of citizens in a democratic society.

## **Context and Chronology<sup>12</sup>**

At least four distinct arenas – U.S. foreign policy, U.S domestic politics, Ohio state politics, and the history of student demonstrations at KSU – are important for situating these events. We discuss each briefly, before highlighting the events of May 1-4.

The foreign policy context, of course, was the long history of U.S. imperialism and its disastrous involvement in Southeast Asia (e.g., Kolko, 1985; Herring, 1986; Duiker, 1995). U.S. involvement in Vietnam had begun already in 1950 with U.S. support – despite its avowed anti-imperialist policy -- for the re-imposition of French imperialism after the successful anti-colonial struggle led by Ho Chih Minh. After partition in 1954, the U.S. provided support to the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem in the southern part of Vietnam, equipping and training his army. In the early 1960s the U.S. steadily increased its aid and the deployment of military advisors. The so-called ‘Gulf of Tonkin’ incident in August 1964, followed by the U.S. presidential election in November, made possible the massive escalation of U.S. commitments to South Vietnam. Operation Rolling Thunder – massive air strikes against North Vietnam -- began in August of 1964,<sup>13</sup> followed by the deployment of ground troop in March 1965. U.S. troop commitments peaked in 1969 at over half a million. Increasing pressure to scale back and then end the war led to the Nixon administration’s promise of its ‘Vietnamization’ – i.e., the increasing substitution of South Vietnamese for U.S. troops. But after this promise was made, Nixon extended the war into Cambodia, on the grounds that the Ho Chih Minh Trail, along which supplies were coming from the North, required interdiction. It was the announcement of this extension for the war, as we note below, that precipitated the events at Kent State.

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<sup>12</sup> Chronologies of these events abound. A particularly thoughtful and comprehensive chronology is provided by James Best (1978). We draw extensively on it, and on several others, including the brief chronology offered on the Kent Direct Action Coalition website. See also Davies (1973, Chapter 1).

Domestically, the shootings were located in a time of political polarization, of intense frustration, and even of anguish over both foreign and domestic policy (Jackson, 1992: 2). The U.S. had witnessed growing popular and especially student disapproval of the war, and growing upheaval over civil rights and women's rights, accompanied by the assassination of a range of political leaders, from Malcolm X to Robert Kennedy. The 1960s had produced 'the flowering of many campaigns of dissent which represented a concerted attack on powerful myths and images concerning American benevolence, uniqueness, perfectibility, and power' (Bills, 1996: 194). Central to this dissent, after the dramatic escalation of U.S. involvement in Vietnam in 1965, was the burgeoning anti-war movement. An increasing number of Americans, especially students, came to see 'South Vietnam' as a cold war invention (Bills, 1996: 196) and the war as an imperial adventure (e.g., Shurmann, 1974; Cumings, 1992). Nation-wide antiwar protests highlighted the growing conviction that the U.S. was oppressing a weak nation and obstructing an anti-colonial struggle for independence by attempting to graft by force a bit of empire onto Indo-China (Jackson, 1992: 2). The civil rights movement polarized the country as well, leading to pervasive images of violence against blacks, against civil rights activists, and even against students and children.<sup>14</sup>

The state of Ohio was neither isolated from this context nor immune to campus unrest. Before the demonstrations at Kent State, there had been demonstrations and assorted unrest at Akron University, Ohio University, Dayton University, Miami University and Ohio State University (Best, 1978: 7). In response, Ohio's Governor, James Rhodes, had developed a

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<sup>13</sup> For an excellent analysis of the discursive constructions that enabled the bombing, see Milliken and Sylvan, 1996.

<sup>14</sup> As Darlene Hine reminds us, the May 4<sup>th</sup> shootings were situated between two other sets of campus killings, the 1968 murders of Delano Middleton, Henry Smith and Samuel Hammond, Jr. by South Carolina highway patrolmen after demonstrations over racial segregation in a white-owned bowling alley near South Carolina State University and the murder by city police of James Earl Green and Philip L. Gibbs at Jackson State University (1996: 157-158) in the wake of civil rights and antiwar protests.

reputation for swift and decisive action, and especially for his unstinting use of the Ohio National Guard. Indeed, 'By the first week in May, 1970, violence on Ohio's state supported campuses was an old story.' Governor Rhodes 'had ... called out the National Guard forty times during the preceding two years.' As a result, 'Ohio's expenditure for National Guard duty is said to have exceeded the total for all other forty-nine states during 1968-1970' (O'Neill, Morris and Mack, quoted in Best, 1978: 7). Moreover, and of considerable importance, Governor Rhodes was nearing the end of a primary campaign for the Republican Senatorial nomination -- the last weekend of the closely fought campaign (which he lost) was May 1-4. One of his major platforms was law and order.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, it should be mentioned that Kent State itself had a rather mixed history of student activism and was actually quite conservative. As James Best notes, KSU 'did not make many [of its students] radicals, or even very liberal' (1978: 5). On the other hand, Kent State did briefly host a chapter of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and had an active Black United Students (BUS) organization. In the late 1960s, student activism increased at Kent State as elsewhere. While opposition to racism and to the war in Vietnam were major issues, they also agitated (unsuccessfully) for issues closer to home, including the abolition of ROTC on campus, the closure of the Liquid Crystal Institute, funded in part by the U.S. Department of Defense, the 'removal of a state criminal investigation laboratory from campus', and the termination of the university's law enforcement program (Best, 1978: 5-6).

The immediate catalyst for May 4<sup>th</sup> was President Nixon's announcement on April 30<sup>th</sup> that, despite his promise to end the war in Indochina, a large U.S.-South Vietnamese offensive

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<sup>15</sup> Some, such as former Portage County, Ohio, prosecutor Charles Kirkwood, have argued that the May 4th shootings should in large measure be attributed to Governor Rhode's political ambitions: 'You mean to tell me they died because a governor was running for office and a bunch of untrained people were brought to a campus run by people who didn't know how to handle student unrest? ... Unfortunately, the answer is yes' (1988: 115).

was underway in Cambodia to interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail. As Nixon explained: ‘In cooperation with the armed forces of South Vietnam, attacks are being launched this week to clean out major enemy sanctuaries on the Cambodian-Vietnam border.’ Although Nixon claimed that ‘A major responsibility for the ground operation is being assumed by South Vietnamese forces,’ he also explained that ‘tonight, American and South Vietnamese units will attack the headquarters for the entire Communist military operation in south Vietnam’ (Nixon, 1970). For many activists and students, this policy change signaled an escalation of the war, and massive protests erupted across the U.S.

It is in these nested contexts that the events of May 4<sup>th</sup> unfolded. On Friday, May 1, about 500 students gathered on the KSU Commons for a ceremonial burial of the American Constitution, which they claimed had been murdered by the Nixon administration’s failure to get a Congressional declaration of war for the action in Cambodia. This was followed by an anti-racist rally of about 400 organized by BUS and, in the evening, a spontaneous anti-war demonstration broke out in downtown Kent on ‘the Strip’. Police cars were hit with beer bottles, anti-war slogans were chanted, a bonfire was set in the street, and, in the end, 43 windows had been broken. Kent’s Mayor Leroy Satrom declared a ‘state of emergency’, all bars were ordered closed, and the police dispersed the crowd.

On the morning of Saturday, May 2, while some students helped to clean up ‘the Strip’, rumors circulated that the ROTC building on campus would be burned down. A dusk-to-dawn curfew was imposed in Kent and students were restricted to campus. At 5 pm, Mayor Satrom alerted the Ohio National Guard. Later in the evening, several thousand marchers crossed the Commons and surrounded the ROTC building, which was set on fire by (still unknown) arsonists. (30 ROTC buildings were to be burnt down across the USA in the first 2 weeks of May

1970). Protected by police, firefighters fought the blaze, and National Guardsmen armed with tear gas and bayonets cleared the crowds. At least one student was bayoneted.

By Sunday morning, May 3, the National Guard completely occupied the KSU campus. Governor Rhodes, in what has been regarded as a highly inflammatory speech, claimed that organized outside agitators were attempting to ‘destroy higher education in Ohio’ and announced that ‘we’re going to use every part of the law enforcement of Ohio to drive them out of Kent’ (Rhodes, 1970). That evening saw several confrontations between students and the National Guard, both on and off campus, and the Guard, using tear gas and helicopters – which remained overhead all night -- eventually dispersed the crowds.

Over the course of the morning on Monday, May 4<sup>th</sup>, a crowd gathered on the Commons. At around noon, the National Guard ordered the crowd of about 1500 to disperse. When they refused, General Canterbury ordered the guardsmen to disperse them. Armed with loaded M-1 rifles and tear gas, a skirmish line approached the crowd, pushing them across the Commons. The students retreated; the Guardsmen followed firing tear gas. Some students threw rocks at the Guard, and threw back tear gas canisters as well. After a brief, 10-minute interlude -- during which many thought the confrontation over and started to leave the area – the Guard marched back across the Commons. Suddenly 28 Guardsmen turned and fired their weapons into the crowd that remained in the Prentice Hall parking lot. 67 shots were fired in 13 seconds. Four students were killed. Nine others were wounded, several seriously. On May 5<sup>th</sup>, Governor Rhodes declared martial law, and across the U.S., campuses erupted. Over 700 colleges and universities were shut down. In fact, ‘Cambodia and Kent State produced the biggest student strike in American history’ (Jackson, 1988: 183).

The fallout from May 4<sup>th</sup> would be prolonged. Indeed, the aftermath is still with us, and the narratives and memories are still being constructed. There were many investigations, most importantly the Scranton Commission, which found that, although ‘violence by students ... can never be justified’, ‘the indiscriminate firing of rifles into a crowd of students and the deaths that followed were unnecessary, unwarranted, and inexcusable’ and that ‘the guardsmen should not have been able to kill so easily.... The general issuance of loaded weapons to law enforcement officers engaged in controlling disorders is never justified except in the case of armed resistance that trained sniper teams are unable to handle. This was not the case at Kent State, yet each guardsman carried a loaded M-1 rifle’ (President’s Commission, 1971: 289). The most notorious investigation culminated in the Portage County Grand Jury Report which, in full knowledge of the Scranton Commission findings, completely exonerated the National Guard and laid the blame on just about everyone else. As the *New Republic* reported, ‘the Ohio grand jury found guilt almost everywhere. Demonstrators, arsonists, on-lookers, outsiders, obscenity shouters, faculty, and, most of all, the [KSU] administration was to blame – but not the Guard’ (quoted in Johansen, 1995: 15).<sup>16</sup>

### **Narrating May 4<sup>th</sup> at Kent State**

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<sup>16</sup> In the aftermath of the official inquiries, there were also several court cases, culminating in the 1979 out-of-court settlement between the victims and their families and the State of Ohio (see Hensley, 1978).



Strikingly different, in some respects completely conflicting, narratives of the events of May 4<sup>th</sup> emerged at the time and have remained remarkably persistent. At least three distinct views<sup>17</sup> have dominated the debate. Two were national in scope:

The country cracked in two: there were those who blamed the National Guard and their commanders in high places for shooting into an unarmed crowd, and, on the other hand, those who blamed the students for burning down ROTC buildings and God knows what else and wanted more of them killed. (Gitlin, 1996: 187)

The third emerged as the ‘middle ground’,<sup>18</sup> championed among others by the University in its attempt to cope with the other two: the shootings were merely a tragic accident; no one was to blame. These divergent narratives illustrate the very different ways in which seemingly straightforward events can be constructed. More significantly, they also illustrate the divergence between different representations of the relations between U.S. foreign policy, domestic protest, and their implications. The following are condensed versions of each narrative designed to highlight their most salient differences.

The conservative narrative – still surprisingly resonant in the surrounding community, particularly in the city of Kent and the near-by county seat, Ravenna<sup>19</sup> – is a ‘law and order’ story in which the protesters ‘got what they deserved’. This version of events depicts a pack of ungrateful, obscene, violent and dirty students (the relative importance of the adjectives varies across versions of the story) who, probably at the instigation of outside agitators and communists, had been rioting for several days, inflicting property damage on Kent businesses, burning down the ROTC building on campus, and finally holding an illegal rally on May 4 in defiance of the National Guard’s legitimate, and laudable, attempt to reestablish order. This

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<sup>17</sup> A brief analysis offering three slightly different narratives can be found in Wisebaker (2001).

<sup>18</sup> A fourth narrative was suggested to us by David Welch. On this view, the shootings of May 4<sup>th</sup> were quite simply the result of a cock-up. This ‘screw-up narrative’ [NOTE links to Michael Mann’s view of history], however, is actually very similar to the KSU preferred view that it was really nobody’s fault; it was just one of those tragic things.

large, illegal mob assaulted the National Guardsmen with rocks and obscenities. The Guardsmen shot in self-defense. Local opinion of the consequences is best captured directly: When interviewed in 1982, former Ohio National Guardsman Robert Gabriel explained: ‘I suppose I thought that the shootings were a good thing, because they stopped everything right there. Everything cooled down after that. That took the hot air out of the radical stuff in the nation’ (1988: 122). Seabury Ford, Special Prosecutor, wasn’t so pleased. ‘They should have shot all the troublemakers,’ he complained on 24 October 1970 (quoted in Bills, 1988b: 30). In some quarters, this sentiment remains even after thirty years. On the ‘Interactive Internet Memorial’ commemorating May 4<sup>th</sup>, T.J. Martin wrote on 1 March 2000: ‘I think the guards should have fired for more than 11 seconds [sic].’ In this narrative, the state acted appropriately to quell an illegal (and generally unfathomable) breakdown of law and order, of the civilized middle-American way of life. To the extent that foreign policy entered into the story, it was largely in the form of outside communist agitators who had infiltrated American campuses and instigated unrest. The salient political issue was the collapse of law and order and the consequent threat to American society. Moreover, ‘In Nixons’ Washington, Kent State was ... an insurrection. It was an insurrection in time of war. Insurrectionists are traitors, and traitors are shot’ (Aptheker, 1980: 3).

A second, subaltern narrative – one of state repression -- contests this construction directly. On this view, the four dead students were martyrs, murdered by the U.S. state. As the May 4<sup>th</sup> Task Force explains: ‘KSU students were exercising their constitutional rights to protest the Cambodian invasion. The guard violated these rights when they broke up a peaceful rally. The deaths of Allison, Sandy, Jeff, and Bill were deliberate murder’ (May 4<sup>th</sup> Task Force

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<sup>19</sup> The authors lived in Ravenna and worked at KSU from 1992 to 1999.

Homepage: 4). The students were legitimately protesting both their government's ill-advised, and indeed criminal, foreign policy in Southeast Asia, and specifically President Nixon's expansion of the war into Cambodia, and the presence of the National Guard on campus. In this narrative, the domestic politics of law and order were directly linked to U.S. foreign policy – indeed, they were its accomplice. Ironically and horribly, not only were the students not rioting, obscenity-shouting, ingrates, but two of those killed – Sandy Scheuer and Bill Schroeder -- were not involved in the protests; they were merely crossing the campus to attend classes. According to this narrative, 'May 4<sup>th</sup>' is a dark moment in American history in which 'America kills its children' ('Kent State, May 4, 1970'). Even the Scranton Commission Report asserted unambiguously that 'The indiscriminate firing of rifles into a crowd of students and the deaths that followed were unnecessary, unwarranted, and inexcusable' (President's Commission, 1970: 289). The killings, then, were the state's violent response to legitimate dissent from an illegal and imperial foreign policy. The continued re-articulation of this alternative narrative indicates 'a sustained struggle against the reconstruction of a sturdy national myth' (Bills, 1996: 200); it signals ongoing 'struggles against imperialism, militarism and domestic oppression' (Thulin, 1980: 2).

Kent State University has attempted to silence, or at least to contain, this deeply polarized set of narratives. Both the narrative of 'law and order' and that of 'state repression' focus on assigning blame – whether to the National Guard, or to everyone but the National Guard. Successive Kent State administrations, in contrast, have tried to avoid the issue of blame and responsibility – at least overtly -- by constructing a third narrative – one of 'tragedy.' (We discuss the notion of 'tragedy' in more detail below.) On this narrative the events of early May and their culmination in the shootings of May 4<sup>th</sup> were, quite simply, 'a tragedy', both for the

University and for the wider community. KSU President Brage Golding, for instance, described the slain students as ‘victims of a tragedy, a combination of international, national, local and personal forces which exploded in panic and unreason on May 4’ (in Bills, 1988b: 49). The situation was essentially beyond anyone’s control – a variety of ‘forces’ combined to lead to an unexpected, and certainly unintended, outcome. On this view, the events of May 4<sup>th</sup> issued from ‘a series of mistakes on everyone’s part: a chain of events that incredibly lead to the shooting of four students on a college campus in the United States’ (Herington, 1988: 80). It was no one’s fault, so no one can be blamed. We are instructed to ‘inquire’ into these events, and then ‘learn’ about and ‘reflect’ on them; we are on no account to act, as this might lead to tragedy. This narrative, like the conservative ‘law and order’ story, sidelines the foreign policy context of the protests, ignores the link between dissent from foreign policy and state repression, and focuses all attention onto the ‘tragedy’ that results from ‘violent protest’. It focuses on the lessons of this tragedy for democratic governance, but only in the interests of promoting ‘peaceful change’ – a charge aimed at protesters, but not at the state -- not in terms of the conduct of foreign policy.

### **Managing Public Memory**

According to Robert Dyal, a former faculty member at Kent State, the University administration’s response to May 4<sup>th</sup> has been ‘denial, defensiveness, hostility, cowardice, indifference, incompetence, and an excessive regard for the University’s “public relations” image’ (1988: 203). Whether one views this as a harsh judgment or not,<sup>20</sup> it is certain that a variety of discursive strategies have been used within each narrative to marginalize some

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<sup>20</sup> In contrast, Geoffrey Smith has argued, however implausibly, that ‘in seeking to heal the wounds of the past, and thus claim an affirmative future, Kent State itself deserves great credit’ (Smith, 1996: 150). His evidence is the competition sponsored by KSU for designs for the memorial dedicated in 1990.

implications and meanings of ‘May 4<sup>th</sup>’ and to highlight others. We discuss several of these strategies below. The university’s strategies in particular, we argue, contribute to a representation of these events that has fostered political passivity while also allowing for the more recent rearticulation of May 4<sup>th</sup> as a source of name recognition and thus of ‘corporate rebranding’. It has done so, in part, by persistently failing to acknowledge the integral relations between imperialism abroad and repression at home.

### ***Bums, Martyrs, or Tragic Victims?***

One specific, and predictable, strategy, has been the manipulation of the image of the students involved in the protests at Kent State, and elsewhere. The most pervasive popular image, actively fostered by the U.S. state, was harsh and demeaning (if also sometimes funny). At the time, Vice President Spiro Agnew was famous for his denunciations of student protesters. In 1968, for instance, he said: ‘If you tell me hippies and yippies are going to be able to do the job of helping America, I’ll tell you this: They can’t run a bus; they can’t serve in a government office; they can’t run a lathe in a factory. All they can do is lay down in the park and sleep or kick policemen’ (in Sievert, 1973: 1). Students are not only layabouts, kicking policemen, Agnew informed America, but they are snobs. In perhaps his most famous statement, he asserted that ‘The student now goes to college to proclaim rather than to learn. A spirit of national masochism prevails, encouraged by an effete corps of impudent snobs who characterize themselves as intellectuals’ (ibid.). Even worse, he later added, these layabouts and snobs were also fascists! In April of 1970, shortly before the Kent State shootings, Agnew again lambasted students, offering ‘One modest suggestion for my friends in the academic community: the next time a mob of students, waving their non-violent demands, start pitching bricks and rocks at the

Student Union – just imagine they are wearing brown shirts or white sheets and act accordingly’ (quoted in ‘A brief glimpse of history,’ 2000).

President Nixon contributed his two bits to the demonization of protesting students. Just two days before the shootings, he referred to campus radicals who opposed the Vietnam war as ‘bums’, arguing that: ‘You see these bums, you know, blowing up the campuses. Listen, the boys that are on the college campuses today are the luckiest people in the world, and here they are burning up the books, storming around about this issue. You name it. Get rid of the war there will be another one [i.e., another issue to protest]’ (‘Nixon puts “bums” label’, 1970). In his autobiography Nixon recognized that this statement ‘added fuel to the fires of dissent that were already getting out of control on many campuses’ (Nixon, 1978: 456). It also granted legitimacy to the conservative narrative about student unrest and about the May 4<sup>th</sup> shootings themselves.

On May 3, Governor Rhodes, echoing Agnew’s fascist imagery, added his own large chunk of inflammatory rhetoric. In justifying the deployment of the National Guard to Kent and the KSU campus, Rhodes charged that the students protesting the war at Kent State were ‘worse than the brownshirts and the Communist element and the night riders and the vigilantes. They are the worst type of people that we harbor in America. ... We’re going to eradicate the problem, we’re not going to treat the symptoms’ (quoted in ‘A brief glimpse of history,’ 2000).<sup>21</sup>

The report of the Portage County (Ohio) Grand Jury, convened to examine the ‘events’ that ‘occurred in the city of Kent, Ohio and on the campus of Kent State University during the period from May 1, 1970, to May 4, 1970,’ drew on and repeated such sentiments (Portage County Special Grand Jury, 1970). In the words of one outraged observer, ‘The grand jury report

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<sup>21</sup> In informing J. Edgar Hoover of the shootings, Rhodes toned down the rhetoric: ‘At Kent State University today four persons were killed and others injured in a confrontation between Ohio National Guard troops and a mob of unidentified persons.’ (in Bills, 1988a: xi). In transforming the protesters from students into ‘a mob of unidentified persons’, he opened up space for the later interpretation of the protests as instigated by outside agitators.

had not only exonerated the National Guard but also berated students for going barefoot, decried professors for not saluting the flag, and condemned the KSU administration for allowing the Yippies to meet on campus. It hardly seemed to notice that four students were killed' (Arthrell, 1988: 95).<sup>22</sup> The report itself barely mentions the shootings; only in passing does it acknowledge that anyone was killed. In contrast to other investigations, notably the Scranton Commission's, the grand jury exonerated the National Guardsmen, whom they determined had acted in self-defense in the face of a 'gathering' that 'quickly degenerated into a riotous mob'. The 74 Guardsmen, the jury found, were 'surrounded by several hundred hostile rioters' who 'forced' them 'to retreat ... under a constant barrage of rocks and other flying objects, accompanied by a constant flow of obscenities and chants such as "KILL, KILL, KILL"' (Portage County Special Grand Jury, 1970). On reading this report, it is clear that the obscenities played a large part in condemning the students and exonerating the Guard. As the report notes, with some logical contortions:

It should be added, that although we fully understand and agree with the principle of law that words alone are never sufficient to justify the use of lethal force, the verbal abuse directed at the Guardsmen by the students during the period in question represented a level of obscenity and vulgarity which we have never before witnessed! The epithets directed at the Guardsmen and members of their families by male and female [!] rioters alike would have been unbelievable had they not been confirmed by the testimony from every quarter and by audio tapes made available to the Grand Jury. It is hard to accept the fact that the language of the gutter has become the common vernacular of many persons posing as students in search of a higher education. (ibid.).

In this 'law and order' narrative, then, obscenity-shouting 'bums' and 'brown shirts', ungrateful for their privileges, uncivilized and dangerous, brought on the shootings themselves, and so got what they deserved.

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<sup>22</sup>Arthrell's comment, while generally accurate, includes a slight misrepresentation: there is actually nothing in the grand jury report about bare feet! The objects of its venom were, first, the obscene and violent students, and the

The 'state repression' narrative, in contrast, depicts the students as America's real heroes. As Frances Lehman, a Kent State alumnus stated on May 5, 1970, '... if students at KSU had taken no stand against the escalation of the war in Southeast Asia by an intransigent president, I would have been sorely disappointed. These young people have given their lives for their country in a purer sense than those on the battlefield. To give one's life without killing in return is in the finest tradition' (quoted in Bills, 1988b: 22-23).<sup>23</sup> As one of the protesters has argued: It was 'not only our RIGHT, but our DUTY to protest the actions of a government acting in ways we found morally reprehensible' (JPK, on the Interactive Internet Memorial). On this view, the slain students were 'representatives of the conscience of the nation' (Jackson, 1992: 4). Their slaying, by agents of the state armed with M-1 rifles and fixed bayonets, was nothing short of a 'massacre' ('Position paper of the May 4 coalition'). What had happened at Kent State was 'murder' ('A brief glimpse of history,' 2000), indeed 'official murder' (Howard, 1980: 13). The slain students are thus 'martyrs' (Canfora, 1980: 22) 'who lost their lives in the struggle for peace' ('May 4<sup>th</sup> Memorial Controversy'). May 4<sup>th</sup>, in this narrative, was 'an instance of national repression of the antiwar movement as performed locally' (Howard, 1980: 14). On this view, 'there was something terribly wrong with a society that could kill its own children for exercising rights of speech and assembly which those children had been taught were inherent in the American way' (Jackson, 1980: 276).

Kent State's solution to the dilemma of how to represent the students has been multiple. First, they don't mention the dead and wounded students at all if they can help it. Many of the

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obligatory 'outside agitators'; second, those faculty who encouraged dissent; and third, an overly lax University administration.

<sup>23</sup> Of course, it must be noted that subsequent information casts some slight doubt on this heroic interpretation. After all, two of the victims were not protesters at all. Bill Schroeder, who was shot in the back from almost 400 feet away, was an ROTC student of military science and business administration; Sandra Scheuer, who was shot through the throat from nearly 400 feet away, was simply on her way to class. Neither 'gave their lives' for the protests.



commemorations and memorials – such as the CPC as ‘living memorial’ -- are dedicated to ‘the events of May 4, 1970’: the students remain unnamed and ultimately unacknowledged. Second, if and when mentioning the slain students cannot be avoided, they are treated as (generally still unnamed) victims of a ‘tragedy’. That way, justice is not at issue, nor is state or university policy. Third, however, the university is also complicit in the conservative depiction of the protesters as violent. This is perhaps not surprising as it reflects the contemporary American political climate. In 1970, as U.S. opinion polls showed, ‘while the war was unpopular, antiwar activists were even more so. Such activists could not be innocent’ (Bills, 1996: 197).<sup>24</sup> Fourth, the establishment of the Center for Peaceful Change as a ‘living memorial’ articulates the university’s hope that future movements for change, including student protests, will remain peaceful. But as one KSU student commented: ‘What was needed [in May 1970] was a peaceful change school for the Ohio National Guard, not the students who were engaged in a legal assembly’ (quoted in Bills, 1996: 204). In the memorialization itself, then, the university attributes violence, and thus ultimately blame, to the dissenting students. This, in turn, helps to make sense of KSU’s vision of itself as a major victim of May 4<sup>th</sup>. As Michael Schwartz, former KSU President, has lamented, ‘The Kent State tragedy had one more victim besides those killed and wounded. That victim was the institution itself. ...Kent State University as a corporate body paid and still continues to pay a heavy price’ (Schwartz, 1996: 180).<sup>25</sup>

### ***Whose Violence?***

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<sup>24</sup> As Bills notes, The Gallup Opinion Index from May 1970 showed that campus unrest was considered the country’s major problem, while an August 1970 poll showed that the American public disapproved more of the Black Panther Party than of the Viet Cong (Bills, 1996: 206, note 7).

<sup>25</sup> This KSU self-obsession is particularly evident in the new KSU-sponsored website ‘May4.Net’. Although it describes itself as ‘An online resource to Inquire, Learn and Reflect about May 4, 1970,’ it is overwhelmingly a PR exercise, full of press releases about symposia held at Kent State, KSU’s May 4<sup>th</sup> commemoration, and a list of

Another, corresponding, difference among the narratives of May 4<sup>th</sup> is the attribution of violence. The law and order narrative, unsurprisingly, attributes violence to the students. On this representation, the May 4<sup>th</sup> shootings are persistently set in the context of violent student protest. Violence is an attribute of the protesters – who threw rocks and shouted slogans and obscenities. But such an attribution is specifically withheld from the National Guard, which merely acted in self-defense. As noted above, the Portage County Grand Jury Report, in particular, emphasized the student violence, including their rock-throwing and obscenity-shouting. But the fact that the Guard, armed with loaded M-1 rifles, actually killed and wounded unarmed students goes unmentioned. This representation has a crucial implication: the protesters' violence means that they, not the National Guard, bear responsibility for the killings.<sup>26</sup> After all, by 1970, Americans were largely agreed that 'the discipline and punishment of marauding antiwarriors was overdue' (Bills, 1996: 195).

Nixon provided a similar narrative. In response to the shootings, Nixon issued the following statement: 'This should remind us all once again that when dissent turns to violence [the protests] it invites tragedy [the shootings]. It is my hope that this tragic and unfortunate incident will strengthen the determination of all the nation's campuses, administrators, faculty and students alike to stand firmly for the right which exists in this country of peaceful dissent and just as strongly against the resort to violence as a means of such expression' (quoted in

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experts on May 4<sup>th</sup>, many of them at KSU.

<sup>26</sup> The conservative narrative generally opposes any memorialization of 'May 4th' at all. As a result, most conservative energies have gone into blocking or scaling back the attempts by others to memorialize these events. The one exception we have found is worth mentioning, however. An alternative memorialization of 'May 4<sup>th</sup>' is offered on a web page entitled 'Kent State Memorial, May 4th, 1970'. This somewhat incoherent text opposes the commemoration and memorialization of the shootings at Kent State by providing an alternative memorial drawing on a distinct discourse and narrative. Specifically, this website is dedicated 'In remembrance of the twenty-three young men who were killed in action on May 4th, 1970 somewhere in South Vietnam' and lists their names, dates of birth and death, home towns and ages. A similar list appears as an entry in the Interactive Internet Memorial asking readers to remember both sets of May 4th victims.

Kifner, 1970: 1).<sup>27</sup> Similarly, Agnew was quoted in the *New York Times* on May 4 as saying: ‘It is my prayer tonight that those who have councilled our young people into the violent action that sparked today’s incident will give second thought to what they are doing – to the youth of America and to the nation’ (CITE, p. 17). In both cases, the National Guard shootings become an ‘incident’ or ‘a tragedy’ brought on by the student violence. This is not an unusual construction. Indeed, as John Logue has argued, ‘It is part of [American] tradition ... that those shot were subsequently (and frequently posthumously) declared guilty, while those who did the shooting were exonerated’ (Logue, 1988: 143).

In contrast, of course, the state repression narrative emphasizes the essentially peaceful nature of the protests and the excessive violence of the National Guard, and, by extension, of the U.S. state. Students had gathered at a ‘peaceful rally’ at which they were ‘exercising their constitutional rights to protest’ (May 4<sup>th</sup> Task Force homepage). They were unarmed. As Alan Canfora has said, the stones thrown at the Guard were ‘few and ineffective’ (1980: 22). Contrary to the Guards’ claims to self-defense, there was no time on May 4<sup>th</sup> ‘when a guardsman’s life was in danger’ (ibid.) and they were certainly ‘in no danger at the time they fired into an unarmed crowd (May 4<sup>th</sup> Task Force homepage). In direct contrast, the force wielded by the state – the Guard units were armed with loaded M-1 rifles, fixed bayonets, .45 caliber pistols, several shotguns loaded with birdshot and buckshot, and wearing gas masks (Best, 1978: 20) -- was wildly excessive. This narrative stresses the right to assemble and dissent in a democratic society, and is scathing in its condemnation of the use of armed force to police such dissent. As one commentator put it: May 4, 1970 was ‘one of the stark moments on the nightmare side of the

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<sup>27</sup> The similarities with the constructions of the killing of the anti-globalization protester in Genoa are striking, but beyond the scope of this paper.

American dream' (Gitlin, 1996: 182) and the four slain students were 'Victims of the reign of terror by Nixon, the FBI et al' (John Banyard, on the Interactive Internet Memorial).

Kent State has, as usual, attempted to steer a course between these narratives. It can, of course, hardly claim that its students got what they deserved, and so it has distanced itself somewhat from the law and order discourse of filthy and obscene students. On the other hand, it has persistently adopted the law and order line that the student unrest was violent and that such violence was the cause of the shootings. As Miriam Jackson has pointed out, the name of the 'Center for Peaceful Change' is revealing: it reflects the 'apparent administration conclusions concerning the shootings: that social protest was neither conceivable nor justifiable unless it was peaceful, and that the four students had died because the May 4 protest had not been peaceful' (1988: 178). On this view the lessons of the 'tragedy' at Kent state were two-fold: First, there should be no use of such military force against students or other demonstrations.<sup>28</sup> Second, students should work within the system for change (Herington, 1988: 81): violent protest leads to tragedy.

Moreover, the University has for years striven to deflect any charge of complicity in the deaths of its students. Its rendition of events, not surprisingly, completely ignores the charge that 'the university administration's 'handling of student unrest on May 2 and 3, 1970, was remarkably inept'; that 'its delivery of campus control into the hands of Governor Rhodes and the Ohio National Guard helped pave the way for the May 4 confrontation'; that those who 'insisted on exercising' their 'First Amendment rights by peacefully assembling on the Commons that day may have been justified in denying the subsequent dispersal orders of the National Guard' (Jackson, 1988: 178). It has done so, we argue, by carefully, if uneasily,

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<sup>28</sup> Although, as we mention below, current KSU President Carol Cartwright does apparently think that campus

negotiating the ‘law and order’ and ‘state repression’ narratives in constructing its own narrative of tragedy. The university has tried to have it both ways – the student protest turned violent, which caused the shootings; but the state replied with excessive force. Thus, violence – itself completely outside of the control of the University -- is attributed to both sides, albeit initiated by the students, and the outcome was ‘a tragedy’.

### ***The Language of ‘Tragedy’***

As one commentator noted furiously: ‘Most of all, what happened was not a TRAGEDY, similar to *Love Story* or the untimely death of an athlete or entertainer. Four students were murdered in an official action of the state of Ohio, under the direction of state and national authorities. This is criminal, not tragic.... To bathe such truth in the homogenizing mythology of tragedy or accident is a perversion of justice’ (Howard, 1980: 14). Thus, even the narrative of ‘tragedy’ has been contested. Nonetheless it remains prominent, not least through KSU’s efforts to depoliticize May 4<sup>th</sup>. There are at least two ways<sup>29</sup> in which this notion of tragedy have been used, however, and with quite different political implications.

The first, common in the university discourse, deploys the notion of ‘tragedy’ to neutralize these events, to depoliticize them. On this view, the events were a ‘tragedy’ in ‘the common sense of the word: a dreadful, calamitous, and fateful event’ (Nurmi, 1980: 246). On this construction, the May 4<sup>th</sup> shootings were a ‘tragedy’ rather than a deliberate act or policy, or the foreseeable consequence of a deliberate policy. As we noted, KSU President Brage Golding articulated this view, defining the slain students as ‘victims of a tragedy, a combination of

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police might be armed with rifles, as long as they aren’t M-16s!

<sup>29</sup> A third way is captured by Erich Segal, who wrote in *Ladies Home Journal* in 1970 that ‘The real tragedy is that some people think they deserved to die.’

international, national, local and personal forces which exploded in panic and unreason on May 4' (in Bills, 1988b: 49). Similarly, others have viewed 'the tragedy as a series of mistakes on everyone's part: a chain of events that incredibly lead to the shooting of four students on a college campus in the United States' (Herington, 1988: 80). On May 5, Nixon had already sheltered behind this construction: 'This should remind us all once again that when dissent turns to violence it invites tragedy,' he said (in Kifner, 1970: 1). The narrative of 'a tragedy' was and is central to the Kent State's administrations' – and indeed the U.S. administration's – attempt to come to terms with, and evade responsibility for, the shootings. This construction makes the state violence seem the unforeseen result of an uncontrollable situation.

But one can understand this 'tragedy' differently. One might argue that the events were 'a tragedy' precisely because they were the foreseeable outcome of a deliberate state policy of repressing dissent from foreign policy. Such a notion is obscured by the dominant construction of May 4<sup>th</sup> because it downplays the foreign policy context of the May 4 protests and completely ignores the state repression of dissent. Once the foreign policy context and the resulting repression of dissent is brought to the forefront of the narrative, however, a different story emerges. The violence by the state becomes central and foreseeable, and the tragedy is that it was not prevented. As one commentator has put it: 'There was nothing at Kent State different from a hundred or two hundred other universities in this country, except that people died there. If it didn't happen at Kent, it was going to happen someplace else. That was the tragedy of the whole thing' (Kirkwood, 1988: 116).

John Logue has offered a telling analysis of these events. As Logue notes, the use of force by the U.S. state 'against demonstrating citizens is no novelty in American history.'

Instead, it is part of a long-standing ‘American tradition, hallowed by age and honed by use. Official violence, rarely discussed in times of domestic tranquility, has been a standard response to the waves of popular discontent that called into question the sanctity of government decisions’ (Logue, 1988: 143). In May of 1970, the U.S. government was actively trying to stem ‘the rising tide of popular protest, to bring the popular will into accordance with its own, to replace an unduly critical population with a more quiescent, if not more supportive one’ (ibid.: 144-5). May 4<sup>th</sup> appears as a solitary event, isolated from its foreign policy and domestic political contexts, only because of the considerable ideological labor that has constructed it as such. It is in fact part of a larger practice. Thus, Logue concludes:

That the gunfire occurred in Kent was accidental, but that it occurred at all, of course, was not. The names of the dead at Kent State are as accidental as the names of the guardsmen who shot them. That they died is not. It is no accident that the right to protest is limited only when people make us of it. It is no accident that the government resorts to violence to defend policies its citizens no longer consider legitimate. (ibid.: 148)

### ***The Personal is Not Political***

According to Miriam Jackson, ‘Kent State University would have preferred us to make May 4 simply a day of mourning. It has always felt most comfortable with the quasi-religious candlelight vigil on the night of May 3-4, and least comfortable with the somewhat contrasting atmosphere typical of May 4 itself, an atmosphere which has tended to encourage reaffirmation of the necessity and justifiability of dissent’ (1988: 177-178). The depoliticized nature of the Candlelight Walk and Vigil criticized by Jackson is offered as a positive virtue by former KSU President Glenn Olds. According to Olds, the May 3 vigil allowed ‘all concerned persons’ to ‘participate, reflect and silently commemorate the meaning of these events *without distractions from any alien, partisan, or political interpretation*’ (ibid.: 178, emphasis added). By memorializing ‘the tragedy’ of May 4<sup>th</sup> in such a solemn, contemplative way, the University has

tried to defang these memories, to render them politically mute by making their commemoration a personal, rather than a political, matter. Similarly, as Scott Bills has noted, ‘Inquire, Learn, Reflect’ – the slogan for the May 4<sup>th</sup> Memorial -- also encourages ‘personal reflection rather than political activism’ (1988a.: xiv). The University’s narrative, then, has striven mightily to neutralize these events, to render alien any attempt to remember the *politics* of May 4<sup>th</sup> -- whether the foreign, imperial politics, the politics of state repression, or the links between the two. It ignores the horrific violence unleashed by the U.S. onto Vietnam and Cambodia for nearly a decade; it ignores the pervasive, indeed quite commonplace, violence by the U.S. state throughout the 1960s in response to civil rights and other forms of social protest. And it ignores the blatant attempt by the U.S. state to curtail the constitutional right to dissent through the deployment of military force against its own citizens.

### **Rebranding the Corporate University<sup>30</sup>**

For almost thirty years, KSU sought to distance itself from ‘May 4<sup>th</sup>’ and ‘Kent State’. These efforts continued through the 1980s and culminated in an attempt to rebrand the university itself. In 1986, ‘Kent State’ became ‘Kent’. Then, fourteen years later, the university changed its mind. In 2000, the thirtieth anniversary of the shootings, the university decided to restore the original name and, in a dramatic change of policy, to embrace the legacy of ‘May 4<sup>th</sup>’. Why? According to the *The Daily Kent Stater*, ‘Perhaps most interesting to ponder is Kent State’s coincidental urge to put the ‘state’ back in the name on the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the May 4 shootings, an anniversary that is certain to offer a plethora of commercial opportunities for the university’ (‘A new fact lift’, 2000). The explanation for the shifting articulations of identity by

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<sup>30</sup> On branding, see Klein, 2000.



the university administration lies at least in part in what we might term the political economy of higher education.

One of the most immediate effects of ‘May 4<sup>th</sup>’ on the university was to make ‘Kent State’ synonymous with student protest and its sometimes violent consequences. ‘Kent State’ suddenly became widely perceived as a radical campus. However misleading such a representation, as we noted above, being branded as a hotbed of student radicalism proved disastrous for the recruitment of new students. [data on fall in student numbers in the 1970s] Fewer students meant reduced revenues. Fund-raising also suffered. For the university administration, ‘May 4<sup>th</sup>’ was a continuing threat to KSU’s reputation, and in particular a cause of financial uncertainty and crisis. In a belated response to the poor public perception of the university and its implications for recruitment and fund-raising, in 1986 the administration decided to rebrand the university as ‘Kent’.

The University logo was changed to emphasize ‘Kent’ over ‘state university’ (see Figures 2a and 2b) and the administration insisted that the University be referred to as ‘Kent’ rather than ‘Kent State.’ Athletics uniforms (see Figures 3a and 3b, pp. 52 and 53) and the scoreboard at athletic events were altered to read ‘Kent’ instead of ‘Kent State’ (Rasinski, 1999: 1). As Will Roleson, a former assistant director of sports information at KSU has explained, the sports information department at KSU routinely told the media ‘to refer to us as Kent.’ Admittedly this caused some confusion – ‘They hear Kent,’ Roleson explained, ‘and sometimes we’re mistaken for Kent University or the University of Kent’ (ibid.). The university persisted nonetheless. Although this practice was limited largely to the administration and the sports information department (‘A new face lift...’ 2000), it was common knowledge amongst academic staff in the early and mid 1990s that they were supposed to refer to ‘Kent’ in correspondence and when

dealing with the public.

According to Michael Schwartz, President of KSU in 1986, the change was made for aesthetic reasons. ‘We changed it (the logo) because we were bored with it’, he said. ‘The type was ugly and black and I just didn’t like it’ (quoted in Rasinski, 1999: 1). But the real reasons were not hard to find. William E. Shelton, then Vice President for Institutional Advancement, argued that the decision to emphasize ‘Kent’ actually reflected ‘the power of the single word advertising. It is a dynamic, memorable reference to the University’ (ibid.). As Michael Schwartz later admitted, ‘We wanted to get people to think of the university in other terms. Kent State is more than just a historical event. In the 70s and into the 80s, there was a lot of negativity about (the incident). I don’t understand that. It is almost like blaming the rape victim for the rape’ (ibid.: 16). Current President Carol Cartwright has also acknowledged the connection between the name change and ‘May 4<sup>th</sup>’: ‘Some people have suggested that the name change was associated (with the May 4<sup>th</sup> incident),’ she explained. ‘There is some merit in that belief, that maybe the university was trying to distance itself from it’ (ibid.). The stress on athletics thus makes sense, given the centrality of college sports to name recognition, student recruitment, continuing alumni engagement with the university, and revenue generation. In short, ‘May 4<sup>th</sup>’ was bad for ‘Kent State’. In a bid to break the chain of connotation, the university administration attempted to transform ‘Kent State’ into ‘Kent’.

Fourteen years later, the university changed the name back again, from ‘Kent’ to ‘Kent State’. In 2000, the thirtieth anniversary of the shootings, a new logo was introduced, returning the ‘state’ to a larger size (see Figures 2a, 2b, 2c). William Spiker, Associate Vice President of University Relations and Development put it thus: ‘When the shootings took place in 1970, they looked inwards as a university and not outwards as much. The shootings prevented Kent from

moving forward with fundraising, public relations and alumni relations because of the tragedy. Now the university is much more visible to alumni and friends, and we can look at the good things at the university' (in Rasinski, 1999: 16). In fact, as Cartwright explained, 'There is a strong consensus that we have a place in American and international history. We look at ways for that to bring attention to the university' (ibid.). If the University was to take advantage of the place it held in public and popular memory, it had to revert back to its original name: 'Kent State' has a place in U.S. history, 'Kent' does not.



Figure 2a: Kent State University Logo in 1970.



Figure 2b: Kent State University Logo 1986-2000.



Figure 2c: Kent State University Logo 2000.

Once again, financial and marketing considerations were central to the decision. In June 1998, the Centennial Commission published its report and recommendations for the future development and success of KSU. Established eighteen months earlier, the Commission

consisted of 160 prominent business and civic leaders from across Ohio and the U.S., as well as representatives of KSU's faculty, administration and student body, including 88 'proud Kent alumni' (Centennial Commission Report and Recommendations, 1998). Its stated ambition was 'to envision the tremendous potential of Kent State University to build on its strengths, address opportunities for improvement, and redefine itself for a new millennium'. This 'external overview' of the University would in turn serve as the basis for the new Strategic Plan (ibid.).

Reflecting ongoing changes in higher education, a central theme in the report is the necessity to generate new sources of revenue, and in particular to engage with alumni and the private sector. To distinguish itself from other institutions of higher learning, the University needed a new image and commissioners explicitly recommended a new "branding" process' (Task Force on Values, Identity and Communication, Centennial Commission Report and Recommendations, 1998). It is in this context that the report discusses May 4<sup>th</sup>:

For many members of the public, Kent State University is probably best known for the events of May 4, 1970. The Commission concluded that it is time to move forward from this tragic moment in the University's history -- not to forget the lessons of May 4, but to embrace the opportunities they provide to inquire, to learn, and to reflect, and for serious study of democratic values.

*Commissioners explored how Kent's unique place in history has given birth to new initiatives that can effectively be used to advance the University's marketing and communications efforts.*

The University should communicate more widely that, throughout its 90-year history, it has consistently produced quality graduates and continues to foster a bright future for our region and beyond. (Commission Conclusions, Centennial Commission Report and Recommendations, 1998, emphasis added).

The project is clear: 'May 4' should be deployed in the service of efforts to 'Develop consistent marketing and communications that identify and strengthen Kent State University's culture, traditions, and market position' (ibid.). Where once it was an albatross around the neck of KSU,

‘May 4<sup>th</sup>’ has become good for ‘Kent State’ because it provides a mark of distinction in an increasingly competitive higher education environment, in which an ever-decreasing share of university revenues stem from the public purse.<sup>31</sup>

From being a matter of shame and a hindrance to fundraising, ‘May 4<sup>th</sup>’ has become a matter of name recognition in aid of fundraising. Indeed, rearticulation of the meaning of the shootings in the service of revenue creation had already begun six years earlier when, in 1994, the administration renamed the Center for Peaceful Change – the University’s ‘living memorial’ to May 4<sup>th</sup>. Over the objections of its faculty and administrative members, it became the Center for Applied Conflict Management, a seemingly more technical and problem-solving entity, less overtly political and thus a more marketable commodity for today’s corporations, foundations, and other potential service users. Re-launching ‘Kent State’ similarly offers the hope of niche-marketing: not every university has ‘a place in American and international history’ to offer its ‘customers’ – or what used to be called students - and its funders.

How, then, does the renamed ‘Kent State’ define its ‘place in American and international history’? What meaning is attributed to the events of ‘May 4<sup>th</sup>’ and what lessons are students and other audiences encouraged to draw from them? The charge of the 30<sup>th</sup> May 4 Commemoration Committee, established by KSU President Cartwright in 1999, was

To develop programs for the 30<sup>th</sup> May 4 Commemoration which place this historic event in the life of the Kent State University and the nation within the broader context of the democratic values that are the foundation of American society. To develop a theme around which organizations and departments can plan programs and activities that engage the community in democratic debate and civil discourse (‘Committee Charge,’ 1999).

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<sup>31</sup> In 2000, for example, only 35 percent of KSU’s revenues was provided by the state of Ohio, and this in a ‘public’ university [add citation]. The proportion is even less at other institutions: the University of California at Berkeley and the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, two of the leading institutions of higher education in North America, now receive such a small proportion of their revenue from public sources that they are effectively private [get the data]. Universities, both public and private, have been scrambling to identify new revenue streams and to market their knowledge and skills to new customers.

In her meeting with the Commemoration Committee on August 4, 1999, Cartwright made clear both the role of the Committee itself, and how she would prefer the University to mark the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of ‘May 4’. The Committee was to coordinate and schedule programs during spring semester 2000. Meanwhile, the annual candlelight walk and vigil on May 3 and 4, and the program of events on May 4 itself would remain in the care of the May 4<sup>th</sup> Task Force. Stressing that the role of the Committee was to coordinate the various pieces of the commemoration and make sure that they fit together within the context of a central theme and overall approach, as recorded in the minutes of the meeting,

She encouraged the committee to commemorate events of May 4, 1970, in a way that was respectful but also forward-looking. In the year 2000 we have a once in a lifetime opportunity [sic] to promote the larger values and ideas that were playing out in the late 1960s and early 1970s and to contribute to a national, or perhaps even international, discussion of the values of a democratic society. While it is important to respect and to be sensitive to the past, Dr. Cartwright urged us to push ourselves to respond to the events of May 4, 1970, in a way that we had not done previously. (Minutes, 30<sup>th</sup> May 4 Commemoration Committee, 1999)

The links to external fund-raising were explicit: immediately following the above, ‘Dr. Cartwright shared that she is seeking a major gift from a foundation and will ask the foundation to partner with us to determine how we can advance a discussion about the responsibilities, risks and opportunities of living in a democratic society on an ongoing basis’ (ibid.).

The emphasis on ‘the larger issues of democratic values’, according to Cartwright, had come from ‘extensive research and thoughtful discussion’ with the Centennial Commission, the University’s Cultural Self-Study, and strategic planning activities (ibid.) The theme for the official university commemoration of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the shootings, ‘Experiencing Democracy: Inquire, Learn, Reflect’, was chosen by the committee at the end of this meeting. The highlight of the events organized by the Committee, according to Cartwright, was ‘a world-

class, academic symposium, “The Boundaries of Freedom of Expression and Order in a Democratic Society”, held on May 1-2 (‘Letter issued by President Carol Cartwright,’ 2000). In contrast, pointing to the continuing tensions between official representations and popular memory, and the links between Northeast Ohio and the wider world, the May 4<sup>th</sup> Task Force’s theme for the 30<sup>th</sup> Commemoration was ‘Peace: Learn It, Live It, Teach It.’ At the announcement on April 4, 2000 of the final list of speakers, which included well-known critic of U.S. foreign policy, Noam Chomsky, the Task Force also held a rally for ‘political prisoner’ Mumia Abu-Jamal and announced that they would include a 10-minute taped message from Abu-Jamal as part of the program. Cartwright responded immediately with a letter distancing the university and the 30<sup>th</sup> May 4 Commemoration Committee from ‘this individual’ and his taped message (ibid.).

Of course, despite the ongoing ideological labor undertaken by KSU to make ‘May 4<sup>th</sup>’ safe -- and profitable -- for ‘Kent State’, it would be a mistake to assume that these efforts have put an end to the difficulties popular memory produces for public memory. The rebranding of KSU has gone hand in hand with continuing controversy over the May 4<sup>th</sup> commemorations, particularly amongst the latest generation of students. In 2001, just a year after the massive 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations, the undergraduate Student Senate Allocation Committee (SSAC) voted 7-1 to deny funding to the May 4<sup>th</sup> Task Force for its annual commemoration program. The Task Force had requested \$15,900 of the SSAC’s \$300,000 budget to bring two speakers, including Martin Luther King III, to campus for the 31<sup>st</sup> anniversary. Several of the members of the allocations committee questioned the need for commemorations, which one student claimed were an ‘eye sore’ (Donofrio, 2001). Interestingly, the Task Force was the only student group whose request was denied by the Republican-dominated committee that had previously spent

\$86,000 to have Barbara Bush speak on campus (Kaushik, 2001). Unsurprisingly, the decision provoked an uproar, both on campus and beyond. For many Americans, ‘Kent State’ remained synonymous with ‘May 4<sup>th</sup>’; the attempt to abolish the annual commemoration was simply evidence that the student Republicans had forgotten their own history. In another distant echo of 1970, a protest against Barbara Bush’s appearance and the payment of over \$60,000 ‘to a millionaire woman’, as she was described by one student, prompted a sophomore ROTC cadet to opine that ‘They [the students] should be proud to be Americans and not proud to protest’ (Lavrach, 2001).<sup>32</sup>

But if this example suggests some of the more politically regressive features of the contemporary politics of public memory at Kent State, it should also be emphasized that the evidence is not all on one side. In January 2001, student opposition also scuppered the University’s plan to buy eight M-16 rifles for its campus police force. Michelle Touve of the May 4<sup>th</sup> Task Force argued that the purchase of M-16s would be ‘an insult to the memory of the victims of May 4, 1970’. University President Carol Cartwright informed the campus police that they would need to find some other weapon. ‘The outpouring of comment in the last few days,’ she said, ‘makes it very clear that this particular rifle is not appropriate for this university’ (‘Campus police,’ 2001). Besides the rather startling assumption that other rifles *are* appropriate for ‘this university’, this remarkable little story indicates the continued importance of ‘May 4<sup>th</sup>’ at ‘Kent State’.

### **Conclusion: From May 4<sup>th</sup> to September 11 and Beyond**

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<sup>32</sup> A later, reduced allocation of \$2500 was refused by the Task Force as ‘a hollow gesture’ (Byard, 2001) and a ‘slap in the face’ (Donofrio, 2001). As a result, the commemorations were more limited and none of the speakers – who included Susie Erenrich, the author of an anthology about May 4th, Tina Tully, a representative of Sinn Fein,



*Kent State has meaning around the world.  
Vietnam, Cambodia, Kent State. People struggling in the United States  
and Asia against the hegemony of American capitalist power.  
Orangeburg, Kent State, Jackson State. Savage military repression of  
young Americans.  
Kent State, Watergate. Cynical obstruction by overt class-interested state  
action. (Grim, 1977:8)*

In 'Kent State' and 'May 4<sup>th</sup>' foreign policy, domestic repression, and the state are combined. As Miriam Jackson wrote in 1980, 'in 1970, the issues were war and repression' (1980: 27). And these remain the issues in the continued struggle over the collective memory of 'Kent State' and 'May 4<sup>th</sup>'.

The ideological effect of the conservative narratives -- both the law and order narrative and the narrative of tragedy fostered by KSU -- is to reproduce and reinscribe the inside/outside distinction, the boundary between domestic and international politics. Violence occurs 'outside' in the anarchic international realm of conflict and interests. This is not only expected, but sometimes actively to be encouraged -- i.e., when 'we, the U.S.' do our benevolent intervention thing abroad. But violence 'inside', in the passified domestic realm of consensus and cooperation is not acceptable. If violence should occur 'inside' -- i.e., the 'violent' student protests -- it must be an aberration, and it must be disciplined, and punished. Only thus can the distinction between these realms, and the legitimacy of violence in the 'outside', be sustained. But, finally, the mutual dependence -- the mutual constitution -- of violent outside and discipline inside must be obscured. So, the link back from domestic repression to foreign policy is erased. Instead, the May 4<sup>th</sup> shootings become an isolated 'tragedy'.

The alternative narrative -- sounding strident and extreme in the context of the dominant conservative narratives -- resists this erasure. But it fights a rearguard action against the power of

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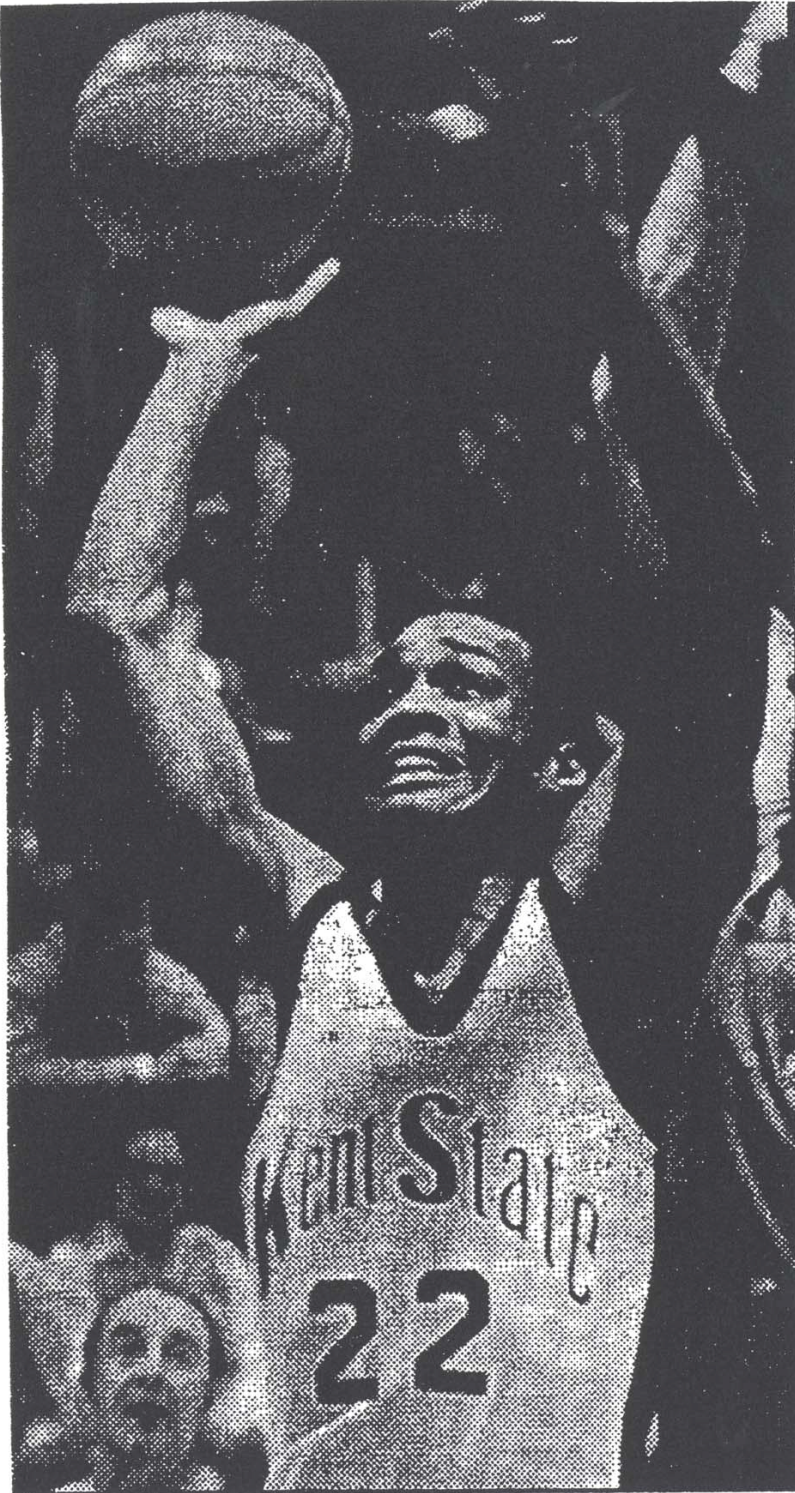
and four KSU students -- were paid (Rutti, 2001).

the state, whether the M-1s of the National Guard, the constructive power of the national discourses of ‘rioting bums’, or the local institutional power of KSU to insist that we passively and, apolitically, ‘inquire, learn, and reflect’ on the ‘tragedy’ of ‘May 4<sup>th</sup>’.

The memory of ‘May 4<sup>th</sup>’ at ‘Kent State’ is long and far-reaching, touching even the aftermath of ‘September 11’. On 24 September, *The Guardian* (Engel, 2001) ran a story about peace protests, including student anti-war protests, spanning the U.S. just two weeks after in terrorist attacks. Under the headline ‘Echoes of Vietnam stir US campuses’, were two photographs: one was of a ‘peace protest at the University of New Mexico’ in September 2001; the other was John Filo’s iconic image of Jeff Miller bleeding to death on the Kent State campus while Mary Anne Vecchio kneels at his side (Figure 1).

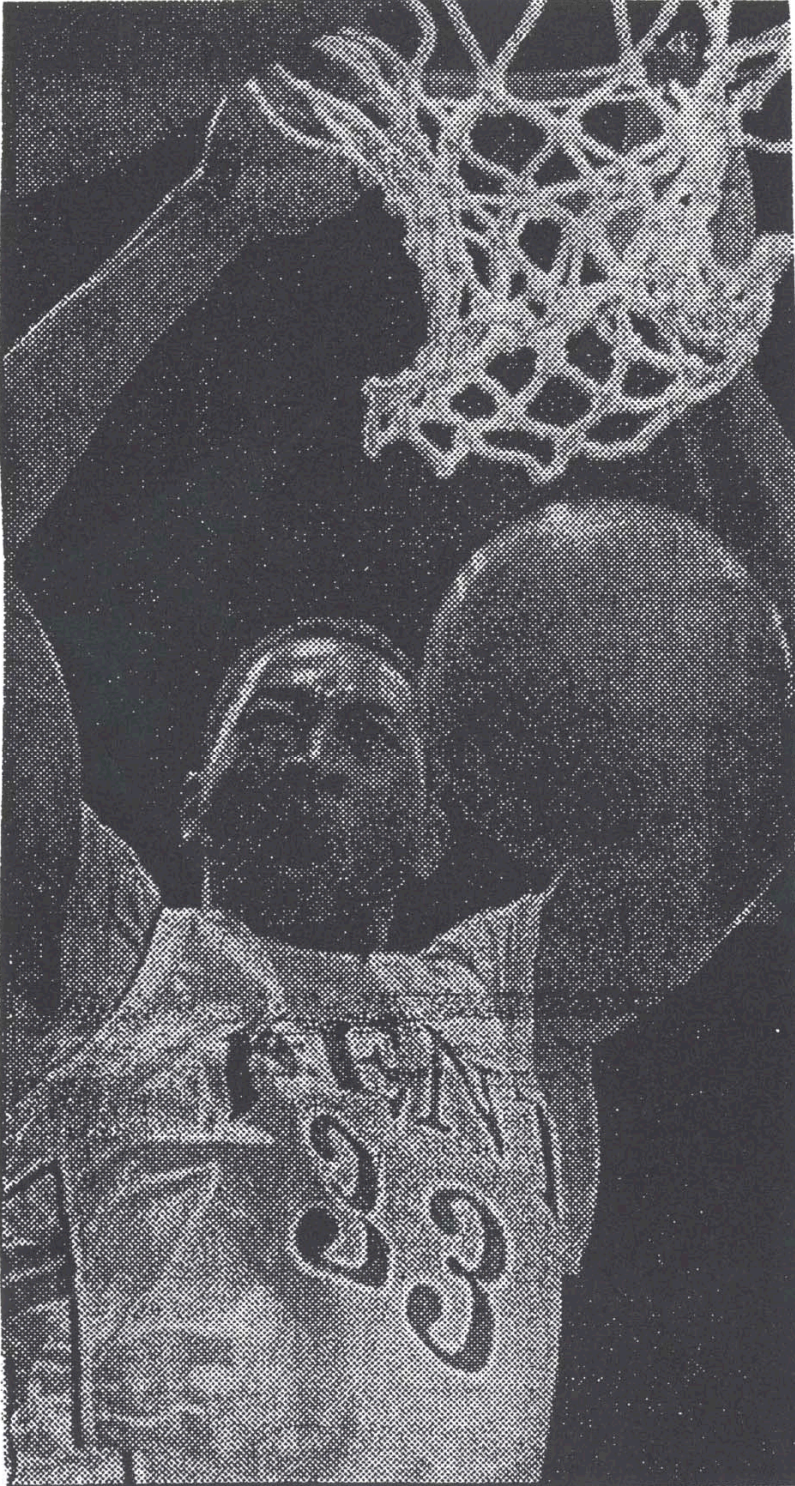
As Scott Bills put it recently, ‘the link between culture, narrative and empire is the key to examining post-1970 events at Kent State’ (1996: 202). This is true, we want to argue, in general for American constructions of U.S. adventured abroad. For example, similar ideological practices to those characterizing the disputes over ‘May 4<sup>th</sup>’ are already evident in the aftermath of September 11. [We will expand this to give examples of narratives that obscure the integral relations between the U.S. and Afghanistan, the U.S. and the Middle East, and that generated the conditions that led to the September 11 attacks. Plot the likely implications for how ordinary U.S. citizens will see the place of U.S. in the world, and their willingness to support state action.]

Figure 3a: Kent State athletic shirt before the 1986 rebranding.  
(from the *Daily Kent Stater*, May 4, 1999, p. 1)



FRED SQUILLANTE / CHESTNUT BURR (1981)

Figure 3b Kent State athletic shirt after the 1986 rebranding.  
(from the *Daily Kent Stater*, May 4, 1999, p. 1)



JASON KAYE / DKS (1999)

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