

To what Extent was the Kent State Shooting, a turning point in the student anti-war movement?

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A. Plan of Investigation

On May 4th, 1970, The Ohio National Guard killed four students and injured nine, one of which suffered permanent paralysis by firing sixty-seven rounds over an unarmed student body. This investigation will specifically be answering the question, “To what extent were the Kent State shootings a turning point in the student anti-war movement?” In order to answer this question, I will be investigating the Anti-war movement before the shooting, the shooting itself, and the aftermath and long-term effects of the Kent State Shootings on the anti-war movement. I will be using primary sources along with secondary sources from multiple perspectives to achieve this.

B. Summary of Evidence

The Anti-War Movement before the Shooting

- “In the spring of 1965, "teach-ins" against the war were held on many college campuses. Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) organized the first national antiwar demonstration in Washington; 20,000 people, mainly students, attended.”
(english.illinois.edu)
- “Most Americans pragmatically opposed escalating the U.S. role in Vietnam, believing the economic cost too high; in November of 1969 a second march on Washington drew an estimated 500,000 participants.” (english.illinois.edu)

- “At the same time, most disapproved of the counterculture that had arisen alongside the antiwar movement.” (english.illinois.edu)
- “The White House continued to be plagued by two wars: the war in Vietnam and the "war at home" ignited by the antiwar movement.” (library.thinkquest)
- “The movement against U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War began small--among peace activists and leftist intellectuals on college campuses--but gained national prominence in 1965, after the United States began bombing North Vietnam in earnest.” (History)
- “With President Kennedy’s first massive intervention, isolated groups of college-student radicals began to question the American policy and to attack specific government allegations about the nature of the war.” (Conlin 107)
- “The movement’s greatest frustration, however, was not its inability to war with a picket sign. It was the fact that they had felt they destroyed the government’s case and were nevertheless ignored; they had correctly dictated the course of the war yet were being shunned by majority of the population.” (Conlin 108)

The Kent State Shooting

- “The 1960’s ended in a small town in Ohio called Kent. It happened on May 4, 1970, ...at a campus demonstration which was like so many others except that, in thirteen crackling seconds of gunfire, four students were killed and nine were wounded” (Kent state shootings)
- “Near the crest of blanket hill, the guard turned and twenty-eight guardsmen fired between sixty-one and sixty-seven shots in thirteen seconds.” (Caputo 126)

- “The Kent State Massacre remains a unique event in American history – it was the first and only time American troops fired upon and killed American students.” (Caputo 77)
- “As the author William Gordon remarked in his book, the killings were, ‘the most popular murders ever committed in the United States.’” (Caputo 98)
- “President Nixon announced on national television that he was sending military combat troops into Cambodia on a mission to destroy communist sanctuaries there.” (Gordon 21)
- “This announcement angered many college students who felt that Nixon had broken his promise to wind down the war in Southeast Asia, and was instead escalating it” (Gordon 21)

The aftermath and long-term effects

- “Tensions ran so high on Campus after the incident that 450 colleges closed, either voluntarily or because students shut them down.” (Kent State shootings)
- “Eighty percent of the Nation’s campuses experienced protests after Kent State, and Fifty-eight of the students participated in them.” (Kent State shootings)
- “The Kent state massacre sparked the only massive student strike in U.S history, with four million students shutting down eight hundred campuses across the country.” (Caputo 97)
- “Cambodia and Kent State ‘created this massive, absolute hysteria’ and Ray Price complained, ‘And all the reason just fled out the window.’ Student were reacting largely to things that never happened, that they imagined did.” (Wells 431)
- “In Maryland Young demonstrators closed U.S highway 1 outside Washington D.C, while in the capitol, thousands surrounded the White House.” (Caputo 98)

- “Many officials felt the press and protesters were blowing the Kent State shooting out of proportion, ‘ that picture of that girl kneeling down [and crying next to a victim] was really blown up in the media to the point where you would have thought that Kent state was a matter of great importance to the president.’” (Wells 430-1)
- “White house officials anxiously discussed how to contain the uproar” (Wells 432)
- “Beyond the direct effects of the May 4th, the shootings have certainly come to symbolize the deep political and social divisions that so sharply divided the country during the Vietnam War era.” (history-world)
- “The overwhelming response to the invasion of Cambodia and the Kent State crisis soon became too much for President Nixon. On December 15, he announced his intention to withdraw fifty thousand troops from Vietnam in 1970.” (library.thinkquest)
- “The anti-war movement ramped up after Kent State to the point where it shortened the war and thus saved lives.” (vvaw)
- A historian, Howard Zinn, said in an interview in 2007, ‘I think the war ended because the protests in the United States reached a crescendo, which couldn't be ignored.’ Kent State started the crescendo that stopped the war.” (vvaw)
- “But the mass protests nonetheless marked a significant turning point in the conduct of the war in Vietnam.” (wsws)
- “A little more than a month after Kent State, Nixon established the President’s Commission on Campus Unrest.”(wsws)

C. Evaluation of Sources



Anguish. (Photo by John P. Filo) povl

This photo shows Mary Vecchio who was a fourteen year old runaway screaming over the body of Jeffery Miller. Vecchino said, “She was calling for help because she felt she could do nothing” (Halstead). This photo was taken by John P. Filo whose purpose was to see “if he could get an interesting picture” (Halstead) Filo has photography major that he received from Kent State and continues to work as a newspaper photographer and editor at *Newsweek*. This photo is valuable in the way that it was taken in a matter of seconds and in the spur of the moment and shows the emotions of Vecchio. This is useful to historians because it means this photo does not have much bias besides the photographer’s choice of frame. This photo is useful also in that it shows an iconic image of the Anti-war movement among students in the anti-war movement after the Kent State shootings. Although the photo is useful because it captures a single moment to analyze, it is also a limitation in that it does not show the actual actions of the Kent state shootings; such as, The Ohio state troopers shooting the crowd of students.

13 Seconds by Philip Caputo

The book, 13 seconds by Caputo gives a detailed summary of what happened on May 4th along with plenty primary sources. The purpose of this book is to give a detailed account of what caused the Kent State shootings and what actually happened during the shootings along with the social reaction of the shooting. Philip Caputo is also the author of *A Rumor for War*, a memoir of his service during the Vietnam War as a marine lieutenant and was a reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*. This book gives an accurate view of the after effects of the Kent state shootings and how they affected people and their views on the war and government. There is also much value in the different perspectives that this book holds. Another value is that the book is that it contains stories from the Kent state witnesses, which allows historians to gain their different sides of the event. One limitation is that this book seems to hold some bias. The introduction to the book shows how the author disapproved the shootings which could affect how he portrays the Kent state shooting in favor of the students rather than a neutral viewpoint. The author, himself, is also a veteran of the Vietnam War which also introduces some bias.

D. Analysis

The student anti-war movement began to gain strength in 1965 when the U.S began to bomb Vietnam and Students began to organize antiwar demonstrations. However, when Nixon decided that he was sending American troops to Cambodia, he angered students, and causing Students at Kent State University to hold a protest on May 4th that ended up with nine injured and four dead. This caused uproar in the Antiwar and non-antiwar student population.

Majority of Americans actually opposed the war because they thought the economic cost was too high; allowing The Anti-war student movement to gain strength in the spring of 1965, with teach-ins, on college campuses after the bombing of North Vietnam. The Students for a Democratic Society even organized the first national antiwar demonstration in Washington that 20,000 people, mainly students, attended. Even though, many Americans opposed the war they also opposed the counter culture that came with the anti-war movement, (History) but in 1969, there was a second march in Washington that brought 500,000 people.

On May, 4 1970 Students at Kent state University were holding a peaceful protest after being angered that Nixon was sending troops to Cambodia to destroy communist sanctuaries, this action, they viewed as, escalating the war instead of bringing it to an end. Roughly 2,000 students attended the banned gathering to protest the war, the Guard attempted to disperse the crowd with tear gas with no avail. On the top of Blanket hill the twenty-eight guardsman turned and shot at the crowd of students, killing four and injuring nine, one of which suffered permanent paralysis. The Kent state shooting was the only event in American history where students were shot by American troops and was considered “the most popular murders ever committed in the United States” (Caputo 98)

“The Kent state massacre sparked the only massive student strike in U.S history.” (Caputo 97) The shootings created this sense of mass frenzy among the students, the photo taken by Filo of Mary Vecchio screaming over the body of Jeffery Miller was shown throughout the media by the press and it gave the Kent state shootings a sense of importance. After the shooting, four hundred and fifty colleges closed and eighty percent of all colleges were affected with fifty-eight percent of students participating in them. Maryland had to shut down US highway 1 because of student demonstrators along with the white house being surrounded by thousands. Kent state was

a brutal realization that brought the war to the students and family, in the fact, that it was not just behind a TV screen, causing them to feel unsafe. The Kent state shootings that caused the student deaths caused “deep political and social divisions that so sharply divided the country during the Vietnam War era.” (history-world)

E. Conclusion

The Kent state shooting was a turning point in the Student anti-war movement. After the shooting, plans for a national student strike spread to almost every college with roughly five million students. Kent state shootings caused the first and only immediate nationwide strike with students who may have not been in the Anti-war movement originally. Kent state caused the war to come home in the eyes of America and due to the heavy media coverage it allowed the shootings to be extremely popular. It caused mass anti-war movement from the student population who were out raged at the shootings. It not only allowed the student Anti-war movement to rise together in order to protest the murders, but it caused “deep political and social divisions that so sharply divided the country” (history-world)

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