

This essay assesses the meaning of the Kent State Massacre of May 4, 1970, by comparing it with the Boston Massacre of March 5, 1770. Similarities in background and dynamics suggest that the two events are analogous, yet differences predominate. Whereas the Boston Massacre emerged out of a local situation, it drew its meaning from national events that came after it, culminating in the American Revolution. Indeed, by 1795, the details of the Boston Massacre had been all but forgotten. The Kent State Massacre, by way of contrast, occurred more as a result of national, anti-Vietnam War demonstrations than local circumstances and marked the culmination of the turbulent 1960s rather than the start of a new period of revolutionary ferment. The fact that the 1995 commemoration of the shootings at Kent State garnered both local and national attention suggests that the meaning of the Vietnam War continues to be elusive.

ASSESSING THE MEANING OF MASSACRE: BOSTON (1770) AND KENT STATE (1970)

by Ronald L. Hatzenbuehler

The evening of March 5, 1770, was cold in Boston, Massachusetts, with a quarter moon somewhat illuminating the snow and ice covering King Street. Outside of the Customs House—the symbol of British taxation and imperial control—a private quarrel involving a British soldier and a local citizen escalated into a violent confrontation. About 8:00 p.m., Private Hugh White, on sentry duty that night, struck Edward Garrick, a wig-maker's apprentice, at the side of his head. Quickly, a crowd of about fifty people surrounded the private, and many more people turned

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out into the streets about 9:00 as bells began ringing through the town, the standard alarm for fire.¹

One hundred yards down King Street from Private White, the Captain of the Day, forty-year-old Thomas Preston, organized a seven-man contingent and marched off to rescue the soldier. Private White successfully joined the group in front of the Customs House, but the crowd (now numbering about 300–400) blocked the soldiers' retreat. "Up and down the line, men dared the Redcoats to fire, called them cowardly rascals, challenged them to put down their weapons and fight." Less than fifteen minutes had elapsed since Captain Preston left the guardhouse. One of his men was knocked down by a club thrown from the crowd, regained his feet, and fired his musket into the throng. During the next two minutes, other soldiers also fired. Five men lay dying from their wounds.²

* * *

On May 4, 1970, in Kent, Ohio, the day warmed quickly in bright, sunny weather. By 11:00 a.m., students began gathering on the Commons at the center of the Kent State University campus in defiance of an order banning "[a]ll outdoor demonstrations and gatherings." At 11:59, Ohio National Guard Brigadier General Robert H. Canterbury ordered the 113 guardsmen under his command to fire tear-gas canisters and disperse the crowd, which numbered about a thousand people. At 12:03 p.m., eighteen soldiers in G Troop, Second Squadron, 107th Armored Cavalry Regiment, detached themselves from the main unit and followed the retreating students over a hill adjacent to the Commons ("Blanket Hill" in local parlance). As the guardsmen advanced, the students threw rocks and taunts at them.³

At the top of the hill at 12:06, G Troop was joined by some 50 additional soldiers from Alpha Company, 145th Infantry, and the two groups marched down the hill and onto a practice football and intramural field where they found themselves surrounded on three sides by a chain-link fence, topped with barbed wire. Some

of the students who had given way as the guardsmen advanced now began to regroup against the isolated soldiers. At 12:22, the units formed a v-shaped wedge and began reascending Blanket Hill, planning to rejoin the main group on the Commons. Near the top, some of the guardsmen on the right flank turned, lowered their rifles, and at 12:25 fired at students, killing four.⁴

* * *

Two events, so widely separated by time and circumstance, would seem unlikely to evoke useful comparisons beyond the coincidental correlation provided by time, having occurred nearly 200 years apart. In fact, the two happenings do contain numerous similarities in background, dynamics, and importance, and last year's 225th/25th anniversaries invite a close comparison. In doing so, we also gain a fresh perspective from which to assess the historical significance of the shootings at Kent State.⁵

I

The decision to send troops to Boston resulted from opposition, often violent, to Parliament's attempts to tax colonists and stop rampant smuggling. As early as April 1767, Major General Thomas Gage, commander of British troops in the North American colonies, recommended that "small detachments of troops [be] posted along the Coast to assist the Customs house officers in the execution of their Duty."⁶

Although it had been common throughout the 1760s in both England and Ireland for regular troops to be used to maintain law and order, soldiers in the American colonies had been used exclusively to fight British enemies. The troops in or near Boston—primarily from the 14th and 29th regiments—came from Ireland. Many of the members of the 29th were later described as men predominately "over thirty, medium tall, and Irish." The person ultimately responsible for sending the troops (Wills Hill,

the Earl of Hillsborough) was an Irish peer intent on "enforcing a due Obedience to the Laws of this Kingdom."⁷

Importantly, the British official on the scene, Royal Governor Francis Bernard, never asked for the troops and believed it dangerous to station them "in the old Colonies which have been long settled and inhabited, unless call'd for by the Civil Magistrate or Government of the Province, as necessary to preserve the publick peace." Such a request was unlikely, as Bernard knew all too well, and throughout their stay in Boston the soldiers (especially the rank and file) found themselves hindered rather than aided by the colony's laws and courts. Local leaders who might have worked to lessen conflict between citizens and the troops did not. Samuel Adams, especially, insinuated from the moment the troops arrived that they were in Boston in order "to introduce a general massacre." He and others also spread the rumor that the soldiers could not use force unless some civil authority requested they do so. By the end of 1769, the 600 troops felt themselves "in physical danger" and "morally isolated" from the more than 15,000 people of Boston.⁸

A measure of the citizens' hostility toward the troops can be gained by studying the actions of the crowd that surrounded Preston and his men on the evening of March 5. Civil authorities were notably absent in front of the Customs House except for one justice of the peace who tried to convince the crowd to disperse and soon found himself sent packing by the unruly mob. Bells rang and colonists rapped upon gun barrels with sticks and clubs, daring the soldiers to fire—which they did without receiving an order from their commander to do so.⁹

Two hundred years later, National Guard troops were the preferred agents for law enforcement in Ohio when local control seemed ineffective, being called into action more often than in any other state in the nation. On May 2, it was Mayor Leroy Satrom who called the Guard to Kent based upon his fear that the disorder in the city from the evening before would escalate dramatically. In making his decision, the mayor consulted neither the president of the university (who was out of town until early morning on May 3) nor any other school officials, who in prior

situations had preferred to use the Ohio Highway Patrol rather than the National Guard in order to supplement the campus police force.¹⁰

Many of the guardsmen who came to Kent had gained experience dealing with crowd control under difficult situations. Two years earlier, the unit had tried to quell racial disturbances in nearby Akron; and, beginning April 29, 1970, the same men were providing armed escort for nonstriking teamsters through roadblocks set up by rank-and-file union members. On the morning of April 30, Captain James Snyder had ordered his men (most of whom were college age) to load their weapons. He read to them from the Guard's manual of operations that a guardsman might fire if he felt his own life or that of someone else was endangered or if he were ordered to do so. These orders were not later modified; indeed, guardsmen had every reason to believe that deadly force was acceptable.¹¹

Although many would later question whether the troops should have been armed with M-1 rifles at Kent State, another piece of equipment the Guardsmen carried that day played a large role in the events leading to the shootings. Because the Guard used tear gas as a basic component of their attempts at crowd control, it was necessary for them to wear gas masks to protect themselves. The gas masks were hot and difficult to see through. As the day warmed, perspiration further limited each man's vision. Therefore, while it is true that the students at Kent State were farther away from the guardsmen than the citizens of Boston were from the soldiers, one can make a plausible case that the gas masks significantly interfered with a guardsman's judgment concerning whether his safety was endangered.¹²

With the exception of the distance between crowd and Guard, there are more similarities than differences between the events immediately preceding both shootings. At Kent, the ringing of the "victory bell" summoned students to the Commons for the noon rally (it was a fire bell in Boston). Students threw rocks and pieces of concrete and shouted epithets at the men determined to break up the illegal gathering (snowballs, bricks, and sticks in Boston). There was a feeling that the Guard had loaded their guns

with blanks or would not fire directly into a crowd (rumors that the soldiers would not fire without a direct order in Boston); and neither Captain Snyder nor any other officer gave a command for the troops to fire (neither did Preston).¹³

There are other parallels as well. In both situations, politicians away from the immediate situation had a large hand in the decision to send military troops to contain local upheaval. In Boston, the royal governor never asked for the troops; at Kent, the mayor's decision was supported by Ohio Governor James Rhodes, whose visit to the city early on May 3 inflamed the situation due to his harsh language and refusal to consider closing the university (as the Portage County prosecutor pleaded with him to do).¹⁴

In both instances, people expected even more violence to break out after the shootings. Preston put his entire garrison on alert as rumors circulated that perhaps 5,000 people were organizing for an attack on the Customs House. In Kent, townspeople and law enforcement officials were convinced that insurrectional activities would continue. Yet, in neither case were the deaths followed by further violence.¹⁵

Finally, in both cases the soldiers stood trial for the killings but were acquitted of murder. In Boston, John Adams was able to prove that Captain Preston did not give an order to fire, and several witnesses stepped forward to testify in behalf of the soldiers. Eventually, two soldiers who were proved to have fired were found guilty of manslaughter. The short criminal trial of a small group of Ohio National Guardsmen in 1974 resulted in acquittal. A lengthy civil suit was resolved in an out-of-court settlement in 1979, offering monetary compensation and a statement of regret from state officials.¹⁶

Yet, there are on balance more differences than similarities between the two events. The Boston Massacre became known, over time, as one of the first shots of the American Revolution (though less so than the skirmish at Lexington). Consider only a small excerpt from Thomas Jefferson's preamble to the Declaration of Independence where he listed "life" first among the "inalienable rights" enjoyed by men. Without the Boston Massacre, the phrase "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" loses

much of its resonance. By way of contrast, the Kent State Massacre is best viewed as the culmination of the tumultuous 1960s rather than the first shot of what many predicted at the time would be a protracted guerrilla war in America.¹⁷ In order to explain these differences and to assess the historical significance of each event more fully, one must examine more closely the context in which each situation developed.

II

For five years before the massacre, the city of Boston was the center of colonial resistance to the British Parliament's attempts to assert firmer control over the American colonies, and it remained so in the years following 1770. Violence against stamp collectors, customs officials, and imperial agents arose in other settings, to be sure (notably, New York City), but Boston was the chief thorn in the side of parliamentary leaders who struggled to craft a policy that would generate revenue in America to help retire England's staggering debt in the aftermath of the French and Indian War (1754–63). In short, the Boston Massacre is best seen simply as one part—albeit an important one—in a persistent refusal on the part of Bostonians (or at least their leaders) to recognize parliamentary supremacy over their lives. Would activists elsewhere have so tormented the Parliament? Perhaps so, at some point, but probably not in the variety of ways nor with the consistency of purpose that Bostonians demonstrated from 1765 through 1775.¹⁸

Alternatively, most commentators on the shootings at Kent State agree either that they *might* have occurred on many different campuses or that they *should* have. To be sure, Kent State experienced a measure of turmoil on campus in the late 1960s involving both black student protests and antiwar rallies; and the local chapter of Students for a Democratic Society was eventually denied meeting space on campus because of its disruptive actions.¹⁹ Still, the impact of these activities on campus life pales in comparison to the impact of the Free Speech Movement at

Berkeley, the attacks on laboratories and research centers at the University of Wisconsin and the University of Michigan, or even activism at other state universities in Ohio.²⁰ A fortnight before the May 4 shootings, more students at Ohio State University had battled National Guard troops than did so at Kent; the following November, 40,000 Ohio State students (after a football game) inflicted three times the amount of damage to property in downtown Columbus as occurred in Kent. For all of his attempts to paint the events at Kent State as somehow unique, James Michener's final assessment on this point is instructive: "Kent State . . . was like many other American colleges and universities, and to believe the deaths occurred here because the school was in some way different is to miss the point. The shootings could have occurred at almost any large university. . . ." ²¹

This dichotomy between the two places and the two eras becomes clearer when we compare the events leading to the two shootings. In Boston, the personal confrontation between Private White and the wig-maker's apprentice was simply one of many conflicts between the soldiers in the British garrison and the working men of Boston. Robbery, fighting, and verbal harangues were especially common between local sailors/dock workers and the troops. Behind the scenes, however, there were leaders—like Samuel Adams, Joseph Warren, and James Otis—who were well prepared *after the fact* to invest the personal conflicts with political overtones. Indeed, the famous engraving that Paul Revere made of the shootings captured perfectly the political "spin" which the radical leaders put on the event—gunfire from "Butcher's Hall" (the Customs House) linked royal appointees and British soldiers. By the time of the third anniversary of the shootings, the incident had already taken on numerous mythical qualities. John Adams, whose defense of Preston and his men at their trials helped gain them acquittal, said it seemed as if the soldiers had been convicted of murder instead.²²

At Kent, the violence on May 1 that led shortly to the mayor's request for the National Guard occurred outside of the long row of bars lining the town's main street. Bar owners later said that most of the people who became the nucleus of the violence were

high schoolers (legal drinking age for 3.2 percent beer was eighteen in Ohio in 1970) and street gangs, not college students. In contrast to Boston, however, the political underpinning for the events of May 1 came not *after* the events but rather was present prior to them, epitomized by the nationwide television appearance by President Richard Nixon on the evening of April 30 when he announced that U.S. troops were expanding the Vietnam War into neighboring Cambodia.²³

Nothing so clearly makes this point than the fact that there was no organized leadership for the events that occurred May 1–4, 1970. In October, a county grand jury handed down 31 indictments against 25 people for all of the violence that occurred over the weekend—numbers that confirm the lack of a centralized planning group orchestrating protests. The burning of the ROTC building on the evening of May 2 is also a case in point. No evidence exists that the building had been targeted for destruction that evening. Ineptness rather than design best characterizes the initial, abortive efforts to burn the structure; and the two young men who eventually got the building to burn cannot be proved to have been Kent State students.²⁴ In short, what gave political focus to the events at Kent State, prior to the shootings and afterward, was the national antiwar movement, not a separate, local agenda. Put a different way, without the nationwide antiwar movement it is doubtful that the destruction of May 1 would have led to the shootings on May 4.²⁵

III

The fact that the Boston Massacre grew out of local conflicts and afterward gained national importance and that the Kent State Massacre gained importance because of the national events preceding it bears emphasis, especially in assessing the historical significance of the two episodes. In Boston, Samuel Adams saw to it that March 5 became an annual day of mourning for the city, but by 1784, July 4 had become the official day of commemoration as the starting point of the American Revolution.²⁶ By the time

of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the shootings on King Street, the importance of the event as a prelude to revolution had faded. One newspaper carried a story commemorating March 5 as “a Day sacred to Liberty” in which “the intrepid exertions of their *Boston Brethren*” stood “in defence of their dearest rights!” The most striking aspect of the article, however, was the fact that its avowed purpose was not to “rais[e] an unmanly indignation against *that nation*, whose troops were the immediate instruments of our distresses,” but rather to warn modern-day citizens against the evils of standing armies.²⁷ In 1795, names of only three of the five men who were killed at the massacre appeared in the newspaper.²⁸

As the public memory of the event faded, its mythic importance changed as well. By the 1840s, abolitionists transformed the importance of the Boston Massacre by hailing Crispus Attucks—a man of uncertain ethnic background at best—as the first African American to die for liberty. By the 1960s, Attucks had found his way into most school textbooks as the nation looked for parallels in history to the civil rights movement, and the Boston Equal Rights League still annually conducts a commemorative ceremony linking civic freedom and civil rights.²⁹

On May 4, 1995, a week of activities commemorated the twenty-fifth anniversary of the shootings at Kent State, and the campus was deluged with reporters from various national news organizations. Students chose as their theme the words on the campus memorial—“Inquire, Learn, Reflect”—and the local newspaper repeatedly contrasted the “quiet activism” of today’s students with the demonstrations that ended in violence in 1970. Words like “dignified,” “thoughtful,” “focused,” and “peaceful” appear repeatedly in the editorials and news accounts of the week’s events.³⁰

Prominent, however, in the commemoration were the names of the four students killed on May 4: Allison Krause, Jeffrey Miller, Sandra Scheuer, and William Schroeder. Will an unforeseeable twist of history elevate one of these students to the mythical status of Crispus Attucks? Perhaps, but in 1995 their deaths continue to be understood within the context of the continuing

impact of the Vietnam War on the United States. Just as citizens periodically visit the Vietnam Memorial in Washington to read the long list of names, the fact that these students are similarly remembered suggests that the controversies surrounding the meaning of the war and antiwar protests remain alive.³¹ As Walter Capps wrote, "There is simply no way to deal with the subject [of Vietnam] in quick, finished fashion, to dispose of it by reducing it to a clearly stated formula, for the mechanisms of closure are not yet present to surround it."³²

It is even more interesting to wonder whether the names of Phillip L. Gibbs and James Earl Green—the two students killed on May 14, 1995, at Jackson State College (now University) in Mississippi—will ever be elevated to the significance of Attucks or even Krause, Miller, Scheuer and Schroeder.³³ Like Kent State, the shootings at Jackson State drew their importance from the national events of the day. Although the deaths in Mississippi also owe much to protests surrounding the Vietnam War, there were also important links with the violence surrounding the civil rights movement—another milestone from the 1960s for which closure has not come and will not for some time.

In the end, therefore, perhaps the most remarkable thing of all about the twenty-fifth anniversary of the massacres at Kent State and Jackson State is that the reality of the deaths of six college students continues to capture national attention. After all, by 1795 the Boston Massacre had become lost in the nation's memory, and the local incident shrouded in myth.

NOTES

1. Hiller B. Zobel, *The Boston Massacre* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970), 184–93; see "Map of Boston (1769)" following p. 196.

2. *Ibid.*, 193–215.

3. James A. Michener, *Kent State: What Happened and Why* (New York: Random House, 1971), 327–37.

4. *Ibid.*, 337–41; *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 5, 1995, A-12.

5. Because Zobel's book on the Boston Massacre was published in 1970, many reviewers of the book noted its timeliness, given the activism of the decade of the 1960s. Lawrence S. Kaplan also compared the two events briefly in his 1977 commencement

address at Kent State University, arguing that in the same way Boston accepted the massacre as part of its history the university should not be destroyed by the event's tragedy. See Kaplan, "The Kent Heritage," in *Kent State/May 4: Echoes through a Decade*, ed. Scott L. Bills (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1988), 139–40.

6. Zobel, *Boston Massacre*, 64.

7. *Ibid.*, 68, 94, 85. Numerous historians have noted that Ireland was frequently a staging ground for troops used later in the North American colonies. For example, see John Ferling, *Struggle for a Continent: The Wars of Early America* (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1993).

8. Zobel, *Boston Massacre*, 66, 70, 81, 111, 197, 132–44.

9. *Ibid.*, 196.

10. Michener, *Kent State*, 226, 186–87.

11. *Ibid.*, 127–30.

12. *Ibid.*, 364–65.

13. *Ibid.*, 328–41, 347–49, 361.

14. *Ibid.*, 248–52.

15. *Ibid.*, 399–408, 434–51; Zobel, *Boston Massacre*, 201.

16. See Sanford J. Rosen, "The Legal Battle: Finishing Unfinished Business," and Charles A. Thomas, "December Dialogues: The Settlement Reconsidered," in Bills, *Kent State/May 4*, 236–38 and 243–44.

17. John Logue, "Official Violence: An American Tradition," in Bills, *Kent State/May 4*, 144–49.

18. Indeed, the radicalism of Boston did not permeate far into the countryside of Massachusetts until 1774, when the Massachusetts Government Act threatened to undermine the legal basis for all of the towns of the colony. See Richard L. Bushman, "Massachusetts Farmers and the Revolution," in *Society, Freedom, and Conscience: The Coming of the Revolution in Virginia, Massachusetts, and New York*, ed. Richard M. Jellison (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976), 81 ff. For a recent treatment of why Boston was the center of resistance, see David Hackett Fischer, *Paul Revere's Ride* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

19. Michener, *Kent State*, 26–33, 47, 174–78.

20. See W. J. Rorabaugh, *Berkeley at War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), and Gerard J. DeGroot, "The Limits of Moral Protest and Participatory Democracy: The Vietnam Day Committee," *Pacific Historical Review* 64 (February 1995): 95–119.

21. Michener, *Kent State*, 7, 461, 181.

22. Zobel, *Boston Massacre*, 134, 211–12, 301. Alternatively, Fischer emphasizes the broad nature of the leadership of events in Boston and the Massachusetts colony from 1770–76 in *Paul Revere's Ride*, esp. 138 ff.

23. Michener, *Kent State*, 58–65.

24. *Ibid.*, 530, 192–95. Norman and Emily Rosenberg make the same point concerning the "youth movement"—it was "a loose collection of diverse groups with very different styles of political and cultural dissent"; *In Our Times: America Since World War II*, 5th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1995), 165. J. Justin Gustainis and Dan F. Hahn make the slightly different point that even if there had been a united leadership among student groups, their protests would still have been ineffectual in ending the war (*Communication Quarterly* 36 [Summer 1988]: 215–16).

25. Certainly, Mayor Satrom viewed the events of May 1 within the context of national events. One of the main reasons he asked for National Guard troops to be sent was the

number of rumors that circulated on May 2 that Kent was about to be invaded by carloads of armed radicals from surrounding states. See Michener, *Kent State*, 186.

26. Zobel, *Boston Massacre*, 301.

27. [Boston] *The Independent Chronicle and the Universal Advertiser*, March 5, 1795. There were no articles in any of the other Boston papers available on microfilm or microcard: *Federal Orrery*, *Columbian Centinel*, or *The Boston Gazette*.

28. [Boston] *Independent Chronicle*, March 5, 1795.

29. Zobel, *Boston Massacre*, 303; *The Boston Globe*, March 5, 1995, "City" section.

30. (Kent-Ravenna) *Record-Courier*, April 30, 1995; May 4, 1995; May 7, 1995; May 8 1995.

31. There are still many unanswered questions about the details of the shootings at Kent State and Jackson State, including the motives of the National Guardsmen/Highway Patrol. See, for example, Ann Scott Tyson, "Kent State at 25: A Troubling Legacy," *Christian Science Monitor*, May 4, 1995, A-3.

32. Walter Capps, "Introduction," *The Vietnam Reader* (New York: Routledge, Chapman, and Hall, 1990), 3.

33. See, for example, Tim Spofford, *Lynch Street: The May 1970 Slayings at Jackson State College* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1988); Patrick Healy, "Death on a Starry Night at Jackson State College," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 5, 1995, A-15, and Dr. Kwame Nantambu, "Jackson State deaths are shortchanged by biased news media," *Record-Courier*, May 14, 1995.