
MAY 4, 1970: HOW U.S. HISTORY TEXTBOOKS PORTRAY THE KENT STATE SHOOTINGS

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For many Americans, the iconic photograph of a young woman bending over the body of a Kent State University student is the most compelling image of the Vietnam era. As such, May 4, 1970, is often viewed as the defining day of the anti-war protest era because it brought many diverse elements of that tumultuous time together in one chaotic moment. The significance of the Kent State incident was noted by Lewis and Hensley (1998), who stated that May 4 was the day on which “the Vietnam War came home to America” (p. 18). For today’s high school students, however, Kent State may be just another fragment of a long-ago history that seems to have little relevance for their lives as they come of age in the second decade of the 21st century. Given that fact and in observance of the recent 40th anniversary of the Kent State shootings, an evaluation of what today’s students learn about the incident will help educators examine their teaching of that watershed day in American history. Through that evaluation, teachers will be able to improve their instruction about Kent State, thus increasing their students’ knowledge about what occurred and the effect that the incident continues to have on America’s social and political consciousness.

The Continuing Impact of the Kent State Shootings on American Politics and Society

Hoerl (2009) contends that the event is an ongoing public trauma because “they [the shootings] have been a haunting presence in public memory of social protest in the United States” (p. 108). Perhaps unexpectedly, the event “signaled the end of student involvement and activism and the beginning of a new era of individualism” (Johnson, 1990, p. A2) because “Rather than invite renewed public support for student activism, the Kent State shootings have come to signify a youthful populace withdrawn from public life and a public culture disinterested in rally for social causes” (Hoerl, 2009, p 108 a). Moreover, Kirchenblatt-Gimblett (2003) calls Kent State a “flashbulb comment” whose image is seared into the minds of many individuals who were not present at the event itself. As a result, Kent State is a circumstance that, “rattle[s] default notions of what it means morally to remain members of a collective” (Zelizer, 2002, p. 698). The Kent State event has become, therefore, a seminal moment in American history.

Relevance to Ohio’s Academic Standards for Social Studies Education

The Kent State shootings are addressed within the general framework of Standard 21 of Ohio’s model curriculum for high school American history, which reads “The Cold War and conflicts in Korea and Vietnam influenced domestic and international politics,” and the content elaboration

text that accompanies that standard states, “The Vietnam War divided the country and sparked massive protests” (Ohio Department of Education, 2011, p. 27). A similar statement is found in the *National History Standards for Grades 5-12* (National Center for History in the Schools, 1996), which notes that “it [the Vietnam War] left scars on American society that have not yet been erased” (n.p.).

Background of the Study

Because most high school social studies instruction is textbook driven (Beal, Bolick, & Martorella, 2009), it can be held that textbooks provide the primary information that teachers use in designing lessons about Kent State. As such, an evaluation of textbook coverage of the event will provide insights about how the topic is presented in today’s high school history classrooms.

Method

This paper evaluates the coverage of Kent State that is provided in three of the textbooks that are used most frequently in high school history courses throughout the United States. One book published by each of the three major publishers of high school social studies textbooks (Glencoe, Holt McDougal, and Pearson) is evaluated. Each textbook’s treatment of Kent State is examined using the following themes:

1. placement related to other topics;
2. discussion of events leading to the incident;
3. coverage of the incident itself;
4. discussion of circumstances evolving from the incident; and
5. use of John Filo’s Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph.

In this paper, the textbooks are identified as follows: (a) *Vision* (Glencoe); (b) *Anthem* (Holt McDougal); and (c) *Reconstruction* (Pearson). Current editions of the books were reviewed (2009 or 2010 copyrights), and complete bibliographical data as well as additional online resources may be found in Appendix A.

General Overview

Data regarding the five themes noted above were recorded on matrix charts, with five charts (one per theme) prepared for each textbook. Indicators on the charts included the scope of coverage, accuracy of coverage, and inferences that could be made from the coverage as it relates to internal (Kent State-focused) and external (non-Kent State-focused) events. The charts for each theme were then evaluated, with comments about the theme and each textbook’s coverage of it being developed.

Placement of the coverage of the Kent State shootings related to other topics. *Anthem* places its coverage in the subsection “Increasing Protests,” which is part of the section “The War Ends.” Other topics discussed in this subsection include the evolution of the anti-war movement, the increasingly radical nature of the protests that occurred, and the My Lai incident. The section as a whole discusses the war’s expansion and the eventual end of American involvement in Vietnam.

Similarly, *Reconstruction* sets Kent State within the framework of “Troubles on the Home Front Intensify,” a subsection included in “The War’s End and Impact.” Other topics in the subsection include protests about the incursion into Cambodia and My Lai in addition to a brief discussion of the role that the Pentagon Papers played in undermining public trust in the government. The section also discusses America’s withdrawal from Vietnam, the war’s end, and the long-term impact of the war on American politics and society.

Vision’s coverage is placed in “The War Winds Down.” This section parallels those found in the other textbooks, including coverage of My Lai, protests about Cambodia, America’s withdrawal from the war, the collapse of South Vietnam’s government, the war’s end, and Vietnam’s legacy for American society and politics. As such, all three textbooks present contextualized, albeit surface level, accounts of Kent State, setting the event within the framework of the protest movement in particular and the overall flow of the war in general.

Coverage of events leading to the Kent State shootings. All three textbooks correctly tie the growing nationwide protest movement to the decision to send American troops into Cambodia, but inferences that may be drawn from the textbooks’ coverage of that situation differ in one critical way. Both *Anthem* and *Vision* state that President Nixon announced that the war was being escalated, with *Anthem* adding a Kent State student’s visceral comment that “As much as we hated the war on April 29, we hated it more on April 30,” the day on which the Cambodian decision was made public. However, neither *Anthem* nor *Vision* provides any information about the format of that announcement. In contrast, *Reconstruction* states that “Nixon addressed the American people, informing them of his decision to carry the war into Cambodia.” While a subtle distinction, the disparity between what seems to be an impersonal announcement, as inferred by *Anthem* and *Vision*, and a presidential address, as stated in *Reconstruction*, is critical. An amorphous announcement from the Pentagon might have one result, but a face-to-face interaction between an already controversial president on one hand and the American people on the other has far-reaching implications regarding public reaction to the expansion of the war.

Coverage of the Kent State shootings. Both *Anthem* and *Reconstruction* provide considerable detail about the incident. *Anthem* notes that protesters set the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps building at Kent State on fire on May 2, resulting in the movement of National Guard troops to the campus by order of Ohio’s governor. The events that immediately preceded the shootings are recounted, the casualty toll is listed, and the fact that several of those who were shot were not involved in the protest is noted.

Reconstruction follows the same approach, adding a critical note to its introduction: “The Cambodian incursion had a profound impact on the peace movement at home.” The event’s chronology follows, with the added comment that “When one guardsman *thought he heard a*

sniper's shot, he fired his rifle" [italics added for emphasis]. Whether or not this occurred remains a matter of conjecture, a critical point that should have been included in the narrative.

Similarly, *Vision's* description of the incident states that the National Guard soldiers "fired on demonstrators without an order to do so." Lewis and Hensley (1998) concur with this view as they do not suggest that any order was given. However, they also present several scenarios that have been proposed in attempting to explain why the soldiers opened fire. Having opened the discussion to a rationale for the commencement of firing, both textbooks should have explored the contentious debate that continues to surround this issue.

Coverage of events resulting from the Kent State shootings. All three textbooks link Kent State to an event that occurred at Mississippi's Jackson State College a few days later. ¹ *Vision* then moves to a discussion of the loss of Congressional support for the war, which led eventually to the repeal of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. *Anthem* continues by discussing the expansion of the anti-war movement, noting that "the peace movement began to seem more mainstream and respectable to many middle-class Americans." This narrative is supported by several examples and ends with a reference to an anti-war rally staged by members of Vietnam Veterans Against the War.

Reconstruction expands the narrative of the protests that followed Kent State by discussing a counter protest that occurred a few days later when New York City construction workers held their own rally, leading to nationwide confrontations between pro-war and anti-war groups. *Reconstruction* concludes its coverage of the incident with the cogent observation that "As the fighting continued in Vietnam, the American homefront became its own physical and emotional battlefield."

Coverage of the iconic Kent State photograph. The use of visual imagery in general and photographs in particular has much to offer social studies teachers as they plan and implement curricula. Photographs have the power to enhance and expand student perceptions and interest while accessing their prior knowledge to a greater degree than often occurs with the use of printed text (Levstik & Barton, 2005). In this regard, Zevin (2007) holds that using photographs in social studies classrooms can be effective because they are valuable primary sources that become excellent tools for teaching analysis and interpretation while providing experiences in determining the authenticity of historical sources. Moreover, analyzing visual images helps students develop independent reading strategies (Beers & Howell, 2005) and can be useful in implementing differentiated learning in classrooms by allowing students who are visual learners to employ their particular learning style (Gregory & Chapman, 2002).

The possibilities inherent in using photographs to teach social studies are enhanced when images of special significance are used. Thus, Hariman (2001) discusses how photographs of civic unrest can achieve iconic status, noting that Filo's image now fulfills a unique role in American history. He states:

A photograph of civic unrest can become iconic, not because it shows the demonstration as it really is, but because it equips the audience to think, feel, and act in respect to the inherent problems of dissent in a liberal democratic society...Although all iconic photos (and many others as well) evoke strong emotional reactions, the Kent State image is virtually unique in its depiction of raw pain....The girl's anguish registers not only

personal affect, but the profound social rupture that has occurred....They [iconic images] are celebrated on a more abstract plane as broader symbols of national valor, human courage, inconceivable inhumanity, or senseless loss. (pp. 8-9)

Thus, Filo's photograph must be evaluated on three levels. First, the young woman's reaction to what had just happened must be considered. Second, the image's role in the nation's evolving angst about Vietnam should be noted. Third, and most critically, the photograph's long-term effect on the American psyche must be evaluated. As such, the photograph should be given a central role in presenting Kent State to students who are removed in time and place from the event but who can tell from the image that what has occurred is the "ripping out of her heart, spontaneous, uninhibited, and unanswerable—almost as if she had been the one shot" (Hariman, 2001, p. 8).

Each textbook includes the photograph in its coverage of Kent State. *Vision's* image is small (one-eighth of a page) and removed physically from its discussion of the incident. The photograph's caption states "To convince North Vietnam to settle for a negotiated peace, Nixon ordered troops into Cambodia to destroy North Vietnamese bases there. The invasion led to mass protests in the United States and to the tragic shooting of four students by National Guard troops at Kent State University (above)." No commentary about the photograph's short-term or long-term effect on public opinion is given.

Anthem's image (one-fourth of a page) is larger than *Vision's*, but its caption is similarly limited. It reads "Below [another photograph] demonstrators show their support for the war. Right, an anti-war rally turns tragic at Kent State University in Ohio, leaving four students dead. At far right [a third photograph], war protesters take their cause to the nation's capital." Again, no mention of the photograph's significant role on many levels is suggested.

Covering one-half of a page, *Reconstruction's* image plays a more prominent role than its counterparts in the other two textbooks. Introduced by the title **Protest and Death in Ohio** [bold-faced in original], its caption reads, "A student photographer at Kent State snapped this photograph moments after the Ohio National Guard opened fire on student protesters on May 4, 1970. *How do you think people reacted to seeing this photograph in the newspaper?*" [italics in original] In this case, a limited inference is made regarding the fact that the image will play some expanded role in a context that extends beyond Kent State itself.

Discussion: Teaching about the Kent State Shootings

Lewis and Hensley (1998) contend that much of the early research published about the incident was filled with factual inaccuracies, adding that many of those errors were perpetuated in later accounts of the event. They also note that many questions about the shootings remain unanswered, thus adding to the complexity that surrounds the teaching of the incident. In order to improve instruction about Kent State, they suggest that teachers focus their instruction about the event on the following questions:

1. Who was responsible for the violence in downtown Kent and on the Kent State campus in the three days prior to May 4th? As an important part of this question, were "outside agitators" primarily responsible? Who was responsible for setting fire to the ROTC building?

2. Should the Guard have been called to Kent and Kent State University? Could local law enforcement personnel have handled any situations? Was the Guard properly trained for this type of assignment?
3. Did the Kent State University administration respond appropriately in their reactions to the demonstrations and with Ohio political officials and Guard officials?
4. Would the shootings have been avoided if the rally had not been banned? Did the banning of the rally violate First Amendment rights?
5. Did the Guardsmen conspire to shoot students when they huddled on the practice football field? If not, why did they fire? Were they justified in firing?
6. Who was ultimately responsible for the events of May 4, 1970? (p. 17)

Addressing these questions at complex levels would enhance the development of students' understanding of the Kent State shootings as well as their overall ability to consider complex historical situations. These questions go far beyond the simple recitation of facts as they force students to dialogue regarding questions that remain unanswered (and that are, perhaps, unanswerable) to the present time. As such, considering these questions moves students to a new level of sophistication in their study of history, a necessary process because:

When teaching about the Holocaust (*or any complex subject, for that matter*), it is critical to “complicate” student thinking. In this context, “complicating students’ thinking” means assisting students to appreciate the fact that historical situations and people’s motives are generally complex and not easily explained or understood....Ultimately, students must appreciate the need to dig, search, analyze, and synthesize as they seek answers to questions regarding rationales, motives, and causes. (Totten, 2002, p. 91) [Italics added for emphasis]

Conclusion

The basic information presented in *Anthem* and *Reconstruction* parallel each other, with *Vision* providing considerably less detail than is found in the other two textbooks. The topics presented before and after the coverage of the Kent State shootings in the three textbooks are also similar. In each case, therefore, the typical surface narrative that high school history textbooks give to most topics is present.

Thus, several criticisms that are often directed toward high school history textbooks in general may be applied to how the three textbooks evaluated in this paper cover the Kent State shootings. It is often argued that textbooks are one-dimensional because “they [the textbooks] are bland. The spice of human experience is diluted. Authors of textbooks rarely offer interpretations and many slam the door to uncertainty. The ‘metadiscourse,’ or suggestions of judgment, points of emphasis, doubts, and uncertainty are absent” (Drake & Nelson, 2009, p. 98).

Specifically, references to the intensely emotional nature of the time are largely absent. The textbooks’ narratives suggest little of the angst that the Vietnam War caused in the country during the late 1960s and into the mid-1970s. In particular, the pivotal role that the Kent State shootings played in turning public opinion against the war is missing from the narratives, as is any substantial discussion of the effect that the Kent State shootings continue to have on

America's public conscience. Teachers should, therefore, develop their knowledge of the event so that Lewis and Hensley's questions can be brought into the classroom in a complex, nuanced fashion, thus giving students a valid perspective about the events of May 4 while leading them to consider the study of history in general at ever-deepening layers of evaluation.

The problems noted with regard to the textbooks' coverage of the Kent State shootings are consistent with much research that has been conducted regarding high school history textbooks in general. In this regard, it is argued that many (perhaps most) history textbooks are "bland, overburdened with factual content, overly sensitive to pressure groups, distorted, and watered down" (Beal, Bolick, & Martorella, 2009, p. 91). It is not surprising, therefore, that the eminent American historian David McCullough states, "They [history textbooks] are so bad, they seem designed to kill the interest of the student" (National School Boards Association, 2006, n.p.). Given this ongoing, long-term, and seemingly endemic situation, teachers should move beyond a reliance on textbooks as they build their programs. The complexity that should be central to the study of the Kent State shootings provides a rich setting through which teachers can move their students beyond a reliance on simple answers to complex questions, thus engaging students in the study of history while encouraging them to develop deep understandings of both history in general and of specific historical events in particular.

Footnote

¹ *Anthem* and *Vision* refer to Jackson State College, which was that school's name in 1970. *Reconstruction* identifies the school as Jackson State University, the institution's current name, which was adopted in 1974.

APPENDIX A

Textbooks Reviewed

Appleby, J., Brinkely, A., Broussard, A. S., McPherson, J. M., & Ritchie, D. A. (2010). *The American Vision, Modern Times*. Columbus, OH: Glencoe.

Ayers, E. L., de la Teja, J. F., White, D. G., & Schulzinger, R. D. (2010). *American Anthem: Reconstruction to the Present*. Austin, TX: Holt McDougal.

Lapansky-Werner, E. J., Levy, P. B., Roberts, R., & Taylor, A. (2009). *United States History: Reconstruction to the Present*. Boston: Pearson.

Online Resources

(The) Kent State Shootings: An Annotated Bibliography. <http://www.nrbooks.com/kent-state-bibliography.htm>

Kent State Shootings. <http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org/entry.php?rec=1595>.

Kent State and the Vietnam War Protest Movement. <http://www.ohiohistory.org/historyworksohio/classroom/plan.cfm?id=17>.

May 4 Collection. <http://www.library.kent.edu/page/11247>. (The) Year the Vietnam War Came Home. <http://www.may4archiv>

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