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Address Delivered at Kent State, May 4, 1987

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Address Delivered at Kent State, May 4, 1987

Tom Grace

For some it may sound strange to say how glad I am to be here today. Certainly, I have ample reason to be troubled on this, the seventeenth anniversary of the shooting deaths of four of my classmates. I know the killers walk free and that they live out their lives unmolested in nearby Ravenna, in Akron, in Wooster and in any one of a number of other places. I know justice was not done. I know that the one chiefly responsible for the wanton killing of Sandy Scheuer, who died next to me in an ambulance, has had a statue erected to himself on the grounds of your state capitol. How unfitting that James Rhodes, a man who called Kent students brownshirts, is remembered with a bronze statue while those killed by his soldiers still await a suitable memorial tribute.

Those self-appointed overseers of the Kent memorial agonized over the decision as to whether the monument to the fallen should have the names of those murdered inscribed on its walls. They deliberated—without any input from the most wronged—whether to have a historical plaque affixed to the side of the memorial. Apparently, there was no such indecision when Governor Rhodes ensured that one of his favorite sayings was carved into the base of his bronze likeness: “Profit is not dirty work in Ohio.” Perhaps an elderly steel worker friend of mine had Rhodes in mind when he said the words of our 1776 declaration would have more accurate meaning today had it been written to read “life, liberty and the pursuit of profit.” Perhaps this would be a truer description of the aims of those who rule this nation.

In spite of all this I remain happy to be with you as I have on past spring days on the fourth of May. Military veterans have told me of the terrifying exhilaration they experienced after being shot at and missed. On May 4, I was not fortunate enough to have been missed. The fact that my wound was not mortal, however, has enabled me to stay active in a movement for peace abroad, and for economic, social and racial justice at home.

I am also pleased that the man on whose statue pigeons leave their droppings was defeated by a landslide margin last November. Just as the killings at Kent State may have contributed to his May 1970 primary setback, the United Students Against Rhodes—formed here at Kent—can claim at least a small measure of credit for his defeat in the November election of 1986.

Moreover, I also derive great satisfaction from seeing so many of you here on May fourth, both old friends and new. Any number of you were in nursery school when Troop G and Company A of the Ohio National Guard opened fire on us that Monday afternoon seventeen years past. By coming out today you are demonstrating how aware you are of the importance of remembering Kent State. However much we would disagree with James Kilpatrick on who to blame for Kent State, the conservative columnist was right when he wrote recently that “the high school graduate who is ignorant of Kent State... has missed the cultural boat.”

I know some of today's young are unaware of the cultural and political significance of what happened here nearly two decades ago, while many others, including those of my generation, have overlooked or forgotten a murderous deed no less horrifying—the killings of two students at all black Jackson State University on May 14, 1970.

Today some in the nation are reading signals from President Reagan that racism is now back in style. “It's just like the old days,” he might say, “when we didn't have a racial problem.”

However distressing incidents like Howard Beach are to opponents of racial injustice we would do well to remember that when this university announced plans to build a gymnasium on the site of the killings, KSU students like Alan Canfora rallied behind the slogan “Long Live the Spirit of Kent *and* Jackson State.” In doing so, KSU students of the 1970s carried on what KSU students did in the 1960s when black and white undergraduates blocked the Oakland Police from interviewing potential recruits at this university. It was the Oakland Police who, among other things, had, earlier in 1968, shot down seventeen-year-old Black Panther Bobby Hutton. These struggles of the past point the way forward to what we must do in the present. We must do as Jesse Jackson has said and move the fight from the racial battlegrounds to the economic common ground.

When this commonality of economic and political interests has been realized and effectively acted upon, the movement for social justice has experienced its greatest gains. During the dark days of the Depression, with unemployment at record highs, the men and women of the CIO broke the color line and organized blacks and whites into the same industrial unions. By refusing to acquiesce to the Jim Crow mentality which had crippled past organizing efforts, the unity of workers in the steel, auto, and rubber industries made the union movement into a force for economic and racial justice.

Similarly, during the 1960s, white and black students went to Mississippi to challenge what southern historian James W. Silver termed “the closed society.” It was a society imbued with what Silver called an “all pervading doctrine.... white supremacy.” When, in 1961, a newly formed group, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) first embarked on

voter registration work in Mississippi they found only 4% of the states black population registered to vote. One hundred years after the start of the Civil War, Mississippi blacks were so oppressed that many did not realize that black people *could* vote. Founders of SNCC like Julian Bond, with whom I am privileged to share this podium, helped break the back of Jim Crow. Into the cauldron of the worst racism in America went SNCC members like Massillon, Ohio native Chuck McDrew and Stokely Carmichael, who spoke on this very spot seven years ago. Against tremendous odds SNCC withstood thousands of arrests, hundreds of beatings and an unknown number of killings. They organized a powerful independent political movement, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. By 1965, along with Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference, they had generated enough pressure to win passage of the revolutionary Voting Rights Act. The Second Reconstruction had come to Mississippi and Alabama and hundreds of thousands of rural blacks cast ballots for the first time in their lives.

As was the case at Kent State, however, the price was high. During the 1964 Freedom Summer campaign three civil rights workers, Mississippi native James Chaney and two white New Yorkers, Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, were murdered by sheriff's deputies. The three were killed, execution style, after being apprehended while investigating the Ku Klux Klan's burning of the all black Mount Zion Church in Philadelphia, Mississippi. Unlike the indecision experienced by KSU administrators, the parishioners of Mount Zion quickly dedicated a plaque to the three in 1966 after they rebuilt their burned-down church. "Out of One Blood God Hath Made All Men," it reads. "This plaque is dedicated to the memory of Michael Schwerner, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman whose concern for others, and more particularly those of this community led to their early martyrdom. Their death quickened men's consciences and more firmly established justice, liberty and brotherhood in our land."

It was in this same state, however, six years later that elements of the Mississippi Highway Patrol shot to death twenty-year-old Jackson State student Phillip Gibbs and high school student James Earl Green on the evening of May 14, 1970.

Jackson State students on May 7 had been among the millions of college age young who demonstrated against the invasion of Cambodia and the killings in Kent, Ohio. A week later, they had become victims of the very crimes they were protesting. Just as General Canterbury announced one half hour before the Kent shootings that we would find out what law and order was all about, the Jackson police gave the following radio order the evening of May 14: "Call that security guard out there at Jackson State and see if they can't scatter them niggers." Before the night was out, Gibbs and Green were dead and twelve others were wounded, most of them as they took shelter inside their Alexander Hall dormitory.

The lessons of the 1930s and the 1960s teach many things. The state has taught us where there is struggle there will be sacrifice. We have also learned from our history that what is first perpetrated against blacks will also, if left unchecked, be dealt out to whites. This was just demonstrated again last week in South Africa when, for the first time, police used guns to quell white students protesting apartheid.

Yet just as the sacrifices of the civil rights activists broke the back of Jim Crow racial codes, the sacrifices of Jackson and Kent State students helped end the war in Southeast Asia. In fact, it was organizations like SNCC and leaders like Julian Bond who were among the first to oppose the Vietnam war. We must learn that our greatest gains have come when blacks and whites fought together rather than each other.

In 1987 America, racial attacks—whether in Howard Beach in Queens, NY, or in Forsyth County, Georgia, or even at the University of Massachusetts—are on the increase. In 1987 America, unions, once a vanguard in the struggle for justice, are all too often in the hands of those supporting the status quo. In 1987 America, Ronald Reagan is spending millions to arm and equip the Contras in an illegal bid to overthrow the sovereign government of Nicaragua.

Yet there are two aspects to everything. Thousands have marched in Forsyth County and Howard Beach—where a twenty-three-year-old black man, Michael Griffith, was killed in December 1968—to demand justice. The debate is going on in the unions between the old guard and those who advocate a new militancy and for putting movement back into the labor movement. Just last week my own union, the New York State Public Employees Federation AFL-CIO, was among more than twenty-five labor organizations that marched thousands strong in a Washington protest against administration policies in South Africa and Central America.

This is what must happen—an interlocking of movements that can utilize every form of struggle: rallies and marches, petition and boycott campaigns, lobbying elected representatives or electing new representatives who reflect the mass of public opinion in this country against U.S. involvement in Central America.

Although because of lessons learned from Vietnam a *clear* majority oppose war preparations in Central America, a *near* majority—disproportionately black and brown, young and poor—exercise their right *not* to vote because they feel, with considerable justification, there is nothing or no one to vote for.

Yet there is an exception on the national stage. A man who brought two million first-time voters into the polling booths in 1984. A man feared by the big money contributors because of his genuine concern for the disfranchised. A man who only one year after the Kent shooting came to this campus to remember Jeff and Allison, Sandy and Bill. The man, of course, is Jesse Jackson.

In 1984 and again in 1988 Jackson has and will continue to offer the most effective antidote to the social and economic miseries brought on by years of Reaganomics. Knowing what we know, Jesse Jackson realizes that one Republican Party is enough. He stands almost alone in the Democratic Party as a voice for the left out and left behind, be they students who can't get loans or women who can't enjoy equal rights, or workers who can't keep their jobs or oppressed minorities who can't buy a home because the color their skin says no sale. Whether the victimized are jobless blacks in Chicago, striking Chicana women in Watsonville, California, or dispossessed farmers in Missouri, Jesse Jackson has heeded their call.

We cannot afford to retreat from the importance of the Jackson campaign in favor of a Gebhardt or a Gore because they are white and "more electable." Jesse Jackson was the third largest Democratic vote getter in 1984. If we believe in what we are doing, if we are to have an effective national movement that seeks fundamental social change we must have an effective national spokesman. While most Democrats are content to simply dull the sharp edge of Reaganism, Jesse Jackson offers us a real difference and a new direction away from a war driven economy. In this spirit we must work towards 1988 while setting our sights on the 1990s. There will be no immediate victories. Certainly there will be no victory at all without the unity of black and white. Martin Luther King, Jr. electrified 250,000 marchers in 1963 when he told those assembled in the shadow of the Lincoln Memorial that "many of our white brothers realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny, that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom. We cannot walk alone."

We couldn't walk alone in 1963 and we cannot afford to go our separate ways behind separate candidates in 1988. This year and next and the year after that we have an opportunity, indeed an obligation to help transform America by uniting the many needy to challenge the truly greedy.

In conclusion we must never forget that the killings at Kent became possible because the killings of blacks became commonplace. We cannot afford to travel the self-defeating road where one social movement works in isolation from the other. We can limit the number of new Jackson and Kent States only by refusing to accept injustice towards anyone.

Let us go forth remembering those who lost their lives while opposing an immoral war. But not only that, let us also go forth with the mission of making America a land free from economic want, free from social injustice and free from foreign war. Commemorations fail to accomplish everything they should if we leave here and return to the routines of our daily lives satisfied that we have done enough for one year.

I propose today no simple plan for the building of a better America. I know simply that we cannot allow a system of injustice to go unchallenged and unchanged.

Grace

Like the civil rights martyrs of Freedom Summer, the Kent victims need and will have a memorial. Such monuments will help us and future generations to remember those who died here.

Memorialize them, too, by building a movement in opposition to racial oppression, in opposition to economic inequality, and in opposition to the plans of Ronald Reagan who would use the lives of young Americans to thwart the destinies of the Nicaraguan people. Let us remember the lives of Sandy and Bill, and Phil Gibbs, Allison, Jeff Miller and James Earl Green by struggling to gain better control over our own destinies. They would, I believe, thank us for that.



At 12:24 pm every May 4, people leave the vigil site and come down to the Commons to attend the commemorative program at Kent State University. This photo was taken May 4, 1976 © by John P. Rowe.