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How 13 seconds Changed History: Macrocosm and Microcosm Interpretations of  
the Kent State Shooting and its Influence

An analysis of the May 4, 1970 Kent State Shooting and resulting impact on U.S. Foreign Policy

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Dr. Turek

Nixon sent flowers  
Of white phosphorus and agent orange

On April 30.  
Brazenly he invaded Cambodia.  
Brazenly students  
Picked up their peace.  
Where were the bullets?  
They were four Kent State hearts torn open—  
The wind of M-1s—  
The echo of Springtime.<sup>1</sup>

On May 4, 1970, the Ohio National Guard opened fire on a crowd of Kent State student anti-war demonstrators. After only 13 seconds and more than 60 bullets of live ammunition, 4 students were killed and 9 more were injured. The “echo of Springtime,” captured in the poem above, highlighted the events of Vietnam and the shooting at Kent State. May 1970 began with this unprecedented occurrence in the Vietnam anti-war movement—students murdered by Ohio National Guardsmen. The “wind of the M-1s” from that day and the resulted “hearts torn open” generated an undeniable impact on American society that ultimately, via Congress’s actions that constrained Nixon’s executive power, influenced how President Nixon engaged with the public on domestic issues and his foreign policy in Vietnam.

The Vietnam War cultivated a strong faction of domestic dissent and inflamed a growing culture of counter protest. The Vietnam War started in the Fall of 1955 between the communist North Vietnamese and the anti-communist Southern Vietnamese. Amidst the Cold War atmosphere, the United States backed anti-communist Southern Vietnam, and in March 1965 transitioned to physical involvement when the first American troops arrived in Vietnam to fight. During Vietnam, the United States military drafted 2.2 million men.<sup>2</sup> The draft inflamed controversy and disapproval in the American public. The draft upset young people forced to fight

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<sup>1</sup>Bill Arthrell, “Springtime” in *Kent State University Libraries. Special Collections and Archives*, (2006).

<sup>2</sup>University of Michigan, “The Military Draft During the Vietnam War.” in *Resistance and Revolution: The Anti-Vietnam War Movement*.” (University of Michigan, 2019).

a war they did not believe in, frustration resulted from loss of American lives abroad, and initially the draft indirectly targeted low-income demographics which gave rise to political tensions between classes. Young men who were eligible for the draft and who were of higher income backgrounds “sought refuge in college or parental deferments” and “thousands fled to Canada.”<sup>3</sup> Unlike other wars Vietnam was marked by dynamic domestic disapproval stemming from youth factions. U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War and the draft caused civil unrest in the streets and on campuses.

In American society and especially in the college communities, there was collective sentiment against the war in ranging levels. Anti-war activists viewed the draft as “immoral and the only means for the government to continue the war with fresh soldiers.”<sup>4</sup> By 1970, nearly 335,000 American troops were in Vietnam, with over 50,000 killed.<sup>5</sup> The Vietnam War “changed the attitudes of a generation” and “increased caution about involvement in foreign affairs.”<sup>6</sup> Anti-war protestors were furious about youth sent to fight a ‘far-off’, and in their eyes an unjustified war, and also outraged by human rights violations that materialized abroad. Notably, in March 1968, U.S. Army Troops slaughtered and murdered approximately 500 unarmed civilian villages in My Lai. Photographs appeared in the media of groups of women, children, and elderly dead along dirt roads.<sup>7</sup> The imagery of innocent deaths violated notions of American values and acted as evidence of wrongful U.S. action in Vietnam. As the media exposed the American public to human rights abuses and violence, it built upon anger created by the draft. This dissent resulted in an increased anti-war movement and protests of greater frequency throughout the United States.

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Michael Ray, “Vietnam War Timeline.” in “Encyclopædia Britannica,” 2019.

<sup>6</sup>History.com Editors. “Kent State Shooting” in *History.com. A&E Television Networks*, September 8, 2017.

<sup>7</sup>Ray, 2019.

As spring of 1970 unfolded, the frequency of campus uproar, and the overall pattern of confrontation approached a peak. The surging civil unrest and campus outrage toward the Vietnam War demonstrated that the Kent State shooting can be understood as a macrocosm climax of escalation in the anti-war movement, and a microcosm issue sourced from a breakdown in communication in Kent the first week of May 1970. The intensified atmosphere of counterculture protests and heightened Vietnam War dissent highlights how the Kent State Shooting was a part of a greater macrocosm of civil unrest. In microcosm terms, logistical communication breakdowns materialized in Kent from May 1st-4th which contributed to the escalation of the National Guard interactions at Kent State. The event produced a wave of magnified dynamic protest in the American public following the shooting which influenced Congress and ultimately constrained President Nixon's foreign policy. Despite such civil uproar, Nixon's stubbornly characterized the anti-war view as an 'other' in his own mind and this limited the extent to which he changed policies. The Kent State shooting fits into a greater scheme of how public opinion was a constraint on the foreign policy actions of American democracy and shaped the parameters for which Congress and the President could act within. Further this study illuminated how a strong minority of public sentiment against the war shaped what was talked about and therefore prioritized. The event further contributes to greater themes of the importance of domestic opinion during wartime and its resulting influence on presidential administrations—and importantly demonstrates how *13 seconds* can change history.

The Kent State shooting fits into a macrocosm context of a growing culture of protest and increased dissent toward United States government authority and its foreign policy decisions with the Vietnam War. By the spring of 1970, American society had endured civic unrest in a variety of mediums from the anti-war movement, the civil rights movement, the women's rights

movement as well as political upheaval and distress. In addition to the Cold War, the arms race, and Vietnam, political dynamics were threatened: Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in 1968 and President John F. Kennedy and his brother were assassinated in 1963 and 1968. These events were still raw in the minds of the American public, and contributed to “[shape] a context for confrontation that was [expanded] monthly.”<sup>8</sup> The youth generation embraced counterculture that “challenged the conclusion of dress, language, sexuality, authority, and sometimes reason itself.”<sup>9</sup> It was an age of questioning the status quo and pushing limits of the constructs of society.

This overall atmosphere of pushed boundaries affected how protests and demonstrations occurred. Violence, while absent in the majority of anti-war protests, was not uncommon in demonstrations. Property destruction by demonstrators such as window smashing of stores, looting, and burning ROTC buildings on college campuses radiated throughout the news. Violent clashes occurred between demonstrators and the police with demonstrators throwing rocks, arrests, tear gas, and physical confrontations apart of the story of the events. Anti-war demonstrations and property destruction often especially escalated on college campuses and in youth protests. In April 1970, Harvard declared itself to be in a state of emergency and closed the following day after student demonstrators “[sparked] a five hour battle with police.”<sup>10</sup> During the late 1960s and into 1970, “a ‘rising war’ of bombings swept through the county” in which anti-war youth attempted and sometimes succeeded in planting home-made bombs in government buildings and other public locations.<sup>11</sup> Protest violence highlighted the intense sentiments of disapproval for the government

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<sup>8</sup>John, Dumbrell, *Vietnam and the antiwar movement: an international perspective*. (England: Avebury, 1989), 69.

<sup>9</sup>Dumbrell, 69.

<sup>10</sup>Tom, Wells. *The War Within: America's Battle over Vietnam*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 406.

<sup>11</sup>Wells, 406.

felt by some anti-war protestors, and increased divisions between demonstrators and government authority.

The Nixon administration's attitude toward the anti-war movement on college campuses was hostile and antagonistic. In 1969, Vice President Spiro Agnew spoke in front of graduates at Ohio State University, and warned that, "a society that comes to fear its children is effete. If my generation doesn't stop cringing, yours will inherit a lawless society where emotion and muscle replace reason."<sup>12</sup> This statement highlighted that disapproval toward younger-generation expressed dissent. 'Emotion and violence' applied to the demonstrations that rippled throughout the country; and rather than a clamp-down response from the older generation, as Agnew said, a 'cringing' passive response occurred. He suggested passive response was not suitable to countering the youths' behavior and predicted that emotion and force were incompatible with reason—and instead aligned with a 'lawless' anarchic society. Bluntly, Agnew demonstrated his dislike for the anti-war youth, and Nixon was on the same page. Nixon wrote to his chief of staff H.R. Haldeman, "somewhere in the heartland of student America and young America are some decent types," however, "as far as universities are concerned, just rule out the east...go the Midwest to try to find some decent people."<sup>13</sup> Nixon's language characterized students of the east coast, who were more vocal in their disapproval of the war as the opposite of 'decent' and that the majority of the youth was therefore indecent.

The language Nixon's administration utilized toward the youth anti-war movement extended into criminalizing characterizations. With the increase in violent demonstrations, despite the *overwhelming majority* of peaceful ones, the fear and dislike of the anti-war movement was prominent in the administration. Anti-war demonstrators were labeled as "potential murderers."

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<sup>12</sup>W.E. Leuchtenberg, *A Troubled Feast: American Society since 1945*, (Boston: Little Brown, 1983), p. 240.

<sup>13</sup>Bruce Oudes. "The President; Richard Nixon's secret Files." (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978), p. 412

The administration conversed that, “we’re dealing with the criminal mind, with people who have snapped for some reason,” and were a “severe internal security threat.”<sup>14</sup> This message conveyed the hyperbolized threat of anti-war protestors, despite that the majority of demonstrations were peaceful. He described youth that utilized their right to free speech as ‘criminal’ and labeled their behavior of assembly as unreasonable and rather a fluke of ‘snapped’ people. All of such dismissed the root of the issue that divided protestors and the administration–foreign policy decisions in Vietnam. Further, by labeling the protestors as an “internal security threat”—an imagined division of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ materialized between the administration and their view the youth American public. Tom Huston, a member of the Nixon administration, wrote Haldeman on March 12, 1970 and expressed growing concern:

I...warn with deadly seriousness that this threat is terribly great [anti-war protestors and bombings]...This Spring may be the most violent on and off the campus that we have yet witnessed. The number of people involved may not be great, but the level of violence is likely to be far greater. In the past two weeks we have had five bombings, two attempted bombings, and a bank burned down.<sup>15</sup>

Such language of paranoia also spoke to the nature of how popular protest and occurrences of violence terrified Nixon’s administration. The anti-war movement “remained a serious political problem” and was “far from dead.”<sup>16</sup> The administration further was not prepared to handle nor address the dissent expressed by the American public. While they had collected intelligence and anticipated violence, the conversation stopped without formulating a solution.

Kent State encapsulated the peak of the confrontation that had built from Nixon’s continued dismissal of the dynamic anti-war movement on college campuses. The Kent State shooting grew to symbolize a public combustion of all Nixon’s foreign policy decisions made in secret. In 1970,

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<sup>14</sup>Oudes, 412.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid, 413.

<sup>16</sup>Oudes, 412.



Kent State experienced dynamic growth in its student body. Unfortunately, in the midst of this, the university was “becoming more bureaucratized and authorization in its governance.”<sup>17</sup> This disconnect between students and university administration was a part of a greater pattern that manifested throughout the nation on campuses. The Port Huron Statement drafted by the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) highlighted this sentiment:

Our professors and administrators sacrifice controversy to public relations; their curriculums change more slowly than the living events of the world; their skills and silence are purchased by investors in the arms race; passion is called un-scholastic.<sup>18</sup>

This statement highlighted the division that developed in universities between a youthful generation “housed in universities, looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit” with a growing concern as the comfort of their childhood of unbeatable American from World War II “was penetrated by events too troubling to dismiss.”<sup>19</sup> The college anti-war movement recognized an “urgent’ need for “revolutionary leadership” and diversion away from “goals ambiguous and tradition-bound instead of informed and clear.”<sup>20</sup> A disconnect existed between leftist students who felt lacking recognition for their dynamic passion as “un-scholastic.”

There had been an evolving growth of anti-war movement on campuses as part of a larger SDS presence that strove to influence a society “rooted in love, reflectiveness, reason, and creativity” and viewed universities as the location in which the anti-war movement and leftist ideas would continue to evolve. The statement highlighted that ‘the university’ was in a “permanent position of social influence,” critical to the “formation of social attitudes” and acted as the “central institution for organizing, evaluating, and transmitting knowledge.”<sup>21</sup> Universities were where

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<sup>17</sup>Dumbrell, 69.

<sup>18</sup>Students for a Democratic Society. “The Port Huron Statement.” *The Port Huron Statement*. 1962, 5.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid, 3.

<sup>20</sup>Students for a Democratic Society. “The Port Huron Statement.” *The Port Huron Statement*. 1962, 4.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid, 61.

political life was permitted to “be an adjunct to the academic one, and action to be informed by reason” and where further alliances of “awakening community” could be built upon.<sup>22</sup> In this context of universities were the ‘hot-beds’ for counter-culture, and anti-war discussion and assembly.

The embodiment that formulated in youth protest is nicely consolidated behind the words of Mario Savio’s “Bodies upon the gears” speech at Berkeley in 1964:

There is a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can’t take part; you can’t even passively take part, and you’ve got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus, and you’ve got to make it stop. And you’ve got to indicate to the people who run it, to the people who own it, that unless you’re free, the machine will be prevented from working at all!<sup>23</sup>

In this passionate speech, the imagery created from the determination to “stop” the system via direct personal confrontation speaks to the sheer determination that was embedded in the strong minority of the anti-war movement. As mentioned above, Agnew argued that the protestors had no “reason,” that their vision of society was “lawless,” yet here one can see that it was the lacking reason from the government that troubled the anti-war protestors to a brink of doing whatever was necessary to “make it stop.” This disconnect highlighted the opposing viewpoints and inability to communicate and compromise. The anti-war movement held their own set of reasons and felt strongly about the ‘system’ of the government, while the government’s ‘reason’ contradicted the youth’s.

In addition to this strengthened mission of anti-war sentiment, further of issue for Kent State was the internal dynamics of the university leadership and its lacking communication with the Kent city leadership. Disconnected and dismissive attitude from the Kent State administration

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid, 62.

<sup>23</sup>Mario Savio, “Bodies upon the Gears.” (Berkeley: 1964).

toward its students became a serious issue in retrospect as well. As students “became more politically active, there was little acknowledgement of their concern and no plan or policy as to how their concerns would be recognized or addressed.”<sup>24</sup> This dismissed students’ voices and created an environment of relatively zero interacting dialogue. This was further exacerbated with an administrative style that “did not encourage a communication exchange between student, faculty, staff, or admissions.”<sup>25</sup> University President White “made few positive contributions to relations between students and the university.”<sup>26</sup> Prior to the shooting, the university administration had “created an environment conducive to the escalation of violence” and that further “the extremist faction that dominated Kent State’s SDS chapter by 1968 was very much a creature of this environment of repression.”<sup>27</sup> All of which, in the context of a national college sentiment concentrated behind challenging the status quo and questioning involvement in Vietnam was *considerably aggravated* by conscious dismissal from University authority. In 1965, right-wing pro-war students harassed KSU anti-war demonstrators; as the small group of protestors was assaulted, “campus police stood passively by, refusing to intervene.”<sup>28</sup> An apparent division materialized between the University administration leadership and pro-war students against anti-war students that expressed concern in both university and political affairs. An atmosphere of holistic distrust between students and authority and faculty accumulated in the microcosm of Kent State during a macrocosm time of popular student protest.

Prior to May 1970, Nixon made policy changes that diminished some public upheaval; however, while the public was under the illusion that the war was “winding down” with troop

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<sup>24</sup>Dumbrell, 69.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>Melvin, Small and William D. Hoover. “*Give peace a chance: exploring the Vietnam anti war movement: essays from the Charles DeBenedetti memorial conference.*” (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press:1992), 221.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid, 221.

<sup>28</sup>Wells, 20.

withdrawals, Nixon secretly ordered bombings in Laos and Cambodia. Once such became known to the public, dissent inflamed.

Nixon gathers his clouds  
At neutral Cambodia  
For one Year  
He bombed Buddah's secret temples secretly,  
The media did not know.  
'The war is winding down.'  
The war is dropping down  
3 million dead Indochinese<sup>29</sup>

In 1969 Nixon implemented his Vietnamization policy which fueled increased public support. Vietnamization decreased U.S involvement in Vietnam with the intent to “expand, equip, and train South Vietnam's forces” and reduced the number of U.S. combat troops.<sup>30</sup> In April 1970, Nixon initiated the withdrawal of 150,000 American troops from Vietnam which “sapped strength” from the anti-war movement.<sup>31</sup> However, Nixon secretly ordered bombings in Laos and Cambodia in 1969 about which the “media did not know” and many Indochinese civilian deaths resulted. As news of these secret bombings leaked to the press, public dissent inflamed, and Nixon grew paranoid.

Nixon's administration advised against invading Cambodia. Melvin Laird, Secretary of Defense, and William Rogers, Secretary of State feared high casualties and domestic uproar; Marshall Green, East Asia diplomat, warned that the “campuses will go up in flames.”<sup>32</sup> Due to their differing opinions, Nixon chose to keep the Defense and State Departments “in the dark on much of the planning operations.”<sup>33</sup> Rather than utilizing his access to diverse expert opinions,

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<sup>29</sup>Arthrell, 2006.

<sup>30</sup>United States Department of Defense, "Melvin R. Laird", Secretaries of Defense

<sup>31</sup>Bruce Oudes. "The President; Richard Nixon's secret Files." (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978), p. 412.

<sup>32</sup> Wells, 417.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

Nixon shut out anyone who disagreed with his plans. This weakened and disjointed the administration which affected its capacity to address domestic issues and Vietnam. Despite the overwhelming negative reaction Nixon received from his advisors, he decided to go forward with the invasion in Cambodia. As noted by one of his aides, Nixon remarked that, “we’ll catch unshirted hell no matter what we do, so we’d better get on with it.”<sup>34</sup> This attitude was repeated throughout Nixon’s decisions, and highlighted that Nixon was aware of criticism –but ultimately did not care enough to allow such to affect his foreign policy decisions. Roger Morris, National Security Council staff, recalled that “Nixon drank exceptionally at night,” there were “many times when a cable would come up late and Henry would say ‘there’s no sense waking him up—he’d be incoherent.’”<sup>35</sup> This was highly irresponsible, and affected the efficiency of the administration to handle foreign policy issues. Further, it spoke to Nixon’s awareness of the troubles of his presidency and faults. James Lynn, American cabinet officer, divulged that, “all of us were worried about his men's stability. We’d have glimpses of him and didn’t know what to do with it...We’ve got a madman on our hearts.”<sup>36</sup> Thomas Birmingham’s poem in the Kent State archives captured the imagined scene of the night prior to Nixon’s April 30<sup>th</sup> speech.

On Wednesday, the President’s not to be found,  
He’s drinking to steady his nerves.  
His ear’s a-flattened against the ground,  
Hearing’ jeers of the people he serves.

Do I really care what Americans think?  
I lead, and they follow real well.  
We’ll put these hippies in their place.  
And’ I’ll see them all in hell!”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>Melvin Small, “*Antiwarriors: The Vietnam War and the Battle for America’s Hearts and Minds.*” (2002), 122.

<sup>35</sup>J. Anthony. Lukan, “*Nightmare: the underside of the Nixon Years.*” (New York: Viking: 1976).

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Thomas Harlan, Birmingham. ““Up the Constitution!”” *Kent State University Libraries. Special Collections and Archives*, 1996.

This poem captured the questioned the stability of the president and the sentiment felt by American society that public dissent and opinion were irrelevant to him. This poem highlighted the absent impression Nixon left the public, as well as his direct disregard for the peoples' concerns, and rather his hubris attitude above the anti-war movement. with Further, the poem highlighted Nixon's antagonistic attitude toward the anti-war movement and disregard for making peace with that faction of American society. Rather than confronting the root issue of foregin policy unease felt by the public, Nixon ignored such and was "not to be found," and disregarding "what Americans think" ; he was set on leading and wanted to "put these hippies in their place," and meet them in "hell," suggesting that both he and anti-war movement were wrong.

On April 30, 1970 Nixon announced to the American public that he was sending U.S. troops into Cambodia. He reasoned that such action was necessary to protect U.S. men and "guarantee the continued success of our withdrawal and Vietnamization programs." Nixon stressed that "this [was] not an invasion of Cambodia"<sup>38</sup> but a limited and temporary action for big-picture war success. He continued to boldly address the anti-war movement:

We live in an age of anarchy, both abroad and at home. We see mindless attacks on all the great institutions which have been created by free civilizations in the last 500 years. Even here in the United States, great universities are being systematically destroyed.<sup>39</sup>

Nixon perceived the anti-war movement as anarchic and destructive. In characterizing the anti-war faction in this manner, Nixon crystallized his own 'us' versus 'them' mentality. American public sentiments were not in his mind valid concern, but rather an "attack" and "mindless," therefore lacking validity. Such harsh language contributed to the polarization between demonstrators and their trust in Nixon. Leading up to the Kent State Shooting, Nixon's rhetoric

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<sup>38</sup>Nixon, Richard. April 30, 1970. <https://sites.temple.edu/immerman/president-nixons-speech-on-cambodia-april-30-1970/>.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

toward the anti-war movement and college campus demonstrations was antagonist and damaging. Given the immense warning Nixon received leading up to the Cambodia invasion, and emphasized concern on campus uproar, Nixon should have addressed the anti-war movement in a more collaborative and diplomatic manner rather than almost militaristic. Nixon lacked concern for the anti-war movement, and lacked priority to de-escalate disapproval.

The furious reaction to Nixon's April 30th speech about Cambodia was not limited to college campuses and reached into the internal dynamics of the Nixon administration. Three of National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger's closest senior aides resigned due to their intense opposition for the invasion.<sup>40</sup> Three members of the National Security Council resigned, and 250 foreign service officers signed a protest note against the invasion and sent it to the secretary of state.<sup>41</sup> Rogers predicted that:

My God, the kids are going to retch when they hear this kind of thing! This is the kind of thing that is going to touch them off...in this atmosphere, it was going to have an incendiary effect amongst the youth.<sup>42</sup>

The "incendiary effect amongst the youth" predicted became reality the next day. On May 1, there was a wave of protests throughout the country. In Maryland, students "launched a 'hit-and-run attack' on their schools ROTC headquarters," while Princeton students firebombed the armory, and Stanford students "went on a rampage, breaking into shops and smashing the windows."<sup>43</sup>

From May 1-4, Kent State "suffered a total communication breakdown."<sup>44</sup> In the wake of his April 30 address, "Kent State experienced a series of violent reactions, including the burning of the ROTC building" which led the mayor to call the National Guard after a communication

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<sup>40</sup>Wells, 1994.

<sup>41</sup>Small, 2005.

<sup>42</sup>Henry, Kissinger. *White House Years*. (Boston: Little, Brown), 1979.

<sup>43</sup>Wells, 421.

<sup>44</sup>Dumbrell, 79.

breakup in between the city police and Kent State campus police.<sup>45</sup> As seen on many other college campuses, the ROTC buildings were the tangible embodiment of pro-war authority and targeted for property destruction to make a statement. Students' motivations were further bolstered by annoyance and frustration for the presence of the Guard. The burning of the ROTC building however enacted phase II of the National Guards' plan, with authorized their legal authority to control of the university. This however was not communicated to the University administration nor the Mayor.<sup>46</sup> With conditions escalating, the Attorney of the city crafted his interpretation of what legal conditions fell under the 'State of Emergency.' This legal document, unlike before, "prohibited all forms of outdoor demonstrations and rallies—peaceful or otherwise."<sup>47</sup> This incorrect legal document was partially circulated around campus, but not effectively.

All the previous events highlighted an example of a damaging communication breakdown in which four crucial parties: the students, the university administration, city leadership, and the Ohio National Guard were not all on the same page on a variety of factors. This set the groundwork for a microcosm of escalation and confusion in a time period of confrontation and frustration at both the local level and apart of the national anti-war sentiment. Sunday night, the "flowers and peace signs were replaced with tear gas and bayonets" when a sit down protest on the edge of campus demanded the Guard be sent home and requested an audience with the mayor and university president was denied—and instead turned hostile with the confrontation with the National Guard, stirring up "fear, anger, and in some cases hysteria."<sup>48</sup> Over the course of a few days since Nixon's speech, relatively normal protest triggered the presence of the Ohio National Guard which fueled an increase in student anti-war participation. Within 72 hours of the speech, a bonfire

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<sup>45</sup>Small, 2002.

<sup>46</sup>Tompkins & Anderson, 1971.

<sup>47</sup>Commission on Campus Unrest issues report to President; (1970) , p. 256-259.

<sup>48</sup>Dumbrell, 76.



demonstration in the streets of downtown escalated to a State of Emergency, a burned ROTC building, and now tear gas and confrontation with the National Guard all occurred—all of which materialized with minimized communication between the National Guard and the University administration and absent communication to students. This dynamic three day period demonstrated a narrow microcosm timeline of communication negligence in the context of a macrocosm sentiment of anti-war protest.

On May 4th peaceful protest occurred in the afternoon. As classes were released, the flow of students greatly increased in audience to be three times the size of the actual demonstrators which gave a false visual for the number of actual protestors present.<sup>49</sup> The Guards arrived and started to clear the area with tear gas. Students hurled tear canisters back at the Guards and rocks, and the crowd cheered “Pigs off campus”<sup>50</sup> and cursed the war: “Kids R yellin: “One, two, three, four! We don’t want your fucking war.”<sup>51</sup>This assembly was legal under the State of Emergency; there was false assumption of illegality from the city attorney. Nevertheless, Guards steered students away from the commons and up over Taylor Hill. As recognized by Dumbrell, a current student noted that, this is where the “guards [made] a tactical mistake.” By pushing them up the hill—now clearly beyond what their mission was—the Guards were “overextended and without a strategy” and the “whole sequence made very little sense,” the “sight of heavily armed, helmeted combat ready troops with gas masks, advancing on students who were heading in a variety of directions.”<sup>52</sup> A chaos of student demonstrators and Guards quickly spun out of control, “but make

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<sup>49</sup>Dumbrell, 79.

<sup>50</sup>John Kifner, “4 Kent State Students Killed by Troops.” *The New York Times* . (New York: 1970).

<sup>51</sup>Thomas Harlan, Birmingham. ““Up the Constitution!”” *Kent State University Libraries. Special Collections and Archives*, 1996.

<sup>52</sup>Dumbrell, 79.

no runs at the Guardsman fun, He'll have your Mother Grieving."<sup>53</sup>From his vantage point at Wright Hall, Dumbrell could see students spilling over Taylor Hill. He observed that:

A significant factor on both sides was the testing of wills. The Guard was losing its patience and the students grew bolder. As I viewed the events for about three hundred yards away, the Guard seemed to be in a kneeling position and then suddenly loud cracks were heard and dozens of people fell to the ground. Someone standing next to me grabbed his binoculars and exclaimed "My God they shot them" I grabbed his glasses and my eyes confirmed again what I had heard, but did not believe.<sup>54</sup>

After 13 seconds of live ammunition fired into the crowd of students, 13 students were shot by the Ohio National Guard. Four were dead and nine lay injured, one of which was permanently paralyzed from his injury.<sup>55</sup> Tom Grace was shot in the foot, he was loaded into an ambulance and watched a sheet pulled over dead Sandy Scheuer's head.<sup>56</sup> At the top of Taylor hill, "a student crumpled over, spun sideways and fell to the ground, shot in the head;" in the parking lot, "a slim girl, wearing a cowboy shirt and faded jeans, was lying face down, blood pouring out."<sup>57</sup>

The scenes of war with innocent murdered on May 4th penetrated into domestic society:

The Guardsman's gun couldn't tell if you'd run,  
An' it never gives girls any slack  
Miller falls first from a Guardsman's burst,  
Then down go Schroeder and Krause.  
Their future's done by the Guardsmen's gun,  
Sandy Schus in the rear dies last.<sup>58</sup>

The same anguish and outrage for human rights violations abroad in Vietnam and the ensuing helpless was felt in the poem above. Women, who were thought safe from targeted military violence, were given no 'slack.' These lines spoke to one of the last barriers that could be

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<sup>53</sup>Thomas Harlan, Birmingham. "Up the Constitution!" *Kent State University Libraries. Special Collections and Archives*, 1996.

<sup>54</sup>Dumbrell, 79.

<sup>55</sup>Kent State University Library. "Kent State Shootings: May 4 Collection." in "*Kent State Shootings*," 2019.

<sup>56</sup>Small, 1992.

<sup>57</sup>Kifner, "4 Kent State Students Killed by Troops." 1970.

<sup>58</sup>Birmingham. "Up the Constitution!", 1996.

penetrated; not only the notion of killing innocent people, but women and in many senses ‘kids’ too. The poet humanized the deaths by including the names of the victims which communicated the personal aspect of their death. On Monday morning May 4, 1970, the National Guard shot and killed 4 unarmed students; 9 others injured. The micro analysis of ‘how’ behind this escalation better painted the holistic picture in interpreting the Kent State shooting in addition to the macro influence of the event. Much to Nixon’s surprise, “in thirteen seconds or under, Kent State became an international symbol of anti-war protests and government repression.”<sup>59</sup>

The aftermath of the Kent State Shooting in American society was wide scale and dynamic. The “eruptions” at universities throughout the nation following Kent State were “unprecedented in American history” with an average of 100 demonstrations a day between May 4-8. At least 448 colleges “[experienced] strikes or closures during the first two weeks in May.”<sup>60</sup> Some demonstrations were violent with students at Buffalo, New York who pelted guards, shouting “shoot me, shoot me” while other universities such as Trinity in San Antonio were peaceful and gathered around their fountain with candles in solidarity for the “four students shot at point-black range with automatic-weapons fired by guardsmen who are instructed in each situation to ‘aim low to disable rather than kill.’”<sup>61</sup> An accumulation of over 4 million students at 1,350 colleges participated in “demonstration against the shootings and the escalation,” many of whom were moderates or conservatives for the first time.<sup>62</sup> Such intense sentiment “swept like an out-of-control brush fire across the country.”<sup>63</sup> Different than prior to Kent State, faculty, administrators, and academics across the country joined students in active dissent which expanded the power of

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<sup>59</sup>Small, 1992, 201.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid, 123.

<sup>61</sup>Wolfe, Richard. “Editorial.” Trinitonian.. <http://edu.arcaserach.com/trc/initArcaCode.asp> (San Antonio: 1970), 3.

<sup>62</sup>Small, 201.

<sup>63</sup>Wells, 425.

the demonstrations by including a new class of anti-war demonstrators.<sup>64</sup> Other professionals joined such as clergy, doctors, lawyers, editors, who “flooded into Washington to express their opposition to the war and domestic government violence.”<sup>65</sup> The tragedy at Kent State unified different demographics and collectivized disapproval toward the Nixon administration which increased Congress' duty to balance Nixon's executive power.

When the shocking and devastating news arrived at the White House, Nixon's and Agnew's initial response aggravated further anger and distrust in the public. Nixon “did not even faintly envision the emotional torrent that the Kent State incident would set off across the country.”<sup>66</sup> The White House announced, “this should remind us all once again that when dissent turns to violence, it invites tragedy.”<sup>67</sup> This provocative statement suggested that the tragedy was “invited” and perhaps justified. The complete disregard for wrongful death perpetuated further when Nixon addressed the public that “this tragic and unfortunate incident” will “strengthen the determination” 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.”<sup>68</sup> The White House's initial reaction to the Kent State shooting expressed a “callous attitude”<sup>69</sup> that placed a degree of blame on the demonstrators, which was highly politically unfavorable. Agnew labeled Kent State as “predictable.”<sup>70</sup> Almost taking the role of an I-told-you-so-parent, he highlighted, “I have called attention to the grave dangers which accompany the new politics of violence and confrontation

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Wells, 427.

<sup>66</sup> Rowland Evan, Jr. & Robert D. Novak, *“Nixon in the White House: The Frustrations of Power.”* (New York; Random House, 1971), 277.

<sup>67</sup> Small, 2002, 122-3 ; Wells, 424.

<sup>68</sup> Robert B. Semple, “Nixon Says Violence Invites Tragedy.” in *“The New York Times.”* (New York: 1970).

<sup>69</sup> Wells, 424.

<sup>70</sup> Melvin “Small, *At the Water's Edge: American Politics and the Vietnam War.*” ( Chicago: I.R: 2005), 151.

and which have found so much favor on our college campuses.”<sup>71</sup> He further attacked anti-war sentiments as those “who do not represent authority, who cannot cope with tradition,” who also threatened the “traditions of civility.”<sup>72</sup> Haldeman recounted that the day after the shooting, Nixon “kept after me all day for more facts...hoping rioters had provoked the shooting.”<sup>73</sup> Such lack of initial condolences highlighted Nixon’s and Agnew’s impulsive opinions regarding the anti-war movement and lack of intention to de-escalate their differences.

Nixon did retreat from his harsh view of Kent State after more facts circulated to the public. He “vowed” to the American public to find methods that would need with “problems of violence,” but “at the same time not take the lives of innocent people.”<sup>74</sup> In this public statement Nixon crucially acknowledged the deaths of “innocent” lives and removed the atmosphere of blame he previously set on the demonstrators. Nixon later reflected that the days following Kent State “were among the darkest in my presidency” and that he “felt utterly dejected when I read that the father of one of the dead girls had told a reporter ‘My child was not a bum.’” His ‘bums’ remark and April 30th speech he recognized “had fanned the flames of campus dissent.”<sup>75</sup> While Nixon’s public discourse on the Kent State Shooting retracted, his actions toward addressing the root of the issue in the anti-war movement’s foreign policy dissent did not.

The actions Nixon took to address the anti-war movement did not seek to bridge differences and understanding but rather continued to foster an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ mentality between Nixon and the anti-war movement. With increased anti-war protests following Kent State, Nixon ordered an increase in the “intensity of surveillance and harassment programs from the FBI, CIA, [and the]

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<sup>71</sup> Semple, Robert B. “Nixon Says Violence Invites Tragedy.” *The New York Times*. 1970.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> National Archives/NPM, Box 414; Folder: April-May (1970).

<sup>74</sup> Nixon, Richard. May 4, 1970. <https://www.history.com/topics/vietnam-war/kent-state-shooting-video>.

<sup>75</sup> Nixon, Richard M. *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978, 430.

IRS” as well as targeted “perceived enemies in the media.”<sup>76</sup> This agenda included spying, intimidation, and negative relations with the press—all of which were antagonist in nature rather than diplomatic. On June 5, 1970, Nixon arranged meetings with the heads of the FBI, CIA, and NSA to develop “new and more effective practices and centurions to monitor potentially violent dissenters and other radicals allegedly working to overthrow the government.”<sup>77</sup> Additionally, Nixon ordered more aid to ‘pro-war’ groups on campuses and initiated a program to commend those “who take a strong stand against demonstrators and other militants when they engage in illegal activities.”<sup>78</sup> These ‘solutions’ did not address the root of concern expressed by anti-war demonstrators toward foreign policy in Vietnam, but rather increased approval of the ‘pro-war’ faction Nixon was in favor of, and treated anti-war sentiment as an enemy. This strategy highlighted Nixon’s attitude of disregard for the anti-war movement, his lacking prioritization to de-escalate dissent, and instead bolstered the other side of the spectrum which increased polarization and decreased a direct communication between two opposing views. \_

Behind closed doors, Nixon continued to hold a negative view of demonstrators. Nixon said that the college anti-war movement was no more than a front for a “calculated, consistent, and well-publicized barrage of criticism *against the principles of this nation.*”<sup>79</sup> J. Edgar Hoover, FBI head, informed officials that one of the female victims killed had been “sleeping around” and was “nothing more than a whore.”<sup>80</sup> This disturbing line shouted the incredible disregard for the deaths of innocent Americans at the hands of National Guard government workers. When the Scranton Commission delivered its report months later it concluded that “the indiscriminate firing of bullets

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<sup>76</sup> Melvin, Small. *At the Water’s Edge: American Politics and the Vietnam War.* (Chicago: I.R. , 2005) , 119.

<sup>77</sup>Small, 2005, 158.

<sup>78</sup>Bruce, Oudes. “The President; Richard Nixon’s secret Files.” (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978), p. 410; Wells, 1994.

<sup>79</sup>Semple, “Nixon Says Violence Invites Tragedy,” 1970.

<sup>80</sup>Wells, 424.

into crowds of students and the deaths that followed were unnecessary, unwarranted, and inexcusable;" Nixon labeled the report "crap."<sup>81</sup> The White House was paranoid following Kent State and feared violent protest outside the White House; Nixon told his staff, "if the crazies try anything, we'll clobber them."<sup>82</sup> This statement perhaps most of all revealed the lack of consideration Nixon felt toward the Kent State Shooting.

However, despite such, Nixon was more permanently influenced by Kent State because of Congress. Nixon's actions in Cambodia and his distasteful attitude after Kent State had rippling effects in his interaction with Congress. A "massive congressional lobby campaign took off"<sup>83</sup> from anti-war protests following Kent State. Congress passed the Cooper-Church amendment which "threatened to cut off funds for the war if all American troops had not withdrawn from Cambodia by June 30th."<sup>84</sup> Kissinger highlighted this was "one concrete result of public pressures."<sup>85</sup> Further, the Senate revoked the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution which removed Nixon's ability to take any measures deemed "necessary to retaliate and to promote the maintenance of international peace and security in southeast Asia."<sup>86</sup> These actions from Congress constrained Nixon's capacity to mandate foreign policy decisions, and the restraint delivered from Congress was a reflection of the sentiments that circulated in the American public following the Kent State Shooting. It appeared that Nixon did not personally experience much influence from Kent State highlighted from his lack of de-escalation policies toward the anti-war movement, but also their relatively absent presence in his foreign policy decisions. However, the magnified influence from

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<sup>81</sup>Small, 2005, 152.

<sup>82</sup>Wells, 439.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid, 26.

<sup>84</sup>Small, 2002, 124.

<sup>85</sup>Kissinger, Henry. *White House Years*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1979.

<sup>86</sup>Office of the Historian. "U.S. Involvement in the Vietnam War: the Gulf of Tonkin and Escalation, 1964." in "U.S. Department of State. U.S. Department of State," 2019.

protest influenced Congress which resulted with foreign policy constraints on Nixon, and ultimately influenced the War in Vietnam.

The occurrence Kent State shooting can be attributed to a macrocosm environment of the anti-war movement on college campuses and a collective atmosphere of counterculture and growing protest. The microcosm aspect of a complete communication breakdown between university, city, and National Guard leadership and the students themselves left everyone vulnerable to a spark that became a flame. The Kent State Shooting was a combustion of evolving public dissent and distrust toward the U.S. Government and the Vietnam War. While the lives of thousands of soldiers in Vietnam was not sufficient to sway U.S. foreign policy, the lives of 4 students ultimately was. Kent State is a lesson of how history is made up of both large trends, but also pivotal moments. Those 13 seconds on May 4, 1970 when four students were killed and nine injured sparked a dynamic increase in the magnitude of protests and expanded the diversity of American demographics in anti-war demonstration. The intense protesting following the shooting resulted with serious pressure on Congress which ultimately shaped how Nixon had to continue his foreign policy in Vietnam. How long does it take to change history? As little as 13 seconds.

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Megan Uren

My research is entitled: “How 13 seconds Changed History: Macrocosm and Microcosm Interpretations of the Kent State Shooting and its Influence.” In my essay I analyze the Kent State shooting of May 4, 1970 to understand *how and why* it happened, and further the meaning that can be derived from this historical tragedy. I approached this historical research with a dual method: looking both to the macrocosm of culture and public foreign policy sentiment during the Vietnam War, as well as the microcosm of the week that led up to the shooting at Kent State. I believe both notions of macrocosm and microcosm perspective are crucial to interpreting history and thematic lessons. The macrocosm of a culture of protest and the Vietnam War anti-war movement sheds insight into the greater pattern and sentiment of the time period, provides relevance to how escalation materialized rapidly, and details the pre-existing tensions between authority and youth protestors. The macrocosm layer digs at specific tracing of how and why the shooting took place at Kent State University, and why this was a rare occurrence. Of importance was a severe breakdown in communication between leadership in Kent.

My research utilizes both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources such as speeches from Nixon, interviews from the Nixon administration, and newspapers highlight the opinions of Nixon and his administration during the time. Such is compared and contrasted with speeches and documents from anti-war protestors. At the microcosm level of the week of the shooting, I have sources that trace the involvement of the National Guard and the disconnect in communication between leadership authority. Further, personal accounts from students are included to provide an insight to the week of May 4, 1970 from the students themselves.

Trinity University and other colleges did not experience violence and *murder* on their campuses from political expression and opinion. Why Kent State? It was the macrocosm

environment created from years of dissent in the anti-war youth movement and disregard from Nixon to address public opinion, and a microcosm breakdown in communication on the grounds of Kent State University. My research interprets the macrocosm and microcosm layers of the Kent State shooting, and ultimately concludes that it only takes 13 seconds to change history. **13 seconds** and 4 lives lost **changed the tide of the Vietnam War**, and the radiating influence from the aftermath of Kent State was large enough to influence Congress and constrain executive power. How long did it take to change history? 13 seconds. Such should serve as a reminder that history happens every day, and it only requires a few seconds for a dynamic occurrence to swing the pendulum another way, and for a ripple effect to manifest.