

5-16-70
NYT

Law of the Jungle...

The uncontrolled use of firearms by police and National Guardsmen has become a menace to internal security. The deaths at Kent State University have now been followed by killings in Augusta's ghetto and at Jackson State College in Mississippi. Within hours after the Kent State tragedy, Kentucky guard units were ordered to the state university campus with loaded rifles, and in Ohio itself authorities continue to sanction the use of live ammunition for campus policing.

Those who engage in riotous and violent demonstrations are often guilty of extreme provocation. But it is the task of the police and the guard to prevent bloodshed, not to commit it.

A shelf-full of reports by Presidential commissions makes it plain that there is no validity to the claim that curbing police violence means blocking law-enforcement. The laws are best enforced by the arrest of law-breakers and the imposition of appropriate penalties, not by indiscriminate shooting.

Experience has shown that Governor Rockefeller's standing instructions against the use of firearms by Guardsmen on anti-riot duty in no way constitutes surrender to lawlessness. Even serious civic disorders have been brought under control more speedily and with minimal injury when guns and bullets were left in the armories.

Once New York City's police decided this week that their mission was to keep the peace while pro-war and anti-war forces had their say, they needed no guns or tear gas to prevent the streets around City Hall from turning into combat zones.

Competent and well-disciplined personnel under responsible and efficient leadership are essential to effective law-enforcement. Panicky or vindictive use of force invites immediate tragedy and leads to lasting contempt for all authority. But the dangerous trend will not be reversed until governmental leadership at the Federal, state and local levels makes it plain that "law and order" does not imply a backlash of police violence. The sole effect of get-tough rhetoric is a swift reversion to the law of the jungle.