

Death on the Campus

The four students, including two women, killed by M-1 bullets fired by Ohio National Guardsmen, did not die on their campus because they were known to be committing acts of violence or engaging in illegal dissent. They were victims of panic, ineptness or worse on the part of National Guard officers and soldiers with loaded weapons—almost as if Kent, Ohio, were Parrot's Beak, Cambodia.

Many students at Kent State University had indeed been demonstrating with inexcusable violence against expansion of the Vietnam war. The National Guard had been called in after an Army R.O.T.C. building had been burned down. Rocks and vile names were thrown at Guardsmen; Guardsmen laid down a tear-gas barrage against the provocative students. But shooting the students down? According to a New York Times reporter standing ten feet away from one of the students who was killed, there was no audible or visible gunfire until the National Guardsmen set to. And the Ohio National Guard itself said yesterday it was unable to find evidence of sniper fire.

The State of Ohio has an obligation thoroughly to investigate this tragedy and tell the American people how and why these four students were killed—and if there is criminal responsibility. The statements by National Guard officials reveal at the very least a gross lack of control of the men under their command. Do individual Guardsmen have an option to fire without orders? Are Guardsmen allowed to fire point-blank into crowds without warning or warning shots? Did these Guardsmen and their commanders fail to carry out guidelines issued by the Pentagon on civil disturbances and riot control?

The deplorably unfeeling statement by the President of the United States—through an intermediary—certainly does not provide either any answer or any comfort—nor does it show any compassion or even understanding. Mr. Nixon says that the needless deaths “should remind us all once again that when dissent turns to violence it invites tragedy,” which of course is true but turns this tragedy upside down by placing the blame on the victims instead of the killers. The way this dreadful incident has been handled could hardly have been better calculated to drive the mass of moderate students—the great majority—over to the side of the alienated. It is nothing short of a disaster for the United States, and it is doubly tragic that the President does not seem to realize that this is so.