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Needless Deaths in Baton Rouge

The story of the killing of two students at Southern University at Baton Rouge last week began unfolding with a depressing familiarity. Students, brought to a heightened moral consciousness by the events of the sixties were protesting something real in the world. In this case it was the inequality of treatment between white students and black students in the Louisiana system of higher education. At Kent State, it was the war. At Orangeburg, South Carolina, it was the segregation of local places of public accommodation near the South Carolina State campus. At Jackson State, it was long simmering racial problems brought to a boil by the war. When the students gathered, or took over buildings, the authorities—sometimes the local police, sometimes the national guard, sometimes the state police and sometimes a combination of the three—were called in.

In all of those instances, shots were fired, students were killed and the official explanations immediately began to flow. The explanations were predictable. The students had been obstreperous and provocative . . . maybe they'd fired first . . . but even if they hadn't it was impossible for the authorities to have fired the fatal shots . . . and even if they had, it wasn't their fault. Then follow public lamentations, funerals, mourning, fruitless

investigations . . . and silence . . . until the next time.

At Baton Rouge last week, the scenario began in the same dreary and infuriating way until it was pierced by refreshing—but later regretted—candor by Governor Edwin W. Edwards. He told Nicholas Chriss of the Los Angeles Times and three representatives of the Community Relations Service of the Department of Justice, "I have no doubt it was a deputy sheriff who fired." He also said the deputies were "scared to death" and poorly trained for the confrontation. Although an official inquiry into the matter is now scheduled, very little more truth than that is likely to be shed.

And, the sad thing about it is that it was all so predictable. Very few law enforcement forces in the country are prepared to deal with large groups of students whom they perceive to be hostile and threatening. This is particularly true in the South when the law enforcement forces are white and the students are black. Better training of the forces likely to be called to such campuses would be of some help, no doubt. But there is only one sure way to prevent future killings and that is to take the bullets out of the guns. Rifles, in our view, have no place on college campuses nor does live ammunition. Tear gas alone has always worked very well.