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The Kent State Dead: Too High a Price

WASHINGTON — It was obtuse and heartless for President Nixon to say of the dead at Kent State only that "when dissent turns to violence it invites tragedy." It was indecent for Spiro Agnew to call this awful event "predictable and avoidable," then to go on with one of his standard denunciations of students, as if he and the President, pledged as they are to "bring us together," had not instead done as much as anyone to drive us into conflict. No one has less right than they to "murder the mankind" of these senseless deaths with "grave truths" about violence and dissent.

Agnew's sustained and inflammatory assault on some young Americans could have had no other purpose, and no other result, than to set generation against generation and class against class for the calculated political purposes of the Nixon Administration.

Nixon's blurted condemnation of "bums" on the campus is all the more culpable for apparently having been spontaneous and from the heart, a true revelation of his inmost feelings.

But there is more to it than the spirit of fear and vengeance and repression—that spirit exemplified by the use on a tense college campus of tired and frightened National Guardsmen with live rounds in their weapons and discretionary orders to return fire.

Even this piece of insanity might not have left the dead at Kent State had it not been for Nixon's monumental blunder in reversing the whole course of what he had said was his Vietnamese policy with the invasion of Cambodia and the reopening of the bombing of North Vietnam. That is real violence. And any President less swayed by generals, less awed by the myopic political hard-line of John Mitchell, less fixed in the outdated attitudes of Cold War days, could not have failed to have foreseen that re-escalation would set off an explosion of anger and despair and bitterness—hence violence and counter-violence, rebellion and repression.

It may be argued by those politicians and commentators as concerned as Nixon about manhood, humiliation and American vanity that, even had he known his people well enough to expect the reaction he is getting, he still would have had no choice but to act in the national interest, as he saw it. But none will be able to explain what interest is worth having pushed so many of the educated and concerned of a whole generation into hatred and mistrust of their own government; and who can say how the future can be protected abroad if a nation must club and shoot its children in the streets and on the campus?

What, in fact, has re-escalation gained us? A chilly diplomatic reaction, for one thing, including quite possibly a setback to the nuclear arms limitation talks. For another, the most severe congressional reaction in decades against the exercise of presidential powers.

The administration itself is divided and wounded at the top, with Nixon—like Lyndon Johnson only two years ago—suddenly unable or unwilling to travel among his own people.

Secretary of State Rogers is shown either to know little of what is happening or to have minimal policy influence; Secretary of Defense Laird was apparently overruled and—worse—uninformed about what his own bombers were doing. Is it an accident that these two, with Robert Finch among the ablest men in the administration, now join Finch in the kind of public embarrassment to which he has had to become inured?

Whatever the answer, the dead at Kent State are far too high a price for it. Like the dead in Cambodia and Vietnam, they can be buried; but somehow the nation has to go on living with itself. Secretary of the Interior Hickel's courageous letter to the President shows that even within the administration, Nixon and Agnew have only made that harder to do.