

# CAN NIXON TRUST THE ARMY?

## Half of Riot Control unit would not shoot students

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A conversation with a soldier of the 519th Military Police Battalion, the most elite Army riot-control unit between Washington and New York, raises the question of how much longer President Nixon can rely on his troops. Dissidence among troops both in Vietnam and at home is, of course, no secret. The talk of refusing to board helicopters bound for Cambodian operations aired on national TV a month ago is an example. But with the march on Washington, May 6, in the aftermath of Kent State, the dissidence of stateside troops surfaced on the matter of whether they would fire on students if given the order. The answer of half of the 519th was reportedly no. And the 519th was the unit assigned responsibility (but never called on) for the last line of defense at the south perimeter of the White House in the event of a charge.

The debate among the 519th MPs was touched off by briefings given before and after they deployed from Ft. Meade, Md., to the basement of the Interior Department, three blocks from the White House, the night before the demonstration. In platoon meetings on Friday and the Saturday of the demonstration the troops were told that the high command of the task force charged with defending the White House would give the order to fire on the crowd if the 519th suffered only two casualties. Further, the troops were told that the company commanders of the three 519th companies, numbering over 500 men, had in turn been authorized to give the order to open fire, if their companies sustained two casualties. The troops were not told, however, what the task force command or the company commander would consider a "casualty."

This information, according to my informant, split the 519th down the middle. Half the troops in their discussion over poker in the Interior Department basement, said that they absolutely would not fire, and clearly preferred to be on the other side. The only way some of this element could imagine firing was a "chain reaction." "you're rushed; rocks are flying; people are firing on both sides." The risk here is that if a shot goes off, others down the line might assume the firing soldier got an order which the others hadn't heard.

The remaining MPs looked with enthusiasm at the chance for a confrontation. They wanted action. They felt no identification with marchers, and hoped they would be called upon. The sentiment was encouraged by a 519th company commander the day before the demonstration, when he told his men that they would have had the weekend off if it had not been for the hippie protestors. He had it from battalion, the CO continued, that some 50,000 to 70,000 demonstrators

were going to try to take over the White House.

The implication for future Kent States of this mix of loose conditions under which fire will be authorized, the split in sentiment of riot control troops, the psychological whipping up before a confrontation, and the specter of a chain reaction, is frightening to consider. It raises not only the possibility of more massacres as the pressure on the war policy, particularly in the fall campaign, takes on a more violent character, but also raises the harrowing possibility of troops squaring off against the troops. Nothing is less predictable than what will happen under the pressure of this new, more subtle form of domestic combat than American troops are being forced into. The risk factor, and the chance of mistakes, is fantastically high. And it is the highest with National Guard troops, where the sentiments may be the same as in the 519th, but where the training and the discipline are bound to be slacker.

One item that raises the risk is Order No. 3 of the eight "Special Orders for Members of the Armed Forces Engaged in Civil Disturbance Operations." These special orders must be carried on the person of all riot control troops, and the troops are required to rattle them off if asked by a superior. Order No. 3 reads: "I will not load or fire any weapon except when authorized by an officer in person, when authorized in advance by an officer under specific conditions, or when required to save my life." It is this last phrase—the authority to fire if a soldier deems his life in danger—that was used in justification by some Guardsmen interviewed after Kent State. One soldier, to back up his argument that their lives were in danger, told of a guardsman whose knee cap had been shat-

tered by a wrench. Thus, you have a situation where not only is it left to a company commander to define what constitutes a casualty, and thus, order a volley on a crowd, but it is also left to the individual soldier to determine what constitutes a threat to his life, and thus, fire on his own authority.

Whether there was an order, or a chain reaction, or an individual soldier's action at Kent State is not clear, but the explanation offered by Sen. Stephen Young of Ohio that a shot was accidentally triggered by a rock or a brick hitting a guardsman is, according to the 519th MP, impossible. "Anyone who has had one day of riot training," he said, "knows that a rock cannot accidentally trigger a shot. Over and over you hear the statement: 'Don't chamber a round until you're given the order to fire.' In other words, for

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a bullet to enter the rifle chamber from the clip underneath, the soldier must execute the act of pulling back the bolt to force a bullet into the rifle chamber. Only then could the rifle be fired, intentionally or accidentally.

As we sipped beer only four hours after the 519th had given a demonstration of riot control devices and techniques at "Riotville" on Ft. Belvoir, Va., to a graduating class of the FBI school, one soldier commented, "The scary thing is that one person, an Oswald or a Sirhan, could touch off a massacre in a demonstration. Even if only 250 of 500 men in a battalion fired at the crowd ... man, you can kill three or four people with one round of an M-14 at close range." Such is the potential for legalized violence nowadays. When significant numbers of the most elite American troops are questioning Cambodia, Kent State, and their own participation in the Nixon policy, no one can be sure anymore of exactly how the palace guard will react in future confrontations—confrontations that will become more frequent and violent unless the Nixon-Agnew tack is reversed.

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**Riot control unit contemplates order: to shoot or not to shoot.**