



ISSN 1304-8120 | e-ISSN 2149-2786

Araştırma Makalesi * Research Article

Commemorating the Events of May 4, 1970 at Kent State University, USA: An Analysis of the Reconciliation Process

ABD Kent Devlet Üniversitesi'nde 4 Mayıs 1970 Olaylarının Anılması: Uzlaşma Süreci Üzerine Bir İnceleme

Serdar Kenan GÜL

Assoc. Prof., Kastamonu University, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Department of Political Science and Public Administration
skenangul@gmail.com
Orcid ID: 0000-0002-4771-9202

Abstract: On May 4, 1970, American history saw a violent outburst between the US government and anti-Vietnam War demonstrators. On this day, protesters who were unarmed and gathered on the Kent State University campus were opened fire upon by Ohio State National Guardsmen. Four students died and nine were injured in the span of thirteen seconds. Emotions swept across the USA following the shootings. Discussions concerning the shootings' purpose, significance, and memory are still ongoing. Many memorials have been built in the decades after the May 4th shootings as a way to remember the atrocity. This study aims to provide an overview of the May 4th events at Kent State University and the memorializing process that has occurred on campus. This study describes and analyzes some of the commemorations such as the candlelight walk and vigil, memorials, and their function in the transitioning process. The main discussion of this article revolves around the effectiveness of the assistance given to the victims in their healing journey, the adequacy of the support, and the exploration of other options. Additionally, it explores alternative strategies for healing. Finally, this article offers the establishment of a historical truth commission for promoting the healing process.

Keywords: Kent state shootings, May 4 massacre, commemoration, reconciliation.

Öz: 4 Mayıs 1970 tarihinde Amerikan tarihi, ABD hükümeti ve Vietnam Savaşı karşıtı göstericiler arasında şiddetli bir çatışmaya tanıklık etti. O gün, Kent Devlet Üniversitesi kampüsünde silahsız olarak toplanan protestoculara Ohio Eyaleti Ulusal Muhafızları tarafından ateş açıldı. On üç saniye içinde dört öğrenci öldü ve dokuz kişi yaralandı. ABD'de bu olayların ardından duygusal bir dalga yaşandı. Çatışmaların amacı, önemi ve anısına ilişkin tartışmalar halen devam etmektedir. 4 Mayıs olaylarından sonraki on yıllarda birçok anıt, katliamı anmak amacıyla inşa edildi. Bu makale, Kent Devlet Üniversitesi'ndeki 4 Mayıs olaylarına ve kampüste yaşanan anma süreçlerine genel bir bakış sunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu çalışma, mum ışığı yürüyüşü ve nöbeti, anma törenleri gibi bazı etkinliklerin geçiş sürecindeki işlevlerini incelemekte ve analiz etmektedir. Bu makalenin temel tartışması, mağdurlara iyileşme sürecinde verilen yardımın etkinliği, desteğin yeterliliği ve diğer seçeneklerin araştırılması etrafında dönmektedir. Ayrıca iyileşme sürecinde alternatif stratejiler ele alınmaktadır. Son olarak bu makale, iyileşme sürecinin desteklenmesi için bir tarihsel gerçeklik komisyonunun kurulmasını önermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kent state çatışmaları, 4 mayıs katliamı, anma töreni, uzlaşma.

Arrival Date:17.04.2024

Acceptance Date:31.07.2024

Publication Date:31.08.2024

Reference: Gül, S.K. (2024). Commemorating the events of May 4, 1970 at Kent State University, USA: An analysis of the reconciliation process. *Kahramanmaraş Sütçü İmam University Social Sciences Journal*, 21(2), 742-750. Doi: 10.33437/ksusbd.1470030

INTRODUCTION

The US government and anti-Vietnam War protestors had a violent outburst on May 4, 1970, in American history. Ohio State National Guardsmen opened fire on unarmed protestors assembled on the Kent State University campus on this particular day. In thirteen seconds, four students were killed and nine injured. After the shootings, emotions ran across the USA. In the decades that followed the May 4th shootings, numerous memorials were constructed as a means of honoring the tragedy.

Memorials and commemorations play an important role in the reconciliation process after an atrocity. Annual commemorations have taken place since the first anniversary of the shootings at Kent State University, Ohio, USA. Each spring, during the week of May 4, Kent State University hosts a series of retrospectives and memorial ceremonies dedicated to the May 4, 1970, shootings that turned to school into a landmark of the Vietnam War era.

There have been a great number of controversies within the Kent State University community and other communities over the memorialization of these events. How do we treat a mass murder or other atrocity to heal the victim's wounds? The horrific events at Kent State University on May 4, 1970 have their place in history and are still being analyzed and discussed today.

This study first gives a brief overview of the May 4th events, then describes and analyzes some of the commemorations such as the candlelight walk and vigil, memorials, and their function on the transitioning process. The article raises questions about the effectiveness of the support provided to help the victims heal, the adequacy of such support, and the exploration of other viable options. It also considers alternative approaches for healing. Finally, this study discusses about truth commissions and their role in the healing process.

OVERVIEW OF THE MAY 4th EVENTS

A useful starting place to describe the May 4th events, leading to deaths of four Kent State students, is the announcement made by U.S. President Richard Nixon on April 30, 1970 that troops had been sent into Cambodia (Lewis, 1978).

The President's announcement shocked the American public. The following day, scores of college campuses throughout the nation, including Kent State University's, erupted in protest. At the conclusion of the demonstration on the Kent campus, another meeting was called for Monday, May 4, 1970. Before then, demonstrators damaged private property in downtown Kent on the night of May 1st. As a result, Governor James A. Rhodes ordered the Ohio National Guard into the town to suppress the violent activity. The following day, someone set fire to the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) building on the Kent State University campus. Aware of the demonstration scheduled for Monday, the Ohio National Guard stopped students from gathering in more than groups of three or four. Nearly one thousand demonstrators crowded the commons on May 4, 1970. When the protestors resisted an order to disperse, the National Guard marched, turned, crouched and, in thirteen seconds of violence, fired several rounds of ammunition into the crowd. Four students; Allison Krause, Jeffrey Miller, Sandra Scheuer and William Schroeder were killed and nine were wounded (Bills, 1988).

The aftershock felt by the university community, as well as the city of Kent, was immediate. Kent State University President closed the college and ordered students to be off campus by noon on Tuesday, May 5. The National Guard sealed off the city of Kent, halting all traffic coming into and going out of the area (Best, 1978).

In the aftermath of the shootings of May 4th at Kent State, special investigations were made by the FBI, the President's Commission on Campus Unrest (known as Scranton Commission), and the Ohio Highway Patrol in order to determine the responsibility for this event. A special State Grand Jury and a Federal Grand Jury investigated the shootings shortly after May 4th as well (Hensley, 1978).

However, the investigations did not resolve the controversy regarding what actually had happened and who was to blame. The families of the slain and wounded students launched a prolonged effort to prove government responsibility in the May 4 shootings. They wanted recognition of their claims that National Guard and state officials had acted wrongfully, violating the constitutional rights of

student demonstrators. The families also claim that the officials attempted to cover up their mistakes (Bills, 1988).

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances” (First Amendment to the United States Constitution). For most of the people, what happened on May 4, 1970, was a reasonable act in protection of law and order, but for others, it was an inexcusable attack on First Amendment rights (Eckert, 2010). Simpson and Wilson (2016) use oral histories of the Kent State shootings, in addition to significant archival research to examine how memory is created individually and collectively. Locally the community was left traumatized and deeply divided. Afterwards some said the students deserved to be shot. Even 50 years later, division and resentments continue.

THE COMMEMORATION OF MAY 4, 1970 EVENTS

On May 3, 1971 a candlelight walk and vigil was held on the campus. Kent State President Glenn Olds said the vigil was for all concerned persons who wished to “reflect and silently commemorate the meaning of the events without distractions of any alien, partisan, or political interpretation” (Jackson, 1988:178).

On May 3rd of each year, the candlelight walk and vigil begins as students, faculty, and other participants gather at the Victory Bell on Kent State Campus at 11 p.m. This group then walks around the perimeter of the campus, concluding their walk in the Prentice Hall parking lot, where four students were killed. Some participants stand silently for half-hour intervals at the site. This ritual continues through the night until 12:15 p.m. on May 4, the time of the day that National Guard opened fire to the students at Kent State University. The vigil was originally established by Professor Jerry Lewis with the help of some students. It was also sponsored by the Center for Peaceful Change (Lewis, 1988).

Weldes and Laffey (2002:5) find the candlelight walk and vigil very significant because of three reasons: First, even though most of today’s students were not born at the time of the shootings, they attend this commemoration which has continued since 1971. Second, the four slain students were made central to the memorial. Finally, this commemoration was not organized by the university.

This ceremony may hold different meanings for different people. For example, Miram Jackson (1988:178) finds this ceremony as “quasi-religious” and university administration’s preferred mode of remembrance. On the other hand, Mary Sima, a senior student at Kent State University, sees the vigil as an opportunity to self-assess herself, and to think about peace for all people (Graves, 2000). While various people may have different perspectives and desire to commemorate this event in different ways, everyone should be able to experience it in peace.

The broad purpose of this ceremony is simply to keep alive the memory of May 4th as a tragedy. Through this commemoration not only the survivors of the shootings, victim’s families, and friends are allowed the opportunity to heal their wounds but also the lives of the four slain students are honored.

In addition, those who were not present at the time of the 1970 massacre, are given some kind of educational lesson on the consequences of violence as means of resolving differences. By attending this ceremony, future generations might be encouraged to find alternative means of conflict resolution. Thus, the educational aspect of the vigil is vital.

The Center for Peaceful Change was established in 1971 as a “living memorial” to the slain students (Bills, 1988:33). It was later renamed to the Center for Applied Conflict Management in 1994. Then it was transformed into the School of Peace & Conflict Studies in 2017. It focuses on conflict management, peace studies and dispute resolution. Its central goal is to exemplify and advance the School’s job as a living commemoration to the four students killed at Kent State on May 4, 1970; and to respect their memory by continuously working for a peaceful change (School of Peace & Conflict Studies, 2024).

The townspeople of Kent have found an ally in the Center for Peaceful Change. After the violence they were undoubtedly eager for the university to find a way in which students could express

themselves without threatening the community. As an organization dedicated to nonviolent social change, which also acts as a mediator between students and opposing forces, the center fulfills this need and helps ensure peace in the community (Carey, 1988).

The Center for Peaceful Change also does have its critics; Miriam Jackson (1988) accuses the University of being unwilling to analyze the causes of the deadly confrontation on May 4, 1970, and views the center as nothing more than a compromise. The Center for Peaceful Change was perceived by most of the people as an administrative attempt at reconciliation between two factions: radicals on campus who wanted May 4 to be commemorated in a wholly political way, and conservatives from the community and campus who were furious that May 4 should be remembered at all (Jackson, 1988:178).

Nevertheless, the Center was responsible for several forms of recognition dedicated to the events of May 4, 1970. First, it urged the university to address the events of that day in its undergraduate and graduate catalogs referring to May 4, 1970 as a “pivotal moment” in Kent State’s history. Secondly, a factual brochure was written by Professors Glenn Frank, Jerry Lewis, and Thomas Hensley, describing the events of May 4. This brochure was published and distributed by the university at the site of the May 4th conflict, beginning in 1980. Additionally, the Center displayed photographs of the four slain students in their main office on campus, as means of paying tribute to the victims (Bills, 1988).

Currently, the School of Peace and Conflict Studies offers an undergraduate degree program in peace and conflict studies and it offers two minors: Peace and Conflict Studies, and Environment, Peace and Justice. In addition, the center offers graduate level courses in peace and conflict studies and as part of the Conflict Analysis and Management Track in the Political Science doctoral program. The School also provides training seminars and professional development workshops to the public in conflict resolution, mediation, and violence prevention skills (School of Peace & Conflict Studies, 2024).

The university library has also dedicated a memorial room called “May 4 Resource Center” containing books, papers, studies, and other materials relating to the events. In the room, there are four colored glass windows on the outside wall and photographs of the each of the slain students on another wall. It is a quiet room located on the first floor of the library. The Department of Special Collections & Archives also keeps materials documenting the events of May 1970 and their aftermath. May 4 Collection encompasses an integral part of the archive. This demonstrates the university’s attention to detail in creating an invaluable historical record. One can reflect on that fateful day, and can learn what happened from these valuable sources.

Kent State University continues to remember May 4 events each year. 2023’s theme was “The Power of Our Voices”. The annual commemoration serves as a platform for the public and Kent State community members to come together in remembrance of May 4, 1970, exchange stories, get in touch with old acquaintances, and impart the lessons learned from the tragedy to future generations of students, encouraging them to research, learn about, and consider the history that took place on campus (Kent State University, 2024).

Gregory and Lewis (1988), in their article, explain the social process model, and they apply it to the memorializing of the slain and wounded students on May 4, 1970 at Kent State University. They argue that construction of the memorial at the university creates moral unity in the community. The construction of monuments and memorials is one of the most dramatic forms of symbolic expression. This form of symbolic expression represents aspects of the collective history of the community, and its existence serves to crystallize consensus and solidarity. The construction of the memorial is a dialectic of symbolic interaction explained through the use of a social process model (Gregory and Lewis, 1988:213).

Griswold (1992:92) emphasizes that “...a main purpose of the memorial is therapeutic”. Bodnar (1994:76) argues that “Public memory is a body of beliefs and ideas about the past that help a public or society understand both its past and its present, and by implication, its future”.

In response to the events of May 4, 1970, the university has made various attempts of building memorials of different types. In 1985, fifteen years after the event, the university set a nationwide competition for memorial designs to commemorate May 4th. Any American citizen could participate in

the competition, and nearly two thousand entries were received. After a design was chosen, the university had the memorial built, and it was dedicated on May 4, 1990, the 20th anniversary of the shootings. The names of the four victims were written on the memorial, as well as the words “Inquire, Learn, Reflect.” These words were written there to encourage visitors to inquire into the events that led to May 4th, as well as the reasons for this atrocity. The statement “Learn” can be taken in many different ways. Perhaps one way of addressing it would be to encourage people to learn about the political environment of the country in that particular time period, which created the hostile environment at Kent State University and around the country. Finally, “Reflect” means to push people to find alternative ways to solve conflicts, other than through violence, and to think of ways in which this particular tragedy could have resolved otherwise (Bills, 1988).

By examining the ongoing development of Kent State memorials, one can better understand how to best develop a space that is not only a reminder of an event, but also a direct connection to the lives of those affected.

When President Schwartz announced the winner of the competition on April 4, 1986, he addressed the pain and suffering many people at Kent State had endured at the time of the shootings and for years later. He also reminded his listeners of the need to remember the past: “With this announcement today, Kent State University formally acknowledges its own history and its place in recent American history. ...To reflect and inquire into our own values and ideals as Americans, knowing our past and concerned for our future, has been our purpose. It is a tribute to the university’s students of today that they reminded us of the need to remember the past in order to safeguard the future. As president of Kent State University, I am proud of their patience and persistence” (Bills, 1988:xx).

Bills (1988:xvi), in his book, quotes Alan Canfora, one of the students wounded in On May 4, 1970: “We are healing the wounds of the past and now this university can address a brighter future”. Being a sponsor of this memorial, Kent State University acknowledges the four slain and wounded students, more importantly, contributes to the healing process which can bring the reconciliation.

One of the most important aspects of the healing process is having other people acknowledge the victim's moral injuries Understanding the humiliation of the mistreatment is essential for showing the victims and society at large that every individual is significant (Minow, 1998:71).

ANALYSIS OF THE RECONCILIATION PROCESS AND ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES

In 1979, the parents of the four slain students and the nine wounded students filed a suit against the government. After approximately five months of hearings, a settlement in the amount of \$675,000 was reached. In addition to the reparations, the defendants signed the following “statement of regret”:

In retrospect, the tragedy of May 4, 1970 should not have occurred. The students may have believed that they were right in continuing their mass protest in response to the Cambodian invasion, even though this protest followed the posting and reading by the university of an order to ban rallies and an order to disperse. These orders have since have been determined by the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals to have been lawful.

Some of the guardsmen on Blanket Hill, fearful and anxious from prior events, may have believed in their own minds that their lives were in danger. Hindsight suggests that another method would have resolved the confrontation. Better ways must be found to deal with such confrontation.

We devoutly wish that a means had been found to avoid the May 4 events culminating in the Guard shootings and the irreversible deaths and injuries. We deeply regret those events and are profoundly saddened by the deaths of four students and the wounding of nine others which resulted. We hope that the agreement to end this litigation will help to assuage the tragic memories regarding that sad day (Dalton, 1988:9).

“In retrospect, the tragedy of May 4, 1970 should not have occurred. ... We deeply regret those events and are profoundly saddened by the deaths of four students and the wounding of nine others which resulted...” (Dalton, 1988:9).

The statement arrived late and failed to adequately address the pain and suffering experienced by the victims and their families over the nine-year period. This “statement of regret” does not fit Tavuchis’s (1991) essential setting for apologetic discourse. The defendants acknowledge the wrongdoing, and feel regret and remorse for the past events, but there is lacking of admission of fault at first and taking the responsibility, and the pledge not to do it again. Therefore, this cannot be called as an apology, it is more an account.

Tavuchis (1991:9) states that “...failure to apologize may endanger valued social ties; some forms of transgression can be remedied only by apology; apology has the power to rehabilitate the individual and restore social harmony.” An account's urgency is determined by the amount of effort put into extenuation. Conversely, the sincerity of an apology is demonstrated by meticulous self-exposure to justified retaliation while requesting unconditional forgiveness (Tavuchis, 1991:18).

The sincerity of an apology diminishes as time goes by, with longer periods making it less authentic. As a result, if state officials or offenders had offered a public apology for the shootings promptly, it would have helped in a positive way with the healing and reconciliation process.

Trials and other investigations continued for years, but no explanation for the shootings has been established. No one really knows the actual cause of it all, and questions are still left unanswered: Who fired the first shot? Why did four innocent students have to die? Most people just want the truth of what happened. Over the past years the search for the truth, as well as for the victims and their families, has continued.

One of the nine wounded students, Alan Canfora, asserts that federal agents might have set the fire that destroyed the ROTC building as part of Nixon's campaign for the repression of student activism. Canfora asked Attorney General Janet Reno to create a truth commission to open the case again. He says he does not have the truth. Kahler, another wounded student, also states that he still does not know the truth of the event (Walsh, 1995). The terms; truth, forgiveness, vengeance, healing, and reconciliation are important. After a mass violence or atrocity how can we heal the victim’s wound? Legal proceedings, as in this case, may not necessarily generate an acknowledgement or the full truth that the victims seek.

Minow (1998) and Hayner (2001) both talk about truth commissions and their role in the healing process. Hayner (2001) acknowledges that the best that the truth commission can do is to begin a healing process. Truth commissions are hope for the individuals and for the nations, because there is often no other mechanism capable of beginning the healing. Minow (1998:76) argues that a truth commission could stop rumors and wrong pictures of the past.

It is critical that in order to get full revelation of the fateful events, establishment of a historical truth commission is central. According to Hayner (2001:17), historical truth commissions are government-sponsored investigations conducted in the present into long-ago state atrocities. Considering the passage of time, however, it functions to elucidate historical facts and honor victims who were hitherto unknown or their ancestors. The reports from these historical truth commissions can therefore have a significant impact even after years have gone, since they are likely to reveal behaviors that the majority of people are mostly unaware of.

What is peculiar about the historical truth commission is that it looks at the events that happened long time ago. The two best cases in the USA in terms of examples of historical truth commission: Tulsa, Oklahoma and Rosewood, Florida. Finally, these commissions recommended state acknowledgment, building of memorials, setting up a scholarship fund, and direct payment to survivors and their families. So, even in cases where there is a long-time frame, it is seen that that there are mechanisms that are being used to address past atrocities.

The victims, their families, and others still need healing and need to find responses to the questions regarding the horrible events of May 4th. “Victims are not ready to engage in a reconciliation process unless they know more about what happened” (Hayner, 2001:157). Had an organization such as a truth commission established, perhaps the students and guardsmen responsible for the tragedy may have come forward to clarify and provide answers to the victims, students, and faculty.

Therefore, a historical truth commission, as Alan Canfora requested earlier, might be a valuable mechanism in this case. Ohio state legislators might create a historical truth commission and do a historical inquiry. Some of the commissioners may be selected by non-governmental organizations. Its mandate would be to get full knowledge of what took place, and to write an accurate history of the events. Hayner (2001) notes that truth commissions normally work under time limitations. Some constraints, along with the possibility of amnesty, may also encourage people (like guardsmen) to come forward and give full accounts of their wrongdoing or perhaps of which they witnessed. Moreover, this would allow individuals or groups to heal and recover from past injustice.

CONCLUSION

On the 4th of May, 1970, the United States government and protesters demonstrating against the Vietnam War erupted into one of the most violent incidents in US history. On this day, Ohio State National Guard members opened fire on a crowd of unarmed protesters gathered on the campus of Kent State University. Within 13 seconds, four students were killed and nine were injured. The shooting sent shock waves through the nation. Over the next few decades, many memorials were erected to commemorate the tragic events of May 4th, 1970.

After a massacre or other catastrophe, memorials and commemorations are crucial to the process of healing. Some of the policy for memorials and commemorations include: Ending impunity and deliver justice; establish truth and historical record; support victims; prevent future abuses; foster peaceful coexistence and national reconciliation; reduce conflicts about the past; promote democracy and public trust in government, and most importantly, heal victims and offenders.

There have been several memorials at Kent State University since the first anniversary of the shootings. This study describes and analyzes some of them which are a candlelight walk and vigil, and memorials. It also emphasizes the role of the Center for Peaceful Change (renamed later to the School of Peace & Conflict Studies), which was established as a living memorial to the slain students. The university has also dedicated a memorial room, which contains books, papers, studies, and other materials relating to the events. Kent State still remembers the tragic event. Even though it took them sixteen years to get a memorial, it seems the commemorations are as strong as ever. The candlelight vigil, which started thirty-two years ago, is still carried out every year at Kent State University.

But something more needs to be done. Since there are still questions regarding the fateful event in the victim's mind, their wounds cannot heal completely. Setting up a historical truth commission would be the best way in order to promote the healing process, because "the wounds were badly closed, and we still have to clean out the old infection" (Hayner, 2001: xii). Truth commission might enable to reopen the wounds, and clean the old infection, and close it again.

May 4 at Kent State should be remembered so that we can learn from the mistakes of the past. In their signed declaration following the civil proceedings, the Guardsmen acknowledged that more effective means of handling these kinds of conflicts needed to be discovered.

After examining the confrontation between the guardsmen and the students, which ended up with four deaths on May 4, 1970, it is critical to emphasize the importance of training law enforcement personnel-especially campus police officers- about demonstrations, riots, and crowd control. Former Portage County Prosecutor Charles Kirkwood (1988:115) states that "... a bunch of untrained people were brought to a campus run by people who did not know how to handle student unrest...". This was one of the reasons behind this terrible incident that led to fatalities. It is crucial that the officers receive training in handling student unrest. Law enforcement personnel should receive the necessary training in order to prevent incidents like this. This would reduce the likelihood that such occurrences will happen again in the future. Precautions and preventions should always be taken before such terrible events happen.

One of the most important reasons to keep the memory of May 4th alive is to educate future generations. Both students and law enforcement officials can learn from this tragic event that took place at Kent State University on May 4, 1970. There are peaceful ways of conflict resolution that everybody

needs to look for. By remembering we can learn the lessons of the past. Therefore, it is important to commemorate the killings, so that there would be less chance of it happening again.

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