Kent State’s Iconic Imagery: An Analysis

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Photography’s impact on noteworthy events cannot be underestimated. The adage “a picture is worth a thousand words” is increasingly relevant with the advent of new technology which can convey powerful messages instantly across a variety of mediums. This allows images to be captured at key moments and broadcast throughout the world. Two iconic photographs taken at the Kent State shootings on May 4, 1970 serve as an example of that imagery and its power. Kent State student photographers John Filo and Howard Ruffner each captured an iconic image which was able to starkly bring the student anti-war protests against the Vietnam conflict into focus for America. These images countered the state and federal government’s narrative that protesters were nothing but dangerous radicals, communist sympathizers and bums.¹

This paper will seek to show how these photos were used to help inspire further student protests after the shootings. By analyzing how these images were used in print and how that usage inspired popular culture, this paper will seek to show how these photographs helped to change the course of debate around the Vietnam conflict. Filo and Ruffner’s images were seen in

leading newspapers, magazines, and television shows broadcast around the world. As a result, they were a critical part of the media’s portrayal of student protest in the days and weeks that followed. Due to this, there was a greater critique of the Vietnam conflict and awareness as to why students were protesting on campuses across the nation.

In Dr. Menning’s *For a Classroom Craving Certainties, a Theory of Importance*, he examines why certain things, people, places, objects and events are remembered. He proposes certain criteria that an item or event must meet for remembrance. An object’s importance should be measured by one (or more) of the following:

- Scale – What is the size of the item or event? It could be numerical.
- Representativeness – Does the object share commonality with a large swath of the population?
- Non-Representativeness – Does the event share commonality with only a small percentage of people?
- First – Is the event the first of its kind?
- Precedence – Is this event breaking the mold and setting a new model for the future?
- Significance – Was the object regarded as historically important?
• Causation – Did the object become important due to the events it caused? ²

In the case of the Kent State photographs, the images are deeply significant. John Filo’s image of Mary Vecchio standing over the slain body of Jeffrey Miller has a primal emotional impact on the viewer. Howard Ruffner’s image of Joe Cullum applying first aid to a wounded John Cleary has the same depth of feeling. Both images are significant due to the immediacy of the actions they were capturing moments after the shootings. In addition, these images became synonymous with student protest and would be forever tied to civil protest. The photographs served as a rallying cry for college students to protest the shootings and the escalation of the Vietnam conflict across the country.

In his article “The Anti-Vietnam War Pieta”, Dr. Jerry Lewis (an eyewitness to the events of the Kent State shooting and noted professor) relates a quote from Kim Sorvig in her book To Heal Kent State regarding the impact of John Filo’s photograph:

² Ralph Menning, “For a Classroom Craving Certainties, a Theory of Importance.”, Historically Speaking, Volume 12, Number 1, (January 2011), 25-26
John Filo’s version of The Picture was on the front page of many U.S. newspapers; two weeks later, blazoned with the title “Nixon’s Home Front”; it was on the cover of Newsweek. There was no escaping it and no way to avoid reacting to it, whether in grief or in anger of both. Even if you had successfully ignored the manifest grief and horrors of the preceding decade, you responded to the Picture. It summarized so much.3

In much the same way, Howard Ruffner’s photograph is lesser known but has a similar impact. Featured on the May 15, 1970 cover of Life Magazine with the title “Tragedy at Kent”, Ruffner explains why the Kent State photos are so iconic. “People kept saying, ‘No pictures, don’t take any pictures,’ but I had to. I knew pictures were the only way to tell this story.”4

The impact of the Kent State photographs was deeply significant. Michael Burgan, author of Death at Kent State: How A Photograph Brought the Vietnam War Home to America and a noted writer whose books include a focus on American history and geography, writes “that the Kent State killings, especially as symbolized by John Filo’s photo, stunned the nation.”5 The Filo and Ruffner images were so significant they became synonymous with the anti-Vietnam protest movement and remain a part of America’s collective memory of that period.

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3 Thomas Hensley, “Kent State and May 4: A Social Science Perspective.”, (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2010), 130
5 Michael Burgan, "Death at Kent State: how a photograph brought the Vietnam War home to America.", (North Mankato, MN: Compass Point Books, Capstone Press, 2017), 38
Both photos show significance as they were featured prominently in newspapers and magazines and are still known forty-eight years later. As stated in American Photography: A Century of Images: The still image crystallizes a moment in a way that the moving image cannot; it is the still image that in a fundamental manner remains fixed in the memory.⁶

With the media saturation of the events partly inspired by these iconic photographs, the power and impact of the photographer and his lens cannot be underestimated. This was as truthful an idiom in 1970 as it is today. Journalist and photographer Robert Draper (whose work is featured in publication such as National Geographic) writes, “Photographers use their cameras as tools of exploration, passports to inner sanctums, instruments for change. Their images are proof that photography matters — now more than ever.”⁷

The existing histiography on the analysis of the two photographs and their impact on student protest is scant. Kent State Professor Alumnus Dr. Jerry M. Lewis’s article, “The Anti-Vietnam War Pieta”, remains the primary substantial work on this analysis of the Kent State shooting photographs. In that article, Dr. Lewis examines the John Filo photograph of Mary

Vecchio and the impact that it had on American culture. He postulates that the Vecchio picture has become an image that is indelibly imprinted on the American psyche by being utilized in three ways:

- Mass media (as represented by television and print media) utilizing the photograph in relation to the Kent State shooting and aftermath
- The photograph being used in relation to President Nixon’s policies on the Vietnam War and the conflict’s impact
- Integrating the photograph along with other examples of notable events in 1960’s culture

Other sources reviewed for this paper, both primary and secondary, observe that the Vecchio photograph is significant. However, Dr. Lewis’s work is the only one to feature an in-depth analysis of why the Vecchio photograph specifically continues to resonate today.

This paper agrees with Dr. Lewis’s hypothesis and seeks to supplement that research by analyzing how both Howard Ruffner’s and John Filo’s photographs were utilized by student organizations as propaganda.

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8 Thomas Hensley and Jerry M. Lewis, “Kent State and May 4: A Social Science Perspective.” Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2010. 128
An analysis of materials (campus strike posters and newspapers) from 195 colleges in the Kent State May 4 archives revealed examples of the Kent State iconic photographs being used by students urging others to participate in protest. By analyzing these examples, this paper seeks to show how the protests and walkouts following the Kent State shooting were influenced by Filo and Ruffner’s work, analyzing how those photographs were disseminated in the print and television media, and looking at what mass media inspirations were derived from the distribution of those two iconic images.

As a counterpoint argument to the Kent State photograph’s iconic status, Sheryl Ochayon writes on the need to critically analyze photographs for historical bias. In her article, Critical Analysis of Photographs as Historical Sources, Ms. Ochayon writes that photography can present a false image in comparison to the events that the image would show. Photographers are able to manipulate the scene which is being captured. In addition to capturing a scene and identifying that image with a specific moment in time, photographs can be edited by cropping elements to emphasize others and omitting unwanted items from the photograph to create a desired image.9

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In analyzing photographs for historical bias, Ms. Ochayon lists the following steps one should consider:10

- Who is the photographer?
- Why was the photograph taken?
- Where was the photograph found? Was it distributed? If so, to whom?
- What is absent from the photograph?
- Was the photograph staged?

In reference to Ms. Ochayon’s article, this paper shows that the Kent State photographs are significant and do not reveal a significant bias in the images that they capture. Utilizing her criteria, the photographs meet the bar for significance and authenticity.

Both photographs are clearly attributed to student photographers who were eyewitnesses of the Kent State shooting (John Filo and Howard Ruffner). There is a clearly defined reason why the photographs were taken (to document the chaos and confusion in the moments after the shooting). The photographs were distributed via mass media distribution. Both photographs are clearly not staged. The only item that is missing from either photograph is a thin fence line in the Filo photograph

10 Ibid

pg. 9
which was omitted from magazine and newspaper distribution of the image. That omission does not change the content of the Filo photograph.

As such, Filo and Ruffner’s work are authentic, not staged and meet the criteria for being iconic images of the Kent State shootings. This authenticity helps the photographs to resonate with modern relevance, even after so much time has elapsed since May 4, 1970.
Howard Ruffner. “Injured student being given first aid, May 4, 1970,” May 4 Collection – Box 190, (Kent State University, Kent)
What led to the shootings at Kent State on that day in May? Why had the National Guard been called in to maintain order in Kent? Some answers can be found in the tumultuous days leading up to May 4th, 1970. Events were set in motion that week with President Nixon’s address to the nation on April 30th, 1970.

In a televised speech given April 20th, 1970, Nixon had promised to withdraw 150,000 troop from South Vietnam. Ten days later, on April 30th, the President delivered a bombshell announcement where he stated that instead of sending soldiers home from Vietnam, additional troops would be sent to Cambodia in an escalation of the conflict. His closing statement regarding the conflict escalation is particularly telling.

My Fellow Americans, we live in an age of anarchy, both abroad and at home. We see mindless attacks on all the great institutions which have been created by free civilizations in the last 5000 years. Even here in the United States, great universities are being systematically destroyed. Small nations all over the world find themselves under attack from within and from without.

If, when the chips are down, the world’s most powerful nation, The United States of America, acts like a pitiful, helpless giant, the forces of totalitarianism and anarchy will threaten the free nations and free institutions throughout the world.

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14 Ibid, 7
Nixon was breaking a key campaign pledge where he had promised to bring the troops home and end the war.\textsuperscript{15} To the student organizations who were protesting the war, this was an utter repudiation of their efforts. Nixon’s reaction to the protesters was not necessarily one of tolerance. In remarks given at the Pentagon on the following day, the President was referring to antiwar protesters as “bums blowing up the campuses.”\textsuperscript{16}

Protests at Kent State were quick to follow the President’s announcement. One student group with a distinctive name, The World Historians Opposed to Racism and Exploitation (WHORE), distributed pamphlets urging others to gather on May 1 at noon for a protest where a copy of the United States Constitution would be buried.\textsuperscript{17} Other protests and rallies were quick to follow.

That defiant spirit and frenetic energy followed the students and spilled into the streets of downtown Kent as night fell on May 1\textsuperscript{st}. By midnight, the crowd had spread to bars on nearby Water Street in Kent. Debris was burned, windows were smashed and crowds were chanting against the war as Kent’s

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, 7
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, 7
\textsuperscript{17} Thomas M. Grace, "Kent State: Death and Dissent in the long sixties." (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016), 199
police force, supplemented by other nearby precincts, moved in to disperse the crowd with tear gas and close the local bars. As the crowds were driven away from the downtown area, they were funneled back towards the campus. Fifteen were arrested that night.\textsuperscript{18}

In reaction to the wild night’s events, Mayor LeRoy Satrom declared an emergency weekend curfew of 8pm, with Kent State’s campus hours limited to 1am. In addition, Kent bars were closed until further notice and Satrom notified the governor, James Rhodes, that the National Guard may be needed. By 2am, a representative from the Ohio National Guard was in Kent to assess the situation.\textsuperscript{19}

A pattern of student antiwar and police frustration followed by local and state government overreaction was established, which would repeat itself over the next few days. According to the President’s Commission on Campus Unrest (commissioned after the events of the Kent State shooting):

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, 200
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, 202
There were disorderly incidents; authorities could not or did not respond in time to apprehend those responsible or to stop the incidents in their early stages; the disorder grew; the police action; when it came, involved bystanders as well as participants; and finally, the students drew together in the conviction they were being arbitrarily harassed.20

May 2nd brought with it a declaration of civil emergency from Mayor Satrom. While the Kent city curfew was 8pm, the University’s hours were extended to 1am. Mayor Satrom officially requested the assistance of the National Guard. The Guard was already mobilized and in nearby Akron (due to a Teamsters’ strike). With Governor Rhodes’s authorization for armed support, the National Guard was in Kent by 6pm.

It was rumored that the Campus ROTC building would be targeted. As a visible symbol of the military, Nixon’s administration and the growing anger with the National Guard in Kent, the ROTC building served as a focal point for that frustration to lash out at. With a sizable crowd gathering on campus throughout the night, the ROTC was set on fire by unknown assailants. By 9pm, the building was engulfed in flames which the Kent Fire Department was dispatched twice to combat. By 10pm, the Guard (although unauthorized to enter the campus) was

asked by Mayor Satrom to disperse the crowd which they did.\textsuperscript{21} With the Guard firmly established on campus, the students would awake the next day to a militarized presence. The National Guard had not been authorized by university officials, but Brigadier General Canterbury (one of the National Guard officials in Kent to oversee the Guard presence) later stated the ‘permission was not needed’ as the building was on state property.\textsuperscript{22}

May 3\textsuperscript{rd} saw the addition of 850 National Guardsmen on the Kent campus, replete with bayoneted rifles and military vehicles. With the ROTC building burned to the ground the previous night, Governor Rhodes arrived in Kent. An impromptu speech to the press in Kent resulted in bellicose rhetoric (the governor was in a hotly contested Senate race). As the governor stated,

\begin{quote}
The disturbances at Kent State are probably the most vicious form of campus-oriented violence yet perpetrated by dissident groups and their allies in the state of Ohio... And I want to say they are not going to take over the campus. And the Campus is now going to be part of the County and the State of Ohio. There is no sanctuary for these people to burn buildings down of private citizens – of businesses in
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{22} United States, President’s Commission, 250
a community and then run into a sanctuary. It is over with in Ohio.\textsuperscript{23}

While many thought this speech indicated there would be a declaration of martial law or state of emergency, there would not be such a declaration made until May 5\textsuperscript{th}, a full day after the shootings.\textsuperscript{24} Confusion reigned regarding the potential university closure, prohibitions on peaceful student assemblies and what the Guard’s official role at the campus was. Few, if any, students were aware that the National Guard had live ammunition in their M-1 rifles.\textsuperscript{25}

Crowds would visit Kent State en masse on Saturday to view the remains of the ROTC building. By that evening, the students were sizable enough as a group that the National Guard attempted to disperse them. At this point, communication between the Guard, University officials, local authorities, law enforcement and students had broken down completely. A large group of students attempted to have University President White and Mayor Satrom address a list of grievances (students were informed that White and Satrom would meet with them but never arrived), while others were protesting the continued presence of the National Guard.

\textsuperscript{23} Barbato, 8
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid, 9
\textsuperscript{25} Howard Means, 50-52
The communication breakdown, anger, frustration and fatigue (experienced by both the students and Guard members) were all components that contributed towards the culmination of the week’s events on May 4.

The university remained open for classes on May 4 despite the continued presence of the National Guard. There was a planned rally at noon that day. Officials from the Guard, school and the city met to discuss the 8pm - 6am curfew which was now to be extended to the university. There was also no definitive direction on whether the rally would be allowed or banned by officials.26

Students started gathering at the campus Victory Bell at 11am, ringing the Bell to signal the rally’s start. The crowd size grew to roughly two thousand with students virulently protesting against the Guard’s presence on the campus. The National Guard attempted to disperse the crowd by focusing with a more physical presence, practicing organized formations, and utilizing a large amount of tear gas. The students retaliated with a barrage of thrown rocks.

This back and forth exchange reached its zenith when twenty-eight guardsmen wheeled and fired sixty-seven shots.

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26 Craig S. Simpson, 94-97
towards the students, the nearest being sixty feet away. From that thirteen second barrage, four students were killed and another nine wounded. The guardsmen then withdrew while students scrambled for cover. While students and onlookers assisted the wounded protesters, portions of the National Guard stood down while others reformed with General Canterbury preparing to remove more students who had gathered.

Faculty Marshall Glen Frank (along with professors Seymour Baron, Mike Lunine and graduate student Steven Sharoff) persuaded the Guard commander to allow them to talk with the students. Overcome with emotion, Frank was able to plead with and convince the students who had remained to disperse and thus prevented further bloodshed. The chaos of that day was summed up by Frank who later wrote:

...I felt the need to maintain a semblance of order in a chaotic situation. I felt the anguish and hopelessness of moving a group of ‘students’ who would not move after the shootings, and I broke down and wept when they did move.28

27 United States, President’s Commission, 270-272
28 Howard Means, 103
The results of the shooting were immediate. Filo and Ruffner’s photographs were featured prominently in newspapers, magazines, newscasts, and other media. As the story and photographs spread (featuring prominently in newspapers such as the New York Times and magazines such as LIFE), student reaction was swift.

The week after the shooting saw Filo and Ruffner’s iconography prominently displayed in student campus newspapers, leaflets and posters calling for campus strikes and walkouts. The ensuing college campus strikes and protests became the largest in American higher education to date. As historian Christopher Broadhurst (whose article focuses on how the Kent State protests and shooting led to college campuses participating in nationwide protests) writes:

Both private and state schools experienced revolts and the institutions affected ranged from the traditional centers of New Left radicalism, such as Berkeley, to community colleges across the country. Over four million students at nearly 1,350 campuses demonstrated across America. The numbers represented perhaps 60 percent of all enrolled college students...In all, nine hundred colleges were shut down on account of student strikes.

In the ensuing days, the Kent State campus was closed for six weeks.

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33 Ibid, 289
A key example of the Kent State imagery and its dramatic impact in use was the campus walkout at the University of Washington. During a weeklong series of protests, May 5th, 1970 brought students, spurred on by the events at Kent State, to rally and strike. University of Washington President Charles Odegaard directed that the university be closed on May 6th as a day of mourning for the slain Kent State students. Over five thousand students rallied and marched from the campus, through downtown Seattle, and onto Interstate I-5. While there was a standoff between the state police and university protesters, the end result was a peaceful resolution as the authorities allowed the crowd to dissipate on their own and exit the freeway.

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Protest the Kent State Massacre

Strike Demonstrate
Fri 4:30
MAY 8
43RD & MADISON
OHIO DEPT. OF DEVELOPMENT

Sponsored by:
Youth Against War & Fascism
Cleveland High School Student Union
Columbus Council of Interfaith
NNU Strike Committee
Jewish H.S. Students Union
Arabian United (United Arab American Servicemen’s Union)

Ibid

pg. 26
WE DEMAND:

1. That the United States government end its systematic oppression of political dissidents and release all political prisoners, such as Bobby Seale and other members of the Black Panther Party.

2. That the United States government cease its escalation of the Vietnam War into Cambodia and Laos; immediately withdraw all forces from Southeast Asia.

3. That the universities and their complicity with the United States warmachine be immediately ended and all research, ROTC, counterintelligence, and other such programs be terminated.

STRIKE!

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The iconic photographs of the Kent State shootings would also make their mark in popular culture. The popular music group, Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young (CSN&Y) would release a seminal song of those events, “Ohio”, a song which was directly inspired by Filo and Ruffner’s photographs.

Band member David Crosby had given Neil Young, one of the four singer songwriters in the group, an advance copy of the Life issue which featured Ruffner’s photo of a wounded student being tended to. Young looked at the photos and read the story. That same day, he penned the lyrics to the song “Ohio” which became a hit and played on the radio nationwide.41

Robert Santelli, Director of Education at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, stated:

I was in college when the shootings happened. For many people, Ohio became the rallying cry for resistance against what many thought was an unjust war. It became the anthem for the New Left movement. It stirred intense emotions. It told you what was wrong. You could not miss the point.42

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“Ohio”
Lyrics by Neil Young

Tin soldiers and Nixon coming,
We’re finally on our own.
This summer I hear the drumming,
Four dead in Ohio.

Gotta get down to it
Soldiers are cutting us down
Should have been done long ago.
What if you knew her
And found her dead on the ground
How can you run when you know?

Gotta get down to it
Soldiers are cutting us down
Should have been done long ago.
What if you knew her
And found her dead on the ground
How can you run when you know?

Tin soldiers and Nixon coming,
We’re finally on our own.
This summer I hear the drumming,
Four dead in Ohio.
Four dead in Ohio.
Four dead in Ohio...

[fade...]
...How many more...? Why?...
John Filo and Howard Ruffner each captured an iconic moment on May 4, 1970. Each photographer contributed a significant portion to changing the tone of anti-Vietnam War protests, President Nixon’s Cambodia policy and campus strife with their images. The dialogue on Vietnam and student participation in campus protests was irrevocably changed after the May 4 shooting.

The May 4, 1970 iconic photographs permeated their way into the American public consciousness. They became indelibly linked to the anti-Vietnam War movement and served as a means to sway and incite student participation in the campus protests and walkouts which followed. Over time, Filo and Ruffner’s photographs of the Kent State shooting have become inextricably linked to Vietnam, President Nixon, and the end of an era. Howard Ruffner best described these sentiments when he wrote the following:

I saw their faces and I could feel their pain, and I took their pictures so that no one would ever forget what happened at Kent State and the trauma that it caused for our nation. 

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Bibliography:


Menning, Ralph. "For a Classroom Craving Certainties, a Theory of Importance." Historically Speaking, Volume 12, Number 1, (January 2011), pp. 25-26


Ruffner, Howard. Injured student being given first aid. May 4, 1970. May 4 Collection - Box 190, Kent State University, Kent.


