

Briefing Document: Echoes of Dissent - Contemporary Protests and the Legacy of Kent State

Date: May 24, 2024

Subject: Review of recent source material concerning contemporary campus protests against the war in Gaza and their historical parallels to the Kent State and Vietnam War era protests.

Key Sources Reviewed:

- "An Escalation of Oppression: Trump, the Military, and Suppression of Dissent" by Jared Yates Sexton (Apr 29, 2025)
- "Carrying on Kent State's legacy of antiwar organizing, students press for divestment" (May 4, 2024)
- "Decades after Kent State shooting, the tragic legacy shapes its activism" by Jonathan Edwards, The Washington Post (May 4, 2024)
- "Explainer How US campus protests over Gaza differ from Vietnam war era" by Andrea Shalal and Bianca Flowers, NPR (Apr 29, 2024)
- "Four Dead in Ohio" by Michael Moore (May 4, 2025)
- "Journal May 5, 1970" by Jeff Kisling
- "Kent State Victim's Sister Condemns Militarized Response to Pro-Palestinian College Protests" by Laurel Krause (Apr 25, 2024)
- "Letters to the Editor: I was at Kent State in 1970 when my friend was killed. Why are we still using force against college protests?" by Doug Guthrie (May 4, 2024)
- "May 4 Visitors Center National Historic Landmark Site" (undated)
- "Student protesters reflect on the legacy of campus activism during the Vietnam War April 29, 2024" by Brianna Scott, Noah Caldwell, Courtney Dorning and Mary Louise Kelly, NPR (Apr 29, 2024)
- "What a 1968 Columbia University protester makes of today" (undated)

Executive Summary:

The reviewed sources highlight a significant parallel between contemporary campus protests against the war in Gaza and the anti-war demonstrations of the Vietnam War era, particularly those at Kent State University in 1970. A central theme is the concern regarding the potential for state-sanctioned violence and the use of militarized force against peaceful student dissent. The legacy of the Kent State massacre serves as a stark warning against such responses, with survivors and the Kent State community actively drawing comparisons and urging universities and authorities to learn from history. While acknowledging

key differences between the two periods (e.g., the presence of a draft in the Vietnam era), the sources emphasize similarities in student demands (divestment from military industries), the role of universities in responding to student concerns, and the broader political context of dissent. The potential for escalating government response and the historical precedent of official narratives downplaying or justifying violence against protesters are also prominent concerns.

Main Themes and Important Ideas/Facts:

1. **Historical Parallel: Contemporary Gaza Protests and Vietnam War Protests:** Several sources explicitly draw parallels between the current campus protests regarding the war in Gaza and the anti-war movement during the Vietnam War. This comparison is driven by shared themes of student dissent against perceived injustices of war and demands for institutional change.
 - "Matthew Vickers again at Occidental College, which, like so many campuses, saw major protests during the Vietnam War. In April of 1969, hundreds of students protested military recruiters on Occidental's campus. And dozens occupied an administration building just a stone's throw from the current encampment." (Student protesters reflect on the legacy of campus activism during the Vietnam War)
 - "This parallel between today's protests and those of the late '60s - it's being repeated over and over across the country." (Student protesters reflect on the legacy of campus activism during the Vietnam War)
1. **The Kent State Massacre as a Cautionary Tale:** The events of May 4, 1970, at Kent State, where the Ohio National Guard shot and killed four students and wounded nine during an anti-war protest, are repeatedly cited as a critical historical precedent and a warning against the use of militarized force against student protesters.
 - "Decades after Kent State shooting, the tragic legacy shapes its activism. The university where 13 student protesters were killed or injured during the Vietnam War era worries that other schools have learned nothing from its history." (Decades after Kent State shooting)
 - "Laurel Krause, the sister of an anti-war protester who was killed by law enforcement during the infamous 1970 Kent State University massacre, this week warned against the militarized police response to peaceful college campus demonstrations against Israel's military offensive in Gaza." (Kent State Victim's Sister Condemns Militarized Response)
 - "But inviting armed, militarized police on American campuses to disperse peaceful protesters and others has historically not ended well." (Kent State Victim's Sister Condemns Militarized Response)
 - Kent State University has incorporated the history of the shooting into its curriculum and has a dedicated May 4 Visitors Center to educate about the events and their lessons. "Freshmen go there every fall as part of their orientation." (Decades after Kent State shooting)
1. **Concern over Escalating State Violence and Militarized Response to Dissent:** Several sources express deep concern about the potential for increased state violence and the use of law

enforcement and the military to suppress contemporary protests. This is framed as a dangerous escalation and a move towards authoritarianism.

- "The executive order titled "Strengthening and Unleashing America's Law Enforcement to Pursue Criminals and Protect Innocent Citizens" is an escalation of immense magnitude. Behind a wall of strategized legalese and fine-tuned language, what lies here is the infrastructure of a violent crackdown by law enforcement and the military in the event of mass action and protests." (An Escalation of Oppression)
 - "As we face the true, unvarnished nature of this abomination... it is necessary for the authoritarian... to slide into place one of the final elements of the state they desire: growing and relentless state violence." (An Escalation of Oppression)
 - "Administrators, professors and students have spent the past two weeks watching the demonstrations elsewhere in dismay. They are worried by what they see as precursors to the same kind of state-sanctioned violence that led to the deadly confrontation in 1970: rhetoric that dehumanizes opponents, university officials tapping law enforcement to quell protests and politicians calling for the National Guard to be sent in if that doesn't work." (Decades after Kent State shooting)
1. **The Role of Universities and Institutional Response:** Universities are presented as key actors in the current situation, facing pressure from students to address concerns about investments and from external political forces to control protests. The Kent State experience highlights the negative consequences of universities failing to engage with student concerns and resorting to forceful measures.
 - Kent State students protesting the war in Gaza are demanding the university "divest from weapons manufacturers and military contractors and to revise the university's investment ethics statement." (Carrying on Kent State)
 - The Kent State administration's response has been mixed, with the President expressing a willingness to listen but the Board of Trustees refusing to consider divestment, citing fiduciary responsibilities and Ohio state law. "Consistent with our fiduciary responsibilities, the Board of Trustees will not consider the divestment of university investments you have requested." (Carrying on Kent State)
 - "I don't expect [universities] to agree to all the demands that students are making, but I expect them to have a conversation," said Joe Cullum, a May 4 survivor. (Decades after Kent State shooting)
 - "We are not fighting against Kent State. We are fighting for Kent State. Our institution has the opportunity to align its investments with its history and values, without compromising fiduciary responsibility." (Carrying on Kent State)
 - A 1968 Columbia University protester argues that universities should embrace open and free debate on contentious issues, stating, "The purpose of a university is the open expression and

exchange of ideas. That is our fundamental purpose, and especially ideas that are contentious and that have consequences." (What a 1968 Columbia University protester makes of today)

1. **Official Narratives and Justification of Violence:** The sources expose how official narratives following events like the Kent State and Jackson State shootings often involved misinformation and attempts to blame the victims or justify the use of force. This raises concerns about similar tactics being employed today.
 - Following the Kent State shooting, the Ohio National Guard and President Nixon claimed a sniper and student violence justified the shooting. Michael Moore calls these claims lies. "A lie. There was no sniper." (Four Dead in Ohio)
 - Similar false claims of a sniper were made after the Jackson State shooting. "Again, there was no sniper." (Four Dead in Ohio)
 - "In both cases — at both schools — the government lied to justify the government's violence and the press dutifully repeated these lies." (Four Dead in Ohio)
1. **Student Demands for Divestment and Ethical Investment:** A key demand of contemporary student protesters, mirroring those in the Vietnam era, is for universities to divest from companies involved in the military-industrial complex. This reflects a desire for institutional finances to align with ethical principles and oppose war and conflict.
 - "On that terrifying day, four Kent State students... were killed by the National Guard on our campus during a protest against the expansion of the Vietnam War into Cambodia." (Carrying on Kent State) - This context highlights the link between student protest, the war, and the institutions involved.
 - Concerned Students for a Better Future at Kent State are demanding the university "divest from weapons manufacturers and military contractors." (Carrying on Kent State)
 - In the Vietnam era, students targeted the university's "affiliation with the Institute for Defense Analysis, which was a research arm that was facilitating military research at the time." (Student protesters reflect on the legacy of campus activism during the Vietnam War)
1. **Differences Between the Eras:** While drawing parallels, the sources also acknowledge key differences between the Vietnam War era protests and contemporary demonstrations. The absence of a military draft is highlighted as a significant factor influencing the urgency and personal stakes for students in the 1960s and 70s.
 - "There are no U.S. troops fighting in Israel's war in Gaza, but many U.S. citizens have lost family members there." (Explainer How US campus protests over Gaza differ from Vietnam war era)
 - "The draft was a real reality, including for privileged college students in the late 1960s. And so the sense of urgency was slightly different for the college students and the anti-war movement at that time." (Student protesters reflect on the legacy of campus activism during the Vietnam War)

- The diversity of the student body has increased significantly since 1970. (Explainer How US campus protests over Gaza differ from Vietnam war era)
1. **The Importance of Peaceful Dissent and Dialogue:** Several sources emphasize the importance of peaceful protest and the need for dialogue and understanding between students, universities, and authorities, particularly in light of the potential for violence.
 - Student organizers at the University of Iowa following Kent State "urged students not to act, or react, violently." (Journal May 5, 1970)
 - A 1968 Columbia University protester advises current students, "It's important to keep the simple truth of your position and say it clearly and articulately and nonviolently." (Student protesters reflect on the legacy of campus activism during the Vietnam War)
 - Kent State President Todd Diacon is quoted as saying, "We very clearly have a lived lesson, which is polarization and bringing in external armed troops was the exact recipe for the tragedy that happened on our campus." (Decades after Kent State shooting)

Potential Implications:

The recurring concerns about state violence and the invocation of the Kent State legacy suggest a heightened sensitivity to the potential for forceful crackdowns on current campus protests. Universities and authorities are under scrutiny to handle these demonstrations differently than in the past, emphasizing de-escalation and dialogue. The student focus on divestment could lead to increased pressure on university endowments and investment practices. The historical analysis of official narratives raises questions about the reliability of information and the potential for misrepresentation of events surrounding protests. The differences noted between the eras suggest that while historical parallels are valuable, the dynamics and outcomes of contemporary protests may also be distinct.

Areas for Further Research:

- Detailed analysis of the executive order referenced in "An Escalation of Oppression" and its potential legal implications for future protests.
- Comparative analysis of university responses to protests across the country, examining which approaches have been most effective in preventing escalation and violence.
- Investigation into the specific companies and industries that universities are invested in that are linked to military or defense operations.
- Further exploration of the role of social media and online platforms in organizing and shaping contemporary student protests, compared to the media landscape of the Vietnam era.