Kent State University

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Spring 2017

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Lae'l Hughes-Watkins

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Between Two Worlds

A Look at the Impact of the Black Campus Movement on the Antiwar Era of 1968–1970 at Kent State University

BY LAE’L HUGHES-WATKINS

The Kent State shootings on May 4, 1970, which resulted in the death of four students and the wounding of nine others at the hands of the Ohio National Guard, changed the antiwar movement in an immeasurable way. A number of historians, scholars, writers, and documentarians remain captivated by the series of events and its reverberating effect, which influenced the trajectory of the Vietnam War. For many, the grassy hillside where the shootings took place at Kent State remains hallowed ground and has become a place of pilgrimage for individuals who were greatly affected by those events. A wide cross section of individuals visits the grounds, including family members of victims, eyewitnesses, Vietnam veterans, and social activists. They all come annually during the commemoration and throughout the year to Kent State. Many aspects of the shootings have been studied, ranging from the actions of the Guardsmen, the response of the state and federal government, to the role of the demonstrators, even some of the various conspiracy theories. However, one facet that has received little attention is the role of race.

This article reframes the antiwar movement and the Kent State shootings through the lens of race and relies heavily on the narratives of African American alumni who were on the front lines of the black campus movement. It reviews how the movement impacted the level of African American students’ participation at Kent State University during the antiwar movement. Some African American alumni believe that the black campus movement prevented violence being directed at students of color during the Kent State shootings.
Tensions in race relations were quite high in the United States in response to the rise of the black power movement, a radical social movement that filled the void left by the unfulfilled promises of the civil rights movement. Scholars who have studied the Kent State shootings of May 4, 1970, have yet to dedicate a significant amount of attention to the impact of race on the antiwar effort, particularly the influence of the black student movement. This article serves as a springboard into that area of inquisition, detailing this period of Kent State history primarily from previously unexplored viewpoints of black students.

**BRIEF OVERVIEW**

In the mid-1960s, college campuses and universities from coast to coast were caught in a sea of demonstrations and protests. As people under the age of twenty-five outnumbered individuals over twenty-five years old, this rising constituency of the American population became a force academic institutions could not ignore; students began to “see their campuses as tools to foster societal change as many of them participated in the civil rights movement.”¹ This demographic greatly changed the landscape of higher education and generated a new narrative for campuses around the country. Student activists showed an increasing awareness of global affairs, specifically the Vietnam War. A majority of black student activists and their supporters engaged in a push for racial parity within higher education, known as the black campus movement. The black student activists of the 1960s and 1970s would, unfortunately, fall victim to a national trend, where “gun-wielding National Guardsmen were called in to suppress ghetto rebellions, wounding and killing innocent African Americans in the name of law and order.” These rash acts of violence swept across city streets and college campuses.²

Kent State University was just one of the thousands of colleges and universities that had to respond to dual challenges: the demands of a black demographic who felt their civil rights were under siege and the frustrations of a predominantly white antiwar movement. On May 4, 1970, Kent State gained international attention for the killing of four white students and the wounding

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of nine others at the hands of the Ohio National Guard during a rally against the United States’ invasion of Cambodia. However, this type of militarized violence at historically black colleges and universities in southern states did not gain such widespread attention, such as the Orangeburg Massacre in 1968, where three students died and twenty-seven were wounded. The North Carolina A&T University tragedy in Greensboro in 1969 used armored personnel carriers to quell racial tensions. Many of the black students at Kent State University were well aware of these events.

The black campus movement was the academic arm of the black power movement. The coterie of black student activists from late 1960s to the early 1970s at Kent State participating in Black United Students were agents of change pushing for antiracist reforms on campus amid the drum of the peace movement. The organization would lead the campus through one of its most culturally transformative periods in history. But it was antiwar activists who gained national attention while the progress made by African American students was relegated to the footnotes of history.

From 1968 to 1971, Kent State University was immersed in turmoil. A predominantly white campus with a significant percentage of students who were ardent in their resistance toward the war in Vietnam joined the increasing national discord inflaming academic institutions. President Richard M. Nixon’s foreign policy declarations became the source of ire for Kent students who were becoming gradually disheartened by a government that seemed to continuously discount the outcry of youth demanding that the United States withdraw from Vietnam. After the death of Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4, 1968, numerous African American and white students also saw this as a call to arms, “propelling more extreme thinking on both sides.” Protests, teach-ins, silent vigils, boycotts, and panel discussions became widespread at Kent State as the antiwar movement intensified during this period. However, the antiwar effort was not the only form of activist behavior at Kent State.

The black campus movement also awakened the social and political consciousness of many African American students on campus, who had not already been radicalized by the civil rights movement. “This dramatic explosion of militant activism set in motion a period of conflict, crackdown,

3. Ibid., 2.
negotiation, and reform that profoundly transformed college life.”

Institutions of higher education around the nation were facing a growing uprising among black students who felt disregarded on their campuses. Colleges and universities were confronted with an onslaught of demands for increasing financial aid assistance, hiring more black faculty, developing black studies departments, raising the number of black student admissions, and including multicultural programming. “At stake was the very mission of higher education. Who should be permitted entry into universities and colleges? What constituted merit? Who should be the future leaders of the nation in this post-segregation era, and how should this group be determined? What should be taught and who should teach it?”

By the spring of 1968, the Kent State Student Senate voted to recognize BUS (Black United Students), the organization that would lead the campus through one of its most culturally transformative periods but that would also influence the outcome of May 4, 1970, the day of the Kent State shootings.

This article reviews three events that occurred at Kent State between 1968 and 1970: the Hubert H. Humphrey walkout, the black student walkout, and the Kent State shootings. These three events provide insight into what at times was a nebulous relationship between black student activists and the predominantly white antiwar movement at Kent State. The Daily Kent Stater reported on a few efforts during the aforementioned time period when representatives of BUS and other black activist organizations such as the Black Anti-War Union assembled to support activities in alignment with the peace movement. However, there was also significant reporting on divisions between the black campus movement and antiwar effort at Kent State. The swing in ideologies was indicative of the public discourse taking place within national organizations.

DIVISIONS BETWEEN FREEDOM AND PEACE MOVEMENTS

At the beginning of 1965, the majority of African American activists were focusing on the campaign for voting rights in Selma, Alabama. Very little attention was given to the massive dispatch of U.S. ground troops on the beaches of Vietnam. The African American press barely covered the war, which was

7. Ibid.
in stark contrast to white news outlets. Black newspapers had few reporters stationed in Vietnam, and the articles that went to press were usually accolades for black soldiers who were part of the newly integrated armed forces. But soon after, black leaders within the civil rights movement began to voice their opposition to the war.

On March 2, 1965, in an effort to unite the civil rights and peace movements, Martin Luther King Jr. expressed his disapproval of the Vietnam War while speaking at Howard University. However, by late summer King’s endeavor was dealt a brutal blow, causing him to retreat from his initial opposition to the war. The Lyndon Johnson administration chastised King for his antiwar comments, leading King to ultimately realize he did not have the political capital to engage in the antiwar and freedom movement. A month later, on April 17, 1965, Students for a Democratic Society’s (SDS) national chapter orchestrated what was considered the first significant antiwar demonstration in history in Washington, D.C. Tens of thousands, including a considerable number of African Americans, joined from all over the country to protest the military action taking place in Vietnam. The noteworthy representation of blacks was in part due to a large conscious effort by the SDS membership and voices within the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) who worked to draw an indisputable connection between the civil rights movement and the peace movement. The demonstration was branded a success, but the attempt to unite these two efforts had already begun to wane with the rise of black power, which spread nationally as a challenge to nonviolence and integration in the early 1960s. The emergence of this philosophy, with its emphasis on racial pride, black-owned businesses, and economic self-sufficiency turned a number of black activists away from antiwar struggles.

After the Freedom Summer of 1964, SNCC mulled over the idea of making the group an exclusively black organization and had requested that some of its white members organize on behalf of poor whites. During the fall of 1964, SDS leader Todd Gitlin also announced that “the growing reaction against the
“war” would be his organization’s main focus. The United States’ growing opposition to the Vietnam War eventually sidelined the civil rights movement. Consequently, the inability of the antiwar and freedom movements to unite beyond their political rhetoric led to the negligible involvement of African Americans and the predominantly white antiwar effort.

**BLACK POWER BIRTHS BLACK CAMPUS MOVEMENT AT KENT STATE**

By the spring of 1968, black power clearly influenced students who were previously engaged in the civil rights movement but were now questioning its efficacy. The birth of black power caused the dissolution of the university’s National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) chapter. The NAACP chapter at Kent State was organized in January 1964. It was one of the earliest groups on campus to provide a platform to discuss issues of equity for students of color. The KSU NAACP investigated housing discrimination on and off campus, tutored, coordinated voter registration drives, and brought in guest speakers. One guest speaker in particular—Henry Austin, an official for the Deacons of Defense and Justice—would spur the development of BUS at Kent State.

During the spring of 1968, the *Daily Kent Stater* published a scathing letter written by the organization’s own former president, James Anderson, who acknowledged the changing tide on campus. The letter depicted the philosophical revolution that had occurred among black students on the campus of Kent State.

The purpose of this letter is to inform the campus and its surrounding community that the KSU Chapter of the National Association For the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) will as of the end of this quarter, be formally deactivated. The reason for such action is the Executive Board’s and the organization’s members believe that the NAACP is no longer the vehicle for social change. The philosophies of the NAACP have, unfortunately, become outmoded. The organization has justifiably become identified with the black bourgeoisie and the white liberal whose actions, in the past, have proved meaningless to black

16. Ibid., 69.
18. Ibid.
people. As forestated, the organization’s doctrines are now obsolete. As the KSU Chapter of the NAACP no longer has assuming it ever had—the active support of black students, it is henceforth, by unanimous vote of its membership, dissolved. This letter is not to mourn the death of the organization. Its death merely signifies a change in the philosophies of black students. The phony-unity of the NAACP is gone and is presently, being replaced by a black unity as evidenced by the birth and growth of Black United Students. In conclusion of both the NAACP and this letter, we would give our complete support to BUS and other organizations whose doctrines and actions will insure the liberations of the black people as full participations in our society.

The proverbial line in the sand had been drawn. Any remaining “moderate” black students at Kent State needed to choose how to forge ahead with respect to any grievances they had regarding the racial climate on campus. With the official passing of the mantle, BUS became the organization of African American students at Kent State.

In May 1968, the Kent State Student Senate voted to recognize BUS. The organization led the charge for the most pivotal cultural changes that occurred on campus in the late 1960s and early 1970s. African American students at Kent State University, in conjunction with other members of the black campus movement across the country, wanted the very nature of scholarship redefined to include black ideologies. Between 1969 and 1970, of Kent State’s approximately nineteen thousand students, only an estimated 644 (or 3 percent) were black students. Kent State had only twenty-two black faculty members. During this period, the university faced the indignation and frustration of black students who believed the paucity of African American faculty, culturally sensitive academic programming, and black students created an environment that did not lend itself to an educational experience on par with that of their white peers.

“The worst part of the black student educational experience was the core curriculum offered by KSU’s ‘liberal arts’ process,” Erwind Blount, a BUS president later explained. “KSU virtually ignored the history and contributions of Black people to the American experience.” Blount’s statement is

22. Milton E. Wilson, Involvement: 2 Years Later, Human Relations Office, Kent State University, Special Collections and Archives, 63.
representative of BUS’s mission as it moved to usher in a new age of revolution no different than the one taking place on the national stage. “Black student activism in 1968 took many observers by surprise. . . . This phase of the Black student movement was markedly different from the sit-ins of the early 1960s, which had featured courteous men and women in dresses and suits and ties.”

Kent State’s BUS, along with other black student activists at historically white college campuses, were looking for tactics to make their institutions respond to the needs of a more diverse student body.

**Hubert Humphrey Walkout**

The Kent Community to End the War in Vietnam and the Kent SDS chapter continued to lead the dissidence regarding Vietnam at the university throughout the late 1960s. On more than one occasion, these two organizations were part of the discourse and protests that overlapped with BUS’s resistance strategies. However, the leadership of these groups never formally admitted to coordinating efforts to address matters of civil injustice at Kent State.

On April 27, 1968, Hubert H. Humphrey announced his run for presidency, and nearly a week later made a stop at Kent State University. Humphrey saw the Kent State rally as an opportunity to gain in the polls among young voters, which at the time were trending with Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy. Humphrey spoke to a crowd of ten thousand people at Kent State University’s Memorial Gymnasium while sharing the stage with a four-member panel (three students and one faculty member) chosen by Kent State to ask the presidential candidate questions. The Humphrey rally represents one of the events at Kent State that typifies the vague relationship between the two worlds—the antiwar movement and the black campus movement at the university—and how their efforts to draw attention to critical issues valued by both movements were unable to create a sustainable united voice.

Fifteen minutes after Humphrey concluded his speech, Bob Pickett, a panellist and vice president of student government, said that Martin Luther King’s dream had turned into a nightmare, and asked what Humphrey would do to restore his faith (and his people’s faith) in the dream. Almost on cue, about fifty black students decided to march in silence toward the exits of the Memo-

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rial Gym, while the remaining crowd booed the protestors and cheered for Humphrey.27

Donald Thigpen, former head of minority affairs and one of the founding members of BUS said, “It was a publicity stunt” and they were looking to gain the administration’s attention.28 Thigpen said it was widely known that several local and national news outlets would be present at the Humphrey rally and would serve as the perfect vehicle to publicize their grievances. It worked. The student walkout was prominent in media coverage of the Kent State rally—even the positive stories.29 This coverage undoubtedly gave BUS leverage and garnered the attention of the Kent State administration. Three days after the silent protest, the organization met with the dean of students, Robert A. Matson. During this meeting, BUS co-chairman Dwayne White read a prepared statement in which BUS cited housing discrimination, little active recruiting of black counselors and professors, lack of courses in black history, and expressed a desire for an investigation of Greek charters as some of their top demands against the university.30

While the black student walkout obtained significant national news coverage, it was not the only student organization to use the Humphrey event as a vehicle to draw attention to critical issues of concern. Members of the Kent Community to End the War in Vietnam also walked out. The organization’s goals were obvious—to redirect attention away from Humphrey to the war in Vietnam. In the aftermath, both BUS and the Kent Community to End the War in Vietnam received mixed commentary from the Daily Kent Stater. The tone of the editorials from the student newspaper ranged from cantankerous to sympathetic. A Kent student wrote the following in an editorial: “I was ashamed as the Kent students booed the black student walk-out, after cheering pretty words like ‘brotherhood.’ As the Kent students jeered the KCEWV in their walkout, I was ashamed . . . I was disappointed in all respects. The KCEWV had very valid reasons for the walk-out.”31 Other comments were derogatory in nature. One Daily Kent Stater editor wrote: “I have seen some disgusting displays of poor manners in my relatively short life, but nothing to

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27. Smith and Ellis, “Politics of Joy.”
29. Smith and Ellis, “Politics of Joy.”
compare with the RUDE exit of our own Kent ‘grubbies’ (better known as the KCEWV) during the speech of Vice President Humphrey. . . .”

Several members of the student body began to question whether BUS and Kent Community to End War in Vietnam actions were joint efforts, but it quickly became clear that there was no formal alliance between either groups or movements. A few days after the protest, Kent State’s WKSU Hotline radio show host, Bob Carpenter, asked for students from both organizations to call in and explain their acts of resistance to the listeners. A member of BUS was the first to answer his solicitation. The caller said, “It was not our intention to make it national, but to expose the problem to both the black and white community,” and then he began to reiterate the concerns previously expressed to the dean of students about instituting fair housing practices, recognizing black achievements within the curricula, and increasing the number of black faculty. Carpenter asked the caller to respond directly as to whether Kent Community to End War in Vietnam and BUS coordinated their walkout. The student immediately replied, “The Black United Students and the KCEWV are not connected in any way.” This statement harkens back to what was representative of an effort to move away from the history of white paternalism in the era of black pride and was no different than the attitudes of many other black student activists who were not necessarily separatists but were merely trying to reassert images of self-determination. Before the end of the show, a member of Kent Community to End War in Vietnam confirmed that the silent protest at the Humphrey rally was not a coordinated effort and instead made assertions that BUS had attempted to collaborate with them, but their request was rebuffed.

Alvin West, the first cochairman of BUS (before they were officially recognized in 1968) recalls witnessing the ideological shift in some of the black students on campus in the late 1960s. There was a desire for more direct action, he recalls. The membership began to voice their frustrations: “Why aren’t we doing anything?” Students discussed how other black student activist groups were taking over university buildings and increasing the inten-

34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
sity of their efforts. “What are we going to do?” was the attitude among the Kent BUS membership. West, who was a close friend of Jim Anderson, and the former president of the NAACP chapter, was uncomfortable taking on a more militant platform and offered to resign if this was the road that the membership wanted to take. “I didn’t want to go to jail,” West stated, “that’s not what I came to school for.” Nevertheless, the next series of events would serve as one of the clearest representations of self-determination exhibited by Kent State’s BUS.

**Mass Black Student Walkout for Amnesty**

On November 5, 1968, the *Daily Kent Stater* ran an ad soliciting male Kent State students for the Oakland Police Department. As the buzz of the arrival of the Oakland Police Department recruiters spread through campus, West recalls being approached by an SDS member regarding an upcoming informational event the group was going to host about the Oakland Police Department where footage would be shown of the police brutality toward African Americans.

In November 1968, students march at the front of campus in support of Black United Students (BUS) requesting amnesty for the Oakland Police Department sit-in. (Photo by Lafayette Tolliver. Kent State University Libraries, Special Collections and Archives.)
The Oakland police were in the national spotlight due to their violent interaction with African American residents of Oakland and more specifically, its volatile encounters with the Black Panther Party (BPP). On April 6, 1968, "police officers from OAPD ambushed a carload of Black Panther members on a side street. An hour and a half shootout ensued, resulting in the death of Black Panther member Bobby Hutton (17 years-old at time of death and was the first recruit of the BPP) and the arrest of all others present on the scene. Bobby Hutton was shot more than twelve times after he had already surrendered and stripped down to his underwear to prove he was not armed." The Oakland police would make repeated attempts to disrupt the organization with raids of its headquarters, frequent arrests of members, and violent acts of brutality against its membership throughout the existence of the organization. Nevertheless, the BPP was regarded as the most (in)famous black power organization.

Donald Thigpen, the coordinator of minority affairs and former member of BUS, recollects the organization's feeling about BPP. We had “a close comfort level with the Black Panthers in Oakland. We followed the Black Panthers in Oakland constantly. We believed in their cause, we were concerned about their mistreatment. So when their persecutors came to our campus, we needed to do something.”

West recalls BUS members attending an SDS meeting that included the screening of a film highlighting the police brutality inflicted on the Black Panther Party, which ignited their decision to protest. But according to West, the group decided to rebuff the informal campaign by SDS to rally black student activists into a united front against the arrival of the Oakland Police Department on Kent State’s campus. West saw this as a potential ploy by SDS to eventually co-opt BUS in an effort to strengthen its own radical platform. Nevertheless, both groups held a sit-in during the Oakland Police Department’s visit, but further research requires an investigation of the membership’s and leadership’s attitudes during the actual sit-in. Clarification is needed as to whether everyone in BUS (in this era of black power) resented SDS’s presence and felt that only black students could best represent their cause and saw this as an encroachment on their efforts within the black campus movement.

Holding signs that read “End KSU’s Complicity with Racism,” over one hundred members from SDS joined BUS in the Student Activities Center (SAC) on

41. Hall, Peace and Freedom, 58.
42. Thigpen, interview, 2014.
43. West, interview, 2015.
November 13, 1968. The protest included blocking the passageways of the SAC, which would prevent access to the Placement Center, where the OAPD were to engage in their recruitment efforts.\textsuperscript{44} BUS was located in a separate room upon SDS’s initial arrival, but at some point during the sit-in, BUS joined SDS and locked arms in a circle around its members.

However, early news reports by the \textit{Daily Kent Stater} would indicate otherwise in the aftermath of the silent protest. Dean Matson asked the students to disperse or they could face prosecution. At this point, Howie Emmer, an SDS leader, said the students would remain until three demands were met:

1. That Kent State University deny its facilities to the Oakland Police Department
2. That Kent State University sign a pledge of good faith agreeing not to infiltrate or otherwise intimidate recognized, legitimate campus organizations
3. That the Kent State University Police Department disarm

Dean Matson’s competing argument was that “since KSU has a program in law enforcement, those students majoring in it have the right to speak with prospective employers.”\textsuperscript{45} After Matson made his argument, he shared with the protesters that he would discuss the situation with President Robert White. Immediately after his departure from the Student Activities Center, Thigpen and Julius Suber, cochairman of BUS, gave orders on defensive tactics against police and told the BUS members to “Take off all jewelry and sharp objects and anything you’d like to keep for the rest of your life.” The black male students were instructed to form a protective ring around their “black sisters” and link arms.\textsuperscript{46} SDS gave their members similar instructions. While the BUS leadership discussed the possibility of police action, they instructed their membership not to resort to any violence under any circumstances. The protest ended after five hours when BUS and SDS learned that the Oakland police recruiters would not return the following day as planned. The \textit{Daily Kent Stater} reported that both groups decided it was better if they exited the building as a united force, which further supports the notion that they were divided during the sit-in. The sit-in did not end without incident; the protesters were met with white hecklers upon exiting the Student Activities Center. As they marched

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
toward Tri-Towers dormitory, water balloons were thrown from windows.\textsuperscript{47} A physical conflict also ensued between twenty students (black and white), which could have led to a race riot if it hadn’t been broken up by bystanders. A total of four hundred students were involved in the protest.

Two days after the sit-in, a press conference was held at the Student Activities Center. Representatives from BUS and SDS requested that the university give total amnesty to all the students involved in the sit-in during the Oakland police recruitment event. Carl Byers, a spokesperson for BUS, made it clear that the dismissal of one black student would be viewed as the dismissal of all black students, and added, “this is the black liberation front.”\textsuperscript{48} Byers was undoubtedly taking this opportunity to reestablish this action as part of the principles established by the black power movement, reiterating that BUS was its own entity. But at the conclusion of the press conference, Byers and SDS representative Mark Real called for “Amnesty for All.”\textsuperscript{49} Perhaps at this juncture, Byers and BUS were also realizing the ramifications of the situation—that perhaps it would help their cause by standing with SDS in a press conference—and understanding that freeing members from the predominantly white SDS organization would play badly for the university if they did not also grant amnesty for BUS members.

The BUS leadership also provided President White’s administration with a list of demands if a charge was brought against the black students who participated in the Oakland Police Department sit-in. The organization requested the following:

\begin{itemize}
  \item Charges are brought before their peers, with same social, economical background and race, according to the Constitution of the U.S.
  \item All involved receive same punishment
  \item Not to single out some individuals because they are more widely known\textsuperscript{50}
\end{itemize}

President White and members of his administration heard rumors of violence and a suggestion was made that key university personnel meet with a delegation from the black student community.\textsuperscript{51} Approximately four days

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{50} Black Position Paper, Robert I. White papers, box 48, folder 60, Kent State Special Collections and Archives.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.
later, members from BUS held a meeting at the United Methodist Church in Akron, where they made plans to walk off campus in acknowledgment of Matson’s threats that the university would prosecute protesters identified during the sit-in.\(^{52}\) It is unclear whether the administration engaged in a meeting or reached out to members of the black student community before the walkout. On November 19, 1968, one thousand observers, including Kent State students, photographers, and members of the media, watched what seemed like a sea of black students marching throughout the university’s campus. At least three hundred black students left campus; some students made their way to Akron, while others returned home or stayed with friends during the self-imposed exile.\(^{53}\) Before the walkout, the university’s president, Robert White, confirmed that there would be charges filed against those who participated in the Oakland Police Department sit-in. Some faculty members showed support by canceling classes until the black students returned, while SDS members worked to set up picket lines to gather support for the boycotting of class sessions. The walkout lasted for three days.

The day before the black students returned, President White announced that none of the students involved in the Oakland Police Department sit-in would be charged due to insufficient evidence at the advice of the university’s legal counsel.\(^{54}\) A BUS spokesman who contacted the *Daily Kent Stater* that evening simply said, “We are coming home with pride and dignity. We’re black and we’re proud.”\(^{55}\)

The black students returned to the applause of two hundred university personnel and students as they assembled on the front steps of the Administration Building. Dr. Milton E. Wilson, dean of human relations, said, “We do not believe that things at Kent State will continue the same. Changes must occur. The validity of the University must be felt.” He continued, “It is here that an intelligent and urgent responsiveness to the dignity of Black Brothers and Sisters must be generated and extended into surrounding communities and Universities across the nation.”\(^{56}\)

In a prepared statement read by the SDS the next day, Mark Real said, “The

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55. Ibid.
Oakland confrontation proved decisively the exciting possibility of creating a movement for fundamental social change in KSU. We welcome the opportunity to be reunited with our black brothers and to continue with them to raise the moral issue of the Oakland confrontation.”

The following years witnessed a steady increase of student activities and support that was indicative of the university administration’s attempt to quell any possibilities for further black student uprising. The campus was visited by a variety of black musicians, comedians, political activists, and authors, including Sly and the Family Stone, Bill Cosby, LeRoi Jones, Chinua Achebe, Julian Bond, Isaac Stern, Muhammad Ali, Charles Evers, Saunders Redding, and David Ruffins. The university also saw guest performances by the Ghana Dance Company and the La Mama Theatre. BUS also hosted events such as the Black Ball and the Black Arts Festival, featuring poetry, music, and a fashion show. The organization also celebrated Black History Week, and during the several days of festivities, Wilson, Thigpen, and Nelson Stevens, a graduate student in the Art Department, discussed extending the week to an entire month; the month-long celebration of Black History at Kent State was possibly the first of its kind in the country by 1970.

In 1969 BUS strengthened its resolve for self-determination. “There is no existing relationship between the BUS and any other white group, including the SDS, a BUS spokesman said during a panel for a Great Contemporary Issues course.” During this year, there would also surface a more aggressive and more militant stance with rhetoric that would lend itself to the potential for violent encounters if necessary. “Anybody who wants to get a gun and stand by me is welcome to come along . . . revolution may happen anytime. It only takes a spark to ignite it,” the BUS panelist warned. BUS made a passionate argument that it was its actions—and its actions alone—that gained the students amnesty. As BUS continued to lead the black campus movement at Kent State and distance itself from any appearance of unity with white organizations, it still sent representation from its leadership to some antiwar events, including the campus’s national moratorium activities in November.

57. Ibid.
60. Ibid.
62. Ibid.
coordinated by the Student Mobilization Committee, in unification with anti-war activities that took place across the country.

According to Curtis Pittman, a black KSU athlete and member of BUS, it was predominantly BUS leaders who attended antiwar activities:

Basically just the BUS leadership. You know, maybe Rudy Perry, Erwind Blount, Fargo—Ibrahim [al-]Kafiz now—myself indirectly. Because one I was an athlete also, so I had to cover myself being a varsity athlete, a scholarship athlete, and not be too much involved with the politics. But at the same time, during the Vietnam War, world—U.S.-wide—that a lot of minorities: blacks, Hispanics, Latinos, were volunteering for the Marines. Even I had volunteered for the Marines prior to me coming to Kent State. The armed forces were a job opportunity for a lot of blacks between, I guess, between ’66 and ’70, that we had no problems with the Vietnam War. Outside even, Martin Luther King was not until around ’67, ’68 that he felt that something was wrong with the war. Then we all became aware that something was wrong with this war. And at Kent State, we had our own personal concerns that we was dealing with there. . . .

The black campus movement took precedence in the days leading up to May 4, 1970, and its aftermath. In early spring, Blount, a Cleveland native, became the new president of BUS. He remembered hearing about the black student walkout and decided to enroll at Kent State. “I wasn’t going there to get an education, I was going there to give an education!” he recalls.

Kent State Shootings

On May 1, 1970, two rallies were held at Kent State University in the wake of President Nixon’s announcement about the invasion of Cambodia. One rally, held at noon, was in direct response to U.S. foreign policy matters as they related to the escalating war in Vietnam. Hundreds of students watched the burying of the Constitution at the Victory Bell on campus by an ad hoc group called World Historians Opposed to Racism and Exploitation. The rally concluded with discussion of another protest to be held on May 4, 1970.

65. Thomas M. Grace, Kent State: Death and Dissent in the Long Sixties (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 2016), 199.
66. May 1–4 Chronology, Department of Special Collections and Archives, http://www.library.kent.edu/special-collections-and-archives/ksu-libraries-and-media-services-may-4-chronology.
The second rally was held at 3:00 p.m. and was coordinated by BUS.67 Students gathered on the front lawn of campus to hear BUS implore the university to increase the black student population, to provide a better structure for the Black Cultural Center, and to hire a more diverse faculty. The rally also included students from Ohio State University. The guest speakers shared stories of combined efforts made by antiwar protesters and black student activists who had been pushing for change since the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. The students faced a barrage of tear gas and live ammunition from the National Guard and police.68 The Ohio State controversy served as an example of what could happen at Kent State. Blount recalls his objective for the demonstration, where he spoke not only about the white antiwar groups at Kent State, but broadened it to the national antiwar effort. Blount said,

On the other side of that effort [black power movement] was the antiwar movement and the various groups from the Yippie movement to the Students for a Democratic Society and the Weatherman splinter group. I personally supported their courage and actions. America needed changing and I was heartened by the fact that some white people were aware of that. And yet for me a rally to “bury the constitution” was just a distraction from the real war black students were fighting on campus. Black students were being discriminated against and that was my primary concern. When I spoke at the rally it was directly to the administration. It was a warning and an ultimatum. During my speech I presented our list of demands and promised to take the fight to the administration.69

After an afternoon of demonstrations and calls for a second meeting at noon on May 4, a crowd of Kent State students ventured downtown and began breaking windows.70 Police were called to disperse the crowd. Bars were closed by local authorities at the behest of Governor Rhodes, who declared a state of emergency in the City of Kent.71

On May 2, students returned downtown to assist in the cleanup from the damages that occurred the night before, but by 8:00 p.m. mayhem ensued as the barracks at Kent State, which housed the Army Reserve Officer Training Corps, became engulfed in flames. One thousand people surrounded the

70. May 1‒4 Chronology.
71. Ibid.
building. Earlier in the day the university issued an injunction, prohibiting any damage to university property. Reports indicated that individuals at the scene cut fire hoses to keep the firemen from putting out the blaze. Lafayette Tolliver, a black journalism student, remembers watching the barracks burn from afar; in his statement to the Commission on KSU Violence he shared that once tear gas was dispensed by—he assumed—the Portage County Sheriff Department, he and his friends returned to the “Black House—the Kuumba House” for safety. The Kuumba House was designated to BUS between 1968 and 1969. It was the only student organization on campus that had been assigned a university building. The building, though dilapidated, was given to the students with “expediency” as calls for a black cultural center grew. It was a temporary space, but many black students gathered there for tutoring, camaraderie, meetings, and to engage in philosophical debates about Marxism, the Black Diaspora, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X.

On May 3, BUS reportedly held its weekly meeting. Blount told those in

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72. Ibid.
73. Ibid.
74. Wilson, Involvement, 332.
75. West, interview, 2015.
attendance to stay “out of the action and to advise all black students to remain aloof from what was happening.” As the evening continued, Blount deployed the BUS Safety Patrol to make sure black female students had escorts to their dorms. After completing their rounds, the men retired to their dorms by curfew. Blount recalls an encounter between the Guardsmen and members of the BUS Safety Patrol. Ten National Guardsmen were blocking the sidewalk leading up to the dormitory of one of the BUS members. Blount tried to diffuse any uneasiness by striking up a conversation. He recalls approaching a Guardsman standing next to a sergeant, who swung around and pointed his rifle at Blount's abdomen. Blount kept calm and the BUS members did not immediately react. The Guardsman put his rifle down. Blount stepped closer and began to ask questions: “What kind of loads are you guys packing?” The sergeant immediately smiled and replied, ‘30-caliber copper-coated armor piercing.’ I also noticed his side arm was a 45-caliber semiautomatic pistol and his rifle was a heavy-duty M-1 Garand rifle. . . . [Blount] replied, ‘Kind of heavy for a bunch of college kids.’ The sergeant shook his head in the negative and replied ‘Not really.’ Looking around at his men, he continued, ‘We used the same kind of ordnance in Hough and Glenville.’” Blount grew up in Glenville and remembers the National Guard during the Glenville Riots of 1966. Blount said once he heard the reference to Glenville and Hough, he became unsettled and sensed that the situation at Kent was extremely serious.

A number of black students at Kent State University were keenly aware of the violent interactions between African American students and various groups of law enforcement. On February 5, 1968, students in Orangeburg, South Carolina, were “embroiled in a battle to desegregate a nearby bowling alley,” which led to riots. Three days later roadblocks were set up around South Carolina State and students were encouraged to remain on campus—hundreds of Guardsmen, state troopers, and police officers watched as a large crowd of students built a bonfire. Henry Smith, a sophomore, decided to add something to the bonfire when officers began to shoot for no apparent reason. At the conclusion of the flurry of bullets, two South Carolina State students were found dead, including one high school student, and approximately thirty-four were wounded.

76. Wilson, Involvement, 340.
78. Ibid.
79. Ibid.
80. Ibid.
81. Rogers, The Black Campus Movement, 132.
most in their backs. This riot became known as the Orangeburg Massacre. In 1969, a twenty-year-old honors student was found dead with a shot to the back of his head after National Guardsmen and policemen arrived on campus in the midst of a protest on North Carolina State’s campus. Consequently, these incidents and other similar occurrences would go on to serve as shared cultural experiences that dictated the perceptions of law enforcement by the African American community. Kent State’s BUS’s heightened awareness was merely a reflection of the police brutality already occurring in communities of color and campuses around the country, primarily in the South. Nearly all the black students at Kent State heeded the warning and were not present during the upcoming rally on May 4, being fully aware of the potential dangers of armed National Guardsmen.

The National Guard extended its presence into Monday, and classes continued on campus as usual. Though the noon rally was banned, two thousand people, including Kent State students and nonstudents, were present near the Commons (a popular grassy hillside on campus for student gatherings), the National Guard’s orders to disperse were followed by chanting, rock throwing, and curses by members in the crowd. The Guardsmen attempted to diffuse the crowd with tear-gas canisters, but they did not dissuade the demonstrators. It was not until the Guardsmen began to move toward the crowd with their bayonets that the protesters begin to retreat. They managed to push the demonstrators to a nearby athletic practice field, possibly hoping this action would break up the protesters, but the group continued with its “verbal abuse” and rocks. Shortly after, “the guardsmen then retraced their line of march. Some demonstrators followed as close as 20 yards, but most were between 60 and 75 yards behind the guard. Near the crest of Blanket Hill, the guard turned and 28 guardsmen fired between 61 and 67 shots in 13 seconds toward the parking lot.”

Sue Misheff, a freshman in 1970, remembers the shock that she felt on May 4. “I didn’t really see the shooting occur. We heard the shots, we saw the smoke from the guns, and we just thought it was fireworks or blanks. None of us even

83. Rogers, The Black Campus Movement, 139.
84. May 1–4 Chronology.
85. Ibid.
86. Ibid.
87. Ibid.
dreamed that they would be using live ammunition. But then I remember seeing a boy run over the hill with a T-shirt, a bloody T-shirt screaming that they were killing people. And I just went into shock at that moment; I just couldn’t believe that could be happening on such a beautiful spring day here.”

Soon ambulatory care arrived on the scene and efforts by faculty to calm the crowd began. In all, four students were killed (Jeffrey Miller, Sandy Scheuer, Allison Krause, and William Schroeder) and nine students (Joseph Lewis, John Cleary, Thomas Grace, Alan Canfora, Dean Kahler, Douglas Wrentmore, James Russell, Robert Stamps, and Donald MacKenzie) were wounded at the hands of the National Guard.

In the immediate aftermath, BUS leadership prepared for possible retaliation. Blount told his cadre, “the new radicals” of BUS, to get armed. He wanted to be prepared for any additional confrontations that might take place between the National Guard and specifically the black students remaining on campus. “I figured that black people especially on campus would be the victims of what we now call a ‘drive-by,’ after hearing rumors that men in pick-up trucks were on their way to defend the campus against radicals.” Blount wanted to return to Cleveland to prepare for any additional violent encounters and then to campus. “My job and the job of any black man on campus was to protect the sisterhood. We had to be ready and able to do just that. I knew that when I got back from Cleveland we would be able to hold our own in any confrontation.”

Blount said he made it off campus, but during his return he ran into an incredible traffic jam. He assumed news outlets from all over the state were coming in to report on the Kent State story, in addition to other people trying to get on campus. After turning on his car radio, Blount learned that President White announced the closure of the university, so Blount and his cadre of BUS members never made it back to campus.

Ten days later, the shootings occurred at Jackson State, a historically black university, with very little attention in the mainstream media. Two black male students were found dead after police officers shot into a crowd of protesters, who had been upset with the university’s handling of various grievances expressed by students ranging from quality of student life, to curfew, food,
pedestrian safety, and the discovery of a bell previously used to summon students to a class and chapel like slaves.”

KSU alum Pittman recalls his reaction when learning about this incident following the Kent State shootings. His lack of disbelief about Kent State tied directly to what had been happening and was continuing to occur to black students throughout the South and around the country.

I didn’t have that much feelings myself. I was too busy trying to make sure that I was going to be—trying to see about my own education at Kent State and that I didn’t really hear about Jackson State until probably a few months later, even after the Jackson State event even occurred. But the fact that it did take place, I didn’t feel any surprises. I had known about other shootings that occurred at Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, that it wasn’t really a surprise. It was just something that was just accepted—to me.

During the closure of the university, several commissions, including the Commission on KSU Violence (CKSUV) and the Commission to Implement a Commitment to Non-Violence, were formed in an attempt to ascertain what led up to the violence that unfolded at Kent State. Both commissions were interested in BUS. BUS students warned black students to stay away from the May 4 rally. In response to these inquiries, Wilson responded firmly that BUS was engaged in activism that was meant to address the concerns of Kent State’s black student constituency who had joined the ranks of other academic institutions entrenched in fulfilling the demands put forth by the black student movement. As BUS transitioned to a new president, the rally on May 1 was the leadership’s opportunity to speak directly to President White’s administration. The rally that BUS held on May 1, 1970, was not a springboard for the antiwar demonstrations and violence that followed on May 4. Wilson said, “Oh, yes, Black folk become very visible in a crisis. At other times they are invisible. I think this speaks well to racist perceptions.”

In the aftermath of the shootings, Blount said, “Everyone thinks violence is over at Kent State University.” He lamented in an interview with the Cleveland Plain Dealer that the media did not mention the plight of blacks

94. Wilson, Two Years Involvement, 340.
95. Ibid.
96. Wilson, Two Years Involvement, 341-42.
when Kent disturbances were reported. Blount added that blacks, including himself, were shot at by Kent police the day before the shootings on May 4 and arrested.97 Blount said, “The night before the May 4 shootings, Portage County sheriff’s deputies shot at 15 brothers. . . .”98 However, the Plain Dealer states that there were no official reports of the incidents alleged by Blount.

In the long shadow of the antiwar movement, Blount was eventually removed from campus after several intense encounters between him and President White. The black campus movement managed to usher in a series of achievements, most notably the Cultural Center and the eventual creation of the Department of Pan African Studies, further integration of campus athletics, an increase in financial support for cultural events, and representation on various committees regarding campus development.

The invisibility or absence of black students from the majority of the hundreds, if not thousands, of images taken on May 4 and the days leading up to the antiwar rally tells a specific narrative, one of shared cultural experiences amongst students of color who were keenly aware of the risk . . . the risk of being wounded or killed. There is an unspoken racialization that occurs when there is a potential for violence, a conscious fear for people of color that is historically rooted and bears out in events like the Orangeburg Massacre. Though the incident in South Carolina predates Kent State, it received little national attention, “even though three black students died, in addition to students being shot in the face, hips, in their spine, and in the soles of their shoes as they tried to run away. A total of three hundred law enforcement officers were present in Orangeburg (including the FBI, Army Intelligence, and the National Guard.”99 On May 4, 1970, the black campus movement and the antiwar movements at Kent State were no longer two worlds but one. The primarily white antiwar movement suffered in a way that had not been felt before, yet it was familiar territory to the black student activists at Kent State who were privy to a network of realities at other institutions that mirrored what their white classmates at Kent State endured.

The black campus and antiwar movements at Kent State are intertwined in the fabric of its institutional history and further investigation will only prove to uncover the lingering impact of each one.

98. Ibid.