Student Riots at Kent State University

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April 7, 2014
The riots at Kent State University occurred in 1970 and saw college students confront national guardsmen. The primary cause of the Kent State riots was President Richard Nixon’s order to the United States military to bomb Vietnam’s neighbor, Cambodia. The order to bomb can be viewed politically, economically, and socially and can relate to the United States involvement in Afghanistan in 2001 when U.S. troops were located in Iraq in an effort to catch terrorist leaders that fled to the neighboring country.

In 1967 an attack by North Vietnam on 26 cities in South Vietnam during the Vietnamese holiday of Tet indicated that the war was far from being over despite the fact that General William Westmoreland said "I am absolutely certain that whereas in 1965 the enemy was winning, today he is certainly losing." (This-Westmoreland) This led many Americans to question the country’s purpose after three years of fighting. In 1970, President Richard Nixon in an effort to stop supply routes from North Vietnam through Cambodia and into South Vietnam, ordering the bombing of those routes in Cambodia. The result was months of protest and riotous actions by college students across America on their own college campuses. One of them was Kent State University located in Kent, Ohio.

The United States’ decision to bomb Cambodia has many political reasons. First of all, the decision to bomb the country was never approved by the United States Congress. Authorization was from President Nixon to his military leaders and was an attempt to take out the North Vietnamese supply centers. Also, after the bombings occurred it sent the country of Cambodia into political turmoil with their leader Prince Norodom Sihanouk losing control and leading to the rise of Pol Pot (who later in history was responsible for the deaths of one to two million people). (Pol) Nixon was receiving growing opposition to his policy in Indochina with
representatives and senators in the U.S. Congress. He ordered bombings to take place in deeper penetration areas in order to put an end to the communist activities in Cambodia and Vietnam.

Nixon said to his national security advisor, Henry Kissinger, “They have got to go in there and I mean really go in . . . I want everything that can fly to go in there and crack the hell out of them. There is no limitation on mileage and there is no limitation on budget. Is that clear?” (Kiernan)

For political reasons, Richard Nixon decided to order the more in depth bombing of Cambodia which led to student protests at Kent State University.

There are also economic reasons to consider for the bombing of Cambodia. First of all, the use of weaponry results in replacing that weaponry which is the responsibility of American manufacturers. This leads to higher employment rates and can satisfy the public even if the public views the actions wrong. A total of 3,630 flights over Cambodia dropped 110,000 tons of bombs during a 14-month period through April 1970. (This-U.S.) Secondly, the Southeast Asian region is filled with necessary resources that the United States did not want to be controlled by the communists. Trade to this area makes up the fourth largest exporting area for the United States. Recently U.S. trade was $198 billion, making ASEAN (the group of Southeast Asian countries) the fourth largest U.S. export market and fifth largest overall trading partner. Trade in services with ASEAN countries totaled $30 billion, with exports of $19 billion and imports of $11 billion, giving the United States an $8 billion services trade surplus with the ASEAN countries. U.S. foreign direct investment in the ASEAN countries exceeded $159 billion, led by investments in manufacturing, finance and insurance, and non-bank holding companies. (Association) It is evident that the United States held a strong economic interest in Southeast Asia and the effort to keep communism out of the area was to keep U.S. trade strong.
For these economic reasons, Nixon ordered the bombing of Cambodia that led to student protest on the campus of Kent State University.

Nixon’s order to bomb Cambodia can be seen through the effects of the culture of both the United States and Southeast Asia. Allowing communist control of Southeast Asia would affect the lifestyle of Vietnamese and Cambodians; a lifestyle that would limit people’s political and economic rights and allow them to be controlled by a governmental institution that showed more concern for the state than the individual. In America, student’s reacted to the bombings because they saw that their own freedoms and rights were being overshadowed by the decisions of an oppressive government led by the Nixon administration. American students could envision a change in their own lifestyle due to the decisions of a few leaders. For these cultural reasons, Nixon order the bombings and American students reacted.

The bombings of Cambodia can best be related to more current situations between Iraq and the United States. In the wave of terrorism on the United States, the American government ordered an invasion of Iraq to find terrorist leaders in 2001. This led to an overflow of military activity into the neighboring country of Afghanistan. Both the Cambodian and Afghanistan invasions had no congressional approval. Both attacks have opened up the topic of bringing civilians into war. And in both cases, the question of the aftermath of insurgencies rising to power puts question to whether the tactic is a smart tactic.

The bombing of Cambodia by the Nixon administration was the primary cause of the student riots at Kent State University. The bombings provoked student action and resulted in four dead. The government was held responsible and affected the public’s trust in our national government. The country still holds distrustful feelings towards government today.
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