Having been at a good many of these commemorations, I often find there is too much said and not enough really heard. Hence my remarks will be brief. My talk today concerns the generational memory of May 4th or what my professor terms the “past that exists in the present.”

One means of dealing with controversial historic events is too ignore what happened in the hope that the past will no longer burden the present. Previous University administrations, encumbered by the memory of the May 4th killings, tried to mute the memory of antiwar struggle on the Kent State campus. They failed. The current administration no longer seems to fear the
past and recognizes the need to somehow acknowledge what happened here more than three decades ago.

Another way of steering clear of periods of controversy is to concede that an occasion has relevance while denying the political basis of the event. For nearly one hundred years, this was the fate assigned to the American Civil War. Public history in our national battlefield parks emphasized the martial courage of the combatants and managed to ignore the very reason why hundreds of thousands of men killed one another. Reflecting this same historical amnesia, the editor of the Kent Stater complained recently that speakers on
May 4th are “political….divisive….intolerant…. [and that they] Sometimes demonize people.” He finds such speeches “shameful” and inappropriate for May 4th commemorations. His reaction is like that of many Americans who have an understandable need to be pleased or comforted by history irrespective of whether it is remembered or received past. Yet as historian David Blight reminds us in his latest book Race & Reunion, “memory is sometimes that human burden that we can neither live with nor without.”

Kent State and the national uprising against the expansion of the conflict into Cambodia represented, of course, a mass reaction by millions of people in opposition to a divisive war. The killings
unleashed a nationwide storm of campus protests. It was not too much to say, as the president later would, that “a sense of turmoil [existed] bordering on insurrection.” The Stater editor would prefer that we selectively take stock of May 4th leaving out its very essence. This is how the Civil War could be taught for generations with virtually no mention of slavery. Like the battlefields of the Civil War, people with strong and opposing belief systems collided here during a four day period in a series of demonstrations over the heated exercise of their convictions.

Only so much can be done with the metaphor of Civil War, however, because battles are usually fought by opposing groups of armed men. At
Kent, one side was outfitted with bayonets, M-1 rifles, 12 gauge shotguns, and 45 caliber automatics. Some in the opposition were equipped with stones. While the guardsmen were outnumbered, the students were outgunned. The disproportionate casualties reflected the disparity of arms.

We have discussed several faulty ways of dealing with the past, including forgetting memories from long ago and constructing mediated history with the politics left out. Remembering the nature of the struggle of 1970 is one of the best weapons we have to resist warfare and every day injustice.

The final way of imperfectly dealing with the past is to replace the memory of one historical
tradition with another. Ohio is known as the “mother of presidents.” More specifically it is the mother of Republican presidents. In a bid to deny the M4TF the opportunity to conduct this commemoration, the Republican dominated Allocations Committee used virtually all of your student funding to bring the actual mother of a president to this campus. While her talk was ostensibly “nonpolitical” the presence of Barbara Bush served those seeking to preserve one political culture while trying to obliterate another; the political memory of the May 4th struggle. Thankfully they were unsuccessful for their efforts brought renewed national focus to the bloody infamy of this campus and fresh attention to the murderous deeds of
the Ohio National Guard.

Every May this day brings us together to commemorate six people who lost their lives in the movement against the Southeast Asian war—Bill, Jeff, Allison, Phillip Gibbs and James Earl Green and Sandy. I met Sandy only once, sometime in April 1970. The next time I saw her I lay in the same ambulance as attendants struggled mightily to save her life. It is a memory that will never leave me. For her unwilling sacrifice Sandy and the others will be long remembered. Kent and Jackson State will never be truly past until we no longer have the type of society that sanctions such lethal state behavior.
In conclusion, your presence here today confirms the commanding importance of history and affirms what someone once wrote, "The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting." Your participation contributes to the struggle against power. Your concern keeps alive the personal and historical memory of those who died. We, the Kent State families, thank you for helping us and the nation to remember.