STEPHEN E. TERRELL
Creative Director · Brand Strategist · Fractional CMO
stepheneterrell.com ·
stephen@stepheneterrell.com · 1-855-UNBLAND

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They once protested power. *Now they defend it.*



BY STEPHEN E. TERRELL
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On the 55th anniversary of the Kent State shootings, Kent State University student Jack Grandfield writes a note with chalk in the parking lot where four students were killed by Ohio National Guard fire on May 4, 1970. Joshua Gunter, cleveland.com

There was a time when dissent in America carried real risk. Not social media risk. Not donor backlash. Real consequences: arrest, injury, death.

For me, that history was never abstract. As a student at Kent State University, I walked past it every day — Taylor Hall, the lawn where students were shot in 1970, the School of Journalism, where a student photographer captured Pulitzer-Prize-winning images of state violence. Carrying my books to class, I was reminded daily that protest once cost lives — and that journalism existed to document power when it turned on civilians.

That irony is impossible to ignore now. At a moment when political leaders openly encourage skepticism toward the press, journalism is increasingly framed not as a safeguard of democracy but as its enemy. The buildings still stand. What has changed is how easily truth is dismissed — and how casually accountability is undermined.

That's why what I see today is so jarring.

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stepheneterrell.com ·
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Many from the generation once defined by resistance now respond to modern protest with silence — or worse, contempt. This isn't nostalgia. It's accountability. Yes, many Vietnam-era protesters later aligned with conservative politics. That shift isn't mysterious. Time does that. Comfort does that. Mortgages replace marches. Fear replaces urgency. None of this makes them frauds.

What's harder to explain is the selective amnesia that followed.

Too many of the same voices that once defended disruption as necessary now insist dissent be polite, orderly, and convenient. They support protests only when they don't interrupt anything. As if courage can be scheduled between meetings. That isn't growth. It's a retreat.

I've watched this happen inside my own family. People who once questioned authority now view modern demonstrations with suspicion or hostility. These are not uninformed people. They are educated, accomplished, and thoughtful. One is a Harvard Law School graduate. The change didn't arrive all at once. It crept in — through repetition, fear dressed up as patriotism, and a belief that order matters more than accountability.

Media plays a role. Many Americans now get their "news" from performance-based platforms that prioritize opinion over journalism. Their hosts are entertainers, not reporters. They owe their audiences loyalty, not verification. When performance is mistaken for reporting, belief replaces evidence — and truth becomes optional.

At Kent State, journalism students took an oath — explicit and practical. Verify before publishing. Resist power and influence. Place facts above ideology. It wasn't symbolic. It was the standard. Anything less was a breach of the profession.

Today's protests are not abstract. In Minneapolis last month, federal immigration enforcement escalated into violence that left civilians dead despite public warnings from local leaders. Armed agents confronted civilians in public streets. That is not protection. It is domination.

Protest is only celebrated in hindsight. While it's happening, it is always inconvenient, disruptive, and uncomfortable. History never applauds dissent in real time. It applauds it later — once the danger has passed and the lesson feels safe.

For Ohio, a state that has already paid in blood for speaking out, this moment should feel uncomfortably familiar. The lesson of Kent State was never about chaos. It was about conscience.

Silence is not neutrality. It is a choice. And history, as it always does, will keep score.

Terrell is a marketing executive, creative director, and Kent State University journalism alumnus. He lives in Ohio.

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