

Radicals, Rhetoric, and the War

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Radicals, Rhetoric, and the War

The University of Nevada in the
Wake of Kent State

Brad E. Lucas

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RADICALS, RHETORIC, AND THE WAR

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*This book is dedicated to
Lyn, Kayla, and Corey
&
Elaine and Rachel*

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Series Editors' Foreword

At the end of the 1960s in opposition to the Vietnam War and in sympathy with the civil rights and women's liberation movements, protests erupted on college campuses. The University of California at Berkeley experienced the "free speech movement" earlier in the decade; in 1968, on the east coast, Columbia University ignited, forcing that institution to close after a Students for Democratic Society (SDS) demonstration led to the takeover of several campus buildings and a violent clash between demonstrators and the police. The turmoil, not limited to the United States, brought anti-war protests to the Universities of Tokyo, Prague, and Paris, and several campuses in Italy. At the conclusion of the 1969–1970 academic year, unprecedented violence erupted on an American campus when national guardsmen killed four students at Kent State University in Ohio on May 4, 1970. The incursion of American troops into Cambodia on April 30 had set off a wave of protests that spread to virtually every major campus in the nation. Across the United States, more than five hundred colleges and universities closed. In *Radicals, Rhetoric, and the War*, Brad Lucas, who was born less than a year before the Kent State episode, tells the story of the events during this period that occurred at the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR), a school that did not make national headlines but where the local impact was significant.

Lucas could do so because the University of Nevada Oral History Program (UNOHP) had the foresight to establish the Governor's Day oral history project. In 1970, Governor's Day, an annual Reserved Officer Training Corps (ROTC) awards ceremony, occurred the day after the Kent State shootings and became the target of anti-military sentiment. The disruption that occurred at UNR on that day increased campus polarization and had long term consequences for the university and one professor who lost his job—and for academic freedom generally. Shortly after the incident, the UNOHP interviewed students, faculty, administrators, and observers about the events that had ripped the campus and the community asunder. In so doing, the UNOHP interviewers put oral history to use for one of the technique's many versatile purposes: *to record the present for the future*. While oral history usually records memories of the past from the perspective of the present, it can be employed to preserve a record of a contemporary event for future researchers. This is what happened in Reno immediately following Governor's Day and its aftermath, although the untranscribed tapes sat in an archival box until 1998 when the University Archivist led Lucas to this treasure trove of material. With the encouragement of the

staff at the UNOHP, who transcribed the tapes, Lucas edited them and added a special dimension to this work by re-interviewing several of the participants. In so doing, he created the opportunity to compare what was said in the original interviews with memories expressed almost thirty years later, a valuable approach not often available to oral historians.

Lucas's interest in rhetoric, language, and symbolic action informs this study as well, and helps to insure that its significance extends beyond that of just another account of a local college protest during the Vietnam War era. For him, "The oral history interview situation is a rhetorical event." Participants in campus protests battled over the means of communication and representation. Words became weapons in the cultural conflict that divided America. By offering us this framework, *Radicals, Rhetoric, and the War* contributes another dimension to the Palgrave Studies in Oral History series, which attempts to bring to readers cutting edge work in the field while making it accessible to students, scholars, and general readers alike. As the tenth volume in the series, Lucas's study joins topics as diverse as China's Cultural Revolution, Argentina's "Dirty War," and African American activism in the Mississippi Delta, and helps to demonstrate the ability of oral history to illuminate an infinite variety of topics.

Bruce M. Stave
University of Connecticut

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Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission

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The daunting task of interviewing academics, judges, activists, and politicians brought me into contact with wise and wonderful people I might not have otherwise met. In particular, I would like to thank Paul Adamian, Joe Crowley, Warren d'Azevedo, Frankie Sue Del Papa, John Doherty, David Harvey, Robert Harvey, Anne Howard, Procter Hug, Jr., James Hulse, Fred Maher, N. Edd Miller, Jim Richardson, David Slemmons, Lorena Stookey, and particularly Bob Mayberry (whose path I continue to cross in the strangest of places). Thank you all for your time and interest.

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