

AHA Statement on 2024 Campus Protests

Approved by AHA Council, May 2024

The American Historical Association, three-fourths of whose members are either faculty, staff, or students at institutions of higher education, deplores recent decisions among college and university administrators to draw on local and state police forces to evict peaceful demonstrators. It is appropriate for universities to establish and enforce, through fair and transparent procedures, reasonable and content-neutral restrictions on the time, place, and manner of protests and other assemblies. These procedures should not, however, deprive students, faculty, and staff of their right to gather, speak, debate, and protest.

Historical thinking reminds us that the use of force to suppress peaceful public protest at institutions of higher education endangers students, faculty, and staff. This month marks the 54th anniversary of the killing of students by National Guard troops at Kent State University, and by local and state police at Jackson State College. Those terrible events, along with the infamous “Orangeburg Massacre” of 1968, teach us that the introduction of outside armed law enforcement, and even worse, military units, escalates tensions rather than leads to constructive resolution of disputes. The AHA urges everyone involved to learn from that history and turn away from the violent escalation we are now seeing on campuses.

The AHA also urges administrators to recognize the fundamental value of peaceful protest on college and university campuses. We understand that administrators must do their utmost to ensure the safety of members of their campus communities. We also understand that loud and strongly worded differences of opinion on important, sometimes existential, issues can create a deeply uncomfortable, even disturbing environment for some community members. But as historians we emphasize that encountering ideas that might make us uncomfortable is central to the educational process. Suppressing the expression of those ideas by community members engaged in peaceful protest doesn’t make our campuses safer. It makes them weaker, and more dangerous places to be.

We understand that higher education leadership must make tough decisions. But “tough” does not and should not necessarily imply the use of force; nor does it mean banning from campus members of our communities who peacefully oppose institutional policies. It means making the often difficult decisions required to build and maintain communities committed to academic freedom and inquiry.