

An Oral History of Thomas Kolton

Jesse T. White

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SUMMARY

The tape of Thomas Kolton is insightful and interesting because it portrays a man and his suffering here in the United States. It was very difficult time in American history to attend college. The Vietnam War did not just affect those who served there but, also those who chose to do their fighting here. They fought with their voices and hearts.

A valid point is made when the National Guard and campus police are getting ready to gas the protestors. Foreign exchange students facing the fire with young Americans. They make the important statement that you do not necessarily have to be born here in the United States to take pride in the red, white, and blue. The foreign exchange students decide to use those rights allotted to them by being on United States soil.

One other valid point is made about the absolute power of universities in a wartime situation. Imagine what professors would feel like if they failed a student and then he is sent to war and killed. This must have been an overwhelming feeling among professors, since a lot of them participated in the university rallies. The professors were also the ones to take legal action against the National Guard. This was a dangerous route to take with your job on the line.

Vietnam veterans on a whole would probably not be so disappointed in college students of this era. The disappointment would not have been as great had they been better informed of stateside events. The college students did not just speak out of fear for themselves but, also out of fear of losing loved ones

and good young Americans. Soldiers will always suffer more than civilians when the battle is not waged on American soil. Make no mistake the true war was in Vietnam. Suffering does not mean you have to carry a rucksack on your back and pack an automatic weapon. It means you have to care and soldiers and college students, like Thomas, did just that.

TRANSCRIPTION

Thomas: "This was a professional hit?"

Ernst: "No one was ever convicted?"

Thomas: "No, no, no one was ever picked up for anything like that."

Ernst: "How did they leave it in the press, what was, how,, was it finally settled?"

Thomas: "Well, it was just kind offorgotten really."

Thomas: "They picked up this girl, John Y Brown Sr. tells me, gosh, he just picked up her to have somebody don't let her go."

Ernst: "Is she a student?"

Thomas: "She was just an innocent passer by, uh, I think she was a student, I'm pretty sure she was. She was just walking by on the street carrying a pop bottle."

Ernst: "and then the building had been encoded with a?"

Thomas: "Coded inside apparently."

Ernst: "From what you told me it sounded like it's a controlled burn."

Thomas: "It was a controlled burn, exactly."

Ernst: "That's amazing."

Thomas: "Well, what's amazing is every time that uh, no one wants to speak out about how we saved this campus, I wanna know what did he save it from, himself? That's all I can read into it."

Ernst: "and he was on the scene that night."

Thomas: "He was on the scene that night, he claimed he was awakened after the fire started but obviously, here because that building was, he was, in a fight for the governor's mansion and if the fire started at midnight, you tell me? Even if you get in your car at midnight and drive to Lexington that's still gonna take you half an hour. So, uh, if he had to get up out of bed and get dressed and drive to Lexington, one of the interesting things about that is he would say ah my daughter left in the Blazer. What a perfect cover. Oh, I would never do anything like that. My daughters saw me."

Ernst: "Oh, so his daughter was on campus?"

Thomas: "Apparently, his daughter lives in the dorm at the time. That's what they say. To me that would be just one more piece of good cover on his behalf. We'll walk back up here and I will show you the bricks they had to replace on that building, that scorched building, with those flames shorting out the back. (10 second pause) I don't know if that it or, oh yeah this is the place. Huh, it's amazing after that fire was going, there was a lot of people, one they had been screaming. How they wanted to beat up protestors, like football players the that followed the guard was on the scene, They where all marching with us. Nobody got beat up that I remember."

Ernst: "So, that really brought the whole"

Thomas: "Yeah, this event, this event really, it really annoyed more people that I think were probably on the fringe. Uh, there might have been people who hated long hairs at the time, the hippies whatever you want, all of them but, by and large. When all of a sudden, marches that would have amounted to 100 people or 200 at the most, became marchers of a thousand people."

Ernst: "What was the consensus amongst the students about the fire? What did your group say? Is most of the opinion of that you were? Or did they just, I mean we just spoke this now that the Guard was on campus, the state troopers are on campus, Did they forget the fire or what?"

Thomas: "I think the fire was, . . . the fire was an old unrelated building. It was actually called the old Air Force ROTC building, I think they only really did Folk dance and modern dance classes and I think really didn't do all that much with their thing and like I said these were old woken buildings that were left around. Was kind of being torn down right and left anyway."

Ernst: "Were they barracks type buildings?"

Thomas: "Uh, I don't think, if it had been something like this up like this bullae up here that might be where people could go to a an old historic structure. I don't think anybody really focused that much on the great loss of this building, whether they made an opinion or not, about what went on. I don't know. But, I think once a curfew was declared nobody could walk around on campus of groups more than 3 I think it was. Uh, and the guard started arriving uh, it was final's week and people had really. We all skipped finals as a form of protest. In retrospect, It might not have been smart cause ti didn't help my grade point average any. (Laughter) But, uh, it, it, it really made took people away from worrying about their finals and worrying more about their own future, and their own future, and their won strong convictions on whether they should take a stand or not. A lot of people had obviously came out of the woodwork and decided to show up for rally's, which were illegal at that time. One of the great rally's was right behind the student center here. Steve Wright there's the person you should talk to because he's from Southern Appalachia and lives somewhere down in Georgia now. But, you'll find pictures of him standing in the old archway of the student center."

Ernst: "He was the SGA president at that time?"

Thomas: "Yeah,"

Ernst: "What was he like?"

Thomas: "He was a great guy. He was a person who basically, uh, you would have thought he was mister straight and narrow, he kind of looked like Needelmeyer out of Animal House. I don't know if you remember any of that.

Ernst: "Yeah, yeah,"

Thomas: "Blond haired guy, looked real straight, but all of a sudden this guy was taking a stand with us and, uh, to me he was one of the great people I met on campus at this time. Taking the fall and getting arrested, uh, he was, to me eh was great. He was at the right place, at the right time and as far as I'm concerned took the right extent on the issue."

Ernst: "Were there any other leaders at that time that stood up?"

Thomas: "Oh, oh, sure. You know we had a lot of great people come through campus that year too, we had Timothy Leary and Kuntzler, uh, if I can think of some other names. I think he was the head of the SDS at that time. I'm not sure where he is now. I know he would be an interesting person to talk to. Steve Wright and Lou Kolton would be the main ones."

Ernst: "What was Koltons position at that time, do you remember?"

Thomas: "I think he was the SDS at the time on campus, at least for that year. He was a good man to talk to."

Ernst: "So what happens, the Guard comes on campus, the state troopers, curfew, does all this come in the wake of the building going up?"

Thomas: "Ahem, which is all that come in the week of Kent State and Cambodia, it was a very dreadful week."

Ernst: "The finals were off?"

Thomas: "Yeah, the charge up to the 18th floor of the office tower. The elevators were blocked, so we went up the stairs. All the way up to the 18th floor. Then I remember the elevator doors opening and the campus police coming out with foot lockers and billy clubs, and Hah! They didn't go around and trash anybody. It was uh, hard to take the campus police seriously at that time. That week evolved into a lot of things of course. When the May rally, which I guess was probably; I'll have to check the calendar. It was after the fire I guess. The National Guard was here, I'm guessing there were 150 guards here. They had their little green trucks out at the administration building. The state troopers were basically parked back up here at this parking lot. Behind Martin Luther King and Lexington Avenue. Then we had the big meeting, an illegal meeting before they had all those trees planted back there. To make sure they didn't have two meetings, protest meetings, large numbers of people, back out in the back of the office, I mean the student center. We were all gathered there illegally. Then someone comes on down the road screaming, "the troopers are coming! The troopers are coming!" People started to move out pretty quickly and then you look back at the back of the old armory building. The National Guard started to fumble around and people started scattering like flies. When it was all over, there were six of us who didn't move. Me and two other normal looking, protesting Americans, and three foreign exchange students. They were either Indian or Pakistan type. So there is the six of us that didn't move and uh, by this time you realized this walking up here. It goes up to the side walkway."

Thomas: "Here if we step up one, three up one, there it was lined with state troopers. The National Guard was lined the other way. So you probably had, I would guess, probably 200 together. Uniformed state troopers in full riot gear, enclosing us. I know now how Custer must have felt at his last stand but, I kept thinking if I'm going down there is gonna be a lot of people taking pictures. We were kind of

taunting them asking, "If they had beliefs and values, this, that and the other?" I really had a difficult decision to make that day. I had this stick under my blue jean jacket and uh, if I had to save myself. But, eventually they all dropped their masks, and put on their gas masks. They all looked like giant insects. I don't know if you've ever seen what uniformed Guardsmen look like wearing gas masks. There were 150 to 200 of them all putting on their tear gas, whatever, for six people. They sent in this team of about three guys carrying, like a big backpack with a big tube. Their smogger and they want that behind us and uh, were having trouble getting this thing to work. Just then I take out this stick, from under my jacket, shove it up that tube and walk away. At that moment I thought no, these, these National Guardsmen are just young kids. There is probably a redneck amongst them who would open fire on me. The minute I pull out anything, that looks like a weapon, or do anything weird. So, I bit the bullet and kept it in my jacket. We started to ask them, "what's a matter you can't get that thing working?" "Do you have a problem with this thing?" It was about that time that thing blew out the biggest cloud. It was pepper gas. They just smoked us. You know there was six of us and we were breathing fire. Our eyes were burning, all I remember is taking these little bitty breaths because I couldn't breathe. It was like smoke, like really breathing fire. All I remember is getting down on my hands and knees and crawling towards the stone wall. I got to it and rolled over to the edge. I assured that the other did about the same. I started tumbling towards the student center where the glass doors are, somebody grabbed my arm and drug me in that building. One hundred and fifty to two hundred uniformed guards and troopers blasting the six of us and then they don't even apprehend any of us. They let out so much gas, it was in May and they had the windows opened up here in the Good Samaritan Hospital. All of that gas went up into the windows of the hospital. They had plenty of patients up there. That was a interesting time and place. There is some pictures we can get out of the archives. The major picture that was taken, or put in the paper at the time. It's probably a good picture, guys like the foreign exchange students. They were totally out of place there and in that war. This picture went out in the paper. You would think they were gassing a large group, because everyone was scattering.

Ernst: "I wonder why they gassed you? It doesn't seem like an economical use of resources."

Thomas: "I guess they had to. They were ordered to go in and disperse the crowd. The crowd was down to six. It was a, between being there, being gassed at point blank range. I mean this thing was standing right behind my head with this tube. I need to find out something for us. If there is more photos of that. There was quite a crowd gathered watching from the glass as we walked through the campus area. All of those windows, those are wall to wall faces. I remember everybody looking up there and I remember everyone watching. It was a case of overkill as I said, it was Custer's last stand. There is two times I don't know why I wasn't arrested. Two times that I got lucky, not that I had committed any crimes.

Ernst: "I can't believe you were never interrogated about the fire over there. You were never called by the police?"

Thomas: "Doesn't that speak a little about the, well he decided that I didn't do it."

Ernst: "Yeah, it's amazing that you weren't stopped."

Thomas: "The Frankfort firebugs did it."

Ernst: "You weren't even questioned on the spot by the police?"

Thomas: "Nope."

Ernst: "If they might have done an arson investigation, did they come talk to you?"

Thomas: "Nope."

Ernst: "Did they take your name down?"

Thomas: "Nope."

Ernst: "That's amazing."

Thomas: "Well you see things were probably more expected. Corruption was almost considered normal. You had Mayor Daly in Chicago on the one side. It was just more tolerant then. How could allow such a thing. We buy our guests two years later with the Watergate break-in. Then all those questions start getting asked. Back then it was almost like you just expected it. It was the norm. So here you get to

me, you have a gunner who can kill two birds with one stone. You can have a building torched and have it squelched. As much as the campus uprising only that it really wasn't. There certainly wasn't any arrests made that was the only violent act made during the entire thing. Really you know within, I have to check the dates on it. A law suit was filed for bringing in the Guard. He had to appear down here at the Court House."

Ernst: "Who would have filed that?"

Thomas: "I believe a university professor organization might have filed that. We could look into that it might be worth asking who filed the lawsuit. Although what's interesting about that was John Breckinridge who later became our Congressman, was the Attorney General at the time. A Democrat had to represent William Earn, Republican Governor."

Ernst: "Interesting?"

Thomas: "I was able to attend, I think, several days of that. Yeah, it was, it didn't take long for the whole campus to realize what happened here. Why did uh? I'm not sure John Otis Singletary ordered or asked for all of this. I do know that in those days the Lexington Police Department were pretty big people. They resented having state police brought in. As a matter of fact, later in the week we were. After this meeting and such when we finally gathered a fairly large march. We basically found ourselves with no place to go."