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Kill the Death Penalty

Dennis McGuire lingered in agony for fifteen minutes at his January 16, 2014, execution, one of the longest executions in the state of Ohio since it reinstated the death penalty in 1999.

According to witnesses, he gasped for breath and made loud snorting sounds as he died. His executioners experimented with a new combination of lethal drugs that proved tormenting for the fifty-three-year-old condemned man (Welsh-Huggins). This case vividly illustrates the errors that can be made while carrying out executions, and these errors are by no means limited to using the wrong drugs or causing the prisoners pain. Our justice system can even make the gravest error of all: executing innocent people. The death penalty may have had some use in eighteenth and nineteenth century America, when prison security was not sufficient to protect the public from dangerous criminals, but with the high-security prisons we have today, there is no reason to continue this macabre practice. The death penalty should be abolished for both ethical and practical reasons.

Most obviously, execution does not bring back the victim. It does not help the victim's family in any way; if anything, it prolongs the healing process. It hurts the victim's family because it offers them a false promise of justice, but the family finds that, instead of justice, they have only gotten the hollow satisfaction that comes with revenge. That is because ultimately, execution is revenge masquerading as justice. Author Carol Fennelly poignantly illustrates this in

her article, “The Death Penalty Is Only about Revenge.” She cites several cases of people displaying a vengeful attitude towards condemned prisoners and quotes the bloodthirsty words of a *Detroit News* columnist who wished convicted killer Timothy McVeigh would catch fire in the electric chair: “nothing smells better than a well-done mass murderer” (Mitchell 71).

Many other countries have already eliminated the death penalty: France, Germany, Spain, Italy, Ukraine, and Britain, to name a few. The United States is literally surrounded by abolitionist countries—both Canada and Mexico have done away with capital punishment. In fact, over 139 countries worldwide have abolished the death penalty (“International Views”). As of 2001, 38.5 percent of nations have abolished capital punishment outright, and 10.2 percent have abolished it *de facto*, meaning it is technically still allowed but has not been practiced in over ten years (Goldman 161). The United States of America, which calls itself a civilized nation, is the outlier in the west, stubbornly clinging to a barbaric practice that many other countries have long since done away with.

There are many advocates for abolishing the death penalty in the United States, some of whom are prominent figures. Take former Illinois governor George Ryan, for example. He instituted a moratorium on the death penalty in his state in early 2000 in response to a Chicago Tribune report that revealed that the number of Illinois death row inmates exonerated exceeded the number executed (Mills and Armstrong). Then there are people like Ray Krone, who escaped death when DNA evidence proved he was innocent. In 1992, he was arrested for the murder of a bartender in Phoenix, Arizona, and, in his own words, “convicted solely on bite mark evidence.” He is now free after over ten years in jail, including nearly three years on death row (“Ray’s Story”). Survivors of wrongful convictions are living testimony to the error-prone nature of capital punishment. Ray Krone put it best when he said, “Executing an innocent person has most

likely happened and will continue to happen until we do away with the death penalty” (“Ray’s Story”).

Proponents of capital punishment claim that the threat of death deters crime. However, statistics refute this claim. In 1997, out of the twenty states with the highest murder rates, eighteen practiced capital punishment, as did seventeen of twenty U.S. cities with the highest murder rates. From 1975 to 1985, double the number of police officers were killed in states that allow capital punishment as in states without it (Mitchell 64). Even Myron Love, who served as the presiding judge in the Texas county that accounts for 10 percent of all executions in the United States, came to the conclusion that, “We are not getting what I think we should be wanting and that is to deter crime....In fact, the result is the opposite. We’re having more violence, more crime” (Mitchell 64).

One might argue it is expensive to support these prisoners for the rest of their lives, but statistics show that it is actually more expensive to execute them. In 1997, an execution in Florida cost a whopping \$3,200,000—six times higher than the cost of life imprisonment at the time (Mitchell 64). Timothy McVeigh’s 2001 execution cost over \$100,000,000 (Bohm 135). Mark Costanzo and Lawrence T. White give several reasons for the high cost of the death penalty in their *Journal of Social Issues* article. They explain that due to the irreversible nature of the death sentence, trials for capital crimes take more time and involve more steps in every process, from investigation to jury selection. There is also a separate penalty phase in the trial, distinct from a guilt phase that determines the defendant’s guilt or innocence, in which the punishment is selected: either death or life imprisonment. Numerous experts are often called upon to help with the trial, including psychologists, medical professionals, forensic scientists, and jury selection consultants. Then there is the lengthy appeals process, which can delay a death

sentence for years and cost anywhere from \$170,000 to \$219,000, according to statistics cited by Costanzo and White. The existence of the death penalty also takes away from other programs, such as crime prevention programs, because money that could have been used for those things was spent on the equipment and staff necessary to execute prisoners (“Overview of Death Penalty” 10-12).

Execution takes a life, but sometimes it takes two. The executioners themselves can be so overwhelmed by the guilt of what they have done that they commit suicide, like New York executioner Dow Hover, who poisoned himself with carbon monoxide in 1990 (Daly). Most do not take this drastic action but nonetheless are haunted by what they have done. “As it happens, some executioners do in fact suffer delayed reactions, which may feature morbid dreams of men they have put to death,” Robert Johnson writes in his book *Death Work* (180). Even those who do not directly carry out the execution but merely assist with it are psychologically damaged. Johnson describes one man who “suffered an emotional numbness that, over time, came to affect his entire life.” The man voiced fears that his numbness indicated more serious underlying problems: “You never know when you might wake in the middle of the night in a cold sweat and you lost your mind” (182).

There are often doubts about condemned criminals’ guilt, and many inmates on death row are later proven innocent. According to the Death Penalty Information Center, as reported in the book *Deathquest II* by Robert M. Bohm, between 1973 and May 3, 2002, 24 states exonerated 100 death row inmates. Bohm states that this figure works out to approximately one prisoner spared for every eight executed (159). Author Joseph P. Shapiro writes in his article, “The Wrong Men on Death Row,” that from 1976 to 1998 roughly one person was exonerated for every seven executed (Mitchell 97). Those are just the ones we know about. The thought of how

many other criminals there are on death row that are innocent but have not yet been exonerated and, worse still, the ones for whom it is too late for exoneration, is chilling.

If we as a nation are willing to fuel hatred and revenge and even risk killing innocent people all for the sake of keeping the death penalty alive, then we need to seriously rethink our morals. Capital punishment does not improve anything in our society. Incarceration would be sufficient to protect the public, yet we still carry out the dirty work of execution. If we want to honestly call ourselves a just and civilized nation, we must give true justice to all of our citizens, including the criminals, and justice is not death. More often than not, it is simply revenge.

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