

California judge orders man electronically stunned in courtroom

John Andrews
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Every so often an event happens which captures the essence of the times better than thousands of words ever could. One such instance occurred in a Long Beach, California criminal courtroom on June 30, 1998.

The defendant, Ronnie Hawkins, was acting as his own lawyer at a sentencing hearing before Municipal Judge Joan Comparet-Cassani. A chronic substance abuser in his forties--HIV positive and burdened with a lengthy criminal record--Hawkins was facing a sentence of 25 years to life in prison under California's barbaric 'three strikes' law after being convicted of shoplifting \$265 worth of painkillers.

Below Hawkins's jail jumpsuit, he was wearing a two-pound belt with a battery pack. Manufactured by Stun Tech, Inc., the belt is designed to deliver an eight-second 50,000-volt electronic shock when activated by a transmitter controlled by the court bailiff. For two years, Los Angeles County has been placing the device on prisoners who supposedly pose a risk of flight or violence during court appearances, but it had never before been activated in a courtroom.

During the sentencing hearing Hawkins kept trying to speak over the judge. Comparet-Cassani told him, 'You are wearing a very bad instrument, and if you want to feel it, you can, but stop interrupting me.' Hawkins replied, 'You are going to electrocute me for talking?' Comparet-Cassani said, 'No, sir, but they will zap you if you keep doing it.' After Hawkins again spoke, Comparet-Cassani said, 'One more time. One more time. Go ahead.'

When Hawkins declared, 'That is unconstitutional,' Comparet-Cassani ordered the bailiff to activate the belt. Stunned observers watched Hawkins drop to the floor, his face contorting and his limbs rigid and shaking for almost 10 seconds.

'I guess that's how a guy feels who goes to the electric

chair,' Hawkins said in a later interview. 'It was like a stinging in my spine and then a lot of pain in my back. I was paralyzed for about four seconds.' Hawkins added, 'This is America. What about the Constitution? What about my rights to be protected from cruel and unusual punishment?'

This is America.

Hawkins filed a civil rights suit against the judge this week, but he will never see a dime because the Supreme Court has already given judges immunity for ordering courtroom assaults by bailiffs. Instead, Comparet-Cassani will continue to sit as a judge, with her like-minded colleagues of the California judiciary, collecting a six-figure salary for the job of defining and enforcing constitutional rights.

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