Snapshots of America's brutal society: state murder, police corruption and the expanding prison population

Kate Randall
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Judges meeting at luxury resort discuss ways to speed up executions

A group of Southern judges met last week at a luxury resort North of Atlanta, Georgia to discuss ways of expediting the death penalty. Judges from the 11th US Circuit Court of Appeals, comprising the states of Georgia, Florida and Alabama, listened to advice on how to speed up the execution process from their colleagues in Texas—a state which has executed 184 people in the last 20 years.

Judges held their "State Capital Cases Symposium" in the comfort of Chateau Elan, in Braselton, Georgia, which features seven restaurants, four golf courses, an equestrian center, pools, saunas and a winery.

One of the featured speakers was Texas federal appeals judge Edith Hollan Jones, who reportedly once complained to a defense attorney that a last-minute appeal by a death row prisoner was keeping her from her child's birthday party. Another speaker was Michael McCormick, presiding judge of the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals. McCormick opposes the 1963 US Supreme Court decision that requires states to provide lawyers to poor people charged with felonies.

Stephen Bright, director of the Southern Center for Human Rights, commented that the practices of Texas in regard to the death penalty have "all the integrity of professional wrestling."

Florida defends use of electric chair to state's high court

Lawyers for Florida State Attorney General Bob Butterworth defended the state's use of the electric chair as the sole means of execution before the Florida Supreme Court. Photographs depicting recent executions shown to the high court were described by Justice Harry Lee Anstead as "heinous," "horrible" and "right out of some horror show."

The court was shown photographs of the July 8 execution of Allen Lee Davis, where the condemned man's face was covered by a leather strap. The upper half of his face was purple and contorted, and blood that had spurted from his nostril flowed down the side of his face. Florida attorney Richard Martell commented, "Any execution is going to involve certain things no matter how it's carried out. It's going to involve fear, it's going to cause discomfort." He argued that this did not make the punishment cruel and unusual.

The court ordered a halt of executions in Florida until September 14, and ordered a judge in Orlando to hold a hearing on the functioning of the chair.

One exonerated for every seven executed on nation's death row

Since the death penalty was reinstated by the US Supreme Court in 1976, 566 people have been put to death in 38 states. Of those sentenced to death, a total of 82 have been exonerated, a ratio of one freed for every seven executed. The majority of these convictions were overturned as a result of new testimony or physical evidence, including DNA testing.

Many states impose a deadline on evidence that can be presented after conviction. In the most extreme case, the state of Virginia imposes a limitation of only 21 days. By contrast in the state of Illinois, which has no statute of limitations on evidence, over the last 12 years one inmate has been exonerated for every prisoner put to death. Such statistics raise questions about the guilt of many of the 3,300 people on death row in the US. However, states and the federal government continue

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moves to streamline executions, including the federal Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act, signed in 1996 by President Bill Clinton.

Nearly six million Americans in prison, on parole or probation

Those Americans in the correctional system—prisoners, parolees or those on probation—numbered 5,890,300 last December 31, up from 5,726,500 the year before, according to a report from the federal Bureau of Justice Statistics. This figure includes more than 1.7 million in the country's prisons and jails, including more than 3,300 on death row. This means that almost 3 percent of the nation's population, or one of every 34 adults, is under some type of correctional supervision.

Detroit police officers indicted on robbery, beating and drug charges

On August 13 six police officers from Detroit's 5th Precinct were indicted on charges of robbery, beating people on the streets of the precinct, and hoarding money, drugs and guns from illegal searches. They have been charged with federal civil rights conspiracy, carrying a maximum sentence of up to 10 years in prison. Three of the cops are also charged with taking bribes to protect drug dealers as well as possessing drugs and drug paraphernalia, which carries a 20-year maximum sentence and a $1 million fine. The indictments are the result of a joint investigation by the Detroit Police Department and the FBI.

In May three officers from the same precinct were convicted of conspiracy to rob a numbers operator. In 1997, 10 officers from another Detroit police precinct were indicted on charges of conspiring while on duty to steal money, guns and drugs from drug dealers.

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