

# True to form: Clinton rejects moratorium on death penalty

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At a press conference on Wednesday, President Bill Clinton rejected calls for a national moratorium on capital punishment. Clinton had been urged by death penalty opponents to call a halt to federal executions in light of last month's decision by Illinois Governor George Ryan to stay executions in that state.

In the last two decades in Illinois, 13 death row inmates have been freed after they were found to be wrongfully convicted, a greater number than the 12 prisoners actually executed during the same period of time. Ryan, a Republican, said he believed the state's death penalty system is "fraught with errors" and "broken".

In rejecting a moratorium on the death penalty Clinton confirmed the commitment of the American political establishment to a barbaric practice which has been rejected by the vast majority of the world's governments. In fact, membership in the European Union is denied to countries which utilize executions. But in the United States, support for the death penalty has become a routine, almost obligatory, requirement for candidates seeking political office.

Clinton himself presided over four executions as governor of Arkansas. In January 1992 he flew back to Arkansas in the midst of his first presidential campaign to approve the execution of Ricky Ray Rector. Rector, who had blown away part of his brain in a failed suicide attempt, was so mentally impaired that he asked that his desert be put aside so he could eat it after his execution.

Clinton signed the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996, which severely restricts the right of death row inmates to file federal habeas corpus petitions. Also under his administration, in 1996 Congress eliminated funding for the 20 Death Penalty Resource Centers which provided legal services for

poor defendants.

All of the major contenders for the Democratic and Republican presidential nominations support the death penalty. Republican candidate Senator John McCain favors broadening the use of the death penalty. Anthony Lee Chaney died by lethal injection on February 16 in Arizona, McCain's home state.

Democratic candidates Al Gore and Bill Bradley both support capital punishment. Bradley voted in favor of placing a provision for making first-degree murders in Washington DC punishable with the federal death penalty. Gore has supported legislation to expand the federal death penalty to apply to 60 different felonies.

Republican George W. Bush has presided over the execution of 112 people in his five years as governor of Texas. Seven people have already been put to death in Texas this year. In February 1998 Bush refused to stay the execution of Karla Faye Tucker, the first woman put to death in the state since the Civil War. At the time of Tucker's execution the Lexington, Kentucky *Herald-Leader* commented, "Few governors who might like to be president will risk commuting a death sentence, out of fear of the 'soft on crime' campaign commercial."

The execution of Betty Lou Beets, a 62-year-old grandmother, is scheduled for February 24 in Huntsville, Texas. Beets, who was convicted of the 1983 murder of her husband, contends she was a victim of domestic abuse.

Bush also signed a law speeding the appeals process for death row inmates, and the Texas clemency process has been described by death penalty critics as the most unfair of the 38 states that allow executions. Despite this, Bush recently commented on the "Newshour with Jim Lehrer" television program that he was convinced that none of the people put to death during his term as governor were innocent.

On January 21, Larry Keith Robison, a 42-year-old paranoid schizophrenic, was put to death in Texas. Bush, campaigning in Iowa at the time, took no action to stay the execution of the mentally ill man despite pleas from the European Union, Pope John Paul II and the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill. Indeed, it has become standard practice in American elections for candidates to ride to office over the corpses of death row inmates.

Clinton's latest statement on the death penalty should be viewed in light of recent exposures of wrongful convictions of death row inmates. According to the Death Penalty Information Center, 85 people nationally have been released from death row having been exonerated of their crimes. Many of these overturned convictions have come with the use of new DNA technology.

In the Illinois cases, investigations by students at Northwestern University and Chicago-Kent College Law School have led to the release of death row inmates. It is widely accepted that defendants in capital cases are often represented by incompetent defense lawyers and lack the financial resources to mount an adequate defense.



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