

Executions carried out in Virginia, Missouri and Oklahoma

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24 March 2000

The most recent US executions took place in the states of Virginia, Missouri and Oklahoma, bringing the number of death row inmates put to death this year to 27. Since the death penalty was reinstated in 1976, 625 people have been executed in the United States.

Lonnie Weeks Jr., 28, convicted of killing Virginia state trooper Jose Cavazos, was executed by lethal injection on March 16. Virginia Governor Jim Gilmore dismissed Weeks's final clemency pleas and the US Supreme Court rejected a last-minute appeal on his behalf. The Supreme Court had halted Weeks's execution last year less than two hours before he had been scheduled to die. Amnesty International, as well as trooper Cavazos' children, had called for a halt to Weeks's execution. Virginia has carried out 76 executions since 1977, second only to Texas with 211.

James H. Hampton, 62, died by lethal injection in Missouri on March 22 for the abduction and murder of Frances Keaton and Christine Schurman. He had refused for years to appeal his conviction. As police were about to arrest Hampton for the 1992 murders, he shot himself under the chin. The bullet exited through the front of his brain, and death penalty opponents said that his judgment was impaired, leading to his desire to die and not fight his death sentence. Hampton went to reform school at the age of 11, and had served time in 25 different prisons for burglary, assault and drug related crimes before being convicted of the 1992 murders. Forty-one people have been put to death in Missouri since the death penalty was reinstated.

On March 23 in Oklahoma, Kelly Lamont Rogers, 31, was put to death by lethal injection for the 1990 rape and murder of Karen Lauffenburger. Rogers was the fourth person executed in Oklahoma this year and the twenty-third to be put to death in the state since the reinstatement of the death penalty.

Pennsylvania has set execution dates for four people this month: Mark Koehler on March 23; Antyane Robinson, March 28; Carolyn King, a woman, on March 29; and Brad Martin, March 30. Pennsylvania has executed three people since 1976, all in the latter half of the 1990s. Political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal, former Black Panther leader and radio journalist, currently sits on Pennsylvania's death row. Abu-Jamal was framed up for the 1981 murder of a Philadelphia police officer and his execution has been stayed pending an appeal for a new trial before the federal Third Circuit Court of Appeals in Philadelphia.

Ohio, which has carried out only one execution since the reinstatement of the death penalty, has set March 27 as the date of death for Gerald Clemons.

On the morning of March 22, 16 hours before his execution set for 1 a.m. CST March 23, a Tennessee federal judge halted the execution of Robert Glen Coe, 43. Coe had been scheduled to die by lethal injection for the 1979 rape and murder of eight-year-old Cary Ann Medlin, and would have been the first person put to death since four decades earlier, when William Tines was electrocuted in November 1960. Tennessee is the only Southern state that has not carried out an execution since the US Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in 1976. There are currently 101 people on the state's death row.

Judge Aleta A. Trauger issued what she termed a "brief stay of execution," commenting that she had not had sufficient time to review transcripts and other papers to determine if Coe was competent enough to be executed. The stay would expire automatically if the judge subsequently rules to deny Coe's appeal, or would remain in place if the court grants Coe's writ of habeas corpus.

Robert Coe's lawyers and death penalty opponents

say that he is innocent and mentally ill, having spent several years in a Florida mental hospital after sexually assaulting a woman, prior to his murder conviction in Tennessee. Henry Martin, a federal public defender who has represented Coe, commented, "Name the psychotropic drug, and he's been on it for some time."

Coe originally confessed to the murder, but has now changed his story in the course of various appeals of his conviction. His lawyers argue that he was duped into confessing and that prosecutors withheld evidence that Coe was in another town when the murder took place.

Rev. Joe Ingle, one of the leaders of the Tennessee Coalition to Abolish State Killing, says that Coe is a documented paranoid schizophrenic, and that he may have been trying to "please authorities" by confessing to the crime. Ingle has also pointed out that another man, who matched eyewitness descriptions of the kidnapper, was initially arrested for the girl's murder. Blood was found on this suspect's clothes, but charges against the man were eventually dropped.

Coe's defenders had hoped that his final appeal would come before Nashville US District Court Judge John T. Nixon, who has a history of overturning capital convictions, but his case was assigned to Judge Trauger. Judge Nixon has come under attack by pro-death penalty forces who have accused him of practicing "judicial advocacy" by waiting for years to rule on habeas corpus appeals by condemned death row inmates. Death penalty advocates led a failed impeachment drive against the judge after he overturned Robert Coe's conviction, which was later reinstated by a higher appeals court.

Last week an Alachua County, Florida judge ruled that the state had no case against Joseph N. Green Jr., who had been sentenced to death by the same court in 1993. Green, 44, had been released from prison in July 1999 while his case was reviewed, having spent more than six years on death row.

Green was prosecuted for the 1992 murder of Starke, Florida newspaper society editor Judy Miscally. An eyewitness to the murder originally told police that the shooter was white, but later identified Green, who is black. This witness also admitted to being high on crack cocaine, marijuana and beer the night of the killing.

The Florida Supreme Court overturned Green's conviction in 1996, partially because of improperly

seized evidence, and ordered a new trial in the case. The Supreme Court also moved the trial to Alachua County from Starke, where the victim was well known and the case had generated extensive media coverage. It was here that Gainesville Circuit Judge Robert Cates finally threw out the case.

Since the death penalty was reinstated in Florida, Green is the twenty-first person to be taken off the state's death row because of a wrongful conviction or doubt of guilt. Commenting on Green's case, a spokesman for Governor Jef Bush said it didn't prove anything is fundamentally wrong with Florida's judicial system, "In this particular case, the system worked for this gentleman. Based on his direct appeal, his conviction was overturned."

Joseph Green disagreed, saying, "Any hope I did have of having something is lost in time." Referring to police and prosecutors in his case, Green commented, "They used every possible means that the state has to try to kill me. You don't kill a person because you 'believe' something. You've got to have evidence. You've got to have proof."



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