Tennessee executes first prisoner in four decades

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At 1:37 a.m. Wednesday morning, April 19, Robert Glen Coe was pronounced dead after receiving a lethal injection at the Riverbend Maximum Security Institution in west Nashville, Tennessee. He became the first prisoner executed in that state since 1960. Tennessee had been the only Southern state not to have carried out an execution since the death penalty was reinstituted by the United States Supreme Court in 1976. There are currently 100 people on the state's death row.

Robert Coe was convicted and sentenced to death for the 1979 rape and murder of eight-year-old Cary Ann Medlin. He originally confessed to the crime, but subsequently professed innocence. He lawyers argue that he was duped into confessing and that prosecutors withheld evidence that Coe was in another town at the time of the murder. Prosecutors also dropped charges against another suspect who matched eyewitness descriptions of the kidnapper. Advocates for Coe say that he was a paranoid schizophrenic, and that he may have been trying to "please authorities" by confessing.

Coe maintained his innocence, saying before his execution, "I love you all with all my heart and soul. I forgive the state of Tennessee for murdering me for something I didn't do. I'm not guilty of this crime, and that's the God's truth." About 150 death penalty opponents gathered outside the prison to protest the execution.

A Davidson County judge had halted Coe's execution late Tuesday night on administrative grounds, but at 12:21 a.m. Wednesday the Tennessee Supreme Court reversed the judge's stay, opening the way for Coe to be put to death. The US Supreme Court refused last October to hear his appeal.

Tennessee is the home state of Democratic presidential candidate and vice president Al Gore, a death penalty proponent, who has supported legislation to expand the federal death penalty to apply to 60 different felonies.

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