

# After the execution of Gary Graham: the world looks at America and America looks at itself

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The June 22 execution of Gary Graham, sanctioned by Texas Governor and Republican presidential candidate-to-be George W. Bush, has cast a penetrating light on American society and helped lay bare its contradictions. Although hardly the first state murder carried out in the US, there was something particularly shocking and horrifying about the event. This quality was clearly felt around the world.

Graham was put to death Thursday night, but the entire society was on trial. His final statements amounted to an enduring curse against the existing social order. One has the sense that this desperate voice from the death chamber gurney will haunt those who organized and carried out the execution for years to come.

By any standards of civilized society Graham's death was a barbaric act. Everything about the case—Graham's social background and his age (seventeen) at the time of his arrest, the lack of physical evidence linking him to the crime, his identification by only one witness, his criminally incompetent legal counsel and travesty of a trial, his nearly two decades on death row—reeks of injustice and state-organized brutality.

Great numbers of people in the United States and around the world have reacted to the execution with horror. There is a widespread feeling that something terrible has happened. This perception is healthy and humane, but it can only lead to a change in the situation if difficult political questions are confronted: Why does American society carry out crimes like this? How is this barbarism to be explained, and combated?

There are currently some two million people in prison and more than 3,500 people on death row in the US. The state of Texas has executed 23 people in 2000 alone; Bush has presided over the execution of 134 individuals in his five years in office. No other countries in the economically advanced regions of the globe have comparable figures; for the most part, they don't have figures on executions at all—capital punishment is banned in Western Europe.

A society that resorts to incarcerating and executing its citizens in such numbers thereby admits that it is incapable of solving its social problems. Why, in the final analysis, do the vast majority find themselves on death row? Because they are poor and semi-literate, or victims of one kind of abuse or another, or mentally ill, or all of these. Because, in short, society has given them little or no chance in life. The American ruling elite and its two political parties have no answers for the poverty and misery in which

millions are forced to live.

The existence of these conditions provides the key to understanding what seems on the surface a great paradox—that the grim cavalcade of punishment and death has coincided with what is officially described as the most prolonged economic expansion in US history. Analysis reveals that the stock market and profit boom have benefited a relatively small portion of the population, primarily the top 10 percent.

The creation of a “flexible,” low-wage economy, in which workers are constantly prey to insecurity, has not improved the conditions of the vast majority. On the contrary, absolute poverty has tightened its grip on the most oppressed and tens of millions more struggle to make ends meet.

The executives of major corporations in the US make more than 400 times the pay of an average worker. Such a level of social inequality can never be voluntarily or democratically accepted by the population, even in the absence of conscious political opposition. It must be *policed*. One of the inevitable consequences of the social chasm between the rich and everyone else is the meting out of severe punishment to those unlucky enough to be on the wrong side of the law.

Official violence is hardly a new or incidental feature of American life. This is the land, after all, of the police truncheon, the “third degree,” the strikebreaker, the vigilante, the political witch-hunt and the judicial frame-up. One only has to mention a few names to evoke this legacy of cruelty and repression: the Molly Maguires, Joe Hill, Sacco and Vanzetti, the Rosenbergs. A variety of historical and ideological factors can be cited to explain the particular brutality of the American ruling elite—its origins in the extermination of the native population, its shortsighted and pragmatic “frontier” mentality, the absence of social-democratic “buffers,” and so forth.

In the end, however, the *present* violence of the system can only be explained by the *present* state of American society. The US is the most powerful capitalist economy on earth. Yet behind the veneer of prosperity and beneath increasingly threadbare democratic forms, it harbors the fiercest and most bitter class conflict. This exists objectively. That the working population is largely unconscious of this conflict, or at least of its implications, does nothing to lessen it.

The denouement of the Gary Graham case, as it unfolded

Thursday night, sharply exposed this social conflict. More than that, Graham's last hours became a significant episode within the struggle of opposed classes. Graham did not go quietly to his death. He resisted, refusing even to eat his "last meal" on a table provided by his killers. He went to his death proclaiming his innocence and denouncing his murderers.

Who is Gary Graham? In 1981 he was a thief and a thug, responsible for a series of armed robberies and a rape. His poverty-stricken background prepared him for that, as similar backgrounds have prepared thousands of others. But his years in prison changed him, radicalized him.

Graham left this world with a certain nobility. People like him are victims of the social meat grinder. There is no society on earth that wastes human potential more than America. Graham committed violent crimes, but how can that be weighed against the 19 years of torment, waiting to be slaughtered, inflicted in a premeditated fashion by official society? What can be said in defense of a system that mobilizes a "Cell Extraction Team" to drag a man from his cell, straps him to a table and injects carefully-prepared poisons into his bloodstream? The Graham killing exposed the gruesomeness of what goes on every week in the US, in one state or another. The entire society, with its pretenses to democracy, pays a heavy price for this sort of crime.

The response by the political and media establishment has been nervous and defensive, from the ashen-faced reporters who witnessed the execution to a frightened-looking Bush. They don't know what to make of the event and the widespread revulsion.

These are people who believe their own press clippings. Mesmerized by their stock portfolios, they truly believe that opposition to their policies, including radical opposition, is a thing of the past.

They were taken aback by Thursday's events, which did not go at all as planned. An event intended to further brutalize the population largely turned into its opposite: the starting-point for sensitizing masses of people and waking them from their political and even moral torpor.

The Graham execution and its reverberations will have a radicalizing effect on the American people. Already the presence of hundreds of demonstrators outside the Huntsville facility—as well as rallies in Austin, Texas; San Francisco and Northampton, Massachusetts—points to a growth of social protest. This will increase.

This state murder will help clarify the real state of affairs in America. Young people in particular will be increasingly horrified by a society that glorifies billionaires and puts the poor and oppressed to death by half a dozen equally cruel methods. The campaign to defend Mumia Abu-Jamal, another intended victim of state murder, will gain new strength from the popular response to the Graham case.

The assembly line of executions will deepen the hostility felt for both political parties, united in their support for the death penalty. Vice President Al Gore and California's Democratic right-wing governor Gray Davis, for example, took the opportunity of Graham's death to restate their belief in capital punishment.

Periods of social radicalization have often announced themselves in the US by the growth of opposition to frame-ups and capital

punishment. This is historically bound up with the growth of labor militancy in the early part of the twentieth century. In the late 1950s the case of Caryl Chessman, finally executed in 1960 after 12 years on death row, became a focal point of social protest and heralded the radicalism of the following decade. Conversely, the growth in support for the death penalty in the mid- and late 1970s indicated a right-wing turn by sections of the middle class and working class.

For much of the world's population Graham's death will only heighten the belief that the US represents a threat to democratic rights and perhaps to human life in general. The general reaction in the European press has been shock and dismay. The US is seen as a bully, or worse. The credibility of American democracy, with its claims to represent a model for every country on earth, is increasingly a mockery. More and more, the US is seen as a pariah state.

There are signs of growing unease in the political establishment about the consequences of the death penalty policy. There are those who worry that the official bloodlust will alienate the population and undermine faith in the system as a whole. The narrowness of the Supreme Court vote to reject Graham's appeal, a 5-4 margin, has to be seen in this light.

In the end, the decisive issue is what large numbers of workers, students and intellectuals make of Graham's execution. There will be those who consider it terrible, but an aberration. Others will shake their heads, hoping such a thing will never happen again—although they know better. Some will try to ignore it and go about their business. But this execution is not an accident. It is deeply rooted in the social relations and political structures of American capitalism.

The death penalty will not be overcome by appeals to established institutions or to the Democratic or Republican parties, nor can it be overcome if it is addressed as an issue apart from all others. It must be fought on a new basis, as part of the development in the working class of an independent political movement based on a truly democratic, and therefore socialist, program.



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