Following the execution of Gary Graham: a curious silence in the media

Kate Randall
1 July 2000

It has been a little more than a week since Gary Graham was executed in Huntsville, Texas. CNN provided minute-by-minute coverage of the run-up to the lethal injection, and, in general, the American media paid considerable attention at the time of the state killing. Yet within a day or two of Graham's death, TV news commentary on his case and the controversy over capital punishment virtually ceased.

To the extent that the death penalty issue has remained in the news, commentary has centered on speculation about the impact of Graham's execution on the campaign of Texas Governor George W. Bush, the presumptive Republican presidential candidate. Bush refused to intervene in Graham's case, notwithstanding substantial evidence that the prisoner was innocent of murder, and widespread appeals for clemency from within the US and around the world. The 36-year-old, who was 17 at the time of his arrest, became the 134th person to be put to death in Texas since Bush became governor.

There are exceptions to the general silence on the execution of Gary Graham. Some right-wing publications and journalists have seized on the case in an effort to legitimize the US practice of state-sanctioned murder. Not surprisingly, one such forum is the *Wall Street Journal*, which carried a column in its June 28 edition by Dianne Clements and Dudley Sharp of the Houston-based group Justice for All. They called Graham “a perfect example of why capital punishment is needed.”

The June 28 *Washington Post* published an opinion piece by Michael Kelly, editor-in-chief of the conservative *National Review*, entitled “A Press Obsession With the Death Penalty.” Kelly bemoaned the fact that there has been *too much* coverage of the death penalty in the press. He declared, without any attempt at substantiation, that the issue of capital punishment was “not of the slightest interest of the great majority of voters.” A considerable degree of self-delusion appears to be at work here.

Graham was convicted of killing grocery store clerk Bobby Lambert on May 13, 1981, during a robbery attempt. There was no physical evidence linking him to the crime, and only one eyewitness identified him. Other witnesses who told police Graham was not the killer were not called to testify at his trial, and were never heard in the course of subsequent appeals. Ballistics tests showed that the bullet that killed Lambert could not have come from the weapon found on Graham when he was arrested. Graham's court-appointed lawyer barely went through the motions of mounting a defense, and the defendant was found guilty and sentenced to death after a two-day trial.

Graham's execution and the public reaction, both nationally and internationally, seemed to catch the media and political establishment off-guard. They seemed unprepared for the outpouring of revulsion that accompanied the injection of lethal chemicals into Graham's veins the night of June 22. The CNN anchorperson, apparently unable to comprehend how such an event could generate genuine outrage, asked a reporter on the scene in Huntsville whether the 500-strong crowd that had gathered outside the Walls Unit to protest the execution had been “bused in.” Were the demonstrators “outside agitators?” she seemed to be asking.

The fact that Graham maintained his innocence to the end and passionately denounced his murderers was passed over with little comment in the press. The media has become accustomed to reporting what a condemned man selects for his last meal, and final statements asking for forgiveness or reconciliation with God. But

© World Socialist Web Site

this was something different, something chilling and profoundly disturbing. Here was a self-confessed thief and one-time violent criminal proclaiming from the death chamber gurney that his execution was “nothing more than murder, state sanctioned murder in America.” Even the journalists who witnessed the execution were visibly shaken as they reported Graham's final words.

Why have the networks dropped any further commentary on the Graham execution? There is a palpable sense that, confronted with the emergence of a social issue that begins to grip the public imagination, stirring up deeply felt, but rarely articulated, sentiments of protest against injustices of many sorts, the official response is one of bewilderment, fear and—silence.

The entire economic and political establishment, including its servile media apparatus, instinctively flinches when confronted with the first signs of widespread opposition, even an opposition that remains, for now, politically inchoate. The political parties and professional opinion makers sense that the slightest crack in the complacent picture of prosperity and contentment that they strive so tirelessly to project will reveal a cauldron of social conflict lying just below the surface.

They are reacting to something very real. The America of stock market multimillionaires and the privileged layers just below them on the economic ladder stands astride a society riven by class contradictions. In a country where the gap between the haves and the have-nots grows more extreme by the minute, and politics is monopolized by two parties that cater to the richest 10 percent, it is no wonder that the official institutions cannot tolerate any genuine discussion of social issues, from the brutal and vindictive character of the criminal justice system, to the ever-growing ranks of uninsured Americans, to the squandering of the national wealth to satisfy the appetites of the rich.

Another point deserves comment. Considerable media coverage has been given in recent months to the release of wrongfully accused death row inmates, who have been removed from death row or exonerated of their crimes and released. There is justifiable concern among broad layers of the population that innocent people are being unjustly convicted and even sent to their deaths.

But largely absent from the press commentary on these wrongful convictions is any debate on the legitimacy of the death penalty itself—a barbaric practice banned in all but a handful of countries in the Western world.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site