

Anti-abortion murderer executed in Florida

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Paul Jennings Hill, 49, was executed in Florida on September 3 for the 1994 murders of a doctor and his driver outside an abortion clinic in the Florida Panhandle. Just as Dr. John Bayard Britton, 69, James H. Barrett, 74, and his wife June arrived at the Pensacola Ladies Center that day, Hill began firing a 12-gauge shotgun, fatally wounding Britton and Barrett and wounding June Barrett.

Hill was the 53rd death row inmate put to death in the US in 2003, and the third to die in Florida. Since the US Supreme Court reinstated capital punishment in 1976, 873 condemned men and women have been sent to their deaths nationwide.

The US faces continued international criticism for its practice of capital punishment. While the majority of the world's advanced industrialized nations have outlawed the barbaric practice, 38 of 50 US states still allow it. Included among those executed are the mentally ill and those killed for crimes committed when they were juveniles.

Amnesty International has issued a new report saying that the US was responsible for 13 of the 20 known executions carried out for crimes committed before the offender's 18th birthday. "The USA has recently claimed to be 'the global leader in child protection,' but by imposing death sentences on under-age offenders it undermines international law and its own credibility," writes the human rights group.

The execution-style murders carried out by Hill at the Pensacola abortion clinic were particularly heinous. However, principled opponents of the death penalty condemn its use under all circumstances—not simply for the unjustly accused, the innocent and those least able to defend themselves. Putting Hill to death will do nothing to stop brutal crimes by like-minded right-wing fanatics in the future.

On the contrary, Hill himself welcomed the state killing, clearly hoping that it would make him a martyr

among fellow anti-abortion militants. His supporters have vowed to carry on his crusade, openly threatening to escalate violence against abortion providers. In his final interview with the press before his execution, Hill called on his followers to continue his work, "I believe in the short and long term, more and more people will act on the principles for which I stand."

As Hill's 6 p.m. lethal injection approached on Wednesday, opposing contingents gathered outside Florida State Prison in Starke. About 50 Hill supporters, mostly white men, carried signs reading: "Killing Baby Killers is Justifiable Homicide" and "Extremism in Defense of Life Is Not Extreme." A smaller group of death penalty opponents stood vigil to protest the execution. A handful of pro-choice advocates was also present.

Dan Holman, a supporter of the militant anti-abortion group The Army of God, had traveled from Iowa to support Hill. He told the *New York Times*, "Some day, I hope I will have the courage to be as much as a man as he was." Holman carried a sign reading: "Dead Doctors Can't Kill."

This brand of fascistic Christian fundamentalism espouses backwardness on every social question: these "pro-lifers" not only advocate the cold-blooded murder of doctors providing a vital health service for women, they support state-sanctioned executions such as that of Hill as well. A photograph on The Army of God web site shows an anti-abortion protester carrying a sign reading: "Execute Murderers, Abortionists, Accessories."

"Mainstream" anti-abortion groups such as Operation Rescue have attempted to distance themselves from sects like The Army of God, publicly denouncing the premeditated murder of abortion providers. George W. Bush has not commented publicly on the Hill case. Florida Republican Governor Jeb Bush, the president's brother, signed Hill's death warrant and commented,

“This man brutally murdered people, cold-blooded, premeditated. To do it for life’s sake makes it even sicker.”

However, it is precisely the Bush Republicans and forces around them in the Christian fundamentalist right who have cultivated such backward layers, in essence giving them a license to carry out their dirty work. Their championing of the death penalty and efforts to abolish women’s reproductive rights are two planks in the same reactionary social platform.

With the 2004 presidential election approaching, the Bush administration and the Republican Party will do everything in their power to mobilize these ultra-rightist layers, using such issues as abortion, gay marriage and the death penalty as vehicles for “energizing their base.” These efforts will serve to create a climate in which more crimes like those committed by Hill are virtually inevitable.

Pro-choice advocates have voiced fears that Hill’s execution will trigger further violence by anti-abortion militants. Doctors and staff at abortion clinics risk their lives providing a service that Bush and his ultra-right supporters would like to see outlawed. The year before the murder of Dr. John Britton and James Barrett at the Pensacola Ladies Center, Dr. David Gunn was gunned down at Pensacola’s other abortion clinic by anti-abortion zealot Michael Griffin. Dr. Britton wore a bullet-proof vest to work, fearing he was a potential target. Knowing this, Jennings took direct aim at the doctor’s head.

Over the past decade there have been seven fatalities and at least 10 attempts on the lives of doctors and their staff at abortions clinics in the US and Canada. The most recent to die was Dr. Barnett Slepian, a well-known abortion rights advocate in the Buffalo, New York area, who was killed in his home in October 1998 by an anti-abortion sniper.



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