

Thousands protest outside San Quentin

Worldwide outrage over execution of Stanley Tookie Williams

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The execution of Stanley Tookie Williams just after midnight Tuesday morning was met with a mass demonstration outside the gates of California's San Quentin prison and outrage and revulsion all over the world.

What transpired in the death chamber underscored the grotesque and barbaric essence of the state killing. Drawing blood as they repeatedly poked needles into Williams' arm, the executioners spent 12 minutes trying to find a vein to deliver the drugs that induce asphyxiation and cardiac arrest. Williams shook his head, grimaced and asked angrily, "You guys doing that right?"

The entire procedure, which took over 35 minutes, clearly constituted the "cruel and unusual punishment" that is barred by the US Constitution.

Among the witnesses to the execution in San Quentin's converted gas chamber were three friends of Williams, who waited until the co-founder of Los Angeles' Crips gang was pronounced dead, and then shouted in unison, "The state of California just killed an innocent man."

Williams had been imprisoned for 25 years, half of his life. He had renounced gang violence and written books and spoken out in an attempt to dissuade youth from following the path that he had taken. He helped negotiate a series of gang truces and his life was made the subject of a TV movie entitled "Redemption," starring Jamie Foxx. His anti-gang crusade led to his nomination five times for a Nobel Peace Prize.

Williams maintained until his death that he had not committed the 1979 robbery-murders for which he was sentenced to die.

In a statement explaining his decision to refuse clemency, California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger placed emphasis on Williams' refusal to give up his claim of innocence. "Without an apology and atonement for these senseless and brutal killings there can be no redemption," the governor declared.

One of those who witnessed the execution was Barbara Becnel, who co-authored Williams' anti-gang books. She denounced Schwarzenegger as a "cold-blooded murderer" and said that Williams' supporters would continue working to establish his innocence, and would fight to oust the Republican governor from office.

Outside the prison walls, a crowd estimated at over 3,000 gathered to protest the state killing. Demonstrators carried candles and signs denouncing capital punishment. A small group of right-wingers, egged on by "shock-jock" radio announcers, tried to disrupt the protest, but were pushed out by the crowd. The growing size of the demonstration led the police to close the exit to San Quentin from Highway 101 as the execution time approached.

The popular anger over Schwarzenegger's decision to put Williams to death found expression, albeit muted, in editorials published by both of California's biggest daily newspapers that condemned the execution and the continued practice of capital punishment in the state. Governor

Schwarzenegger, the *Los Angeles Times* declared, should have granted clemency not only to Williams, but also to Donald Beardslee, who was put to death last January with far less public attention. "A civilized society doesn't kill for retribution and should certainly not continue doing so when it's become clear that the judicial system's margin of error is unacceptably high."

The newspaper pointed out that 647 more prisoners are on California's death row, and that one of them, Clarence Ray Allen, who is 75 years old, blind and confined to a wheelchair, is scheduled to be executed January 17.

The *San Francisco Chronicle* recalled an earlier statement by Austrian-born Schwarzenegger that he was torn by a conflict over the death penalty between his "Austrian brain and the American brain." Schwarzenegger noted that capital punishment was an "absolute no-no" in his country of birth.

"Perhaps his immersion in American culture has anesthetized him to concerns about the margin of error in this nation's justice system," the *Chronicle* stated. It suggested that Schwarzenegger could have delayed the execution until the California Assembly considered a bill next month that would impose a moratorium on capital punishment. "But it's not American to wait," the editorial concluded. "Regrettably, Schwarzenegger allowed the execution to proceed."

The governor's statement about his "Austrian brain" is disingenuous. The Austrian tradition that he imbibed before immigrating to America was that of his father, a Nazi storm trooper and fervent supporter of a regime that carried state killing to historically unprecedented levels.

In Austria, the rest of Europe and around the globe, Schwarzenegger's action drew bitter condemnation.

Leaders of Austria's Green Party called for the government to strip Schwarzenegger of his Austrian citizenship. "Whoever, out of political calculation, allows the death of a person rehabilitated in such an exemplary manner has rejected the basic values of Austrian society," said the party's leader, Peter Pilz.

In Graz, the town where Schwarzenegger was born, there were calls for removing the California governor's name from the local stadium and renaming it the "Stanley Tookie Williams Stadium."

In France, the leader of the Socialist Party, Julien Dray, denounced the execution, declaring that Schwarzenegger, a former body-builder, had "a lot of muscle, but apparently not much heart."

In Italy, the mayor of Rome, Walter Veltroni, declared it a "sad day" and said the city would pay homage to Williams the next time a victory is registered in the fight against the death penalty. Since 1999, the city has lit up the Coliseum, the ancient site of executions and deadly gladiator spectacles, every time a government commutes a death sentence or abolishes capital punishment. "I hope there will be such an occasion

soon,” Veltroni said. “When it happens, we will do it with a special thought for Tookie.”

On the eve of the execution, as the American courts and Schwarzenegger denied all of Williams’ appeals, the European Parliament in Strasbourg condemned the US as the only “democratic” state that makes “widespread use” of the death penalty. The parliament called on the US and 75 other countries that still have capital punishment to end the practice.

“Most unfortunately, in the US, the 1,000th execution was carried out,” said Joseph Borrell, the president of the parliament. “That it almost coincided with Human Rights day makes this fact particularly poignant.”

The *Times of India* published an editorial Tuesday entitled “Hang the Noose,” calling attention to the more than 1,000 Americans who have been put to death since capital punishment was reinstated in 1976 and pointing out that during that same period it has been established that 122 death row prisoners were falsely convicted.

In a hypocritical and unusually lengthy statement issued 12 hours before Williams was put to death, Governor Schwarzenegger dismissed claims that Williams had changed his life in prison as “hollow,” while arguing that continued gang violence in Los Angeles proved that Williams’ crusade against gangs did not bear consideration.

California political insiders, however, acknowledged that the decision was based on cynical calculations concerning the governor’s electoral future. “The only people who would have been happy with clemency were people who likely wouldn’t support him anyway,” said Dan Schnur, a long-time Republican political strategist. In the wake of his recent special election defeat and after appointing Democrat Susan Kennedy as his chief of staff two weeks ago, the governor saw putting Williams to death as an easy means of solidifying support among his party’s right-wing base.

This is hardly an innovation on his part. No California governor has granted a condemned prisoner a reprieve since Ronald Reagan spared a mentally retarded man in 1967. Williams is the twelfth person put to death by the state since it reinstated capital punishment in 1977. He is the third death row inmate denied clemency by Schwarzenegger.

One section of the governor’s five-page explanation of his decision has drawn particular notice. He cited the dedication in Williams’ book *Life in Prison*, which, Schwarzenegger said, “casts significant doubt on his personal redemption.”

The dedication was to “Nelson Mandela, Angela Davis, Malcolm X, Assata Shakur, Geronimo Ji Jaga Pratt, Ramona Africa, John Africa, Leonard Peltier, Dhoruba Al-Mujahid, George Jackson, Mumia Abu-Jamal and countless other men, women and youths who have had to endure the hellish oppression of living behind bars.”

Schwarzenegger declared that most of these individuals “have violent pasts and some have been convicted of committing heinous murders, including the killing of law enforcement.”

In point of fact, two of them—Geronimo Pratt and Dhoruba Al-Mujahid—were freed after decades in prison after it was established that they were framed up by police because of their membership in the Black Panther Party. Most of the others have consistently proclaimed their innocence, winning wide support based upon evidence of police and prosecutorial misconduct. As for Mandela, who was imprisoned for 27 years by the apartheid regime of South Africa before becoming the country’s first black president, Schwarzenegger felt no need to make any distinction between him and his description of “violent” and “heinous” criminals.

The most curious section of the statement, however, dealt with George Jackson, whose inclusion in the dedication, the governor said, “defies reason and is a significant indicator that Williams is not reformed and that he still sees violence and lawlessness as a legitimate means to address societal problems.”

A footnote attached to Schwarzenegger’s statement asserts the

following: “Jackson was charged with the murder of a San Quentin correctional officer. In 1970, when Jackson was out to court in Marin County on the murder case, his brother stormed the courtroom with a machine gun, and along with Jackson and two other inmates, took a judge, the prosecutor and three others hostage in an escape attempt. The prosecutor was paralyzed from a police bullet, and the judge was killed by a close-range blast to his head when the shotgun taped to his throat was fired by one of Jackson’s accomplices.”

This account is a complete fabrication and a gross distortion of what happened to George Jackson, who became radicalized in prison in the 1960s. He had been convicted for driving a getaway car in a theft that netted \$71 from a gas station and was sentenced to one year-to-life. He spoke out against the brutal conditions inside California’s jails and developed a large following, both inside and outside the prison system.

While in Soledad Prison, he joined the Black Panther Party and wrote two books, *Blood in My Eye* and *Soledad Brother*, both of which became bestsellers. Prison officials described him as a “dangerous freewheeling convict leader who must be isolated because of his impact on the prison population.”

He was not charged with the murder of a San Quentin prison guard. Rather he, together with two other inmates, was charged with the death of a guard at Soledad following the killing of three black prisoners by correction officers. Jackson and the two other inmates became known as the Soledad Brothers and was the subject of a broad defense campaign headed by Angela Davis, then a professor at the University of California, who was witch-hunted by Governor Ronald Reagan for her membership in the Communist Party.

Contrary to Schwarzenegger’s statement, George Jackson was not even in the Marin County court on the day of the shootout, August, 7, 1970, when an unrelated case involving a San Quentin inmate was being heard. Jackson’s brother, Jonathan, did not “storm” the courtroom with a machine gun, but walked in with a bag carrying pistols and a sawed-off shotgun. He armed the inmate on trial and two others called as witnesses and took the judge, prosecutor and three jurors hostage in a bid to free his brother.

They loaded the hostages into a county van and left the courthouse, only to be cut down by a hail of gunfire from cops and San Quentin guards. Jonathan Jackson, Judge Haley and two of the inmates died. Only one, Ruchell Magee, survived and remains in prison to this day.

George Jackson was shot and killed by prison guards in the yard at San Quentin on August 21, 1971, three days before he was to go on trial for the killing of the Soledad guard. Prison officials claimed that he was involved in an escape attempt and had obtained a gun from his attorney, Stephen Bingham. Other prisoners, however, said that there was no gun or escape attempt. The killing of Jackson sparked prison revolts in California and contributed to the uprising at Attica prison in New York a few weeks later.

Bingham was acquitted in 1984 of charges related to Jackson’s alleged escape attempt.

Also acquitted in the trial over the Soledad Prison guard’s death were the two surviving Soledad Brothers—Fleeta Drumgo and John Clutchette—raising the obvious implication that Jackson was responsible for no crime outside of being poor, having participated in a bungled robbery of \$71 and then becoming a political activist.

The gross errors in Schwarzenegger’s statement give the lie to his claim to have carefully considered the facts in Williams’ case. More fundamentally, they underscore the indifference to human life inherent in the entire legal process in capital punishment cases. It is not the facts that matter, but rather cynical political appeals to the basest and most reactionary political instincts.



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