

Georgia inmate put to death, ending seven-month halt to US executions

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7 May 2008

William Earl Lynd was killed by lethal injection Tuesday evening at a prison in Jackson, Georgia. With his death, the effective moratorium on capital punishment in place for the last seven months in the US was lifted. The execution followed a ruling last month by the US Supreme Court that upheld the lethal injection procedure.

A number of other states have followed Georgia's lead, scheduling a round of new executions. Fifteen are scheduled over the next five months. After a brief pause, the barbaric assembly line of sanctioned-state killing continues with renewed legal sanction.

Lynd, 53, became the 1,100th inmate put to death in the US since the Supreme Court reinstated capital punishment in 1976. He was sentenced to death for the 1988 murder of his girlfriend Ginger Moore.

Just minutes before William Lynd's execution, the US Supreme Court denied without comment a last-minute reprieve. Earlier Tuesday, the Georgia Supreme Court denied a motion by his attorneys for a stay of execution. On Monday, Georgia's Parole and Pardon Board had denied Lynd's request for clemency.

Death penalty opponents held vigils across Georgia on Tuesday as the execution approached, including outside the death chamber at the Jackson prison, just south of Atlanta.

On April 16, the US Supreme Court ruled that execution by lethal injection, as practiced by 35 states and the District of Columbia, does not constitute "cruel and unusual punishment" as barred by the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution.

Ruling 7-2 in *Baze v. Rees*, a case brought by two death row inmates in Kentucky, the high court claimed the procedure did not pose a significant enough risk of pain to render it unconstitutional. Chief Justice John Roberts wrote in the majority opinion that "Some risk

of pain is inherent in any method of execution—no matter how humane."

Roberts continued by cynically noting, "There are no methods of legal execution that are satisfactory to those who oppose the death penalty on moral, religious, or societal grounds."

Five days later, the Supreme Court denied without comment the appeals of 11 death row inmates, most in connection with the lethal injection procedure, making clear that the ruling in the Kentucky case had put an end to any successful appeals on those grounds.

Mississippi plans to execute Earl Wesley Berry on May 21. Virginia will send four men to their deaths: Kevin Green, on May 27; Percy Walton, June 10; Robert Yarbrough, June 25; and Edward Nathaniel Bell, July 24. Prior to these executions, Virginia had executed the second highest number of inmates—98—since the Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in 1976.

Texas, the state with highest rate of execution—405 since 1976—has six inmates on its execution docket: Derrick Sonnier, on June 3; Charles Hood, June 17; Lester Bower, July 22; Larry Davis, July 31; Jose Medellin, August 5; and Denard Manns, August 25.

Oklahoma is set to execute Terry Lyn Short on June 17.

On July 15, Louisiana plans to send one man and one woman to their deaths: Antoinette Frank and Darrell Robinson, although their attorneys are appealing the sentences on grounds unrelated to the lethal injection procedure.

South Dakota has scheduled to execute Briley Piper sometime between October 7 and 13.

If the above listed executions proceed, all the condemned individuals will be put to death by lethal injection. This procedure—now explicitly sanctioned by

the Supreme Court—involves the administration of three separate chemicals. The first chemical, sodium thiopental, is given to induce unconsciousness. The second, pancuronium bromide, paralyzes muscle movement and the third, potassium chloride, induces cardiac arrest.

Critics of the procedure argue that, if not properly administered, the drugs can cause excruciating pain. The danger is that if the first drug is improperly administered or wears off too quickly, the prisoner can be awake, but unable to move because of the paralytic agent, when the potassium chloride is injected.

The Death Penalty Information Center lists 28 known incidents of botched lethal injections, most involving difficulty in finding a vein to administer the drugs. In several known cases, the toxic chemicals have been injected into the soft tissue rather than the vein, rendering them ineffective.

Last year, 42 condemned inmates were sent to their deaths in the US, the lowest since 1996. Amnesty International reports that at least 1,252 people in 24 countries were executed in 2007, down from 1,591 in 2006. The US, however, was still fifth in the world in the number of executions. The US, China, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Pakistan carried out 88 percent of the known executions in 2007.

The United States and Japan are the only advanced industrialized countries where the death penalty is still enforced. The Death Penalty Information Center reports that as of January/February 2008 there were 3,263 death row prisoners in the US, including a staggering 669 in California, 388 in Florida, 370 in Texas, 328 in Pennsylvania, and 201 in Alabama.

According to a 2007 National Omnibus Poll conducted by RT Strategies for the Death Penalty Information Center, 62 percent of Americans still support the death penalty for those convicted of murder. When compared to a mandatory life sentence, support for the death penalty drops to less than 50 percent.

Popular support for the death penalty in the US is fostered by the political establishment. In line with their backing of US military policy and the “war on terror,” politicians of both big business parties promote it along with other “tough on crime” policies. These same policies have worked to swell the ranks of the US prison population to more than 2.3 million at the start

of this year—more than any other country.

Support for the death penalty has eroded slowly over the past 10 years. Opposition has increased in part due to the documented risk of executing the innocent.

Levon Jones, a North Carolina death row inmate who was freed on May 2 after spending 13 years on death row. Jones was the 129th inmate to be exonerated and released from death row since 1973.

A US District Court judge overturned his conviction two years ago after the prosecution’s star witness recanted her testimony. She stated that she had been coached on her testimony and had collected \$4,000 from the governor’s office for offering information leading to Jones’s arrest. The district attorney in the case asked the judge to drop all charges against Jones just days before a retrial was set to begin.



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