

Bush approves execution of army prisoner

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President Bush on Monday approved the death sentence of Ronald A. Gray, a former US Army cook convicted on multiple rape and murder charges. The decision marked the first time in 51 years that a president has affirmed the death penalty of a member of the US military.

The last time a president approved a military execution was in 1957, when Dwight D. Eisenhower authorized the execution of John Bennett, who had been convicted of raping and attempting to kill an 11-year-old Austrian girl. Bennett was hanged in 1961. In 1962, faced with a decision on the execution of Jimmie Henderson, President John F. Kennedy commuted the Navy seaman's sentence to life in prison.

Only 10 military service members have been executed since 1951, when the Uniform Code of Military Justice, the military's modern-day legal system, was enacted into law. Under this code, only the president has the authority to commute a death sentence and no service member can be executed unless the president personally confirms the death sentence.

In keeping with his fervent pro-death penalty record, Bush signed Ronald Gray's death warrant. White House press secretary Dana Perino commented, "While approving a sentence of death for a member of our armed services is a serious and difficult decision for a commander in chief, the president believes the facts of this case leave no doubt that the sentence is just and warranted."

It is doubtful that Bush spent any more time considering Gray's fate than he did before assuming the presidency in the cases of death row inmates that came across his desk in his five years as Texas governor. He presided over 152 executions during his term in office, accounting for more than a third of the 408 prisoners sent to their deaths in Texas since the US Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in

1976—more than any other US state.

The Bush administration has also presided over executions by lethal injection of three federal death row inmates, the first such executions in almost four decades. These included Timothy McVeigh, convicted in the Oklahoma City bombings and executed on June 11, 2001, at the U.S. Federal Penitentiary in Terre Haute, Indiana to an attendant media fanfare.

Ronald A. Gray was convicted in a series of brutal crimes in both civilian and military courts, and has been on death row at the US Disciplinary Barracks of Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, since 1988. He will remain there while his attorneys file new appeals in his civilian case.

A military court-martial panel convicted Gray in April 1988 of raping and killing Army Pvt. Laura Lee Vickery-Clay of Fayetteville, North Carolina on December 15, 1986. It also convicted him in the rape and murder of Kimberly Ann Ruggles, a civilian cab driver from Fayetteville.

Another victim survived to testify at Gray's court-martial, Army Pvt. Mary Ann Lang Nameth, who identified him as the man who raped and robbed her in her Fort Bragg barracks and attempted to kill her by stabbing her multiple times in the neck and side.

Gray had pled guilty in 1987 in North Carolina state court to the same charges of rape, murder and attempted murder. He was sentenced to three consecutive terms of life imprisonment in those proceedings.

Silas DeRoma, one of several military attorneys who represented Ronald Gray on appeal, commented following Bush's decision that the basis of some of Gray's appeals focused on the defendant's mental competency and his representation at trial. The heinous nature of his crimes underscores a need for this individual to receive ongoing psychological diagnosis and treatment.

Bush's approval of the death penalty in Gray's case, however, is not dependant upon an analysis of the severity and brutality of his crimes. The "decider in chief" is a true believer in the barbaric practice, having presided over executions in Texas of the mentally impaired, foreign nationals denied their consular rights, and those convicted of crimes committed when they were juveniles.

As Texas governor, Bush also refused to grant clemency to two female death row prisoners. He mocked the impending execution of one of these women, Karla Faye Tucker, imitating her in a high-pitched voice—"Don't kill me! Don't kill me!" Tucker died by lethal injection February 3, 1998, the first woman executed in Texas since the Civil War.

Despite numerous studies that have shown Texas death row inmates—who are overwhelming poor and disproportionately black and Latino—receive shoddy legal representation and are often convicted on the basis of botched forensic evidence, Bush consistently maintained that the system functions adequately and that no innocent individuals have been sent to their deaths.

By signing the papers approving the execution of army soldier Ronald A. Gray, Bush has added a new category of condemned inmate to his execution resume. There are currently nine men on federal death row in Fort Leavenworth. It is likely that Bush's approval in Gray's case will lead to other requests by the military for presidential sanction for their execution.



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