

The horror in Ohio's death chamber

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Dennis McGuire, 53, was put to death on Thursday, January 16 in the execution chamber at the Southern Ohio Correctional Facility in Lucasville, Ohio. News of McGuire's execution—and details of the gruesome manner in which authorities carried out his death sentence—have evoked disgust and revulsion in the US and internationally.

Family members watched as an untested, lethal cocktail of two medical drugs were injected into McGuire's veins. He writhed in pain before being pronounced dead 25 minutes later by prison authorities.

At a press conference the next day, the condemned prisoner's son described the horror of what he had witnessed. "I watched his stomach heave," he said. "I watched him trying to sit up against the straps on the gurney, I watched him repeatedly clench his fist," adding that it "appeared to me he was fighting for his life while suffocating."

The younger McGuire continued, "The agony and terror of watching my dad suffocate to death lasted more than 19 minutes. I can't think of any other way to describe it other than torture. Until yesterday, I did not understand what cruel and unusual punishment was. Now I do, I witnessed it. No one should have to die the way my dad did."

Attorneys for Dennis McGuire sought to stop the execution, arguing that the use of the untested drug protocol could lead to "air hunger," causing him to suffer "agony and terror" while struggling to breathe. By all witness accounts, this is precisely what happened. But Ohio Assistant Attorney General Thomas Madden rejected halting the execution on this basis, arguing that despite the Eighth Amendment's ban on cruel and unusual punishment, "You're not entitled to a pain-free execution."

These words speak volumes about the state of American democracy. The officials who populate the political apparatus, from state officials like Madden to

the Obama administration, have little or no understanding of basic democratic principles; indeed they are intensely hostile to these principles.

The Eighth Amendment to the US Constitution, ratified in 1791, reads: "Excessive bail shall not be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted." Like the Bill of Rights as a whole, the Eight Amendment has deep roots in American and British history, and in Enlightenment thought. It is rooted in an understanding, the product of long historical experience, that protections for prisoners and the accused are central to combating arbitrary power and political tyranny.

By any reasonable interpretation, Dennis McGuire's gruesome lethal injection was both cruel and unusual. Moreover, the fact that he was put to death at all—in the United States, in the year 2014—was a violation of his most basic democratic rights. The US stands virtually alone in the industrialized world in its use of the death penalty. Every European nation except Belarus has abolished the barbaric practice in criminal cases.

While briefly suspending capital punishment from 1972 to 1976, the US Supreme Court has never ruled it unconstitutional, refusing to yield to "evolving standards of decency" recognized throughout much of the world. Since the high court reinstated the death penalty in 1976, 1,362 people have been put to death across the US. According to the Death Penalty Information Center, these condemned individuals have included 28 foreign nationals, 44 with mental disabilities, and 22 executed for crimes committed as juveniles.

The scale of the American prison system is immense. As of last year, more than 3,100 prisoners languished on death row. These inmates constitute a fraction of the massive prison population in the US, which stands at more than 2.4 million, the highest in the world, having more than quadrupled since 1980. The American Civil

Liberties Union estimates that more than 49,000 people are now imprisoned for life without parole, many having committed only minor offenses.

Rehabilitation of prisoners, championed in the Progressive Era at the turn of the 20th century, has long since been abandoned in favor of vindictive retribution, including the perverse practice of charging juveniles as adults for having committed “adult crimes,” and incarcerating them for lengthy prison terms with little hope of receiving meaningful counseling. As with the rest of the prison population—overwhelmingly working class and poor—authorities routinely reject as irrelevant a defendant’s life experience of poverty, abuse or mental impairment.

The state killing carried out last week in the Ohio death chamber is but the latest, most horrific example of the brutality of the US ruling elite. Violence is its modus operandi. It pervades all aspects of social life, and its reach extends across America and around the globe.

The savage workings of the US criminal justice system are mirrored on the world arena in the criminal activities of the US military. Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, have been killed in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan alone. Millions more have been displaced, entire cities laid waste and cultural institutions destroyed.

The US operates a global “Murder Inc.,” in which alleged “terror” suspects are tortured and murdered in complete disregard for international law. Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, extraordinary rendition, “targeted killing,” “enhanced interrogation techniques”—these are the terms that have come to define the policy of the American ruling class. President Obama personally approves drone strikes for extrajudicial assassinations, including of US citizens.

It is within this context that the state killing machine operates at home. The explosive growth of the prison system in the United States over the past several decades has corresponded with unprecedented levels of social inequality. The response of the ruling class to every social problem—including those that manifest themselves in violent actions of individuals—is to increase the powers of the state.

When Ohio Assistant Attorney General Madden proclaims that the torturous execution of a prisoner with untested chemicals is not a violation of

constitutional protections against cruel and unusual punishment, he speaks not simply as a backward individual, but as a representative of a social class.

Similar reactionary views are held and promoted at the highest levels of the US government and judiciary. In largely unreported comments more than a decade ago, US Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia vigorously defended capital punishment, citing the New Testament to claim that government “derives its moral authority from God ... to execute wrath, including even wrath by the sword ...”

Scalia continued, “You want to have a fair death penalty? You kill; you die. That’s fair,” adding, “Does [the death penalty] constitute cruel and unusual punishment? The answer is no. It does not.”

The musings of such moral and intellectual pygmies provide the theoretical underpinnings for dictatorship and police state forms of rule. Rejection among the ruling elite of Enlightenment principles in favor of merciless state killings and torture demonstrates the absence of any constituency within the political establishment for the defense of democratic and constitutional rights.

The execution of Dennis McGuire, and its defense by state authorities, is a disturbing and chilling event. It provides the somber occasion for class conscious workers and youth to take a stand against the death penalty as part of the defense of the social and democratic rights of the working class, a struggle that can be advanced only on the basis of a socialist program and principles.



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