

Missouri carries out ninth execution of the year

Kate Randall
21 November 2014

Leon Taylor was executed in Missouri early Wednesday morning, becoming the ninth inmate put to death in the state this year. On Tuesday, Missouri Governor Jay Nixon, a Democrat, refused to grant Taylor clemency, and the US Supreme Court turned down his appeal for a stay of execution.

Taylor was convicted of killing a suburban Kansas City gas station attendant during a robbery in 1994. Taylor shot and killed Robert Newton in front of Newton's eight-year-old step-daughter. He was sentenced to death by a judge after his original jury deadlocked. That sentence was thrown out, and he was later again sentenced to death by an all-white jury.

Taylor, 56, was strapped to a gurney at the state prison in Bonne Terre just after midnight Wednesday morning. He was seen in his last minutes speaking to family members through the glass window to the witness room adjacent to the execution chamber, his body draped in the white sheet. Taylor apologized to the family of his victims in a poem he had written, saying in part, "I am truly sorry that our lives had to entwine so tragically."

Prison officials then injected the fatal chemicals into Taylor's veins, including pentobarbital, a barbiturate, and potassium chloride to induce cardiac arrest. ABC News reported that Taylor's chest heaved for several seconds after the injection, and then stopped. His jaw then went slack and he made no other movement. He was pronounced dead about eight minutes after being injected with the deadly mix, at 12:22 a.m. local time.

In an appeal to the US Supreme Court, Taylor's attorneys had argued that his death sentence was contrary to earlier rulings of the nation's high court as well as the Missouri Supreme Court. In 2002, the US Supreme Court ruled that only a jury could impose a death sentence, which prompted the state Supreme

Court to commute to life in prison all 10 death sentences handed down by a judge.

Taylor was not among those inmates receiving a commuted sentence. In the appeal, defense attorney Elizabeth Carlyle said that Taylor had essentially been penalized for having successfully appealed his first conviction and then being subsequently sentenced to death by an all-white jury. Carlyle wrote in the appeal, "It is difficult to imagine a more arbitrary denial of the benefit of a state court decision." The high court denied Taylor's appeal for a stay on Tuesday.

Earlier that day, Governor Nixon denied Taylor's clemency request, which appealed for mercy on the grounds that Taylor had turned his life around in prison, becoming a devout Christian who helped other prisoners. The petition also cited abuse Taylor had suffered as a child at the hands of his mother, who began giving him alcohol at the age of five.

Nixon's denial of clemency followed by one day his declaration of a state of emergency in Missouri, calling out the National Guard in anticipation of a grand jury decision on whether to bring charges against Darren Wilson, the Ferguson police officer who killed unarmed teenager Michael Brown in August. Nixon's unprecedented preemptive move, based merely on the *potential* of civil unrest, flies in the face of democratic norms and is of a piece with his pro-death penalty stand.

Serving as Missouri attorney general from January 1993 to January 2009, before becoming governor, Nixon called for a broadening of the death penalty for federal crimes, including for those convicted of international drug trafficking. He also advocated increased spending to build more federal prisons.

Nixon is an advocate of "truth in sentencing" for those convicted of crimes of violence, mandating that

prisoners serve their full sentences with no chance of parole. He has also called for youth accused of felonies to be prosecuted as adults. As attorney general, he once referred to a death row inmate's appeals as "total hokum," while in another capital case, he said his office was moving ahead toward the execution with "grim determination."

Missouri has carried out 9 of the 33 executions in the US so far this year, second only to Texas, with 10. Nixon has presided over 13 executions since he became governor on January 12, 2009, and 11 of these took place either this year or last. Of the 1,392 executions taking place since the US Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in 1976, 79 have been in Missouri, the fifth most of any state.



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