

With support of US Supreme Court, Texas authorities execute mentally ill man

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Adam Kelly Ward, a severely mentally ill Texas man sentenced to death for the 2005 murder of 44-year-old Michael Walker, was executed Tuesday evening by lethal injection. Ward, 33, was the ninth person executed in the US so far this year and the fifth in Texas alone.

Roughly two hours before the execution, the US Supreme Court rejected Ward's appeal. The high court refused to comment on the case, signaling its support for the barbaric practice of murdering the mentally impaired.

Ward was given a lethal dose of pentobarbital at the Walls Unit in Huntsville after 6 p.m. local time, according to the Associated Press. As it took effect, he took a deep breath followed by a smaller one and then stopped moving. He was pronounced dead at 6:34 p.m.

Ward had been on death row less than nine years after being convicted and sentenced to death in 2007. During that trial, a psychiatrist testified that Ward suffered from a psychotic disorder which caused him to "suffer paranoid delusions such that he believes there might be a conspiracy against him and that people might be after him or trying to harm him," according to court documents.

Evidence of Ward's paranoia, delusions and bipolar disorder was presented in his initial trial and subsequent appeals court trials, with a federal district court noting that by age fifteen Ward "interpreted neutral things as a threat or personal attack." He was found to have begun exhibiting delusional tendencies as early as the sixth grade, leading the court to declare, "Adam Kelly Ward has been afflicted with mental illness his entire life."

The details surrounding Ward's murder of Walker clearly indicate that his mental illness of delusions and paranoia prompted him to commit the murder.

Walker was a code enforcement officer who was inspecting Ward's property in Commerce, a town 65 miles northeast of Dallas. The Ward family had been cited numerous times for violating housing and zoning codes.

Witnesses said that the two got into an argument when Walker began taking pictures around the perimeter of the Ward property, prompting Ward to spray Walker with a hose he had been using to wash his car. Ward's trial lawyer, Dennis Davis, says that Walker then told Ward that he was calling for back up, which Ward interpreted as meaning that the police were coming to kill him.

"He had no idea that was the exact wrong thing to say to that person," Davis told AP. After Walker made the phone call, Ward went into his house, returned with a gun and shot Walker nine times.

Ward later testified that he believed Walker was armed, telling AP, "Only time any shots were fired on my behalf was when I was matching force with force, when this man had pulled a gun on me and he pointed it at me and was fixing to shoot me, which is self-defense." There was no evidence demonstrating that Walker had a weapon, suggesting that Ward had suffered a psychotic episode.

Davis told AP, "When I stepped in front of the jury, I said, 'I'm not going to be so callous and look you in the face and say my client didn't kill this man. He killed him but you have to understand why. These delusions he has caused the situation.'"

Despite Ward's mental illness clearly prompting him to commit the murder, state and federal courts repeatedly rejected his appeals for a life sentence in lieu of the death penalty. Most recently, Texas Court of Criminal Appeals Judge Elsa Alcala rejected Ward's last petition with the state last Monday.

In issuing her verdict, Alcala said, “As is the case with intellectual disability, the preferred course would be for legislatures rather than courts to set standards defining the level at which a mental illness is so severe that it should result in a defendant being categorically exempt from the death penalty.”

Any appeals to the state legislature in Texas for reforms to such laws will fall on deaf ears, as the state’s legislature remains among the most reactionary in the country. At present, there are 249 inmates on death row in Texas. The state has carried out by far the most executions since the death penalty was reinstated in the US following the 1976 *Gregg v. Georgia* Supreme Court decision, executing 535 people, or more than a third of the total executions. These have included many individuals convicted of crimes committed as juveniles and the mentally impaired.



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