

# Virginia Democratic governor defies international protests to oversee execution of mentally ill prisoner

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William C. Morva was executed Thursday night in the state of Virginia after Governor Terry McAuliffe, a Democrat, denied his petition for clemency. Morva, 35, a dual Hungarian-American citizen, was sentenced to death for the 2006 murders of a sheriff's deputy and a hospital security guard.

Morva's lethal injection proceeded despite international protests highlighting his mental state, which has been described as both a psychosocial disability and a delusional disorder. He was pronounced dead at 9:15 p.m. at the Greensville Correctional Center near Jarratt, Virginia, according to a spokeswoman for the state corrections department. "The execution was carried out without complications," she said.

This is the third execution presided over by McAuliffe, a longtime Democratic Party operative. While claiming to personally oppose capital punishment due to his Catholic faith, he has vowed to uphold Virginia's reactionary practice of the death penalty.

The US Supreme Court declined to hear an appeal by Morva in October 2010. On February 21, the high court again declined to hear Morva's case—his final appeal. The Supreme Court has repeatedly declined to stop the execution of the mentally ill, saying that only people who are "insane" can be spared the death penalty.

However, "the insane" are narrowly defined by the court as those "who are unaware of the punishment they are about to suffer and why they are to suffer it"—a definition excluding most people with severe mental illness. Even by this narrow definition, Morva's mental condition met the court's standard of insanity.

Those protesting Morva's execution included two United Nations special rapporteurs, the European Union's diplomatic service, more than two dozen members of the Virginia General Assembly and three of the state's representatives in the US Congress.

Amnesty International, the American Civil Liberties Union of Virginia and numerous mental health organizations delivered more than 30,000 petitions to McAuliffe's office calling on him to grant clemency.

Rachel Sutphin, the daughter of one of Morva's victims, also asked for his life to be spared. "I am against the death penalty for religious and moral reasons," she told the AP. "I have fought and will continue to fight for clemency for all death row inmates until Virginia declares the death penalty unconstitutional."

But in a statement Thursday afternoon, McAuliffe said that the condemned prisoner "did not suffer from any condition that would have prevented him from committing these acts consciously and fully understanding their consequences."

## Execution of the mentally ill

McAuliffe's statement is at odds with the facts of the case. In August 2006, Morva was taken to Montgomery Regional Hospital to treat an injury while he was awaiting trial on an attempted burglary charge. While there, he stole a gun from a sheriff's deputy and then fatally shot security guard Derrick McFarland. He fled the scene, and a day later shot and killed Eric Sutphin, a sheriff's deputy.

At his 2008 trial, jurors were told Morva suffered from a personality disorder that resulted in "odd beliefs," but that he was not delusional. In 2014, a psychiatrist diagnosed him with delusional disorder, a severe mental illness akin to schizophrenia that makes it impossible for him to distinguish between delusions and reality, according to his attorneys.

His lawyers also argued that his escape from custody and the subsequent murders were prompted by Morva's belief that someone wanted him to die in jail. Dawn Davison, a senior attorney at the Virginia Capital Representation Resource Center, said her client "was in the grip of a powerful psychosis" at the time of the shootings.

He had not accepted in-person visits from his lawyers or his mother for years, insisting they were part of a conspiracy to kill him. His mother, Elizabeth Morva, wrote in an affidavit in her son's support, "If someone had intervened sooner, I truly believe William could never have killed those two men. But I cannot change the past. I can only say that I am so sorry and ask that my son please be spared."

According to court records, following his conviction and just before being sentenced to death, Morva went on a courtroom rant, declaring his "slave name" was Nemo and he did not expect mercy. "There are others like me, and I hope you know that," he said. "And soon they're going to get together. They're going to

sweep over your whole civilization, and they're going to wipe these smiles off your faces forever."

According to information on a web site dedicated to stopping his execution, his friends and family describe behavior such as eating large amounts of raw meat and subsisting on a diet of nuts, berries and pinecones, sleeping out in the woods with nothing but leaves as cover, and claiming he had been chosen to save indigenous people.

In a statement responding to McAuliffe's denial of clemency, his legal team said, "He is not 'the worst of the worst' for whom the death penalty is supposed to be reserved. He is a person with a severe mental illness whose problematic and criminal behaviors were driven by his chronic psychotic disorder."

## The Democratic Party and the death penalty

McAuliffe's overseeing of the execution of a highly delusional prisoner highlights in grim fashion the Democratic Party's support for the barbaric practice of capital punishment. The multimillionaire governor has close ties to Bill and Hillary Clinton, serving as co-chairman of President Clinton's 1996 reelection campaign, and chairman of Hillary Clinton's 2008 presidential campaign. He also chaired the Democratic National Committee from 2001 to 2005.

In January 1992, Bill Clinton, then Arkansas governor and a candidate for the Democratic Party presidential nomination, demonstrated his support for the death penalty when he flew home mid-campaign to ensure that the execution of Ricky Ray Rector proceeded as scheduled. As governor, Clinton presided over three additional executions.

Rector was convicted and sentenced to death for the 1981 murder of a police officer. After shooting the officer in the back, he then turned the gun on himself. The attempted suicide effectively resulted in a frontal lobotomy, rendering Rector incapable of comprehending his death sentence.

Clinton would go on to sign into law the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996 (AEDPA), which severely limited the federal writ of habeas corpus for death row inmates and extended the death penalty to dozens of crimes.

Since assuming office in January 2014, Governor McAuliffe has now refused clemency to three death row inmates, including Morva. On October 1, 2015, Virginia executed Alfredo Rolando Prieto, 49, despite claims that he was intellectually disabled. Virginia authorities ignored an injunction issued by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) to halt the execution. The execution also proceeded in advance of a ruling from the US Supreme Court on Prieto's appeal challenging Virginia's lethal injection protocol.

On January 18, 2017, McAuliffe oversaw the execution of Ricky Gray, 39. Gray's attorneys had appealed to the Supreme Court to halt his execution due to Virginia's three-drug execution protocol of midazolam, potassium chloride and the paralytic drug, pancuronium bromide. They argued that the sedative midazolam

had already failed to render prisoners unconscious during executions in Alabama, Arizona, Ohio and Oklahoma, subjecting them to a torturous death.

A reporter for the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* witnessed Gray's execution. A minute into the procedure, according to the newspaper, and after the midazolam had been injected, the prisoner lifted up his head, "looked around, moved his toes and legs. He appeared to take a number of deep breaths and he appeared to make snoring or groaning sounds."

Gray's family obtained his official autopsy report, and the *Guardian* revealed details of the report for the first time July 5: "It notes that 'blood-tinged fluid is present from the mouth' and that 'the upper airways contain foamy liquid.' It also finds that the body's lungs were 'severely congested' and that there were 'red cells present in the airways.'"

Mark Edward, associate professor of pathology at Emory University School of Medicine in Atlanta, examined the autopsy report. The *Guardian* writes: "It was an indication, he said, of acute pulmonary edema, in which fluid collects in the lungs and overwhelms an individual's ability to breathe."

"This way of dying is intolerable. You can't control your breathing—it is terrible," Edgar told the *Guardian*. "When it is this severe you can experience panic and terror, and if the individual was in any way aware of what was happening to them it would be unbearable."

The ease with which the ruling elite condones and presides over such gruesome spectacles must stand as a warning to the working class. Governors, Democratic and Republican alike, have presided over 1,456 executions since the Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in 1976. These have included the mentally ill and incompetent, foreign nationals denied their consular rights, and those convicted of crimes committed as juveniles.

The band of sociopaths now occupying the White House are similarly prepared to utilize the type of brutality meted out to condemned death row inmates against the working class as a whole—through police violence, the deportation of immigrants, attacks on democratic and social rights, and against civilian populations in the myriad military operations being prosecuted abroad.

Contemplating William Morva's clemency petition, McAuliffe stated: "It is the hardest part of my job. To be honest with you, I didn't sleep a wink last night thinking about it. This is a very, very, very, tough decision. As governor, I've got to enforce the law." With that, he signed off on the state killing of a mentally ill death row inmate with a psychosocial disability.

Morva's execution was the second in Virginia so far this year and the 14th in the United States as a whole. According to the Death Penalty Information Center, as of October 1, 2016, there were 2,902 prisoners on death row in the 31 US states that continue to practice the death penalty.



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