

Following Georgia execution

## Protests mount vs. planned execution of Texas inmate Rodney Reed

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Twenty death row inmates have been executed in the United States so far this year. The latest took place in Georgia, where Ray Jefferson Cromartie was sent to his death late Wednesday night. Cromartie, 52, was executed despite appeals for new DNA testing, which his lawyers said might prove his innocence.

The next scheduled execution is in Texas. Rodney Reed, 51, is set to die November 20 despite an enormous amount of evidence that points to his innocence. His impending execution has sparked nationwide outrage and calls for his state killing to be halted.

While the number of yearly executions has fallen over the past two decades, a handful of states still carry them out, including Georgia and Texas. Texas has carried out a staggering 568 executions since the US Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in 1976. Georgia has executed 75 individuals.

As of April 1, 2,673 people were languishing on death rows across the US, according to the Death Penalty Information Center. Cromartie and Reed are representative of these condemned prisoners. In both cases, despite substantial evidence pointing to their innocence, state authorities and courts have ruled against testing the new evidence.

### Ray Cromartie

Cromartie was convicted and sentenced to death for the 1994 killing of convenience store clerk Richard Slysz. His lethal injection took place shortly after the

US Supreme Court rejected an eleventh-hour appeal by his attorneys. He was the third person executed in Georgia this year.

Cromartie, who maintained his innocence in Slysz's murder as well as the grave injury of another store clerk a few days earlier, declined to give last words in the execution chamber in the state prison in Jackson, Georgia, CBS News reported. When the deadly drugs began flowing, "the inmate took some deep breaths, exhaling deeply before he went still," according to CBS.

Cromartie's attorneys recently asked state and federal courts to allow DNA testing of evidence collected from the two shootings that they said could rule out their client as the shooter. This evidence included testing on shell casings from both shootings and clothing samples from Slysz, the *Atlanta-Journal Constitution* (AJC) reports. The state insisted that the testing being sought could not prove Cromartie's innocence.

Corey Clark and Thaddeus Lucas, who were involved in the two robberies, testified against Cromartie at his 1997 trial. Each of them pleaded guilty to lesser charges, served prison time, and have since been released. It was recently reported in a court filing that another man, identified as the getaway driver in the second robbery, recently said he had overheard the other robber say that he, not Cromartie, shot Slysz, according to AJC. State officials argued that this didn't matter.

Slysz's daughter, Elizabeth Legette, supported the DNA testing. AJC quoted her statement. "In the course of the past few months, I have not been treated with fairness, dignity or respect, and people in power have refused to listen to what I had to say," she said

Tuesday. “I believe this was, in part, because I was not saying what I was expected to say as a victim.”

## Rodney Reed

About 1,000 people protested Saturday outside the Texas governor’s mansion in Austin, Texas, calling for freedom for death row inmate Rodney Reed, who is set to be put to death on November 20. Protesters carried placards and signs with the slogans “Innocent” and “Free Rodney Reed.”

Celebrities, activists and some lawmakers have called for Reed’s case to be reexamined in light of a preponderance of evidence pointing to his innocence. Governor Greg Abbott, a Republican, as yet has made no statement on the case.

Sandra Reed, the condemned prisoner’s mother, spoke out at the rally. “This case shows that everybody behind bars are not guilty,” she said. “My son is innocent. I stand on these truths—scientific facts and findings back me up.”

Nearly 3 million signatures have been gathered on a petition calling on Abbott to halt Reed’s execution. A number of celebrities, including Kim Kardashian West, Beyoncé, Rhianna, musician QuestLove, model Gigi Hadid, and rappers T.I., Busta Rhymes and LL Cool J, are supporting Reed. The bipartisan Texas House Criminal Justice Report Caucus has called on the governor to delay Reed’s execution so the Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles can review the case.

Reed has been imprisoned for more than 21 years for the 1996 rape and murder of Stacey Stites. He was convicted by an all-white jury and the alleged murder weapon has never been tested for DNA evidence. The Innocence Project is representing Reed. Its attorneys have filed legal documents asking that Reed’s conviction be overturned based on the testimony of seven new witnesses.

The testimony of witnesses coming forward points to Stites’s then-fiancé, Jimmy Fennell, as the perpetrator. For months after the murder, Fennell was the prime suspect in the case. Reed says that he and Stites were having a consensual sexual relationship, but no one came forward at trial to corroborate this.

One witness, Richard Derleth, who worked at the Bastrop Country Sheriff’s office with Fennell, says he occasionally saw Stites at the local grocery store where she worked. He says that on one occasion other employees told him they would be on the lookout for Fennell and would warn Stites if they saw him coming, which would cause her to “run and hide from Jimmy.”

Rebecca Peoples, a former co-worker of Stites, says in her affidavit that Stites told her that she was afraid of her fiancé. In her sworn testimony, Peoples says that Stites also confided with her that she was having an affair with a black man.

Following Stites’s murder, Fennell later served a 10-year prison term for a sex crime and kidnapping. On October 29 of this year, Arthur Snow, a former prison mate of Fennell and former member of the Aryan Brotherhood, disclosed a conversation with Fennell in which he confessed to murdering Stites, stating, “I had to kill my n\*\*\*\*\*-loving fiancée.”

In addition, three Texas forensic experts have admitted to errors in their testimony, submitting affidavits that Stites’s original time of death was inaccurate, making Reed’s responsibility for the victim’s death implausible. Neighbors have also said that they frequently heard Fennell and Stites arguing.

Bryce Benjet of the Innocence Project, Reed’s attorney, told CBS, “These are not people coming out of the woodwork. They are police officers, verified co-workers of the victim, and her neighbors. These people have nothing to gain by telling us what they know; and what we have learned corroborates Mr. Reed’s relationship with Ms. Stites and further implicates Jimmy Fennell in the murder.”

If Reed’s death goes ahead, he would be the ninth person executed in Texas this year.



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