Tennessee carries out fifth electric chair execution since 2018

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The state of Tennessee executed death row inmate Nicholas Todd Sutton, 58, last Thursday using the electric chair, viewed universally as a barbaric throwback. Sutton had been convicted and sentenced to death in 1986 for the stabbing death of a fellow prisoner, Carl Estep.

Sutton was already in prison for the brutal killing spree of four people, including his grandmother and two high school friends. He spent his entire adult life behind bars, having been just 18 years old when he was sentenced to life prison for those killings in 1980.

Thursday night's state-sanctioned killing inside the death chamber at Riverbend Maximum Security Institution was the fifth time since 2018, when the state resumed executions, that Tennessee has used this method to execute a prisoner. Sutton was the 139th inmate executed in Tennessee since 1916. Fifty-three prisoners currently remain on the state's death row.

Gruesomely nicknamed "Old Sparky," the electric chair used Thursday contains wood from the gallows that was used for hangings until that form of execution was outlawed in 1913. The man who rebuilt the chair in 1989, Fred Leuchter, has raised concerns that reductions in the voltage and duration of each round of electricity used since it was reintroduced make it likely that the condemned will feel severe pain and could "cook the executee and boil his blood."

The electric chair was first proposed in 1881 by a Buffalo, New York, dentist, Alfred P Southwick, as a "humane alternative" to hanging. Associated almost exclusively with the United States, there is nothing "humane" about the electric chair, which is now a possible method of execution in nine states including Tennessee. After a prisoner is strapped to the chair, varying cycles of alternating electric current are passed through the body with the aim of rendering the person unconscious, inducing cardiac arrest and finally causing fatal damage to the vital organs.

According the Death Penalty Information Center, although opposition to the death penalty is on the rise, as of 2014 public opinion in the United States is almost evenly split between the death penalty and life without parole for serious capital crimes. As of this year, 29 states as well as the federal government and the US military still have the death penalty, while the remaining 21 states and Washington, D.C., have abolished the practice. Seven states carried out at least one execution in 2019. Texas led the way with nine deaths.

Sutton's life and death speak volumes about social and economic inequality when contrasted with the life of Tennessee's millionaire governor, Bill Lee, who could have commuted his death sentence.

Both Sutton, 58, and Lee, 60, were of the same generation, but after that the similarities end. In a country riven by class divisions and income inequality unrivaled since the Gilded Age, the governor and his victim lived in completely different worlds.

Lee was born with a silver spoon in his mouth, Sutton with a rusty fork.

Bill Lee grew up on a 1,000-acre horse and cattle farm in Williamson County, Tennessee, now the richest county in the state. He played in the creeks, rode horses and enjoyed a life of extreme privilege, attending some of best elementary and high schools in Tennessee. Then it was university. While Lee grew, his father and uncle worked to form a business that young Bill Lee would finally receive. He was being prepped for his very bright future.

While Lee frolicked in this idyllic rural setting, Nicholas Sutton was doing anything but enjoying his life.

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According to Sutton's attorneys, their client was living in a pressure cooker, suffering constant and "pervasive childhood trauma." His father "was a violent, abusive and unstable man who suffered from severe mental illness, struggled with substance abuse and was repeatedly institutionalized."

It was reported by the *Tennessean* that the attorneys also noted that Sutton "started taking illicit drugs with his father by [age] 12, beginning a lifelong addiction."

Only his grandmother would take him in and care for him.

In 1992—by then Sutton was already in prison on death row—Lee would take over the multimillion-dollar family business but suffer his own personal trauma in 2000, when his wife and mother of their four children was killed in a tragic horseback riding accident on the family's Franklin farm.

Lee called her death a "great tragedy" but received help well beyond the means of working-class families. Certainly, beyond any help that Sutton might have hoped for.

Lee was able to stop working and eventually pulled through, but not by his own bootstraps.

"Here's how Bill Lee survived," the *Chattanooga Times* reported in 2018 when Lee was seeking the Republican Party nomination for governor. "His mother and sister helped look after the children. They hired a woman to clean the house. For months, parents at the school cooked dinners for the family. His friends showed up in the morning to pray with him. They got him out of the house, took him to restaurants and ball games."

"He couldn't have done it if he didn't have so much support," his mother, Ann Lee, told the *Chattanooga Times*. "That shaped him."

Lee would, according to the *Chattanooga Times*, decide to run for governor while on "an RV trip through New England and…over a bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon. "

Meanwhile, Sutton was dining on death row fare, having changed his outlook on life while awaiting his ultimate fate.

Sutton's lawyers said he had "gone from a life-taker to a life-saver" after becoming sober in prison," the *Tennessean* reported. "His clemency application cited accounts from three prison officers who said Sutton stepped in to save their lives when he didn't have to, twice stepping between staff and angry inmates to diffuse potentially lethal conflicts.

"Attorneys hoped the courts or Gov. Bill Lee would intervene this time. They pointed to problems with the trial that put him on death row and to his remarkable transformation in prison, where correction officers said he had saved multiple lives."

They were hoping for clemency.

Lee used to belong to the Men of Valor, a prison ministry. He was the keynote speaker at the group's "All-Day Criminal Justice Reform and Addiction Conference," in September of last year.

The *Tennessee Star* reported that Lee remarked in the course of his speech that "The trauma the vast majority of them endured as a child led me to believe that I would be in prison, too, if it happened to me."

Despite his professed empathy for the incarcerated, Lee turned down Sutton's request for clemency.

With the final go-ahead Thursday, the executioner sent two cycles of 1,750 volts of electricity coursing through Sutton's body. Sutton was pronounced dead at 7:26 p.m. local time.

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