

Arizona executes two inmates in less than a month

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The second man in a month was executed in Arizona this week. Frank Atwood, 66, who was convicted for the killing of 8-year old Vicki Lynne Hoskinson in 1984, was put to death by lethal injection at 10:16 a.m. on Wednesday, June 8 at the Arizona State Prison Complex in Florence.

Atwood's lawyers had attempted to overturn his death sentence, arguing that they had discovered an FBI memo indicating that an anonymous caller had described seeing Hoskinson in a car not associated with Atwood. Atwood's defense was heard by the Supreme Court Wednesday morning, which rejected his final defense and cleared the way for his execution to progress.

The state killing of Atwood followed by less than four weeks the execution of Clarence Dixon, also 66, on May 11, both of which come eight years after a federal judge issued a state wide stay following the botched 2014 execution of Jason Wood.

Jason Wood was given a cocktail of experimental drugs in 15 separate injections which took two hours to take effect. Reports from witnesses of the execution indicated that he repeatedly snorted and gasped 600 times before he died, prompting outrage over the cruelty of his execution.

Local reporting indicates that prison staff were unable to locate a vein to inject the lethal dose, and ultimately injected Atwood in his right hand at his own request. Atwood's execution reportedly went "smoothly" according to KOLD-TV's Bud Foster, who said that the execution "was probably the most peaceful of any of the executions that I witnessed in the past."

KOLD-TV was one of three Tucson area news organizations allowed to witness the execution. The Associated Press, which has a long history of witnessing executions, requested permission to send a

journalist but was denied.

The execution before Atwood's was also fraught and nearly botched. Dixon was executed despite being blind, diagnosed with schizophrenia, and a member of the Navajo Nation, which strongly opposes the death penalty for cultural and religious reasons.

Due to Dixon's mental illness, his defense argued that he could not properly understand the rationale for his execution and therefore could not be legally put to death. A psychiatrist who interviewed Dixon multiple times testified that he believed he was being executed as part of a government conspiracy, not for the murder and rape charges that he had been convicted of. The court, however, ruled against Dixon, arguing that he was not mentally impaired enough to merit staying his execution.

Dixon's defense continued to argue against his execution, and on April 8 filed a motion again arguing that he was not mentally competent enough to be executed. Arizona Attorney General Mark Brnovich urged the court to not even hold a hearing, arguing that it would delay Dixon's execution, essentially claiming that it is more important for the state to kill a man than to determine if it is legal to do so.

Witnesses reported that Dixon struggled in pain for 25 minutes as the prison staff failed to insert the IV into his left arm. Eventually, the executioners injected his right arm and made an incision in his groin where they inserted an additional lethal injection. Paul Davenport, a media witness for the Associated Press, noted that "I did see what appeared to be some cutting into the groin, they did have to wipe up a fair amount of blood."

These recent executions have sparked concern among opponents of the death penalty, with Amnesty International in particular noting that Arizona currently has 111 inmates on death row, 22 of whom have

exhausted all of their appeals. Dan Peitzmeyer, the death penalty abolition coordinator for Amnesty International, described the executions as having “opened the flood gates” for an escalation in Arizona’s executions.

The deaths of Dixon and Atwood bring Arizona’s total executions up to 39 since 1992, when the state moved to lethal injections from the previous method of death by gas chamber. Since Atwood had been convicted before 1992, he was given the choice of which method of execution he preferred.

Arizona’s system for applying lethal injections has been fraught with failures and questionable legality. Not only was Wood executed with an experimental cocktail of drugs, but the state of Arizona has been caught multiple times using illegal drugs. In 2011, the Department of Justice found that Arizona’s supply of sodium thiopental was imported illegally. And in 2015, the state of Arizona was caught attempting to illegally import lethal injection drugs from India, which were confiscated by FDA officials in Phoenix.

In 1999, Arizona executed German citizen Walter LaGrand by gas chamber. Two years later, the International Court of Justice ruled that Arizona has violated the Vienna Convention by failing to inform LaGrand of his right to seek assistance from the German Consulate. A year later, the US Supreme Court ruled that Arizona’s entire system for death penalty sentencing unconstitutional in the case *Ring v. Arizona*, which ruled Arizona was violating defendant’s Sixth Amendment rights by entrusting a judge with the authority to find facts sufficient to impose the death penalty without the input of a jury.

It was reported by the *Guardian* last year that the state is reopening its gas chamber and preparing to use Zykon-B, the same chemical used by the Nazis in the Holocaust at the Auschwitz and Majdanek concentration camps. The state had purchased a block of potassium cyanide in December 2020 along with two other ingredients, sodium hydroxide pellets and sulfuric acid for a few thousand dollars.



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