Two US executions this week: Missouri inmate maintained his innocence, Texas inmate claimed racial prejudice and juror misconduct

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The state of Missouri carried out the execution of Leonard "Raheem" Taylor on Tuesday evening at the state prison in Bonne Terre. Taylor, 58, was convicted and sentenced to death for the 2004 killings of his girlfriend, 28-year-old Angela Rowe, and her three children, Alexus Conley, 10, AcQreya Conley, 6, and Tyrese Conley, 5. Taylor has consistently maintained his innocence.

Taylor has long said that he was in California when the four murders took place. Key to his claim was the time of death of the victims. Investigators initially said the victims had been killed no more than a few days before they were discovered. At the trial, however, they changed the estimated time of death to a two- to three-week window, based in part on the cool temperature in the house.

Taylor's lawyers have argued that evidence shows Rowe and her children were alive at the time Taylor was in California. A forensic pathologist hired by the defense also issued a finding January 25 challenging the conclusions of the prosecution on the family's time of death. Taylor alleges that when prosecutors learned of his "airtight alibi" they pressured witnesses to change their testimony about the time of death to place Taylor in town when the killings took place.

The *Kansas City Star* quoted Megan Crane, co-director of the MacArthur Justice Center's Missouri office in St. Louis, who said Taylor was "wrongfully executed" despite a "credible claim of innocence" that was never heard or evaluated by any court of law.

Taylor was unjustly "killed by the very system that should have protected him," the Midwest Innocence Project said in a statement. "Since the moment of his arrest, Mr. Taylor proclaimed his innocence, loudly and for all who would hear. Yet no one—not the police, not the prosecutor, not the attorneys charged with defending him—seriously investigated that claim of innocence," the group wrote.

Missouri Governor Mike Parson, a Republican, denied Taylor's clemency request on February 6. Two petitions before the Missouri Supreme Court were denied in the days leading up to the execution. In a docket entry on Tuesday, the US Supreme Court rejected a stay of execution.

Defense attorney Kevin Schriener said they had also sought a temporary restraining order and stay of execution on the day of Taylor's planned lethal injection, Tuesday, February 7, because Taylor's spiritual adviser was not given permission to be with him in the execution chamber.

At 6:01 p.m., Taylor's lawyers emailed the 8th Circuit Court of Appeals and the Missouri Attorney General's Office to inform them that they would be appealing. Within minutes, the Attorney General Andrew Bailey and Governor Parson both signaled that all legal impediments had been exhausted and the execution should proceed.

The *Star* reported that Taylor was injected with the drug pentobarbital at 6:07 p.m. Missouri Department of Corrections spokeswoman Karen Pojmann said Taylor was pronounced dead at 6:16 p.m.

Taylor's team of post-conviction attorneys are demanding an investigation by the Missouri Department of Corrections and law enforcement into why he was executed before he had exhausted his final appeals in federal court. "This has never happened in the nearly one hundred prior executions that have taken place in

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Missouri in the last thirty-four years," the defense team said in a statement.

John Lezell Balentine, 54, was executed Wednesday evening at the state penitentiary in Huntsville, Texas. Balentine was convicted and sentenced to death for the 1998 shooting deaths of three teenagers—Edward Mark Caylor, 17, Kai Brooke Geyer, 15, and Steven Watson, 15—at a home in Amarillo.

Balentine confessed to the murders. However, the condemned inmate's post-conviction attorneys argued that his trial and sentencing were plagued by racial bias and jury misconduct. Balentine was black and the three victims were white. One of the victims was his ex-girlfriend's brother, who reportedly disapproved of Balentine's relationship with his sister.

Balentine's lawyers argued that their client's trial attorneys referred to the sentencing proceedings in a note as a "justifiable lynching." The attorneys also alleged prosecutors prevented all prospective black jurors from serving on the jury.

Balentine's attorneys also alleged that the jury foreman in his case, Dory England, held racist views and bullied other jurors who wanted to sentence Balentine to a life term into changing their minds. Lola Perkins, formerly married to England's brother, told the attorneys, that England "was racist against black people because that is how he was raised," according to the Associated Press. Before his death in 2021, England said he wanted the death penalty for Balentine because otherwise he "would need to hunt him down" himself.

Balentine was also among a group of five Texas death row inmates who sued the state prison system, alleging that the state's execution drugs are expired and unsafe and should not be used. A civil court judge preliminarily agreed with these claims, but the two top Texas courts have allowed three of the five inmates participating in the suit to be executed: Robert Fratta, Wesley Ruiz, and now Balentine.

The US Supreme Court on Wednesday declined an appeal from Balentine to halt his execution so that his claims of racial bias could be reviewed. Republican Governor Greg Abbott refused to issue a temporary stay. The Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles unanimously declined to commute Balentine's death sentence to a lesser punishment or to grant a temporary reprieve.

The Texas Court of Criminal Appeals also denied a defense request to stay the execution over allegations that "racism and racial issues pervaded" his trial. They ruled on procedural grounds and without reviewing the merits of the request for a stay.

The Associated Press reported that Balentine "took two breaths as the lethal dose of the powerful sedative pentobarbital began flowing through intravenous needles in his arms, snored twice, yawned and began snoring again loudly. The snores—11 of them—became progressively quieter, then stopped." A physician pronounced him dead at 6:36 p.m.

Also in Texas, on January 21 death row prisoner Terence Andrus, 34, hanged himself six months after the US Supreme Court denied review of his case for a second time. Andrus was sentenced to death in 2012 for the 2008 murders of two people during an attempted carjacking while he was high on PCP-laced cannabis.

The jury at Andrus's trial was unaware of his diagnosis of affective psychosis, his neglect as a child or the trauma he endured in juvenile detention. The Death Penalty Information Center (DPIC) writes:

"Beginning at the age of 16, he spent 18 months at an overcrowded juvenile detention center, where he was given high doses of psychotropic drugs and placed in solitary con?nement, consisting of a cold and ?lthy cell for extended periods, either for engaging in self-mutilation, suicidal feelings, minor adolescent infractions, or at his own request to escape the violence in the facility."

On January 26, Texas death row prisoners filed a lawsuit against the state for their unconstitutional conditions of confinement, including inde?nite solitary con?nement, poor health care, and improper access to counsel. "Most of the 181 prisoners have spent years enduring days of 22 hours to 24 hours of solitary con?nement, about 75 of whom have endured these conditions for more than two decades," writes DPIC.

In addition to Taylor and Balentine, four other people have been executed so far this year in the US: Amber McLaughlin in Missouri, on January 3; Robert Alan Fratta, Texas, January 10; Scott J. Elzember, Oklahoma, January 12; and Wesley Lynn Ruiz, Texas, February 1.

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