

Executions in Alabama and Texas as Trump administration sets out death penalty agenda

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The states of Alabama and Texas carried out one execution each last week, bringing the number of executions in 2025 to three. Five more executions are scheduled between now and March 20—two in Texas, and one each in Florida, South Carolina and Oklahoma.

The executions of Steven Nelson in Texas and Demetrius Frazier in Alabama come in the context of the Trump administration's efforts to bolster the federal death penalty and to encourage the 27 states that practice the death penalty to ramp up capital prosecutions.

On Inauguration Day, Trump signed an executive order titled "Restoring the Death Penalty and Protecting Public Safety," whose aim is to "ensure that the laws that authorize capital punishment are respected and faithfully implemented," and claiming that politicians and judges are subverting the law by "obstructing and preventing the execution of capital sentences."

Trump lifted the moratorium on federal executions put in place by the Biden administration's Department of Justice. He also directed his attorney general to challenge Supreme Court rulings that limit the ability of state and federal governments to carry out executions. Trump instructed his newly confirmed Attorney General Pam Bondi to review the placement of 37 federal death row inmates whose sentences were commuted by Biden to ensure they are held in appropriately harsh and draconian conditions.

Texas

Steven Nelson was executed on Wednesday, February 5 at the state prison in Huntsville Texas. Nelson, 37, was convicted and sentenced to death for the 2011 murder during a robbery of Rev. Clinton Dobson, 28, a pastor at the NorthPoint Baptist Church in Arlington. Church secretary Judy Elliott, 69, was also injured in the attack.

Nelson argued at trial that he had not killed Dobson, that he had only been brought along as a lookout, and that two other men allegedly involved in the robbery killed the

pastor. Investigators countered that they found physical evidence linking Nelson to the crime, including blood on Nelson's sneakers matching that of the victims. The men Nelson blamed for the murder were reportedly cleared after their alibis checked out.

Nelson was strapped to a gurney in the execution chamber at the prison after 6 p.m. local time Wednesday, February 5. According to AP, shortly before he was injected with a single dose of the sedative pentobarbital Nelson told his wife that he loved her and was thankful for her. "I'm not scared. I'm at peace," he said. "Let's ride, Warden."

After being injected with a lethal dose of the sedative, Nelson tried to speak and said the word "love" before he reportedly tried to hold his breath. He was pronounced dead at 6:40 p.m.

Texas has three additional executions scheduled through the end of April. Richard Lee Taler is the next inmate scheduled to die in the state, on February 13, the same day that Florida plans to execute James Ford.

Taking its cue from the Trump administration, on January 28 the Florida legislature passed an immigration bill that mandates the automatic imposition of the death penalty for "unauthorized aliens" convicted of a capital offense. The bill was introduced during a special legislative session called by Governor Ron DeSantis. Bills requiring mandatory death sentences contradict longstanding US legal precedent and international laws prohibiting mandatory death sentences.

Trump's January 20 executive order specifically calls for the US attorney general to pursue federal jurisdiction and seek the death penalty for capital crimes involving the murder of a law-enforcement officer and capital crimes "committed by an alien illegally present in this country."

Alabama

Demetrius Frazier was executed Thursday, February 6, in Alabama. Frazier, 52, was convicted and sentenced to

death in 1996 for the 1991 rape and murder of Pauline Brown, 41, in Birmingham. Frazier was the fourth inmate to be put to death in Alabama by nitrogen gas asphyxiation, a method not yet utilized by any other state. Alabama carried out six of the 25 executions in the US in 2024, more than any other state.

Frazier had been serving a life sentence in Michigan for the 1992 murder of Crystal Kendrick, 14, until he was transferred to Alabama in 2011. Frazier's mother and supporters had called on Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer to intervene and have him sent back to Michigan to serve out his life sentence. Michigan abolished the death penalty in 1847.

Prior to the execution, Whitmer told the *Detroit News* that her predecessor as governor, Rick Snyder, "unfortunately" agreed to send Frazier to Alabama. Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel wrote in a filing in January that the state "does not seek to return Frazier to a Michigan correctional facility."

Abraham Bonowitz, executive director of the Death Penalty Action, commented on the refusal of Michigan authorities to intervene. "Michigan was the first state to legislatively abolish the death penalty, and the state has a constitutional prohibition on executions," he said. "Human rights norms usually keep countries and states from sending prisoners to places where they face human rights violations, but in Mr. Frazier's case they inexplicably decided to ship him off to Alabama to be killed."

Frazier was executed at the William C. Holman Correctional Facility in Atmore. According to AL.com, the viewing window into the execution chamber was opened at 6:05 p.m. local time. "First of all, I want to apologize," Frazier said in his final statement. "What happened to Pauline Brown should have never happened."

AL.com reported, "Frazier also said members of the media should contact a former detective at the Detroit Police Department to ask about a false confession he made regarding the killing of a 14-year-old there in 1992."

While strapped to the gurney, Frazier said about Michigan Governor Whitmer, "If you can't stand up for the Michigan Constitution, how can you stand up for the US Constitution?"

Witnesses reported that Frazier showed signs of distress during the execution. In nitrogen asphyxiation, a mask placed over the condemned inmate's face pumps in pure nitrogen gas, suffocating the inmate through oxygen

deprivation.

The nitrogen gas flowed for about 15 minutes, and witnesses reported that Frazier grimaced and quivered as the gas was pumped in. Alabama Corrections Commissioner John Q. Hamm claimed that Frazier lost consciousness quickly and that these movements were "involuntary reactions." However, critics of the gruesome method argue that these reactions appear to be the struggle of an inmate against suffocation. The three previous executions by nitrogen hypoxia have seen inmates convulsing, shaking and gasping for air.

According to the Associated Press, Frazier's execution began at about 6:10 p.m. and he began to grimace and quiver. At 6:13 p.m. he raised both legs several inches off the gurney, then took a few gasping breaths. He had no visible movement by 6:21 p.m. He was pronounced dead at 6:36 p.m.

A federal judge rejected a request by Frazier's attorneys to block his execution due to the apparent suffering of inmates put to death by this method. But the judge ruled that the men hadn't "experienced severe psychological pain or distress over and above what is inherent in any execution."

Alabama Governor Kay Ivy made clear that the purpose of these state killings is retribution. "In Alabama, we enforce the law," she said in a statement. "You don't come to our state and mess with our citizens and get away with it. Rapists and murderers are not welcome on our streets, and tonight, justice was carried out for Pauline Brown and her loved ones."

Alabama has executed 78 individuals since 1976, when the US Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty. Nine prisoners were exonerated of their crimes and removed from death row, which raises the likelihood that innocent people have been executed. As of January 2025, Alabama had 158 prisoners on death row, the fourth largest death row population in the nation.



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