

Executed this week in the US: A Florida inmate with severe mental illness, a Vietnam veteran in Mississippi with PTSD

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Twenty-five men have been sent to their deaths in the first half of 2025, the same number executed in all of last year. Executions took place in 10 of the 27 states, along with the US military and federal government, that still have capital punishment on the books. Four of these states—Arizona, Louisiana, Mississippi and Tennessee—carried out their first execution in multiple years.

All states but one, Arizona, that carried out executions so far in 2025 have Republican governors. They have been emboldened by President Donald Trump's Inauguration Day executive order, "Restoring the Death Penalty and Protecting Public Safety," which directed the US attorney general to "pursue the death penalty for all crimes of a severity demanding its use." The blood-thirsty order came in response in part to the Biden administration's commutation of the death sentences of 37 federal prisoners.

Florida

On Tuesday evening, June 24, Governor Ron DeSantis of Florida, this year's leading official hangman, oversaw the death sentence of Thomas Gudinas, 51. The latter was convicted and sentenced to death in 1995 for the 1994 rape and killing of Michelle McGrath. The medical examiner testified that McGrath had been "savagely raped and severely beaten" with blunt trauma to the head.

Gudinas was pronounced dead at 6:13 p.m. following a lethal injection at Florida State Prison, near Starke. He was the seventh individual executed in Florida this year, a rate that positions the state ahead of all others in the number of state-sanctioned killings in 2025.

Gudinas' attorneys have long argued that their client's severe mental illness should exempt him from execution. They contended that executing him would constitute cruel and unusual punishment, serving no purpose beyond "base vengeance" and violating "evolving standards of decency."

The Florida Supreme Court ruled last week that case law shielding intellectually disabled individuals from execution does not apply to those with other forms of mental illness or brain damage, effectively sealing Gudinas' fate. The US Supreme Court denied Gudinas' last-minute emergency appeal

for a stay of execution.

Gudinas' defense presented a picture of a lifetime marred by severe mental and emotional troubles. Unless one accepts religious dogma that says some individuals are "born evil," the heinous nature of Gudinas' crime can only be explained by his disturbed and deficient mental condition, shaped by his abusive upbringing and neglect by social services.

He was born with fluid on the brain and his childhood was characterized by extreme temper tantrums. He endured profound abuse, including his father burning his hand on a hot stove and forcing him to stand outside in the snow in his underwear for wetting the bed.

Gudinas was diagnosed with hyperactivity and behavioral problems by age six, leading to 105 different placements through the Division of Youth Services. Experts repeatedly recommended long-term residential treatment, something he never received. From a young age, he abused alcohol and various drugs, including marijuana, cocaine and LSD. He scored a low-average of 85 on IQ tests and attended special education classes.

Harvard Medical School consultant Dr. James D. Upson, a clinical neuropsychologist, testified that by age 13 Gudinas was a "very seriously and emotionally disturbed young man," displaying impulsivity, sexual confusion, bizarre ideations and violent tendencies. The doctor described Gudinas as "severely anxious, hyperactive and destructible," noting his "strikingly age inappropriate" behavior and delayed physical maturation.

An indication of Gudinas' mental state was a rambling letter he wrote to President Trump seeking a pardon and detailing a "secret system" causing his death row conviction.

The Florida attorney general's office, however, argued that Gudinas's mental health had been "litigated since his trial" and dismissed the defense appeals as an effort to find "a new doctor to give a more favorable opinion on the eve of his execution." In its sentencing order, the trial court acknowledged Gudinas suffered from personality disorders, developmental impairment, attention deficit disorder, and was a sexually disturbed and abused child, but assigned little weight to these mitigating factors.

Mississippi

The state of Mississippi carried out the execution of Richard Gerald Jordan, 79, on Wednesday evening, June 25. Jordan, a Vietnam veteran, was Mississippi's longest serving and oldest death row inmate.

Jordan's execution at the notorious Mississippi State Penitentiary, widely known as Parchman Farm, came nearly five decades after he kidnapped and murdered Edwina Marter, the wife of a bank officer, in a botched ransom scheme in January 1976.

The US Supreme Court denied without comment three emergency requests for a stay of execution in Jordan's case, clearing the way for the execution to proceed. His lethal injection procedure began at 6:00 p.m. Witnesses reported that he lay on the gurney with his mouth slightly open, took several deep breaths, and then became still. He was pronounced dead at 6:16 p.m.

Jordan's journey to death row began when he enlisted in the US Army at age 18. He served three combat tours, totaling 33 months in Vietnam from 1966 to 1969, volunteering for the position of door gunner. As a soldier in US imperialism's decades-long war against the Vietnamese people, he was "trained to kill on sight," providing fire from helicopters to protect ground troops.

One particularly disturbing incident involved his firing on a hut suspected of harboring those who had downed a US helicopter. He would later discover that women and children were among the dead, a revelation that profoundly affected him.

Court records show that these harrowing combat experiences continued to haunt him, manifesting as hypervigilance, emotional numbness and suspicion of strangers—all clinical signs of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Jordan's legal odyssey was exceptionally prolonged, involving four trials and numerous appeals before his death sentence was finally upheld in 1998. Throughout this process, his attorneys consistently argued that his military service and service-related disorders, particularly PTSD, were not adequately considered.

A central contention of Jordan's defense was that he was denied due process rights by not being provided an independent mental health professional to assist in his defense, as mandated by US Supreme Court precedent.

Instead, the trial court ordered a state-employed psychiatrist, Dr. Henry Maggio, to evaluate Jordan and simultaneously share the report with the prosecution. This arrangement meant the defense received "no expert assistance independent of the prosecution." Dr. Maggio's report found "no clinical evidence" of PTSD and incorrectly diagnosed Jordan with "antisocial personality disorder."

Jordan's lawyers argued that jurors at his 1976 trial never heard about his war service and subsequent PTSD, which could have spared him the death penalty. Final appeals to the US

Supreme Court and the US 5th Circuit Court of Appeals, and a clemency request to Governor Tate Reeves, were denied.

Parchman Farm, the scene of Jordan's execution, is Mississippi's only maximum-security prison for men and houses the death row for males, along with the state execution chamber.

Parchman has a long and sordid history, originating as a prison farm in 1901 constructed largely by state prisoners, the majority of whom were African American and were subjected to forced labor through a "convict lease system." David Oshinsky, author of *Worse Than Slavery*, noted that Parchman was "the closest thing to slavery that survived the Civil War."

Jordan's execution followed the state's three-drug lethal injection protocol, which he and other inmates had challenged in a federal lawsuit, arguing that the sedative, midazolam, creates a substantial risk of "excruciating pain" from the subsequent drugs. Autopsies of those executed by this method have shown its victims suffer a drowning sensation likened to "waterboarding" torture.

Parchman has faced intense scrutiny over its "inhumane and dangerous conditions." In 2020, rappers Jay-Z and Yo Gotti filed a federal lawsuit on behalf of over 150 inmates, and a Justice Department investigation launched soon after found that conditions were inhumane due to "years of neglect by the state." This included inadequate protection from violence, failures in suicide prevention, lack of mental-health care, and excessive use of solitary confinement.

The Death Penalty Information Center (DPIC) estimates that approximately 300 veterans are currently on death rows nationwide, representing about 10 percent of the total death row population. Many of these veterans suffer from mental illnesses caused or exacerbated by their military service, yet these illnesses were often barely presented at trial. After doing the dirty work of the military, they are themselves offered up as victims of the violent system they were recruited to serve.



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