

Mississippi executes Charles Ray Crawford amid nationwide execution spree

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As the US races toward an unprecedented high number of executions for the year, Charles Ray Crawford, 59, was executed by lethal injection Wednesday evening, October 15, at the Mississippi State Penitentiary in Parchman, concluding over 30 years on death row.

Crawford's execution marked the third execution in the US this week, with four men slated to die over a four-day period. The explosion in state-sanctioned violence in 2025 is directly linked to the political priorities established by Donald Trump at the start of his second term. With 38 individuals having died by court-ordered execution so far this year, the US is on track to carry out 43 state-sanctioned killings, the highest number in more than a decade.

State attorneys general and governors, aligning themselves with the president's agenda to expand capital punishment, are ramping up their execution schedules. This push, framed by the ultra-conservative blueprint Project 2025, sees the death penalty as an "essential tool" in fighting crime, despite evidence that capital punishment is not a deterrent.

Crawford was convicted for the kidnapping, rape and murder of 20-year-old Kristy Denise Ray, a community college student, in Tippah County, Mississippi, on January 29, 1993. Ray was abducted from her family's home, which Crawford was burglarizing. He forcibly took her to an abandoned cabin, where he raped her and then stabbed her to death. A ransom note was left behind in the home. DNA evidence linked Crawford to the scene.

The murder was committed just four days before Crawford was scheduled to stand trial for an unrelated 1991 incident where he was charged with the rape and assault of his former 17-year-old sister-in-law and her friend. Crawford was found guilty of rape in that prior

case and sentenced to 46 years in prison, which was then considered an "aggravating circumstance" by jurors during the capital murder trial for Ray's death.

Republican Governor Tate Reeves denied clemency for Crawford on October 13. Reeves stated that justice "must be served on behalf of victims," and cited the nature of the crime, noting that Crawford never claimed innocence. This is the fourth execution Reeves has overseen since taking office.

The US Supreme Court first rejected Crawford's appeal against his death sentence in 2014. Following years of appeals regarding his prior rape conviction, the 5th US Circuit Court of Appeals turned down another appeal in November 2024, and the US Supreme Court denied his final appeal against the rape conviction on June 2, 2025.

On October 2, 2025, Crawford's lawyers filed a final appeal to the nation's high court seeking a stay of execution, challenging his death sentence based on constitutional concerns regarding his initial trial defense. They argued in their petition to the Supreme Court that his Sixth Amendment rights were violated because his trial counsel conceded his guilt to the jury despite Crawford's "repeated and vehement objections." While pursuing an insanity defense, Crawford's lawyers told jurors that he was "legally responsible" for the crimes and was "still dangerous to the community."

Crawford's claim was predicated on a 2018 Supreme Court ruling which established that a lawyer for a criminal defendant cannot override a client's wish to maintain innocence at trial. The state refuted this argument, claiming counsel was pursuing an insanity defense aimed at acquittal and that Crawford never instructed them to maintain his innocence, only to advocate for acquittal.

In addition, Crawford's history of mental impairment, although well documented, was overlooked by the court system. At trial, Crawford's insanity defense was supported by his claim that he had blackouts and could not remember the killing. A prison psychiatrist testified that Crawford experienced depression, memory loss episodes, psychiatric hospitalization, and a 1989 diagnosis of bipolar disorder. While some experts later found him insane at the time of the murder, rebuttal witnesses argued he appeared to have acted with premeditation and was faking memory deficits.

Advocates argued that Crawford's background and transformation during his three decades on death row should serve as mitigating factors, calling for his sentence to be commuted to life without parole. Mitzi Magleby, a Mississippi prison reform advocate, described Crawford as having become a changed man, stressing, "We are not killing a man that is the same person." Crawford was characterized as "extremely polite" and "not a violent person now," and having maintained a prison job for more than 25 years. The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood, a spiritual adviser, noted that Crawford is respectful and concerned about the victim's family.

The state prosecutor's office, requesting Crawford's execution date, argued to the high court that his "guilt is not in question" and his punishment should proceed. The US Supreme Court did not grant a last-minute stay.

Crawford's execution is part of a chilling four days of state-sanctioned killings this week. This marks the third execution this week alone, following executions carried out on Tuesday, October 14:

- Samuel Smithers was executed in Florida, the state's 14th execution of 2025—extending its record for the most executions in a single year.
- Lance Shockley was executed in Missouri, despite the jury not reaching a unanimous decision, allowing a judge to unilaterally impose the death sentence.

The relentless pursuit of death continues on October 17, when Richard Djerf is scheduled to be put to death in Arizona.

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