

Trump's vendetta against federal death row inmates: Sends prisoners who received commutations to "Alcatraz of the Rockies"

Kate Randall
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In an unprecedented escalation of state-sanctioned vengeance, the Trump administration has launched a systematic campaign to dismantle the humanitarian protections afforded to 37 federal prisoners whose death sentences were commuted by former President Joe Biden.

This vendetta, characterized by the weaponization of brutal prison conditions and a legally dubious push for state-level retrials, represents a calculated assault on the constitutional order and a further regression into the dark ages of criminal punishment. It is a stark reminder that under the current political framework, the machinery of death is not merely a legal instrument but a political tool of class-based retribution.

Donald Trump has maintained a relentless rhetorical assault on the individuals spared by his predecessor, describing Biden's commutations as a "stain on our justice system" and a "betrayal" of victims' families. Labeling these men as "monsters," "liars" and "the worst killers in our country," Trump has utilized social media to bypass legal nuance and demand savage retribution, at one point telling the commuted prisoners to "GO TO HELL!"

This inflammatory language serves as the ideological foundation for an executive agenda that views the death penalty as a means to "restore order" in the interest of class rule. On his first day in office, Trump signed Executive Order 14164, "Restoring the Death Penalty and Protecting Public Safety," which formally directed the attorney general to expand capital punishment. The order specifically targets the 37 commuted individuals, instructing officials to ensure they are held in conditions "consistent with the monstrosity of their crimes." Trump has signaled an intent to seek the death penalty for an expanded list of offenses, including drug trafficking, human trafficking, the killing of law enforcement officers, and capital crimes committed by undocumented immigrants.

The "Alcatraz of the Rockies" as a tool of torture

The administration has already begun the process of transferring these men to ADX Florence in Colorado, the only true federal "supermax" facility. Known as the "Alcatraz of the Rockies," the prison is designed for those considered threats to "national security" and those who have committed extreme violence against prison staff. As of late 2025, 10 former death row federal prisoners had been moved to the facility.

Trump and Attorney General Pam Bondi justify these moves not in the interest of security, but as extrajudicial punishment intended to ensure that confinement conditions "match" the prisoners' crimes. Life at ADX is defined by near-total social and sensory deprivation, with inmates kept in concrete cells smaller than a standard parking space for 22 to 24 hours a day. Human contact is restricted to a few minutes of verbal exchange through steel doors, and all exercise is conducted alone in high-walled cages known as "dog runs." These conditions are so extreme that a former warden described the facility as "a clean version of hell" and "much worse than death."

The inherent danger of using such extreme isolation as a retributive tool is illustrated by the tragic case of Robert Gerald Knott, a severely mentally ill prisoner who spent 11 years in solitary at ADX before committing suicide in 2013. Knott was described by fellow prisoners as "stark raving mad" when he died; they reported seeing guards peering into his cell as if watching a "spectacle" rather than providing medical care.

Despite his acute psychotic episodes, which included drinking dirty shower water and babbling incoherently, Knott was never placed on suicide watch. He eventually hanged himself with a bedsheets in a feces-lined cell. The Department of Justice settled the resulting lawsuit on Knott's behalf for a mere \$175,000. Experts warn that the

current transfers will lead to similar extreme psychological distress, noting that several commuted prisoners have already attempted suicide to avoid the “social death” of ADX.

Because the 37 men are protected from federal execution by the Fifth Amendment’s double jeopardy clause, the administration is exploiting the “separate sovereigns” doctrine. This legal loophole allows state and federal governments to prosecute the same crime independently. Under Trump’s directive, the attorney general is evaluating whether these offenders can be charged with state capital crimes.

This strategy is already in motion:

- Thomas Steven Sanders: A Louisiana prosecutor successfully sought a first-degree murder charge for a 2010 killing, with the explicit goal of reimposing the death sentence Biden commuted.
- Brandon Council: In South Carolina, state prosecutors have filed murder charges for a 2017 bank robbery for which Council was already federally convicted. Solicitor Jimmy Richardson admitted the state dropped previous charges specifically to keep its “powder dry” for such an occasion.
- Daniel Troya and Ricardo Sanchez Jr.: Florida officials have reopened cases against the two men for a 2006 homicide to seek new death sentences.

The ACLU and other organizations have filed a federal lawsuit on behalf of 21 of the 37 prisoners, alleging that the administration is conducting a “sham process” designed to inflict pain. The suit argues that the administration’s actions violate several bedrock principles:

- Bill of attainder and ex post facto clauses: The administration is retroactively increasing punishment for a specific, identifiable group of people without judicial process.
- Clemency power: By weaponizing confinement conditions to nullify the effect of previous commutations, Trump is unconstitutionally interfering with the plenary authority of a previous president’s exercise of mercy.
- Procedural due process and equal protection: The lawsuit alleges that the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) departed from established policies—such as downgrading medical “care levels” without any change in physical health—to satisfy a retributive vendetta.

An assault on Enlightenment principles of criminal justice

Judith Lichtenberg, professor emerita of philosophy at

Georgetown University who has taught at Jessup Correctional Institution in Maryland and the District of Columbia Jail, argues that the American prison system violates three core principles of criminal justice. First, it rejects proportionality, as the punishment (indefinite solitary confinement) often exceeds the severity of any disciplinary need. Second, it fails to treat like cases alike, targeting a specific group of 37 men for harsher treatment than others who have had their sentences vacated or commuted. Finally, it violates the axiom that punishment should not do more harm than good. In its current form, the system is spectacularly ineffective at rehabilitation and inflicts a staggering burden on the families and communities of the incarcerated.

Moreover, efforts to increase the use of capital punishment at the federal and state level is a rejection of Enlightenment principles established by thinkers like Cesare Beccaria. In 1764, Beccaria denounced state killing as a “public assassination” and a “ritual act of vengeance.” While modern European law recognizes any execution as an inherent violation of human rights rooted in dignity, the US remains an outlier of extraordinary harshness in league with regimes like Saudi Arabia and Iran. The current administration’s reliance on capital punishment is a direct contradiction of the humanistic norms that have shaped democratic societies for centuries.

Trump’s aggressive federal stance has already influenced a resurgence of state-level judicial violence. South Carolina resumed executions after a 13-year hiatus, recently employing a firing squad, while Alabama and Florida have accelerated their execution schedules. Even in states with previous moratoriums, such as North Carolina, officials are taking steps to revive the machinery of death. Experts suggest that while Trump has no direct authority over state courts, his rhetoric signals to political allies that the expansion of the death penalty is once again a primary objective of the capitalist state. This trajectory toward state-sanctioned killing and indefinite isolation is not merely a “tough on crime” stance; it is the social normalization of cruelty in a society that has abandoned the pursuit of justice for the theater of vengeance.



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