Idaho constructs remote-controlled firing squad chamber: A method of state killing with a merciless history

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The continued practice of state-sanctioned murder in the United States remains a brutal reality of American capitalism. Even in this gruesome landscape, however, the construction of a remote-controlled firing squad chamber in Idaho stands out for its calculated, technological savagery. As the ruling establishment struggles to maintain its "assembly line of death," five states—Idaho, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina and Utah—have turned to the firing squad in a desperate effort to keep the state killing machine moving.

Idaho: Engineering death by remote control

In Idaho, this retrogression has met with significant opposition. Protesters, including local faith leaders and anti-death penalty advocates, have gathered in Boise to deliver petitions to the private corporations complicit in designing this facility, among them the engineering firm Cator Ruma and Associates, whose employees have been drawn into the machinery of state murder through routine contracting work.

The chamber itself, a "retrofit" of the F Block execution unit at the Idaho State Maximum Security Institution, stands as a testament to the cold, bureaucratic character of state killing. Internal emails between contractors reveal a chilling "business as usual" tone, with technicians discussing floor drains to "mop/squeegee liquids" and soundproofing measures to ensure other incarcerated people do not hear the shots. The project will utilize a remote-operated firing mechanism specifically designed to "minimize correctional staff involvement"—allowing the state to kill a human being with the push of a button.

The Idaho Department of Correction paused all executions as of May 23, 2025, to complete the renovations needed to make the firing squad the primary form of execution by July 1, 2026. Under House Bill 37, signed into law by Governor Brad Little in March 2025, Idaho will become the first state in the nation to designate the firing squad as its primary execution method, with lethal injection retained as a backup. Officials say construction of the firing-squad chamber is expected to be completed in time for staff training ahead of the policy change.

IDOC Director Bree Derrick has added that if direct staff involvement becomes necessary, the department would "seek assistance from law enforcement personnel who are specifically trained and psychologically equipped for such responsibilities." Rep. Bruce Skaug, a Republican from Nampa who sponsored the underlying bill, has voiced some concern that remote-operated firearms could malfunction on the day of an execution, but assured the public that a backup firing squad—described as "old-school with rifles ready to go"—would be on standby if the mechanical system failed.

The drive toward this mechanical slaughter was accelerated by the state's own previous incompetence in killing a condemned prisoner. In 2024, Idaho attempted to execute Thomas Creech by lethal injection. In a torturous procedure, the execution team failed eight times to establish an IV line, probing Creech's hands, feet and legs for nearly an hour before abandoning the attempt. The grotesque spectacle did not prompt a reconsideration of the death penalty itself. Instead, the legislature responded by passing House Bill 37, clearing the path for the chamber now under construction.

South Carolina: Three executions by firing squad in 2025

Idaho's embrace of the rifle follows the trail blazed by South Carolina, which carried out three firing squad executions in 2025—the first such executions anywhere in the United States since Utah put Ronnie Lee Gardner to death in 2010.

On March 7, 2025, Brad Sigmon, 67, became the first person executed by firing squad in the United States in 15 years, at the Broad River Correctional Institution in Columbia, South Carolina. Sigmon had been convicted and sentenced to death for the 2001 bludgeoning deaths of his ex-girlfriend's parents, Gladys and David Larke. He chose the firing squad over the electric chair and lethal injection out of fear that those methods would prove more painful—a telling commentary on the menu of horrors the state presented to him. South Carolina keeps the details of its lethal injection protocol secret, and Sigmon had twice before faced execution dates that were called off because the state could not obtain lethal injection drugs or resolve legal challenges to its execution protocols.

The state had spent $54,000 in 2022 constructing the firing squad area within its execution chamber, adjacent to the electric chair. Sigmon was led in and strapped into a metal chair with leg restraints and a strap over his head. A target was placed over his heart and a hood placed over his head. Three volunteer shooters drawn from the prison staff stood out of view of witnesses seated behind shatterproof glass. The executioners were armed with rifles loaded with .308-caliber Winchester 110-grain TAP Urban ammunition, a type of bullet designed for rapid expansion and fragmentation upon impact—shattering against hard surfaces like the rib cage to create extensive internal injuries and cause death through rapid blood loss. There was no warning before the executioners fired simultaneously. After the shots, Sigmon appeared to take two short breaths. A blood stain spread across his chest. He was pronounced dead approximately three minutes after the rifles fired.

Sigmon's attorney, Gerald "Bo" King, described the execution as "horrifying and violent." King noted that Sigmon had chosen the firing squad knowing that the bullets would shatter his bones and destroy his heart—but that it was "the only choice he had" after watching three fellow inmates die by lethal injection in what he believed were prolonged and torturous deaths. King stated: "Everything about this barbaric, state-sanctioned atrocity—from the choice to the method itself—is abjectly cruel. We should not just be horrified—we should be furious."

King described Sigmon as a man who had worked factory shifts as a teenager to help feed his siblings, who suffered from an undiagnosed mental illness that caused irrational and impulsive episodes, and who was likely in the grip of a psychotic episode when he committed the crimes. Like many on death row, Sigmon had endured childhood abuse: his father was an alcoholic who physically abused him, and the young Sigmon had repeatedly intervened to protect his mother.

Five weeks later, on April 11, 2025, Mikal Mahdi became the second person executed by firing squad in South Carolina. An autopsy of Mahdi revealed he had been struck by only two bullets rather than the prescribed three. Pathologist Dr. Jonathan Arden concluded that "as a result of the diminished internal injuries, "it was likely it could have taken 30 to 60 seconds for Mahdi to lose consciousness, during which time Mahdi would have suffered excruciating pain" as his lungs tried to expand against a broken sternum and he experienced what doctors described as "air hunger" as his lungs failed to take in oxygen. This is the "quick and professional" execution promised by legislators and corrections officials.

The state's third firing squad execution of 2025 came on November 14, when Stephen Bryant, 44, was executed for the murders of three people during an eight-day killing spree in 2004. Bryant was strapped to a chair, hooded, a red bull's-eye target placed over his heart. Three volunteer corrections officers fired at him from 15 feet away. Bryant's attorneys had argued he was a deeply troubled man in the months leading up to the killings, obsessed with memories of childhood sexual abuse by relatives, attempting to cope with methamphetamine and marijuana laced with bug killer, and begging a probation agent and his aunt for help.

The last Utah firing squad: Ronnie Lee Gardner, 2010

The grim record of what the firing squad does to a human body was established in vivid detail when Utah executed Ronnie Lee Gardner just after midnight on June 18, 2010, at a prison in Draper. Gardner, 49, was seated in a straight-backed metal chair raised on a platform, his hooded head secured by a strap across his forehead, harness-like straps constraining his chest, his handcuffed arms hanging at his sides. A small white cloth square bearing a black target was affixed over his heart.

A prison official began a countdown from five. At two, five marksmen—police officers who had volunteered for the duty—took aim with Winchester rifles from 25 feet away, firing through a slot in a wall to obscure their identities. Four rifles were loaded with live rounds; a fifth contained a dummy cartridge with a wax bullet designed to give realistic recoil, providing each shooter with a measure of plausible deniability about who had fired the fatal shot.

Gardner had been convicted in the 1985 shooting death of attorney Michael Burdell during a failed escape attempt at a Salt Lake City courthouse. His attorneys argued to the end that the jury had never heard substantial mitigating evidence about his childhood: removed from his home at age two, severely malnourished and wandering the streets; sexually abused at five; sniffing glue at six; addicted to hard drugs by ten; put out to work as a prostitute by a pedophile who had become his foster parent by age 14. In recent years, Gardner had worked with his brother Randy to establish a project for abused children, buying land in northern Utah for an organic farm intended for use in therapy with troubled youth.

Randy Gardner has since become one of the most vocal opponents of the firing squad in the country. After Brad Sigmon's execution in South Carolina in 2025, Randy Gardner publicly described the method as "barbaric" and "cruel and unusual punishment." He said: "I didn't witness my brother's execution, but I got to see his body after. I've got the autopsy photos of what it looked like, and it's just mutilated my brother's body. I think it's terrible." He said he now opposes all methods of execution, adding simply: "To me, it's revenge."

The 20th century record

Defenders of the firing squad promote it as a reliable and even humane alternative to the botched chemistry of lethal injection. The historical record of this method offers a definitive judgment on that claim: the firing squad has historically been used most widely in war: as punishment for desertion and mutiny, in mass killings of civilians and as retribution for political opponents of repressive and colonial regimes.

Irish socialist James Connolly, along with 14 other leaders of the Easter Rising of 1916 against British colonialism, were shot by firing squad. The rebellion began on April 24, 1916, and was suppressed within a week, with the leaders surrendering on April 29-30. Their trials, along with those of dozens of others, were conducted under the Defense of the Realm Act and British military law. They were swift, secret and afforded the accused no meaningful opportunity to defend themselves.

The 15 men were shot by firing squad between May 3 and 12, 1916, at Kilmainham Gaol. Connolly, military commander of the Rising, had been so badly injured during the fighting in Dublin that he could not walk or stand unsupported, and had to be tied to a chair to be shot.

Some of the most harrowing examples of civilian death by firing squad were carried out by the Nazis. The following are only three examples of such atrocities:

On December 18, 1939, following the Nazi invasion of Poland, 56 Polish citizens were massacred in Bochnia, near Kraków, in one of the first mass reprisal executions of the occupation. The victims had committed no crime against the German military. They were murdered as a demonstration of power and terror, a message to the occupied population that resistance or even the suspicion of resistance would be met with collective death.

On June 2, 1941, German paratroopers prepared to execute Greek civilians in the village of Kondomari, on the island of Crete, following the Battle of Crete. The villagers were rounded up in retaliation for armed resistance. Photographs survive of the men of Kondomari being led out of the village, assembled in a field and shot.

In September 1941, on the Eastern Front, German soldiers raised their rifles against Soviet civilians accused of being partisans. A line of men were shot down, falling into a pit already dug.

These examples define the social and political meaning of this method of killing. It is a demonstration of the state's monopoly on violence, an assertion of absolute power over the lives of those it has judged expendable—whether a condemned prisoner in a South Carolina execution chamber or a Polish farmer in a town square in December 1939.

The revival and acceleration of the firing squad in the United States cannot be separated from the broader political context in which it is occurring. On Inauguration Day, January 20, 2025, President Trump signed an executive order titled "Restoring the Death Penalty and Protecting Public Safety," which rescinded the moratorium on federal executions, directed the attorney general to pursue capital punishment in

all applicable federal cases, specifically mandated the death penalty for murders of law enforcement officers and for capital crimes committed by undocumented immigrants, and called for efforts to overturn Supreme Court precedents that limit state and federal authority to impose execution.

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, following Trump's lead, in 2025 ordered more executions in a single year than any Florida governor since the Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in 1976. Florida carried out a record 16 executions last year—double the state's previous record of eight set in 2014.

The search for a "humane" method

Lethal injection was introduced in the 1970s precisely because the ruling establishment needed a method of killing that appeared less violent to observers. But the record of lethal injection has been one of continuous failure and horror: inmates who have groaned and writhed on the gurney, lungs filled with frothy, bloody liquid as they experienced the agonizing sensation of drowning; prisoners removed from the execution chamber alive, only to face another date with the executioner; states unable to obtain the necessary drugs because European pharmaceutical companies have refused to sell them for use in capital punishment.

The return to the firing squad is another iteration of this search—the state's perpetual attempt to find a method of killing that looks clean and defensible, however savage the reality. As the South Carolina autopsy of Mikal Mahdi demonstrated, when the mechanism fails—when one bullet misses the prescribed target—the condemned person may lie there, conscious, for up to a minute, lungs collapsing, before dying. Now Idaho proposes to mechanize this process further still, removing even the human hand from the trigger, replacing the prison volunteer with a remote-operated device.

Meanwhile, states like Alabama have simultaneously moved to adopt nitrogen asphyxiation in the gas chamber, pursuing every available avenue to keep the machinery of death operational. The diversity of methods is not evidence of a search for humanity but of a system determined to keep killing, by whatever means remain available.

There is a direct line between this domestic violence and the violence the US state inflicts around the world. President Trump's recent threats to destroy Iran's entire civilization are the fascistic and desperate statements of an oligarchy in extreme crisis. The imperialist brutality expressed in the Pentagon's military operations is reflected in the treatment of the working class at home. From murders carried out by ICE agents in immigrant communities to the execution of death row inmates whose crimes stem from lives of poverty and abuse, capital punishment is an expression of a system that holds human life in total contempt—whether that life ends in a jail in Dublin in 1916, a Greek field in 1941, or a retrofitted execution chamber in southern Idaho in 2026.