Another gruesome week on America’s death row: 2 executions, another halted amid bungled procedure

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Since the Supreme Court reinstated capital punishment with its 1976 ruling in *Gregg v. Georgia*, the United States has put more than 1,600 of its citizens to death. The two executions carried out in the 48-hour span of May 20–21 brought that total to 1,668. In 2025, the nation executed 47 people, a dramatic increase from 25 in 2024 and the highest annual total in more than 16 years, with Florida leading all states at 19 executions. The all-time peak came in 1999, when 98 executions were carried out in a single year.

Multiple executions within the span of days have become an increasingly routine feature of the American death penalty machinery. The record for a single day came on December 9, 1999, when Oklahoma, Indiana, Texas and Virginia all put prisoners to death; states have carried out three or more executions on the same day 13 times since the US Supreme Court reinstated capital punishment in 1976. The events of May 20–21 fit this pattern, with three men scheduled for execution across three states within 24 hours. Two were carried out. The third, in Tennessee, was halted mid-procedure when prison personnel could not complete the required intravenous access—the seventh such failure in the modern era.

The Death Penalty Information Center has documented six prior failed executions halted when personnel were unable to set an IV line. They include Idaho’s 2024 attempt to execute Thomas Eugene Creech, called off after medical workers made eight attempts through multiple limbs and appendages without success, and Alabama’s 2018 attempt on Doyle Hamm, abandoned after nearly three hours during which officials punctured his legs, ankles and groin repeatedly before declaring failure. In each case, the condemned man was returned to his cell, and the state proceeded to schedule a new date.

Leroy McGill was executed by lethal injection in Arizona on May 20. Tony Carruthers was brought to Tennessee’s death chamber on May 21, where the execution was called off when prison personnel could not complete the required intravenous access. Also on May 21, Richard Knight was executed in Florida despite a last-minute legal challenge over the state’s invasive execution procedure.

The three cases, unfolding within 24 hours of one another, share a disturbing set of commonalities: men condemned after sentencing proceedings their attorneys say were fundamentally unfair, defendants whose severe mental illness, childhood trauma and neurological damage went largely unaddressed or unacknowledged at trial, and execution protocols that are now themselves the subject of legal challenge.

Arizona executes Leroy McGill

McGill was put to death at the Arizona State Prison Complex in Florence on May 20 for the 2002 murder of Charles Perez and the attempted murder of Nova Banta, after prosecutors alleged he poured gasoline on the two and set them on fire in a Phoenix apartment.

His attorneys raised a significant legal issue in the final stages of his case: whether jurors were properly informed about parole eligibility during sentencing. The defense argued that misinformation on this point may have been dispositive—that is, it may have sent McGill to death row when he should not have been there. Under Arizona law, once his appeals were exhausted a warrant was automatically issued, setting the May 20 execution date.

Tennessee: Tony Carruthers’ execution halted

The most dramatic development of the week came in

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Tennessee, where the state attempted to execute Tony Carruthers on May 21 for the 1994 kidnapping and murders of Marcellos Anderson, Delois Anderson and Frederick Tucker.

Tennessee's execution protocol requires a primary intravenous line, a backup vein and, if those fail, a central-line attempt. Officials halted the execution when they could not establish the required secondary vein and could not complete the central-line procedure as the prison executioners were not medically trained to do it. Carruthers was returned to his cell. Tennessee Governor Bill Lee subsequently granted Carruthers a one-year reprieve.

The scene at Riverbend Maximum Security Institution was the latest demonstration of the practical barbarism of lethal injection—a method marketed for decades as clinical and humane, but which depends on the condemned person's veins cooperating with the executioner's needle. When they do not, the state is left unable to proceed—at least temporarily.

Carruthers' case is one that should never have reached the death chamber. By the accounts of those who have examined his background, he grew up in the shadow of serious mental illness: his family has an extensive history of schizophrenia, and he himself struggled with drug addiction and manic episodes from an early age. Most damning among the procedural failures in his case, he was forced to represent himself at trial after the presiding judge rescinded his counsel.

His attorneys have argued that he is innocent, that testimony against him came from unreliable informants, and that DNA and fingerprint evidence that may point to another perpetrator was never tested. They have further argued that his documented mental illness and brain damage make his execution constitutionally impermissible.

Florida executes Richard Knight

In Florida, Richard Knight was executed on May 21 for the murders of Odessia Stephens and her daughter, Hanessia Mullins, in a case dating to 2000, despite a last-minute legal challenge focused not on his guilt or innocence but on the method by which Florida proposed to kill him.

At issue was the state's "venous cut-down" option—a surgical procedure to access a vein deep beneath the skin—which his lawyers argued could be performed without adequate anesthesia or properly trained personnel, creating a risk of severe pain amounting to torture.

As in Carruthers' case, the jury that sentenced Knight to death never fully heard about his background. He suffered childhood sexual abuse, seizures, blackouts, head trauma and chronic headaches. His attorneys contend that had the jury been given the full picture of his life—the neurological damage, the trauma history, the conditions under which he grew up—the outcome at sentencing might have been different. There were also, according to advocates, unresolved questions about fingerprint evidence on the murder weapon.

Three cases, one pattern

What is striking about these three cases, beyond the sheer compression of state violence into a single week, is how faithfully they reproduce the same underlying pattern. Each man came from circumstances marked by profound deprivation—mental illness, addiction, abuse, neurological injury, poverty. Each had legal proceedings his attorneys say failed to adequately present that background to the jury that decided whether he would live or die. Each faced an execution method that is itself the subject of serious legal and medical challenge.

The Biden administration's moratorium on federal executions has long since given way to renewed enthusiasm for capital punishment at the federal and state levels. The political establishment—Democratic and Republican alike—has largely abandoned any pretense of opposition to the death penalty, leaving the courts as the last institutional barrier between the condemned and the death chamber. In case after case, that barrier has proven thin.

The United States remains the only high-income, industrialized country that continues to execute its citizens in significant numbers—a distinction that reflects the reality that American imperialism is, as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said in 1967, the greatest purveyor of violence on the planet. Savagery abroad reinforces savagery at home.

Tony Carruthers is alive today because prison officials in Tennessee could not find a vein. The state has every intention of completing what it started.

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