US Supreme Court clears way for execution of Christa Pike

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For the second time in as many days, the US Supreme Court on Wednesday cleared the way for the execution of Christa Gail Pike, overturning a last-minute stay issued by the 6th Circuit US Court of Appeals less than two hours before she was set to die. In issuing the stay, the appeals court said a delay was needed to consider whether Pike's allegations of childhood sexual abuse were fully considered at her sentencing.

On Tuesday evening, the nation's high court had denied the request of Pike, 50, for a stay in a perfunctory two-sentence order with no noted dissents. Tennessee was scheduled to put Pike death at 10:00 a.m. local time Wednesday at the Riverbend Maximum Security Institution in Nashville. She is the only woman on its death row. The execution, delayed by the ruling of the appeals court, is now expected to take place before the death warrant expires at midnight.

In the appeal to the nation's highest court denied on Tuesday, Pike's lawyers raised whether it is cruel and unusual punishment to execute a woman who was repeatedly raped as a child and who, experts warn, will relive those assaults as she is killed. The justices did not deign to reply.

The ruling is the work of the gang of fascists who control the Court, which declared in 2019 that the Eighth Amendment "does not guarantee a prisoner a painless death." No vote was announced, and there were no dissents recorded from the nominally liberal justices—Sonia Sotomayor, Elena Kagan and Ketanji Brown Jackson.

The Court stayed one execution in 2024, none in 2025 and none so far in 2026. Governor Bill Lee, a Republican, denied clemency on Monday, saying, "I am upholding the sentence of the State of Tennessee and do not plan to intervene."

Pike was 18 at the time of her crime, severely traumatized and mentally ill. Of more than 200 people sentenced to death in Tennessee since 1976, only eight were 18 at the time of the crime. The other seven, all men, have had their death sentences vacated. Pike is also the first woman to be executed in the state since before the Civil War, when Tennessee was a slave state. Eve Martin, a free woman, was hanged in 1820 for the crime of accessory to murder. An enslaved woman, Sarah, was hanged in 1848.

Pike was moved Tuesday from the women's prison in Nashville to Riverbend, where she will be injected in the execution chamber with a single megadose of pentobarbital, a barbiturate, a method that has been shown to cause pulmonary edema and a sensation of drowning. Intellectually disabled prisoner Byron Black was the last person executed in Tennessee before Pike, on August 5, 2025, using the same method. Witnesses saw him conscious and groaning five minutes after his lethal injection began.

Pike is being put to death for the murder of Colleen Slemmer, 19. Her boyfriend, Tadaryl Shipp, who participated in the crime, is serving a life sentence because he was only 17 at the time and therefore ineligible for the death penalty.

She said recently of her crime: "I was a mentally ill 18-year-old kid. It took me numerous years to even realize the gravity of what I'd done. … I took the life of someone's child, sister, friend. It sickens me now to think I had the ability to commit such a crime." She was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and PTSD only after she was sentenced to death. Her attorneys cite evidence that her mother's heavy drinking during pregnancy caused frontal lobe brain damage, leaving her unable to "put the brakes on" as a planned fight escalated into a brutal killing.

She was repeatedly sexually assaulted by her grandmother's boyfriend from ages 2 to 5. She was raped at 11 by a 37-year-old neighbor, who got a suspended sentence and moved down the block from her. At 17, almost exactly a year before the killing of Slemmer, she was raped by a stranger who dragged her into the woods.

An expert's amicus brief warned: "There is a substantial risk she will feel and believe that she is being raped to death," and that "she will relive the sounds, the smells, and the pain." Tennessee Assistant Attorney General William Ayers countered, citing the rulings of the Supreme Court: "The standard is not a painless execution. … Psychological harm alone is not a violation."

Pike's court-appointed lead counsel William Talman had never tried a capital case, and neither had the trial judge. Talman hired a clinical psychologist who compiled binders documenting Pike's abuse and trauma, but decided at the last minute not to call her to testify. The defense presented no testimony on Pike's mental illness, brain damage or rape history and never argued that she should be spared due to her youth.

After her conviction, Pike was held for about 28 years in virtual solitary confinement in a 7-by-12-foot cell "with only a bed, shelves, sink, and commode, for twenty-two to twenty-four hours per day, every day," according to a complaint filed in 2022.

UN rapporteurs have warned that Pike's execution would violate "the absolute prohibition of torture and other forms of ill-treatment." The courts, however, denied her relief at every stage, from the trial court to the Supreme Court.

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The execution of Christa Pike confirms the place of the United States among the world's leading executioners. In its use of capital punishment, it keeps company with China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Egypt, Singapore and Kuwait. The US has repeatedly voted against UN General Assembly resolutions calling for a moratorium on executions, which have been adopted regularly since 2007.

The death chamber stands at the apex of a vast apparatus of punishment. Nearly 2 million people are locked up in the United States on any given day, and more than 2,000 languish on death rows across the country. The US incarceration rate of 608 per 100,000 is the highest of any comparable country.

The prison population is overwhelmingly poor and working class, with blacks and Hispanics disproportionately represented. The mentally ill and intellectually disabled, denied proper care outside prison walls, increasingly end up in cells—and, like Christa Pike and Byron Black, in the execution chamber.

The same state that straps a traumatized woman to a gurney in Nashville kills with impunity around the world. Human rights groups count about 1,721 civilians, including as many as 168 schoolgirls, among the 3,684 people killed since the US launched its war against Iran in February. United Nations experts cite a one-year death toll of 223 "unlawful killings at sea," mostly of fishermen in the Caribbean ordered by the Trump administration under the pretext of fighting drug trafficking.

At home, this violence is directed with growing ferocity against immigrants and the working class. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) held more than 65,000 people in detention as of July 11, 2026, the overwhelming majority having no criminal record. Federal agents have gunned down at least four people in cold blood in 2026: Renée Good and Alex Pretti in Minneapolis, Lorenzo Salgado Araujo in Houston and Johan Sebastián Durán Guerrero in Biddeford, Maine. At least 1,201 people were killed by police in 2025, after a record 1,271 in 2024, according to Mapping Police Violence.

The barbarism and violence of the state apparatus express the reality of class rule in America, where the entire system is subordinated to and controlled by a criminal capitalist oligarchy.

Trump, the personification of this oligarchy, has made capital punishment a central policy objective. On Inauguration Day 2025, he signed the executive order "Restoring the Death Penalty and Protecting Public Safety," which directs the US attorney general to seek federal death sentences "for all crimes of a severity demanding its use," especially killings of police and capital crimes by undocumented immigrants, and seeks to overturn Supreme Court precedents limiting capital punishment.

The results are already evident. In 2025, 47 people were executed in 11 states, the most since 2009, including a record 19 in Florida alone. Pike's will be the 29th execution this year and the 1,683rd since the Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in 1976. Alongside lethal injection, states have revived or devised other grisly methods: electrocution, firing squad, lethal gas and nitrogen asphyxiation. State executioners continue to search for, but will never find, a "humane" way to carry out state-sanctioned murder of a human being.

The Democrats have facilitated and promoted the continued brutal practice of capital punishment. Bill Clinton's 1996 Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act imposed a one-year deadline for federal habeas petitions and required deference to state court rulings unless they violated "clearly established federal law," speeding up the assembly line of death.

Barack Obama wrote in 2006, "I believe there are some crimes—mass murder, the rape and murder of a child—so heinous, so beyond the pale, that the community is justified in expressing the full measure of its outrage by meting out the ultimate punishment." Joe Biden pledged to work to end the federal death penalty, but the Democrats' 2024 election platform removed any mention of it. The Democrats have remained silent on Trump's drive to expand state killing.

In the *New York Daily Tribune* in February 1853, Karl Marx insisted that capital punishment had to be understood in its class dimensions. He wrote that he found it "very difficult, if not altogether impossible, to establish any principle upon which the justice or expediency of capital punishment could be founded, in a society glorying in its civilization." Citing statistics that showed crime recurring with the regularity of physical phenomena, he asked, "is there not a necessity for deeply reflecting upon an alteration of the system that breeds these crimes, instead of glorifying the hangman who executes a lot of criminals to make room only for the supply of new ones?"

The fight to abolish the death penalty is part of the growing struggle of the international working class against a capitalist system that produces poverty, abuse and violence and answers them with the executioner. The execution of Christa Pike shows that this fight cannot be left to the courts or the Democratic Party, which have time and again proven their allegiance to capitalist rule.

Abolition of the death penalty is bound up with the defense of all democratic and social rights and with the fight against inequality, war and police state violence.

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