Christa Pike in critical condition in Nashville hospital after failed execution attempt

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Christa Gail Pike remains in critical condition in a Nashville hospital, receiving life-saving care, following the state of Tennessee's gruesome failed attempt to execute her on September 30. According to an emergency motion filed by her attorneys Friday in Davidson County Chancery Court, Pike is unconscious, intubated and on a ventilator, and both of her arms are swollen, burned and blistered. "Hospital staff are working to save Ms. Pike's life and to clear the pentobarbital from her system," the filing states.

Pike, 50, was convicted in 1996 of the January 1995 murder of Colleen Slemmer, 19, a fellow student at the Knoxville Job Corps, whom she and her 17-year-old boyfriend, Tadaryl Shipp, lured to a park and beat and tortured to death. Pike was 18. Shipp, too young for the death penalty, received a life sentence. Pike has spent three decades in prison, more than a quarter century of it in virtual solitary confinement because she was the only woman on Tennessee's death row.

Pike's case has drawn international attention because of the horrific abuse she suffered as a child. She was sexually assaulted by her grandmother's boyfriend from the ages of 2 to 5, raped at 11 by a 37-year-old neighbor and raped again at 17 by a stranger. She was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) only after she was condemned to death. None of this was presented to the jury. The victim of years of brutality became a perpetrator of brutality and then the victim of the state.

Governor Bill Lee, a Republican, has called the botched execution "deeply disturbing" and a "tragedy." He has ordered a third-party review and called off the state's remaining execution this year, that of Gary Wayne Sutton, scheduled for December 3. But Lee had refused Pike clemency two days before the execution, and on Thursday he stressed that "the people of Tennessee have determined that the death penalty is the appropriate penalty for the most heinous crimes in the state." He has not responded to calls from Pike's attorneys to commute her sentence.

Responsibility for what took place in the death chamber rests with the US Supreme Court, which stands at the head of a justice system that failed Pike. On September 29, the justices denied Pike's request for a stay without a single noted dissent. The next morning, the 6th Circuit Court of Appeals stayed the execution to consider a claim arising from the state's own about-face: After years of branding Pike a liar about her abuse, Tennessee conceded in August that it "does not dispute the terrible things" she suffered. Within hours, the Supreme Court's right-wing majority vacated the stay by a 6-3 vote, so that Tennessee could carry out the killing before her death warrant expired at midnight.

Pike's attorneys had warned the courts months earlier that a blood disorder, thrombocytosis, and her small, fragile veins would make IV access difficult and could turn the execution into torture. A court-appointed special master dismissed their concerns. "Her concerns were called 'speculation,'" the Friday motion states. "They were laughed off, scoffed at, and dismissed."

What followed was a procedure marked by IV failure, chemical burning and severe medical complications. The execution team struggled for an hour just to establish two IV lines. Attorney Randy Spivey counted "seven needles used in her left arm alone, one of which appeared to be bent when it was pulled from her arm." After the first dose of pentobarbital, Pike told her spiritual adviser that her arm felt like it was about to burst open and asked the officials standing over her whether it was supposed to feel that way. She asked them to "please try up on my shoulder higher." A second dose was administered. Spivey said her right

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arm turned purple and began to blister.

The filing contends that at least part of the lethal drug never entered her bloodstream. “Apparently at no point did any member of the execution team realize that the IV lines were not correctly placed or that the veins had blown and that the pentobarbital was, in whole or in part, entering Ms. Pike’s body,” the motion states. “Instead of remedying this failure, TDOC elected to prepare a backup set of syringes … and then administered another lethal dose of pentobarbital.” The motion seeks to preserve all evidence related to the execution and calls the state’s conduct “reckless” and “incompetent.”

Much of what happened took place behind a closed curtain. Media witnesses listened to Pike snoring until 8:53 p.m., when the microphone was cut and they were ordered out. At about 9:15 p.m., as media witnesses were briefing reporters outside, an ambulance and fire truck arrived at Riverbend Maximum Security Institution, lights flashing. Her attorneys say they have not been able to see her since.

The candidates to succeed Lee have responded with opportunism and outright savagery. Republican US Senator Marsha Blackburn, the favorite in the November 3 election, called for the state to “bring back the electric chair.” Democrat Jerri Green, a public defender, called the death penalty “inhumane, expensive, and biased” and pledged a moratorium. On Friday, Green called for the resignation of Department of Correction Commissioner Frank Strada. Representatives for Blackburn and two independent candidates said they would not keep him on—casting the matter as one of personnel, not of state killing.

The failed execution has reignited the debate over capital punishment. “This failed attempt is the worst we’ve ever seen and unlike any other botched execution in the modern era,” said Robin Maher, executive director of the Death Penalty Information Center (DPIC). Amnesty International USA called it “an extreme display of cruelty and the latest reminder that the death penalty is the ultimate cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment.”

Pike’s attorneys, Amnesty and the DPIC have called on Lee to commute her death sentence. Spivey asserted that Pike “has endured punishment greater than any other person in the history of the American death penalty.” Pike’s lawyers say they are waiting to see whether she recovers enough to be asked what she wants to happen next.

More than 2,000 people remain on death rows across the United States. Last year, 47 were executed, the most since 2009. So far in 2026, 29 executions have been carried out, more than half of them in Florida (16), followed by Texas (6), Oklahoma (3), Alabama (2), Arizona (1) and Tennessee (1).

The torture of Christa Pike brings into sharp focus the character of capital punishment in America as a vindictive instrument of class rule, used to terrorize the population. This is happening as popular support for the death penalty stands near its lowest level in half a century—52 percent in Gallup’s 2025 poll. The political establishment, Republican and Democrat alike, is not responding to this sentiment but defying it, while debating only the most “effective” means of killing.

The fight to abolish the death penalty cannot be left to governors, the courts or the parties of big business. It is part of the struggle of the working class against the capitalist system, which breeds poverty, abuse and violence and answers them with the executioner.

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