

A grim week on federal death row: Three men sent to their deaths in Terre Haute, Indiana

By Kate Randall
18 July 2020

On Friday afternoon, the US government executed federal death row prisoner Dustin Lee Honken. His was the third federal execution in five days after a 17-year de facto moratorium on federal executions. Daniel Lewis Lee was executed on Tuesday; Wesley Ira Purkey was put to death on Thursday. All three executions took place at the federal prison in Terre Haute, Indiana.

The US Supreme Court cleared the way for these three lethal injections, vacating lower court injunctions that halted them on the basis of defendants' claims of mental incompetency and that the method of execution to be used constituted "cruel and unusual punishment," as well as legal procedural issues.

The Trump administration actively pushed for an end to the 17-year halt to federal government executions. Last year, Attorney General William Barr directed the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) to reinstate the death penalty for federal prisoners.

Although this drive to resume the federal state killing machine began a year ago, it is not a coincidence that it comes at a time of crisis for the Trump administration in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic.

As Trump's poll numbers plummet in advance of the November election, in large part due to his handling of the COVID-19 crisis, the White House response is to double-down on the president's reactionary policies, which include support for the barbaric practice of capital punishment. There has been little critical coverage in the media or reaction from Democratic or Republican politicians to the government's rapid-fire executions.

The District of Columbia Federal District Court denied Honken's request for a stay of execution. The Supreme Court's ruling on the other two federal cases cleared the way for his execution as well.

As he was strapped to the gurney in the execution chamber in Terre Haute, Indiana, Honken's last words were, "Hail Mary, Mother of God, pray for me." He was pronounced dead at 4:36 p.m. by the BOP. Like Lee and Purkey, Honken was put to death by a lethal injection of a single drug, pentobarbital, which has been known to cause those injected to suffer flash pulmonary edema, which can lead to a sensation akin to drowning, along with pain and panic.

Honken was executed nearly three decades after his brutal crime spree gripped Iowa. Originally from the small town of Britt, Iowa, he was raised by an alcoholic father who recruited Dustin and his brother into a life of crime. He was reportedly terrorized by his violent father, resulting in mental health problems, but the jury never heard evidence about his background.

Dustin was a promising community college chemistry student who dropped out and went on to build a meth empire in Arizona, netting hundreds of thousands of dollars through sales by two dealers back in Iowa.

Honken was eventually convicted in the 1993 killing of one of these dealers, Greg Nicholson, his girlfriend Lori Duncan and her two daughters, Amber and Kandi, after Honken heard that Nicholson had turned state's witness against him. Honken's girlfriend at the time, Angela Johnson, conspired with Honken in committing the murders and was picked up by the police and prosecuted. She revealed the whereabouts of the victims' bodies to another prisoner while in jail, leading to Honken's arrest, conviction and sentencing to death in 2005.

Honken was the first Iowan put to death in more than 50 years. Iowa abolished the death penalty in 1965, but Honken was convicted in federal court due to his killing of government witnesses, which interfered with a federal case.

The Trump administration's drive to resume federal executions runs counter to growing opposition to the death penalty in the US population. The May 2020 Gallup Value and Beliefs poll, released June 23, found that the percentage of Americans who consider the death penalty to be morally acceptable fell to a record-low 54 percent, a 6 percentage-point decline over the previous year and the lowest in the 20-year history of the poll.

A recent Death Penalty Information Center (DPIC) analysis found that more than 85 percent of those facing federal execution have at least one serious impairment that significantly reduces their culpability. These include "severe mental illness, brain damage or intellectual disabilities, and long histories of childhood trauma and abuse."

In the modern use of capital punishment in the US, those sent to their deaths have been disproportionately poor and from minority backgrounds. Defendants' cases have been plagued with poor and disreputable counsel and prosecutorial misconduct. Those executed have included the mentally impaired, those convicted of crimes committed as juveniles, and foreign nationals denied their consular rights.

The next federal prisoner set for execution is Keith Nelson, sentenced to death for kidnapping, raping and strangling a 10-year-old girl, who is scheduled for execution on August 28. So far this year, 10 death row prisoners have been executed in the US, including the three federal inmates, three in Texas, and one each in Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama and Missouri.

Since the Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in 1976, the US has carried out 1,522 executions, according to the DPIC. Of the approximately 2,500 prisoners languishing on death row in America, 65 are held by the US government and the military.

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