Firing Squads and Botched Executions

The Coming End of America's Death Penalty

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On Monday, October 5, President Donald Trump approved the execution by firing squad of Nidal Hasan, an American soldier who, in 2009, killed 13 of his colleagues at Fort Hood, Texas. If Hasan is put to death by that method, it would be the first use by the military since 1945 when Pvt. Eddie Slovik was executed for desertion during wartime. And it will be the first military execution by any method since 1961, when Pvt. John Bennett was hanged for raping and attempting to kill an 11-year-old girl.

That announcement came on the heels of a deeply embarrassing moment for death penalty supporters when Christa Pike survived an execution attempt in Tennessee on September 30. Pike was supposed to be put to death by lethal injection. But she lived despite receiving two doses of pentobarbital in quantities sufficient to stop her heart.

She lived because the IV lines, which were used to carry the lethal drugs, were misplaced, and the pentobarbital seeped into her tissues. They were absorbed and did enough damage that Pike is in the hospital and in critical condition.

Firing squads? Botched executions? It is fair to ask what is going on in a country that once prided itself on its humanity and commitment to human dignity.

If we look beyond those two shocking developments, we will see that the death penalty is dying in the United States. The march toward its abolition has been going on for more than two decades and is unlikely to be derailed by anything Trump does or by developments in any single state.

In fact, things like the resurrection of the firing squad and the frequency of botched executions like Christa Pike's are signs of the vulnerability, not the strength, of America's death penalty.

The Firing Squad

In addition to its embrace by the federal government, the firing squad is now an authorized method of execution in five states: Idaho, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Utah. It is the primary method only in Idaho, but Idaho hasn't executed anyone since 2012, and now has only eight people on its death row.

According to the Death Penalty Information Center, Mississippi and Oklahoma use the firing squad only as an option "if nitrogen hypoxia, lethal injection, and electrocution are held unconstitutional or 'otherwise unavailable.'" In South Carolina, "A person convicted of a capital crime and having imposed upon him the sentence of death shall suffer the penalty by electrocution or, at the election of the convicted person, by firing squad or lethal injection, if it is available at the time of election, under the direction of the Director of the Department of Corrections. The election for death by electrocution, firing squad, or lethal injection must be made in writing fourteen days before each execution date or it is waived."

Utah, which has used the firing squad more than any other state in recent decades, hasn't executed anyone that way since 2010, when it put Ronnie Lee Gardner to death. A PBS affiliate in the state described the scene this way: "Gardner sat in a chair, sandbags around him and a target pinned over his heart. Five prison staffers, drawn from a pool of volunteers, fired from 25 feet (about 8 meters) away with .30-caliber rifles. Gardner was pronounced dead two minutes later.

"A blank cartridge", it noted, "was loaded into one rifle without anyone knowing which. That's partly done to enable those bothered later by their participation to believe they may not have fired a fatal bullet."

Now, Utah "Authorizes the use of the firing squad if lethal injection drugs are unavailable or if lethal injection is held to be unconstitutional. Also, if a prisoner was sentenced to death before May 3, 2004, he may choose firing squad as the method of execution."

In April 2026, the Trump Administration added the firing squad to the federal government's execution menu. But while it may be legal in the United States, the firing squad has been used rarely throughout American history. The Death Penalty Information Center reports that "The firing squad was used on occasion during the American Revolution and Civil War to punish soldiers for desertion.... (T)he soldier was typically brought in front of a crowd and blindfolded, sometimes even 'sitting on his own coffin,' to create a 'public spectacle, a vision of terror.'"

Its review of American executions from 1608 to 1976 found only 141 shooting executions out of 14,489 total, a mere 1%. Since 1976, the firing squad has accounted for just 6 of 1664 (0.4%) executions."

"Just two states, Utah and South Carolina," it observes, "have used the firing squad in the modern era. The last three executions by firing squad were all carried out in South Carolina in 2025.

It first executed Brad Sigmon for murdering his ex-girlfriend's parents. Mikal Mahdi was shot to death one month later in April 2025, and in November, South Carolina executed Stephen Bryant by firing squad.

All three chose it over the two other state-approved methods of execution, lethal injection or the electric chair. All three of their deaths were "horrifying and violent" and at least one of them, Mahadi's, was botched.

NBC News says that "Mahdi cried out as the shots hit him, his arms flexed. 'He groaned two more times about 45 seconds after that...His breaths continued for about 80 seconds before he appeared to take one final gasp.'" An autopsy showed that instead of striking Mahdi's heart as they are supposed to bullets also "struck his diaphragm, left liver lobe and pancreas – all areas of the lower chest and abdomen."

Back-To-The-Future Moment

Don't be fooled, the return of the firing squad, as modest as it has been, is a back-to-the-future moment for America's death penalty. It amounts to a concession that the long-held belief that this country could and would find a safe, reliable, and humane method of execution is a fiction.

That's why, at one time or another, the United States has tried hanging, electrocution, the gas chamber, nitrogen hypoxia, and lethal injection, with the last being by far the most commonly used execution method since its introduction in 1977. Each time a new method was proposed, death penalty supporters hailed it as the ultimate achievement in the technologies of death.

Maurice Chammah, author of "Let the Lord Sort Them: The Rise and Fall of the Death Penalty," is right to say that "There is no tidy way to kill someone." He explains that "for the last century, Americans have searched for a way to carry out the death penalty that minimizes suffering while lessening trauma for executioners and witnesses. Those efforts have gone so poorly that we're returning to a visceral execution method from the past."

Or, as Robert Dunham of the Death Penalty Policy Project puts it, "States are looking for a way to carry out executions that appear to be as peaceful as possible, but it's not... And when they can't do that, if they're desperate to carry out executions, they will blow a hole in a prisoner with rifles to carry them out."

"That," Dunham adds," takes the death penalty optically to a new level, because capital punishment has always been brutal. But when we resort to visibly brutal methods, that may have a further impact and to accelerate public opinion away from the death penalty."

The brutality he describes undermines the premises that sustain capital punishment in the United States, where the Eighth Amendment forbids "cruel and unusual punishment." That's why Trump's authorization of the firing squad to put Hasan to death may have some consequences that he might not fore-

see and is not a good sign for death penalty proponents.

And, as for what happened to Christa Pike, it will not in itself undermine support for capital punishment. In part because we have had so many botched and failed executions.

Botched Executions

In March 2014, I published a book, Gruesome Spectacles: Botched Executions and America's Death Penalty. It was then and remains the only comprehensive examination of the things that have gone wrong when governments try to put someone to death.

My collaborators and I found that 276 of the 8776 executions carried out from 1890 to 2010 were botched. That's 3.15%. And things had only gotten worse from 1980 to 2010, the most recent period that we studied, with more than 8% of the executions in that period going wrong.

As we learned on September 30, when Pike's execution failed, America is still experiencing an epidemic of mishaps and disasters in its execution chambers.

For more than a century, the pattern has been the same. Botched executions make headlines and sometimes lead to changes in the way executions are carried out or to the introduction of new execution methods. But they are generally treated as accidents, mishaps caused by the incompetence of those conducting the execution or their bureaucratic superiors, not as indicative of the cruelty of state killing itself.

However, that does not mean that what happened to Pike can't and won't aid the abolitionist cause. For the last several decades, abolitionists have made progress in changing the national conversation about capital punishment.

They have done so by moving away from abstract arguments about the morality of capital punishment and focusing the public's attention on frequent miscarriages of justice, false convictions, and racial discrimination in death sentencing. Now, with all of the publicity that Christa Pike's experience has garnered, they can fold it into a larger narrative of a death penalty system in disarray.

That narrative has produced dramatic results. More states have abolished the death penalty in the last two decades than in any other comparable period in American history.

In addition, the number of executions carried out and the number of new death sentences handed down each year have dropped dramatically compared to what they were at the end of the 1990s. Even some of this country's most conservative politicians and groups are saying that it is time to abolish the death penalty. There is nothing that President Trump can do to turn back this tide.

The End of State Killing Will Come

The road to the abolition of America's death penalty will not be smooth, and the journey will not be completed quickly. There will be setbacks, like the president's desire to revive military executions and the failed execution of Christa Pike.

But the end of state killing will come, and when it does, the United States will be a better place because of it.

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