

OUR VIEW

Lethal exit

Execution blitz makes case for ending death penalty

Quietly and without fanfare, President Donald Trump is making a lethal exit, as his administration executes the most people during a presidential transition in more than 130 years. This unprecedented lame-duck killing spree mocks Trump's campaign caricatures as a criminal justice reformer.

In July, the Department of Justice lifted a 17-year moratorium on federal executions. Since then, it has executed 10 people, including three after the Nov. 3 election. Next week, on Jan. 12, eight days before President-elect Joe Biden's inauguration, 52-year-old Lisa Montgomery is scheduled to become the first woman executed by the federal government in nearly 70 years.

After vigorously supporting the death penalty early in his career, Biden now says he opposes it. Following Trump's in-your-face disregard for the prerogatives and preferences of the incoming president, Biden shouldn't hesitate. He ought to muster the courage and political will to end federal death penalty prosecutions on his first day in office, and commute death sentences to life-without-parole terms for the 52 federal prisoners now on death row. The commutations

mean they would die in federal prison.

Acting decisively and immediately after taking office would send a strong message to the 28 death penalty states, including Pennsylvania. It also would make a definitive start to a new presidency and fulfill Biden's campaign promise of real criminal justice reform.

Pennsylvania has a death penalty statute but has not used it since 1999. In 2015, Gov. Tom Wolf announced a moratorium on executions.

A federal ban on executions would not directly affect states.

Growing restrictions on death penalty

In reinstating federal executions, the Trump administration bucked legal and social trends, including Supreme Court rulings restricting the use of capital punishment, a diminishing number of state-sponsored-executions, and decreasing public support for capital punishment. On the flip side, Trump energized death penalty opponents and highlighted some of capital punishment's myriad ethical and constitutional problems.

Among the most controversial executions this year were

those of Alfred Bourgeois, 56, of Louisiana, with an IQ of about 70, low enough to be considered intellectually disabled; and Brandon Bernard, 40, of Texas, who was a teen-ager when he burned the car holding the bodies of a couple murdered by another gang member. In 2018, Bernard's defense attorneys learned the trial prosecutor withheld information from the defense, a violation that should have prompted a mistrial.

In 2002, Supreme Court justices outlawed executing the mentally disabled, arguing the practice violates the Eighth Amendment ban on cruel and unusual punishment. Under federal law, Bourgeois should have been ineligible for the death penalty, but prosecutors argued his mental disability wasn't diagnosed until after he was sentenced for murdering his two-year-old daughter. That preposterous argument suggests a disability doesn't exist until it's diagnosed.

In 2005, Supreme Court Justices further restricted capital punishment by banning the execution of prisoners whose crimes were committed as juveniles. The ruling did not affect Bernard, who was 18 when he committed his crime; still, his age raises similar questions



Brandon Bernard, left, and Alfred Bourgeois were executed as the Trump administration performed an unprecedented number of executions in the run-up to Joe Biden's inauguration. Bernard, a former Texas street-gang member, was charged in a 1999 slaying of a religious couple from Iowa. He was 18 at the time. Bourgeois was charged for murdering his 2-year-old daughter in 2002. Lawyers in his case claim that Bourgeois' IQ is low enough to qualify him as intellectually disabled.

concerning maturity and culpability.

Bernard and Bourgeois died by lethal injection in December.

Ineffective and costly

There is no hard evidence — none — that capital punishment deters crime. Murder rates are, in fact, generally higher in death penalty states.

What can be measured objectively are costs, and those are decidedly and significantly higher in capital cases. They are far more expensive to prosecute, and convictions are subject to a longer appeal process. Death row inmates also are typically housed in more expensive, single-occupancy segregation cells.

Other significant problems

with the death penalty include egregious racial disparities, starting with charging decisions. Perhaps most chilling is the possibility of wrongful convictions that are irreversible after a prisoner is executed.

Despite those inconvenient truths, the President has not shown the slightest misgiving in presiding over more executions than the last 10 presidents combined.

Legal, practical, moral, and financial problems with the death penalty, however, should trouble most Americans, including members of Congress. Following Trump's deadly exit, they should join the fight against this abhorrent and outdated practice.



People attend a rally Tuesday at Freedom Plaza in Washington in support of President Donald Trump.

THE PEOPLE'S VOICE

U.S. elections forever tainted

The election is over but at what cost? The integrity of this country's election process has been forever scarred.

Surveillance footage released during the election hearing in Georgia showed, after election workers kicked our poll observers out of the building, they pulled out boxes filled with ballots that were hidden underneath a table, and then spent hours running them through the tabulating machine while no one was around to observe.

According to witness testimony, this area shown on CCTV is where absentee and military ballots were tabulated on Election Night. This was revealed on Dec. 3, by Facts Matter.

This is just one of many reports. What about the number of illegals voting? The name of deceased people showing up on mail-in ballots, or mail-in ballots sent in without individuals knowing anything about it? The list goes on and on.

During President Trump's administration, this country saw tremendous growth, along with lower taxes and low unemployment.

At every Trump rally, thousands of people waited for hours to hear Trump. Biden, at

times, was barely able to gather a dozen or two people at his rallies.

All I have to say in closing is God help this country; we will get none from the socialist Democrats.

John M. Kurilla
Hermitage

Jury considered inadmissible evidence

I pray all is well with your staff and loved ones, as we navigate these challenging times. As a God-fearing believer, I believe our nation will overcome the pain COVID-19 has brought to so many. God Bless America.

I love my country and the people of Mercer County. My trial was fundamentally unfair. The law entitled me to be tried only for an offense charged. Here, the charge of receiving stolen property (firearm) was dismissed for lack of evidence. Therefore, as a matter of law, the jury was not permitted to consider the stolen weapon during their deliberations for the charge of murder.

It's embarrassing to be perceived as a murderer; but a guilty plea is a statement to the world that you're guilty. I'm appealing the conviction; I hope the judge has empathy as a human being.

Calvin Norris
State Correctional Institution at Forest

Will the real racists in America raise their hands?

While sitting in the Delta lounge in the Atlanta airport waiting for my flight back to Washington, a white gentleman approached me and struck up a conversation.

Politics was on his mind, and seeing me, a black woman, he was sure that he had found a kindred spirit to share his hopes that Democrats will prevail in both U.S. Senate runoff races in Georgia.

I politely straightened him out, leaving him a bit in shock that he had incorrectly assumed that seeing the outside of me was sufficient information to know what is going on inside of me.

There is a word for this: stereotyping.

Is this gentleman a bad man? I don't know.

But he is proof of the horrible success of the perception of racism industry that has been damaging our country since the 1960s. The result is today's identity politics, diversity politics and all the politics of the left that promote the notion that what is relevant is the outside of a person, what he or she looks like, not what is going on inside the person.

With all the screaming about racism, a huge story of recent months hardly received any attention. Maybe because it doesn't fit into the story that our left-wing media want to report about what they call racism.

Several months ago, the Census Bureau issued its annual report called "Income and Poverty in the United States: 2019."

According to the report, real median black household income in 2019 was up 7.9% -- the largest annual increase in median black household income in history. This put the increase in black household income in 2019 1.1 points higher than the 6.8% increase for the nation as a whole.

Further, for the first time ever, the percentage of high-income black households exceeded the percentage of low-income black households.



AP file

In 2019, 29.4% of black households had income of \$75,000 or more, compared with 28.7% of black households that had income of \$25,000 or less.

In 1967, per the Census Bureau, 9.1% of black households had income of \$75,000 or more, and 44.5% of black households had income of \$25,000 or less.

Contrary to what blares out daily from liberal media, African Americans are not getting a raw deal in our country. In fact, as this new data from the Census Bureau shows, African Americans are systematically getting ahead and improving their lives.

One area of enormous improvement is in education achievement, which no doubt is a major factor in the improvement in income of black households.

According to the Census Bureau, in 2019, the black high school completion rate was 98% of the national average. Back in 1980, it was about 75%.

In 2019, 29.6% of blacks ages 25 and above completed four years of college. In 1980, this stood at 11.6%.

The rejoinder from the left is yes, but black average in-

comes still lag behind white average incomes.

My answer is that what drives human achievement is the same for everyone. It comes from lofty goals and a sense of each individual that it is up to them, their character and hard work to achieve those goals.

Teaching black children that they are living in a racist country and that they have no chance without government intervention, without diversity politics, without receiving special treatment because of their race destroys that child's sense of humanity, personal uniqueness and personal responsibility.

We have two competing cultures in America today. One culture says that life is, by nature, hard and that achievement comes from diligence, good character and struggle. The other culture says that life is only hard if it is unfair, and that life can be made fair and easy through politics.

The latter is the culture of the left, which damages the very individuals it pretends to help.

If we want to build a more perfect union, believe that every person is unique and that what people look like tells you nothing about who they are.

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