

# OPINION

**OUR MISSION:** To inform and empower our community, defending the public interest with truth, innovation, and accountability.

## OUR VIEW

# Ending executions

Biden must act quickly to help Pa. abolish costly, ineffective, and immoral practice

**I**n a career about-face, President Joe Biden vowed in the 2020 campaign to end the federal death penalty and provide incentives for capital punishment states to abolish their death-penalty statutes.

Biden, who took office Jan. 20, is off to a slow and unconvincing start. Up to now, his much-touted criminal justice reforms have been all talk.

Still, if Biden acts immediately and decisively, he can effectively scrap the federal death penalty, and lead a just and prudent campaign to end capital punishment in the nation's 28 death-penalty states, including Pennsylvania.

**Without cleaning up the death penalty in his own backyard, Biden can hardly lean on states to end the practice.**

**More problems, less support**

The time is right to abolish this costly, ineffective, and barbaric practice. It has made the United States a moral outlier among nations, especially U.S. allies. Increasingly, the United Nations and other agencies have made the death penalty an international human rights barometer that isolates the United States.

National public support for the death penalty is the lowest in 50 years, with 60 percent of Americans preferring mandatory life sentences to executions.

U.S. Supreme Court justices have gradually narrowed how courts can apply capital sentences. Among other things, they have outlawed executing prisoners with intellectual disabilities and those who committed their crimes as children.

In addition, local, state, and federal prosecutors, mindful of numerous DNA exonerations since 1990, are trying fewer capital cases, partly to avoid executing innocent people.

None of that stopped the administration of former President Donald Trump in July from lifting the moratorium on federal executions and overseeing the executions of 13 death row prisoners during the next six months. The first federal executions in 17 years revived a dormant public debate on capital punishment.

Partly because of that appalling execution spree, Biden's supporters urged the new president to sign executive actions on his first day that renewed a moratorium on federal executions, and commute the death sentences of 50 federal prisoners to mandatory life.

Biden also plans to work with Congress to abolish the federal death penalty statute, preventing future presidents from resuming executions. He wants to use financial incentives and the president's bully pulpit to persuade states with capital punishment to ditch their death penalty statutes.

It's an ambitious agenda. So far, Biden has failed to act, even though he can suspend federal executions, literally, with a stroke of the pen.

He signed more than 50 executive actions in the early days



**Protesters gather last August across from the the federal prison complex in Terre Haute, Ind. The group was protesting the then-scheduled execution of Keith Dwayne Nelson, who was convicted of kidnapping, raping and murdering a 10-year-old Kansas girl. Nelson was executed Aug. 28.**

of his administration, including imposing a mask mandate on federal property and reversing Trump's travel ban targeting largely Muslim countries. None of those actions, however, affected the death penalty.

### Urging states to act

The 28 capital punishment states hold 2,500 death row prisoners, including 150 in Pennsylvania. Without cleaning up the death penalty statute in his own backyard, Biden can hardly lean on states to abolish theirs.

Quick action on the federal death penalty is especially important for Pennsylvania and three other states with governor-imposed moratoriums.

Lyndsay Kensinger, spokesperson for Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Wolf, told The Herald editorial page that Wolf plans

to extend Pennsylvania's death penalty moratorium, until his term ends in January 2023.

Executions in Pennsylvania, however, could resume after that. Meantime, dozens of more people await trials in which prosecutors are seeking death, despite egregious racial disparities and other problems with Pennsylvania's death penalty.

Abolishing death penalty laws should be an easy sell. Capital punishment exacts tens of millions of dollars annually in extra legal expenses for longer trials, additional lawyers and expert witnesses, and prolonged appeals.

No evidence supports, or even suggests, capital punishment deters violence or decreases murders. In fact, murder rates are higher in death penalty states. Moreover, with DNA technology, the possibility of conviction errors is no

longer debatable. And unlike life sentences, executions are not reversible.

As a criminal justice reformer, Biden, a former proponent of the death penalty, cuts an improbable figure. He staunchly supported the Draconian 1994 Crime Bill and the nation's failed war on drugs in the 1980s. Both led to enormous increases in U.S. prison populations, especially among African Americans.

No one can know whether Biden's about-face stems from political expediency or, at 78, the slow maturation of wisdom. Either way, Biden, as a criminal justice reformer, will need to go a long way to make up for the regressive policies he previously supported.

Acting immediately to suspend federal executions would make a good start.



## THE READERS' VOICE

### Hold Trump, Congress accountable

Every day I watch the news and get so frustrated with members of Congress who refuse to hold the ex-president responsible for anything he's done to wreck this country. As Mitt Romney said, if inciting a riot and trying to overthrow an election isn't an impeachable offense, then what is?

I believe the ex-president incited the violence. Who else had the captive attention of those rioters and was able to urge them on? He and all the other congressmen and women who spread falsehoods and conspiracy theories should be held accountable, too. (Their claims were baseless. If not, why did over 50 judges throw out the lawsuits claiming that there was no evidence? How

many times do Republicans need to hear that before it sinks in?)

Think of it this way: If no one is punished for this behavior, we're sending the message that violence works. Violence is the solution.

Even though violent thugs didn't overturn the election, they put enough fear into members of Congress that, from now on, they will not vote their conscience, or for what they believe is fair and necessary. They will vote out of fear for what they think will keep them safe.

Those interviewed admitted they were — and still are — afraid to vote against Republican policies because of threats against themselves and their families. So they give in to thuggish behavior.

In essence, violence has worked. Hasn't this country been bullied enough? Let's put an end to this by holding people accountable.

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## ABOUT THE OPINION PAGE

Local editorials are the opinion of the newspaper. Letters represent the opinion of the letter writer, syndicated columnists are presenting their views on national and interna-

tional issues and local columnists are espousing their points of view, none of which necessarily represents the newspaper's opinion.

It is our hope that the collective opinions presented here encourage you to share your opinions and further a public debate about the issues of our lives in a letter to the editor.

# Let's cancel the phony 'cancel culture' fight in today's politics

Incessant Republican complaints about "cancel culture" might have more credibility if the Republicans didn't engage in so much canceling of their own.

The Grand Old Party's alarm over "cancel culture," the hottest buzzword of its sort since "political correctness" was all the rage, has hardly been subtle.

"I don't know where it ends," Rep. Jim Jordan, an Ohio Republican, said in a ferocious defense of then-President Donald Trump during the latest impeachment debate. "The cancel culture doesn't just go after conservatives and Republicans. It won't just stop there. It'll come for us all. That's what's frightening."

"Cancel culture," in case you're wondering, is very much like the earlier, easily abused catchphrase "political correctness." Nurtured by social media. If you didn't like "PC" you'll really hate "cancel culture," especially if you're on the receiving end.

As a scourge, the term proved too tempting for Trump's legal team to pass over during his impeachment trial. Trump attorney Michael van der Veen labeled the trial "constitutional cancel culture" and "a shameful effort as a deliberate attempt by the Democratic Party to smear, censor and cancel, not just President Trump, but the 75 million Americans who voted for him." Never mind the 80 million or so who voted against him.

This cancel culture theme

already was getting popular in GOP circles as early as last summer's Republican National Convention where Sen. Tim Scott of South Carolina ("Don't give in to cancel culture..."), former United Nations Ambassador Nikki Haley and Florida Rep. Matt Gaetz have called for an end to "cancel culture."

But you don't need to go any further than the ex-president himself, who constantly referred to news media as "fake news" and "enemies of the state" when he disapproved of coverage, which was almost daily.

Of course, there's nothing unusual or unique to one party when it comes to presidents who disapprove of their news coverage. But presidential feuds with bearers of unwelcome news can have real consequences. Just ask Army Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman. He was fired from the National Security Council and forced to retire early, without protest from Republicans, after he testified truthfully about conduct that led to Trump's first impeachment.

Now, for some dissenters, like Rep. Adam Kinzinger, the canceling is coming in even from members of his own family. As one of the 10 House Republicans who voted to impeach Trump, the Illinois Air National Guard lieutenant colonel has been rebuked by county GOP parties across the state — and by some of his own family.

Eleven family members sent him a handwritten two-page letter of outrage two days after he called for Trump's removal from office following the deadly Jan. 6 storming at the Capitol. First reported by The New York Times, it accused him of having joined "the devil's army" (Democrats and the fake news media) for his public

break with the president.

"Oh my, what a disappointment you are to us and to God!" they wrote. "You have embarrassed the Kinzinger family name!"

That's sad, but not too surprising, considering how deeply countless other households have been divided in these polarized times.

But, despite his having lived a life that falls short of what one might call an ideal Christian, Trump still maintains a downright religiously devoted following, which has helped his approval ratings among GOP voters to tick back up after a drop following the Jan. 6 insurrection.

That enables him to maintain a tight hold as potential kingmaker or king breaker in GOP primaries. That helps to explain why even Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell excoriated Trump's role regarding the Jan. 6 riot as "a disgraceful dereliction of duty" on the former president's part — then voted in his favor, claiming it was unconstitutional to impeach a president who no longer was in office.

That's a thin reed, indeed, since a wide array of constitutional law experts disagree. But it's thick enough to help him put the divisiveness aside until the next blowup, perhaps around the bipartisan "9/11-type commission" for which Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi is pushing.

All of which exposes "cancel culture" to be far less urgent than the "No. 1 issue for the country to address," as Jordan called it. I'd rank it farther down, way below the older but still persistent challenge of getting straight talk and accountability from our public officials, regardless of their party. We need it.

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