

I Know What It's Like to Carry Out Executions

The experience of participating in the state-sanctioned killing of another human being has shaped me forever—and is why I believe this country should not pursue federal capital punishment.

[S. Frank Thompson](#) December 3, 2019

Former superintendent of the Oregon State Penitentiary



The execution room at the Oregon State Penitentiary Rick Bowmer / AP

With all of the attention focused in Washington on impeachment, it might be easy to overlook that Donald Trump's administration is undertaking something momentous. Beginning on December 9 and continuing in rapid succession over the following days and weeks, the government is hoping to

carry out the first federal executions in 16 years. Though a federal court [recently issued a temporary injunction stopping the executions](#), the government has appealed that decision, and may yet prevail.

When it comes to the death penalty, I speak from experience. I served as a correctional superintendent in Oregon and as the warden of prisons in Arkansas. During my tenure, I carried out the only two executions that have taken place in Oregon in the past 55 years. The experience of participating in the state-sanctioned killing of another human being had a profound and traumatic effect on me, as well as on other correctional officers and administrators, journalists, and the governor, [John Kitzhaber](#).

My decades as a correctional professional and my direct experience with the administration of the death penalty have left me firmly convinced that capital punishment is a failed government policy. That is why I recently joined with [more than two dozen other former correctional officers and hundreds of other stakeholders](#) in the criminal-justice system to call on the Trump administration to halt its planned executions.

[*Andrea Lyon: For Trump and Barr, executions are a statement*](#)

The death penalty [does not deter crime](#). It [does not make our society safer](#). It is [not imposed on "the worst of the worst."](#) Yes, the individuals on death row committed serious crimes and should be severely punished for their actions. But the men I have known who were sentenced to death were poor, mentally ill, and severely abused. Executing them was just more injustice.

There is another significant reason not to move forward with federal executions, one that should matter greatly to Trump: He would protect the men and women who work for the Federal Bureau of Prisons from the devastating effects of participating in an execution. I still live with those effects. My colleagues and I experienced long-term repercussions from the process of practicing, over and over, to kill someone; from the stress and anxiety of worrying about a possible botched execution; and then, even

when things went “smoothly,” from the aftereffects of knowing that we had used our own hands, and the power of our position, to take a human life. I had many sleepless nights following those executions.

The government’s proposed highly condensed execution schedule increases the chances of an error occurring. Several other factors further heighten that risk. The federal government has not carried out an execution in 16 years, and will be implementing a brand-new lethal-injection protocol. This is a situation that calls for caution, with ample time for training and debriefing—not a rush to conduct multiple executions in a short time. These concerns are reflected in the injunction order entered on November 20, [in which Judge Tanya Chutkan wrote](#): “The public is not served by short-circuiting legitimate judicial process, and is greatly served by attempting to ensure that the most serious punishment is imposed lawfully.” Additionally, the recent leadership change and chronic staffing shortages at the Bureau of Prisons have contributed to an unsettled atmosphere and suggest that the bureau’s resources might be better spent addressing the systemic issues it faces than carrying out executions with a new protocol.

[*Read: The cruel and unusual execution of Clayton Lockett*](#)

I know many good, professional people who work at the Bureau of Prisons. They have undertaken difficult and dangerous jobs, and they know and accept the challenges of managing dangerous prisoners. From my decades of experience in this profession, I can say with confidence that the death penalty does nothing to protect prison employees or other prisoners. Instead, it drains resources that could be used for training, infrastructure improvements, rehabilitation, mental-health treatment, and other things that actually make prisons safer.

Federal resources also would serve the general public better if they were redirected to meeting the needs of the families and friends of the victims of homicides, while ensuring that the perpetrators were safely housed in prison for the rest of their life. For all these reasons, the government should not

bring back federal executions.

This story is part of the project "[The Battle for the Constitution](#)," in partnership with the [National Constitution Center](#).

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