

The person behind the conviction

Capital punishment aims for justice; seems to overlook the people in question

Where were you a week ago? I was standing in the Texas death chamber, watching representatives of this state deliberately execute a living human being in the most calculating manner. What I witnessed was ghastly and inhumane. It was one final act of inhumanity committed within the rhetoric of justice, that served only to perpetuate faith in the effectiveness of violence as a solution to our grim human problems. Robert West #731 had ceased to be a threat to society. Having spent his previous 15 years on death row, locked in a 10' X 8' metal cage, Bobby had endured a grueling and special torture. His story is not extraordinary, and as is the case with all of us, there will come a day when nobody will remember him, nobody will recognize his name. But unlike us, he will posthumously and forevermore bear the terrifying distinction of being the 132nd person to die by lethal injection since Texas reinstated the death penalty in 1977.

Bobby first touched my life in mid-July. Unaware of his pending execution date, I had mailed him an inquiry letter just a month before, hoping to inaugurate a correspondence and wanting to gain a condemned man's viewpoint of life inside the prison system, as well as out. But Bobby gave me more than I could have ever hoped for, and the knowledge I gained has left me equivocal and uncomfortable about supporting the death penalty.

What does the death penalty accomplish? Does it deter crime? It doesn't appear so. Research on capital punishment has shown the ultimate penalty fails to prevent deaths, fails to make society a safer and better entity and fails to satisfy any moral need. But the deterrent factor is weak, lost in the quagmire of indefinite prison time and seemingly random



Former Battalion Editor
STACY STANTON
Senior English major

executions. If only the system could be efficient and accurate ... If we could only make execution certain ... But not all capital offenders will be executed; some will not be found out, some tried and acquitted, some found guilty of lesser charges, some given commuted or reversed sentences. Perfection is an impossibility.

Yet we must ensure perfection, for the cries demand, "an eye for an eye." Those cries are backed by moral common sense, tradition and philosophical thought. And the weepers demand a rush to execution. The mother of Bobby's victim said she resented his chances of appeal granted him since the night of the murder. But those who tout morality must certainly want the condemned to have every chance possible to rightfully escape death, for the imprisoned bears life — a life just as precious as that of the victims.

Bobby's life was indeed precious, if for no other reason than the sole existence of life itself. He made bad decisions and was forced to pay the price, but why could his life not have been spared? Given the heinous inadequacies of the death penalty, would society not have served itself — its citizens — more justly if Bobby had been sentenced to life in prison without parole and with restitution administered to the victim's family?

I was blessed to visit Bobby for two hours one week before his execution. Our conversation sparkled, and it seemed we were both comfortable in our first encounter, separated rather uncomfortably by a security screen and glass window. Bobby related horrifying experiences from the streets — first reform school, then drugs, prostitution, murder; he spun wonderfully thrilling tales of his prison years. He was forthright and engaging, and his stories were of another world. Bobby admitted his

guilt and mused about what would become of him, fearful because he hadn't found the "path of righteousness." But at 35, he could scan his 15 years on death row and note the moment he realized his own self-worth and the worth of each member of mankind. I believed him when he said that he was truly repentant of his crime.

Bobby was a remarkable man in his own right. He had fostered hundreds of friendships through letters — letters, he said, enabled him to "travel, learn, grow, come to understand, share,

dream, escape and live." He believed letters to be "personal and limitless, only held back by our own fears, lines, walls, barriers and limitations."

But Bobby didn't choose to share his last moment with those he previously had shared so much. He chose me, knowing I had supported capital punishment in the past and that my sincere hunger for insight into the system was more than mere curiosity. He ultimately placed his life into my hands, vesting all of his hopes in a college kid.

Yesterday I received a letter from Bob-

by, mailed nearly one week after his death. I agree with the sentiment he penned, "Sometimes words belittle the moment, fall way short of expressing the feelings inside or fail to paint the necessary picture in one's mind's eye."

For information: Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty
P.O. Box 70314
Houston, Texas 77270
(713) 523-8454
e-mail: TCADP@adelante.com
Contact Carol Buntion and tell her Bobby sent you.



Innocent lives fall victim to death penalty system

Richard C. Dieter said, "Instead of confronting the twin crises of the economy and violence, politicians offer the death penalty as if it were a meaningful solution to crime." These words welcome visitors to the Abolition Now Web site.

The focus of this group is one that warrants nationwide attention. The purpose is the eradication of the death penalty.

Capital punishment is one of the most Draconian remnants of American justice. It yields to the old adage, "an eye for an eye." Only this is perhaps the sole portion of this archaic system of beliefs that still plagues our nation.

The death penalty remains one of the most hotly debated issues in modern America. It is perhaps the most divisive debate aside from abortion. The burning question that drives the discussion: who has the right to determine who should die?

The American justice system serves as a self-proclaimed model by which the rest of the world should be judged. And while, for the most part, the system is more civilized and democratic than most nations, that does not mean there is no need for improvement. There are glitches in the system — and some mistakes simply are not acceptable.

For centuries, opposition to capital punishment has been voiced both in the United States and abroad, and not just by activists and radicals. People on all levels of society have been tormented by capital punishment and what it means to a society.

Early 20th century French philosopher and Nobel Prize Laureate Albert Camus said capital punishment is the "most premeditated of murders." He said the only way to compare its horrors to a criminal act would require "a criminal who had warned his victim of the date at which he would inflict a horrible death on him and who, from that moment onward, had confined him at his mercy for months."

The fact that the death penalty does encourage so much discourse and philosophical soul-searching should indicate that perhaps this is not an issue that a society has the right to make. Along with the death penalty comes many difficult questions such as who decides what crimes "deserve" death. And if Americans are to rely on a jury system of justice, is it fair to ask a jury to take away another person's life? The psychological ramifications of being accountable for such a decision must be considered.

More than likely, questions like these will never find definitive answers, yet the United States continues to rely on the death penalty as a legitimate form of punishment. In fact, the number of executions is reaching new heights. Since the reinstatement of the death penalty in the mid-1970s, more than 300 people have been executed in the United States. The jumps are alarming. Between 1977 and 1982, there were only two executions each year. The numbers grew, with 1993 and 1994 seeing 38 and 31 persons executed, respectively. In 1995, the number of executions in the United States reached 56. This year, it seems Texas alone could reach numbers such as these.

Proponents of the death penalty worry about the costs of keeping capital criminals in jail for life. But what about the costs of killing innocent people, something which has certainly happened in the his-



Columnist
MANDY CATER
Senior psychology major

tory of American justice. There is no dollar amount that can be placed on a human life. Amnesty International reports 15 people executed despite evidence of innocence just since 1976, and another 10 seemingly innocent people still on death row.

A recent report by the Death Penalty Information Center (DPCI) said, "The current emphasis on faster executions, less resources for the defense and an expansion in the number of death cases mean that the execution of innocent people is inevitable."

Conclusions like this simply are not acceptable in a civilized society. The DPCI report found that "69 people have been released from death row since 1973, upon evidence of their innocence." One can only wonder how many of the more than 3,200 men and women currently on death row have had their lives stolen due to a lack of resources or trial error.

Even the American Bar Association realizes the inherent problems with a system that allows capital punishment. In February, the group's House of Delegates called for a nationwide moratorium on the death penalty. If the ABA, the most prestigious accrediting body in the legal profession calls for a change in justice, lawmakers and citizens alike should listen.

This is not merely some liberal, "soft on crime" idea. This is about ensuring that innocent Americans are not murdered at the hands of their own justice system. If just one innocent life is taken, is the death penalty really worth it?

The death penalty is little more than a scare tactic that does not work. Executing serious criminals is merely a result of lawmakers with too little creativity to implement real legislation, or simply who care too little to try. Before people are allowed to vote on legislation that includes capital punishment or sit in a jury box with another person's life in their hands, they should be forced to see what their decision will really mean. In other words, there should be a mandatory witnessing of an actual execution. They should have to watch as someone's flesh burns in an electric chair in Florida or as a firing squad in Utah or Idaho blasts an inmate with bullets.

If people are going to play God and appoint themselves the judges, giving themselves the power of taking another person's life, they should be prepared to fully comprehend the heinous repercussions of their decisions. As the number of inmates killed continues to climb, Americans should reflect upon another dark time in our past, when the power of life and death ravaged the innocents of Salem, Mass.

When a society is in turmoil, paranoia and desperation for change often blind us to the reality of our decisions. Capital punishment is a scar on the face of American justice, and something must be done to curtail the problem. America claims to be a civilized, democratic nation; it is time that claim is supported by action.

David Lee Powell, an inmate of the Ellis I Unit in Huntsville, was sentenced to death in 1978. His words should haunt anyone who claims to believe in the ideals of America:

"The act of murder is an admission of one's inability to solve a dilemma in any other way. The state of Texas solves its problems with lethal injections."

UPS strike needs resolution; hinders local-area business

For over 25 years, the United Parcel Service has provided services to millions of people and businesses. From those highly anticipated care packages that college students receive from their parents to medical supply shipments for hospitals and clinics, UPS seems to have been one of the most respected shipping companies in existence.

Until recently, no big complaints have been made toward the company, other than the usual problems that every delivery company faces on a daily basis, such as misplacing an item or having it delivered to the wrong address.

But Sunday, at midnight, the Teamsters organized what is probably going to be known as one of the most devastating strikes toward domestic and foreign country shipping. The problem with this strike does not lie in the action itself, but the repercussions it will have on people and businesses internationally.

Packages that were in mid-stride of being delivered before the strike are now at a standstill. Although some of these shipments might only have been personal deliveries, such as the aforementioned care packages, a lot of them have the potential to be much more important; life-saving medical equipment cannot be held up for the politics of a company strike.

This strike, however, might turn into a more escalated situation than what most people expect. UPS workers are not going to simply drop their strike when they get a pay raise; the conditions of the strike are much more complex.

In addition to better pay, the Teamsters have demanded better safety standards, more full-time jobs and an end to subcontracting. These requests are going to take more than just a couple of meetings with company directors and union presidents. This strike poses a great danger to people in the Bryan-College Station area, as well.

Kenny Martin, director of Material Services for St. Joseph Regional Health Center, said UPS plays a significant role in shipping for the center.

"We receive about 100 different packages a day from them," Martin said.

On Monday, Martin said the center only received 26 items, but these were for the services requested; nothing had been omitted to Martin's knowledge.

With all of the discussions going on about the strike, Martin said he hopes UPS will continue to honor its decision to attempt to ship supplies to medical facilities.

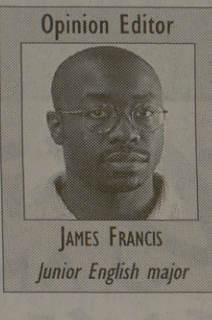
"They're saying they're going to deliver to the hospitals, and give them priority," he said. "I don't know how long that will go on."

No matter what the outcome of the strike, Martin said he does not want to take sides with either party. "I hope they get something resolved that is satisfactory to everybody," he said.

Because of the strike, local businesses have had to rely on other shipping and delivery options. Martin said, no matter what happens, medical supplies for patients are the most important things being considered.

"Even though it may cost us more, we can't run the risk with patient-related items," he said. "We have to make sure patient care is top priority."

But the trouble with the strike doesn't only pertain to



Opinion Editor
JAMES FRANCIS
Junior English major

medical shipments. If students think that they cannot identify with the problems of medical shipments, they should contemplate how they would like to start a new semester of school with no back-to-school clothing. Area clothing stores will also feel the pinch of this strike. An individual only has to go to the mall to realize that this is true.

Jessica Garner, a sophomore psychology major and senior assistant manager at County Seat in Post Oak Mall, said UPS is an important factor in the daily events of many clothing stores.

"We ship out all of our damaged and old merchandise to outlet centers through UPS," Garner said. "There are other ways, but we have a long-standing relationship with UPS."

Garner said County Seat has approximately 700 stores, including outlet facilities. She said she heard about the strike on the news and in passing, but the situation hasn't affected how she or other workers

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Director of Material Services
St. Joseph Regional Health Center

feel about the UPS worker who handles the store's business; workers affectionately call him Dwayne, "the mall UPS guy."

"Our UPS man is hilarious," Garner said. "He just comes in and has a good time."

One of the biggest priorities for anyone who works in sales is the paycheck. For Garner, she said she hopes UPS comes to some sort of agreement before any problems arise surrounding her own compensation.

"We get our mailbag," Garner said, "which carries our paychecks through UPS."

But just as is the case with St. Joseph's, County Seat also uses other carriers, such as Federal Express and special dispatch.

Garner also said it is extremely bad timing for the strike to take place before stores start their back-to-school sales and shipments; this is where the "peak season starts."

"I think everything is going to get backed up; people will be frustrated," Garner said. "I think it's going to be detrimental to the whole mall."

What everyone must realize is that this strike is not only national and it not only deals with big businesses. The Teamsters strike against UPS is a situation where more people are involved and harmed than most people would believe. Hopefully, some agreement can be reached, and with a little luck, both sides can be satisfied with the outcome.