

Watching Timothy McVeigh

Any discussion about the death penalty is almost certain to make people angry. Emotions run high, probably because the conversation is about life and death, and the government.

The Emerald editorial board is not going to argue whether the death penalty is right or wrong. But in the case of Timothy McVeigh, who will (with 99 percent certainty) be executed by the federal government sometime in the future, we have an opinion: The execution should be televised.

Initially, government officials discussed allowing TV cameras to film McVeigh's execution, but once it was denied, no one seemed to care. We think it's important, however, that a federal execution be open to broadcasters. Except for C-SPAN, no station need be obligated to show it, and given the content of the proceedings, some broadcasters probably would not.

But the death penalty is incredibly controversial and taxpayer money is being spent. Taxpayers must be given the opportunity to witness the most final and godlike act a government can perform.

In our editorial board meeting, we had five people with five different opinions about the death penalty. We were finally able to make a decision on the question of televising it, but only after much argument, and we were left with some concerns.

The immediate question, perhaps, is why would anyone want to watch an execution? That's not the point. None of us wants to watch McVeigh die. But our money is being spent to kill, no matter the righteousness of the act. An ABC News/Washington Post poll released May 2 found 45 percent of Americans would choose life imprisonment without parole instead of the death penalty, and 46 percent would choose the death penalty. With that close of a split, we all ought to have the right to witness our government in action.

But wait, citizens don't get to witness every government action. This is certainly true, but we are shown a substantial amount of government proceedings, documents and acts. Bills, laws, legislative sessions, budgets, contracts, purchase orders, plans, wars as they happen and the most minute details of our affairs with regard to presidents' sex lives are made public, and with good reason.

The government is not representing the people (our legislators do that); the government is the people. If inconsequential matters are available without a fuss, then so should McVeigh's execution. There needs to be sufficient and necessary reasons for hiding government proceedings, and an execution doesn't warrant a shroud.

Defense strategies that could expose America to danger or at-

tack should remain hidden. Recipes for weapons of mass destruction should stay secret. But what cause is there to hide an execution? Such events used to be explicitly public, so that leaders could show the "natural" consequences of unlawful actions and deter would-be criminals.

One reason offered to shield Americans from a lawful punishment — some would also say it is "just," but we pass no judgment either way — is that children might be exposed to the execution without guidance, and therefore traumatized. Perhaps this is true. But no one would be forced to watch. McVeigh's death was scheduled for the middle of the night; most parents could easily shield their children's eyes.

Some parents can't constantly keep their children away from TV, but this is a special case with extensive advance notice. If a parent's concern is so great, then surely arrangements could be made to safeguard their offspring on this one important occasion. And some parents might find this a teaching moment; hunters often extol the benefits of exposing their children to death in a guided manner. Why is this not an equal learning experience?

To attack the issue from the other direction, perhaps we should *all* watch the execution. Supporters of the death penalty might find the reality of their government's deed too much to bear and change their mind. Opponents might see that lethal injection is not so cruel and decide it is necessary. Some might argue that since McVeigh committed a crime against the nation, this would offer a chance to soothe the nation's psyche.

More importantly, people who are undecided could see them-

selves. The idea is similar to the Vietnam War. Then, the tide of public opinion turned against the war once the casualties were televised. The point here isn't that everyone will oppose the death penalty once it's seen on TV; supporters and opponents may both have valid arguments. But if citizens don't see the reality of what it takes to produce the end result, how can they know what they're agreeing to?

The concern that made every editorial board member pause was

the glorification and desensitizing that could come from seeing real death happen live on our magic picture boxes. In many ways, our culture is already bloodthirsty. Americans happily consume more gory mayhem than any other nation. And endless TV has trained American minds to absorb what they see as abstraction; it's not really real, right? The possibility of hungry, angry people flocking to the boob tube to feed on the raw meat of live, real death is disturbing.

But if the death penalty is so right and justified and acceptable, as it is to many good people, then why are we afraid of the government exhibiting justice, especially for such a gruesome national tragedy? Why can't taxpayers witness executions, if they are perfectly rational? That question stopped the conversation.

This editorial represents the opinion of the Emerald editorial board. Responses can be sent to ode@oregon.uoregon.edu.



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