

COMMENTARY

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Editorial

Death penalty system is broken, in need of repair or even abolition

It's not very often that someone in government does something extraordinary. Gov. George Ryan of Illinois has. A week ago tomorrow, Ryan, the outgoing republican governor, commuted the death sentences of all 156 prisoners waiting to be executed on the state's death row.

The commutations came after a four-year stretch that began when journalism students at Northwestern University began looking at death row cases. Soon after, with the help of DNA technology, men who had been condemned to die for almost a decade were suddenly freed. One man was only two days away from being executed when his innocence was proved.

Ryan's own investigations, carried out by a blue-ribbon panel he appointed to do a multi-year study, turned up other chilling statistics. The condemned were overwhelmingly minorities, often poor. The death penalty is five times more likely to be administered in the rural areas of Illinois than in Cook County, which contains the city of Chicago. Of the 156 men on death row, 17 were found to be totally innocent, either because of DNA testing or proof that their confessions were beaten out of them in the police's zeal to find someone, anyone, to clear up a homicide investigation. Others were condemned when their lawyers, often underpaid public defenders, were incompetent and did not put up a vigorous defense.

Regardless of personal feelings about the death penalty, everyone should see that the system is broken and in need of either repair or abolition. The death penalty is irreversible: once it's been administered, there is no pardon, no reprieve. If America is to have a death penalty, it has to be one that is administered only to those who, without a shadow of a doubt and with no room for human error, are guilty.

A nationwide moratorium on the death penalty is in order at this moment, to examine how to proceed with what is the most awesome and horrifying power of government — the sanctioned killing of its own citizens. The justice system must clear up all the problems with overzealous police or incompetent defenders or mistakes in technology or whatever the cause may be, and if they cannot be cleared up, to abolish the penalty altogether. It is time for all the other governors in states that allow the death penalty, as well as the Department of Justice, to think about the issue and look at the executions that have been carried out and those still pending.

But in a larger, more cosmic sense, philosophers say that even then, there can be no justice with the death penalty. Justice is more than just retribution, or "lex talionis;" it must have some way of recompensing the family of the victim. Putting a murderer to death may fulfill a need for vengeance, but it will not return the murdered; it cannot provide closure or recompense — or real justice.

Editorial policy

This editorial represents the opinion of the Emerald editorial board. Responses can be sent to letters@dailyemerald.com. Letters to the editor and guest commentaries are encouraged. Letters are limited to 250 words and guest commentaries to 550 words. Authors are limited to one submission per calendar month. Submission must include phone number and address for verification. The Emerald reserves the right to edit for space, grammar and style.

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Letters to the editor

Nonviolence leads to self-confidence

In his essay "A Testament of Hope," Martin Luther King Jr. said that when he lived in Montgomery, Ala., he kept a gun in his house, but he decided to get rid of it when he began teaching nonviolence. He said that discarding the gun made him feel more secure and gave him a stronger sense of self-confidence. "Ultimately, one's sense of manhood must come from within," he said.

Roland Bartel
 professor emeritus
 English

We need Measure 28

Most of us will soon have our special election ballots in our hands. The time has come to make the decision that comes from your heart, and vote yes on Measure 28.

Very few people want to give more of their hard-earned cash to the government, even \$1.30 a week. But if you've seen some of The Register-Guard stories or know someone whose life will be truly messed up if Measure 28 fails, you know it's not just giving money to the government. It's giving help to real people who really need it.

It's supporting goals our own community has carefully developed over many years of great effort. It's an expression of selflessness and compassion. It's a deep understanding that all of us depend on each other for so many things, and that we have asked our government to do this work on our behalf.

Our neighbors with disabilities, illness, addiction; our children with a desire to learn and develop skills for the future; our own need to be protected from destructive criminal elements — this temporary increase will fund them while our new Legislature looks for ways out of this mess without a devastating cutoff of support. If you are not directly affected by one of

these programs, you are one of the lucky ones. Please show your gratitude by supporting those in need. Vote yes on 28.

Tim Mueller
 Eugene

Measure 28 headline shows wrong point

This past Monday, I was surprised by a Daily Emerald headline that proclaimed "Measure (28) may increase tuition surcharge." As many students know, this is untrue. Simply put, the passage of Measure 28 will prevent a tuition surcharge. To my displeasure, this error was repeated in the article's sub-headline, which incorrectly claimed that Measure 28 would leave "students paying a higher price." These errors are unfortunate as they provide false information to students — a group which will suffer greatly if Measure 28 fails.

Tim Johnson
 junior
 history, political science

War may be needed to free Iraqi people

Guest commentary

DAVIS, Calif. — As the looming conflict with Iraq inches closer, sentiment against the war can be found in abundant supply on campus. I'd agree that our imminent conflict with Iraq is not likely to accomplish much, but to be honest I find the overwhelming antiwar attitude depressing. The truth of the matter is that I believe there will come a day when we'll have to go to war with Iraq, and when that day comes, I hope that we are both ready and willing to go.

Why? Because sooner or later, when the Iraqi people say they want their own government and their own freedoms, we will have to fight for them. The alternative is to watch as Hussein's Republican Guard butchers those who question his

power, and we cannot let that happen.

What President Bush does not seem to realize is that we have a great deal to do before a war with Iraq will have any meaning.

First, the U.S. needs to put all of its efforts into brokering a peace between Israelis and Palestinians. As long as that conflict continues, Arab dictators can (and do) deflect blame for their country's lack of education, health care, and human rights onto Israel and the U.S.

Second, we need to make sure Afghanistan gets back on its feet. We have quite the history of fighting the good fight in the Middle East and then forgetting the people we affect.

Third, we need to reduce our dependence on fossil fuels. We need to remove any doubt that our intentions are anything more than a desire to see Arabs enjoy the same freedoms we do, and energy

independence is the place to start.

Meanwhile, if we can broker peace in Palestine and develop renewable energy sources, we will prove ourselves to be a responsible global neighbor and our international support will grow as our list of ulterior motives shrinks.

Finally, we have to do the hardest thing imaginable: When the Iraqis (or Iranians, or anyone else in the region) ask for their freedom, we must win it for them. Because they cannot.

Our military could probably roll over any force in the Middle East. The question is: Will we still go when we have nothing to gain but the freedom of another? I hope we do. That's why I want us to be ready for war ... just not yet.

Patrick Bocash writes for The California Aggie at the University of California-Davis. (U-Wire).