

# Writers on the Range Conservative Republican has a personal mission

I am a lifelong conservative Republican whose faith in the criminal justice system was shattered by my near-death experience with it. I came within nine days of being sent to the gas chamber for a crime I did not commit.

You could say I'm living proof of why people should not trust their government with the death penalty. My nightmare started in 1974 when



**RON KEINE**  
WITNESS TO INNOCENCE

three friends and I were falsely accused of sexually mutilating and killing a student at the University of New Mexico. We were sentenced to death in 1974.

The state had no proof — no weapon, no forensic evidence — just poorly run lie-detector tests and an alleged witness. Even when that witness recanted, the judge refused to grant us a new trial.

It was only after the real killer confessed that we were exonerated, and that happened in the nick of time. My execution had been scheduled, and the assistant warden asked what I wanted for my last meal.

How could this happen?  
This was an abuse of government power, and it happens more often than you might think. In our case, the main witness was coerced to lie at the trial. Also, the murder weapon — nowhere to be seen during the trial — was later found inside the local sheriff's safe. It had been hidden from the defense and traced to a law enforcement officer who ended up confessing.

Our story is not unique. We are among 173 people nationwide to be freed from death sentences because of wrongful conviction.

Although the Trump administration resumed federal executions, there has been a trend of conservative Republicans at the state level rethinking the death penalty. They do so because they believe in limited government, fiscal responsibility and the value of human life.

As Republican State Sen. Owen Hill of Denver put it: "It is against the natural order for one created in the image of God to willfully take the life of another created in the image of God."

There are also powerful financial arguments. The death penalty costs far more money than its alternatives, such as life without parole, according to numerous studies. In fact, death penalty trials, and there are always two — one to determine guilt or innocence and one to decide a sentence — have caused some municipalities to almost go bankrupt, while others have been forced to pass tax increases.

The death penalty is just another wasteful, big-government program. The 25 states that still have the death penalty — eight of them in the West — are wasting resources that could be used to make communities safer by solving cold cases or providing more tools to law enforcement.

Take Wyoming as one example. Since the state passed its death penalty law in 1977, Wyoming has carried out one execution, and today it does not have a single death row inmate. However, the state continues to spend at least \$750,000 each year on a capital defense fund to train attorneys to handle death penalty cases that rarely ever come to them. It is no wonder the overwhelmingly Republican Wyoming Legislature came just a few votes shy of repealing the death penalty in 2019, and hopes are high it will finish the job this year.

New Mexico, where I was sentenced to death, repealed the sentence in 2009, and last year, Colorado ended capital punishment, thanks to three GOP state senators who made the crucial difference. In fact, no state west of Texas has held an execution in more than 10 years, and 2020 was another record low for new death sentences with only six total in all Western states. That's down from a high of 72 death sentences in the West in 1982.

Another encouraging sign of change just arrived with the filing of a death penalty repeal bill in the U.S. Congress, albeit a Democratic proposal with no GOP sponsors — yet.

As someone who barely survived an encounter with the criminal justice system, I call upon all who share my values to get rid of the death penalty once and for all.

And that last meal? It was going to be macaroni and cheese, just like my mother used to make. After I was released from death row I sometimes ate mac and cheese three times a day.

*Ron Keine is a contributor to Writers on the Range, writersontherange.org, a nonprofit dedicated to spurring lively conversation about the West. He is a member of the board of directors of Witness to Innocence, a small nonprofit working to end the death penalty.*



## Letters

### Do the job you are elected to do

I thank Roger Barnes for responding to Warner Wasley's letter and explaining the difference between integrity and doing a job you are elected to do.

Karen Warren  
Elgin

### Blaming your opponents is cowardly

No one went to the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6 to make Donald Trump look bad. He did that all by himself.

Since 2015, he showed his singular ability to intimidate and belittle. He attacked women for their appearance, men for the sincerity and experts in every field for knowing less than him. When this caused disasters, he flew into a rage behind the scenes and acted like a wounded victim in public.

I don't know how this whining coward won a following, perhaps because of the terrifying power in his voice.

The mob shouted "Donald Trump"

as a battle cry while they turned that violence into acts that he basically proposed. As usual, his cowardly allies are trying to blame their opponents.

Mary Cooke  
Cove

### Thank to OSP for helping stranded drivers

My brother and I would like to thank Oregon State Police trooper Ryan Moorehead, of Elgin, (working out of La Grande), for his professional, courteous and timely response, when we were stranded on Tollgate at 4:30 a.m. on Jan. 13.

We were in a no cellphone zone with no engine power or heat. Officer Moorehead stopped during the middle of a slush-snowstorm, moved us into his heated vehicle which had two-way communication. He arranged for a wrecker and stayed with us until we were towed away.

Henry and David Morgan  
Imnaha

### The left is getting what it asked for

Oh, lefties, lefties, lefties. What is it with this torrent of hatred on the editorial page, and especially in the letters to the editor column? Do you not know that your president, the old corrupt-o-crat Joe Biden, has called for unity and healing? Or has unity and healing been redefined as reeducation, deprogramming and outright destruction as so many on the left are calling for these days?

You need to realize something, lefties — no matter how pure your orthodoxy, it will never be enough. There is nothing the left enjoys more than putting each other on trial for heresy. Somewhere, over the decades, you have said something on social media that someone can take offense at. When it is discovered, you too, will know the joy of being doxxed, harassed, fired from your job and, very likely, physically assaulted by your fellow lefties.

This is what you voted for. Enjoy.  
John Kaufman  
Pendleton

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