



Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth speaks at an event for Anduril Industries, Inc., at Sparrows Point Shipyard, Oct. 6, 2026, in Sparrows Point, Maryland. (AP photo/Stephanie Scarbrough)



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When the [news broke](#) that Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth intended to televise the execution of Nidal Hasan by a firing squad, all decent people met the announcement with disgust.

The president of the U.S. bishops' conference, Archbishop Paul Coakley, delivered a [forceful rebuke](#) of the plan.

"It is with shock and great sorrow that I have learned of the Department of War's decision to publicly livestream the execution of Nidal Hasan," the archbishop said. "Our God is the God of life. In no way can Hassan's actions be condoned but this decision is a barbaric promotion of a culture of death and must be reconsidered."

"The macabre spectacle proposed by Secretary Hegseth is not what our Lord asks of us — it will neither honor victims nor bring healing," [said](#) Krisanne Vaillancourt Murphy, executive director of the Catholic Mobilizing Network. "We undermine our own humanity when we treat another person's death as something to watch, celebrate, or use for entertainment. It is reminiscent [sic] of the horrors of lynching in our nation's past, and would be a grotesque display of hatred witnessed in the public executions of some authoritarian countries today."

I agree with every word. But I confess I also had a more ambivalent reaction to the news. Yes, it is barbaric to televise an execution. Yes, it is designed, like so much of the MAGA worldview, to arouse the basest of human instincts instead of the better angels of our nature. But, killing Hasan by firing squad and letting people watch will expose the lie that killing someone by lethal injection, and hiding it from view, is in any way humane.

When I saw the headline about televising the execution, my mind recalled an essay in *Commonweal* by Daniel Callahan published in the weeks after the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision. He wrote:

I am willing — no, well prepared — to grant her that right [to an abortion] under law. I only ask that the society that grants this right be prepared to look with unblinking eyes at just what it is doing, not deceiving itself for one moment about even one aspect of what a granting of that right does. ... [I predict] in the best 1984 tradition, a reconstruction of history. This is done by creating a highly charged mythology of male repression, or religious persecution, or puritanical fanaticism (i.e. whichever one serves best at the moment to induce popular frenzy) ... and, not incidentally, values are reconstructed by making the value of a potential human being dependent upon being wanted by its mother.

That is exactly what happened. Now, in the case of capital punishment, let us "look with unblinking eyes" at this execution.

I have watched an execution on video. In 2002, Danny Pearl was [beheaded by Pakistani terrorists](#) and they filmed his execution. I did not know Pearl well but we moved in some overlapping social circles and he came into the restaurant I managed a few times. It was sickening to watch a human being killed in such a horrific manner. I wanted so badly to look away, but remembered that Pearl did not have the luxury of looking away. His courageous last words, "I am Jewish," linked his death with the countless deaths of Jews at the hands of Jew-haters through the centuries. When Hamas or the mullahs in Tehran say they wish to exterminate the Jews, believe them.

Sr. Helen Prejean said earlier this year, "There's no humane way to kill a human being." She was speaking before the failed execution of Christa Gail Pike by lethal injection exposed the particular inhumanity that can attend an execution by lethal injection. But the inhumanity of execution is not primarily a question of methodology. Executions are inhumane period.

Hasan did something truly inhumane when he killed 13 fellow soldiers at Fort Hood in 2009. We should not mimic his barbarity by perpetuating the inhumanity of taking a human life. Someone who has done monstrous things is not himself a monster. Monsters are the stuff of fiction and there is nothing fictional about the lives Hasan took nor about his own life being taken by the government later this year.

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The death penalty will not bring "closure" to the victims' families. Nothing brings closure when a loved one is lost. You miss them every day.

Nor does the death penalty deliver justice. Justice advances human dignity, it does not degrade it. The reason to oppose the death penalty is not primarily what it does to the condemned, but what it does to us. We are the moral agents in an execution. It is done in our name. And killing someone who is no longer a threat to anyone lowers us to his level, it does not bring justice. It coarsens our valuation for human life.

Finally, the death penalty is idolatrous, arrogating to ourselves what belongs to God. Pentagon spokesperson Sean Parnell [tweeted](#): "Judgement day for Hasan has finally come." No, sir, it has not. God, not Pete Hegseth, will decide when to judge Hasan and how.

Our society has been brutalized enough by the Trump administration. We don't need this spectacle. But, if they proceed to televise it, do not look away. Look at what is done in our name. Allow yourself to be horrified.

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