

Former executioners weigh in on death penalty

Claire Schaeffer-Duffy | Oct. 5, 2011 NCR Today

The high-profile case of Troy Anthony Davis has once again focused national attention on the death penalty with new voices weighing in. Among the most compelling are those of former department of correction officials who oversaw executions.

Like combat veterans recounting the realities of battle, they provide details about an execution that are unknown or ignored whenever capital punishment is discussed in the abstract.

In a recent column for *The Daily Beast* entitled, "[I Ordered Death](#)," [1] Allen Ault, former commissioner of the Georgia Department of Corrections, writes about what it was like to oversee executions at the Georgia Diagnostic and Classification Prison, the same facility where Davis was executed.

Ault knew Georgia Diagnostic's well for he had worked as warden of the prison. In 1971, he renovated a special cell block there for violent offenders. That cellblock became death row when capital punishment was reinstated in 1971.

Ault did not doubt the guilt of the men whose deaths he ordered. Two were accomplices to a "monstrous crime." As teenagers they robbed and raped a cab driver, locked him in the trunk of a car and shoved the vehicle into a pond. But at the time of their execution, they were men in their thirties.

"All these years later, after a little frontal lobe development, they were entirely different people," he writes.

And their deaths haunted him:

"The men and women who assist in executions are not psychopaths or sadists. They do their best to perform the impossible and inhumane job with which the state has charged them. Those of us who participated in executions often suffer something very much like posttraumatic stress. Many turn to alcohol and drugs. For me, those nights that weren't sleepless were plagued by nightmares. My mother and wife worried about me. I tried not to share with them that I was struggling but they knew I was."

Later in the piece Ault writes that after "having witnessed executions firsthand," he has "no doubts: capital punishment is a very scripted and rehearsed murder. It's the most premeditated murder possible."

Ron McAndrews, a retired warden from Florida State Prison, is also haunted by the executions he helped implement. McAndrews, who had experienced two murders in his own family, described himself as a pretty "hardcore kinda guy." [During an April 2009 interview with Fox news](#) [2], McAndrews spoke graphically about the death of Pedro Medina who was executed in 1997 by electric chair. Medina was a Cuban refugee convicted of killing a 52-year old Orlando woman. Like Davis, he said he was innocent of the crime.

Malfunctions in the electric chair used, infamously known as "Old Sparky" [resulted in a gruesome demise for Medina](#) [3].

?You get up close to an execution. You stand 3 or 4 feet from a man departing from this earth, you see the steam coming out from the mask, coming out from his eyes, his nostrils, his ears . . .and you just have to stop and ask yourself what the heck you are doing,? McAndrews said.

The Medina execution led to Florida?s decision to switch to lethal injection as the means of executions. But even this method is not as ?humane? as one might think, according to McAndrews. Because many prisoners are ex-drug users with collapsed veins, executioners have to, in the words of McAndrew ?carve? into the body in order to put ?a needle into a vein that will carry a poison to their heart.?

Ault and McAndrew are among the six former correction officials who wrote a letter to Georgia Corrections Officials and Georgia Governor Nathan Deal asking them to urge the Georgia Board of Pardon and Paroles to reconsider the decision they made Sept. 20 to deny Davis clemency.

Should that fail, the correction officials urged the governor and Georgia?s correction officials to ?unburden? themselves from ?the pain of participating in such a questionable execution to the extent possible by allowing personnel so inclined to opt out of activities related to the execution of Troy Anthony Davis.?

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Links:

[1] <http://readersupportednews.org/opinion2/275-42/7580-focus-i-ordered-death-in-georgia>

[2] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n6tTCIArIVA>

[3] <http://www.nytimes.com/1997/08/03/weekinreview/tightening-the-nuts-and-bolts-of-death-by-electric-chair.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>.