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Capital punishment and the brutality of the American ruling class

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I saw it all. I took exact note of every detail, even to Melanie's considerately helping to fix the leather strap that bound his legs together and his quiet removal of his slippers—and I never wish to see it again. I can see that stiff straight corpse hanging there yet, with its black pillow-cased head turned rigidly to one side, and the purple streaks creeping through the hands and driving the fleshy hue of life before them. Ugh!

—Mark Twain on the execution of John Melanie, Virginia City, Nevada, April 24, 1868

Nearly a century and a half has passed since Mark Twain penned these words as a young correspondent for the *Chicago Republican*. His account of a public hanging in a Nevada mining town retains all the horror today that it evoked at the time. Some 146 years later, however, by overwhelming consensus the American ruling class continues to uphold capital punishment, a barbaric practice condemned and outlawed by the vast majority of industrialized nations around the globe.

Eyes were focused on the United States in horror and revulsion on April 29, when the state of Oklahoma carried out the execution of Clayton D. Lockett. The death row inmate was strapped to a gurney as an untested cocktail of three lethal drugs were pumped first into a vein in his arm, and then into one in his groin. The initial drug, a sedative, apparently did not take full effect, and

the prisoner shook uncontrollably, gritted his teeth, and mumbled nearly 15 minutes into the gruesome procedure. Prison authorities abruptly halted the execution and drew the blinds to the witness observation room. Officials later told reporters that Lockett had died from a massive heart attack, some three-quarters of an hour after the grisly process had begun.

During a joint White House press conference with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Barack Obama was questioned by a French reporter about the botched execution. While calling the incident “deeply troubling,” the president reiterated his defense of capital punishment, stating, “There are certain circumstances in which a crime is so terrible that the application of the death penalty may be appropriate.”

He said the Oklahoma events raised “significant questions about how the death penalty is being applied,” adding, “I think we do have to, as a society, ask ourselves some difficult and profound questions around these issues.”

Yes, indeed, Mr. President. But precisely what are these “profound questions”? And what do the continued practice and defense of capital punishment by the US ruling elite tell us about 21st century America?

The current debate over ensuring the “humane” application of the death penalty is a sham. With European drug makers refusing to supply the drugs to be used for executions in the United States, states are scrambling to devise alternative protocols—utilizing different drugs in new, untested combinations—to be used in lethal injections. This macabre “debate” is focused on only one thing: *keeping the state killing machine in operation.*

There is nothing “humane” about injecting individuals with poisonous chemicals with the aim of killing them. A new report by the Constitution Project, a panel including former judges, police chiefs, attorneys general and governors who have signed execution warrants, has determined that the prevailing “three-drug method” used in US execution chambers “poses a risk of avoidable inmate pain and suffering.”

Similar protocols have been banned in many states in the euthanasia of animals, because they can cause suffocation by paralysis while the animal is still awake.

For his part, President Obama has directed the Justice Department to expand a review of issues surrounding the federal application of the death penalty “to include a survey of state-level protocols and related policy issues,” according to a department spokesman. Again, this review is not aimed at investigating the use of the death penalty itself, but at how it is “applied.”

While the president feigns concern for ensuring the humane application of the death penalty—which is a contradiction in terms—other politicians more openly express their blood lust for retribution.

Republican Mike Christian, a member of the Oklahoma House of Representatives, commented following the April 29 execution, “I realize this may sound harsh, but as a father and former lawman, I really don’t care if it’s by lethal injection, by the electric chair, firing squad, hanging, the guillotine or being fed to the lions.”

Such statements express the outlook of a political establishment presiding over a society ripped apart by class divisions and dominated by violence and brutality. Incidents such as the ghastly state murder of Clayton Lockett lift the lid on the state of class relations in America and the harsh realities confronting the population.

Death row and the vast US prison system epitomize these realities. As the reporter at the White House press conference referenced above noted, “Human rights groups put the United States in the devious company of China, Iran and Saudi Arabia when it comes to the prevalence of executions.” More than 3,000 condemned inmates languish on death rows across the country, awaiting fates like that of Clayton Lockett.

US prisons and jails hold an estimated 2.4 million inmates, a larger share of the population than in any other nation. The prison population is overwhelmingly working class and poor, with Latinos and African-Americans, the mentally ill and impaired, veterans and immigrants disproportionately represented.

Police brutality is rampant in cities across the country, big and small. Barely a day goes by without news of another fatal police shooting in America, with between one and two people killed by the police every day. Immigrants are rounded up, housed in massive detention centers under inhuman conditions, and deported in record numbers. This violent reality goes hand in hand with poverty and the growing erosion of basic democratic rights that confront working people and youth every day. State repression—including the vast police-state apparatus, of which the death penalty is a vital part—is the response of a ruling elite to the threat of rebellion from below.

The claims of the US political establishment, parroted by a servile media, that the United States is the defender of democracy around the globe are continually exposed, as the US military intervenes in countries around the world. The Obama administration has defended and expanded the web of torture, spying and global military aggression handed to it by George W. Bush. Obama’s defense of capital punishment as a US institution is of a piece with his authorization of targeted drone assassinations and his assumption of the right to order the killing of US citizens without due process.

The democratic pretenses of American society are ever more threadbare. The US ruling elite, by justifying as a legitimate government practice the purposeful killing of its own citizens—whether through targeted air strikes or in state execution chambers—has condemned itself as a class with no progressive reason for existence. Opposition to capital punishment goes hand in hand with the defense of the social rights of the working class. As a key component of a socialist program

under a workers government, the *World Socialist Web Site* calls for the abolition of the death penalty.