

## When Governments Kill

### A conservative argues for abolishing the death penalty.

by Richard A. Viguerie

On most public policy matters, Jim Wallis and I disagree. Both of us, however, do believe that the death penalty should be abolished—although we may not agree on how that should be done.

I'm a Catholic. Because of my Christian faith, and because I am a follower of Jesus Christ, I oppose the death penalty. I'm a conservative as well, and because my political philosophy recognizes that government is too often used by humans for the wrong ends, I find it quite logical to oppose capital punishment.

I have been criticized by some conservatives for my opposition to the death penalty. On the other hand, some conservatives have told me they question capital punishment or even oppose it, but believe that the conservative "position" is to support it. Fortunately for me, even if someone were to question my conservative *bona fides* (I've never been called not conservative *enough*, trust me), I wouldn't care.

The fact is, I don't understand why more conservatives don't oppose the death penalty. It is, after all, a system set up under laws established by politicians (too many of whom lack principles); enforced by prosecutors (many of whom *want* to become politicians—perhaps a character flaw?—and who prefer wins over justice); and adjudicated by judges (too many of whom administer personal preference rather than the law).

Conservatives have every reason to believe the death penalty system is no different from any politicized, costly, inefficient, bureaucratic, government-run operation, which we conservatives know are rife with injustice. But here the end result is the end of someone's life. In other words, it's a government system *that kills people*.

Those of us who oppose abortion believe that it is perhaps the greatest immorality to take an innocent life. While the death penalty is supposed to take the life of the guilty, we know that is not always the case. It should have shocked the consciences of conservatives when various government prosecutors withheld exculpatory, or opposed allowing DNA-tested, evidence in death row cases. To conservatives, that should be deemed as immoral as abortion.

The death penalty system is flawed and untrustworthy because human institutions always are. But even when guilt is certain, there are many downsides to the death penalty system. I've heard enough about the pain and suffering of families of victims caused by the long, drawn-out, and even intrusive legal process. Perhaps, then, it's time for America to re-examine the death penalty system, whether it works, and whom it hurts.

On how society would ever get to the point of abolishing the death penalty, if it were to do that, I have my conservative views. It must be done in a way consistent with our constitutional system. That means it cannot be imposed by the courts or by the federal government (except for federal cases). In my opinion, the Constitution does not grant the federal government the authority to ban the death penalty in the states. That must be left to the people's representatives in their respective states, which also means that judges must not take it upon themselves.

This is why I am joining my friend Jim Wallis in a coalition of liberals and conservatives calling for a national moratorium and conversation about the death penalty, so people can study, learn, think, pray if they wish, about whether or how the various state death-penalty systems should be changed. I hope you'll join us.

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