

The execution of Karla Faye Tucker: The Brutal Society

The IWB Editorial Board
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The execution of Karla Faye Tucker on Tuesday evening has evoked intense feelings of revulsion all around the world, and a fair amount of shame among not a few Americans. Throughout the day countless millions of people followed the news reports of the last desperate and futile legal maneuvers to save Tucker's life, horrified by the relentless and remorseless determination of the federal and state authorities to put this woman to death.

And yet, as gruesome as the day's events were, the only unusual aspect of this execution was the gender of its victim. Capital punishment has become commonplace in the United States. Moreover, with its general background of poverty and backwardness, Tucker's life story is typical of nearly all those who are currently on death row, male and female. At age 14 she was introduced to the life of a prostitute by her mother, with whom she shared drugs "like lipstick." In 1983 Tucker, then 23, and her boyfriend committed a brutal double murder, while the two were delirious from drugs.

Fourteen years later, having undergone a religious conversion, Tucker claimed to be rehabilitated. In a clemency appeal to Texas Governor George W. Bush and the state Board of Pardons and Paroles she wrote: "I feel that if I were in here still in the frame of mind I got arrested in, still acting out and fighting and hurting others and not caring or trying to do good, I feel sure you would consider that against me.... I don't really understand why you can't or won't consider my change for the good in my favor."

The sister of the murdered man and the brother of the murdered woman both appealed for Tucker's life to be spared. So did the United Nations, the European Parliament and Pope John Paul II. It was all in vain.

Not one member of the Board of Pardons and Paroles

had the compassion or humanity to vote for the commutation of her death sentence. The Board turned down her appeal February 2 by a vote of 16-0, with two abstentions.

The Board, six of whose members were appointed by the previous governor, Democrat Ann Richards, and 12 by Bush, heard 16 appeals for clemency in 1997. Not one member of the board has voted for clemency in a single case. Nor did Bush commute a single of these executions. Texas executed 37 people in 1997.

After the Board's decision David Botsford, one of Tucker's lawyers, declared: "Texas has no mercy. The clemency process in this state is a farce." In an earlier statement Botsford noted that the Board did not even meet in person. "Those that vote," he noted, "vote by fax, telephone, or letter.... They won't give Karla Tucker a chance to plead her own case with them personally."

One member of the Texas Court of Appeals, in rejecting an appeal to block the 38-year-old woman's execution, commented that while her lawyers presented "a great deal of information suggesting and arguing that she is entitled to ... mercy," Tucker "does not have a constitutional right to mercy." In other words, compassion is available only to the extent that it is required by law!

In the collective action of the Texas state authorities—whose rulings were sanctioned by the US Supreme Court—and the blood lust of their supporters one sees only vindictiveness, brutality and reaction.

But it is not only in the State of Texas that something is profoundly rotten. In its callousness and utter lack of compassion—what the Bard in his innocence called the "quality of mercy"—the disposal of Tucker is only one chilling expression of a broader trend in capitalist politics: the selection of violence as a *preferred*

instrument of policy, the deliberate encouragement of indifference to human suffering, and the general brutalization of society.

There is a profound connection between the moral debasement, indeed the cruelty, of the ruling class and the values it has zealously championed: the celebration of the market, the promotion of greed and wealth, the abandonment of any sense of social responsibility. The deeper the economic and social crisis of the system, the more thoroughgoing the destruction of living standards and social programs, the wider the gap between the rich and nearly everyone else, the greater the need for state violence and intimidation.

Tucker and her partner in crime, as the media constantly repeat, killed their victims with a pickax. Their crime was certainly atrocious, but such terrible events have their origins not merely in the disoriented or deranged psyches of the individuals who commit such acts but in the social conditions within which such individuals develop. Is it really necessary to remind our readers that the denizens of death row are not the products of America's wealthy suburbs?

Moreover, however bloody and awful the murders committed by Tucker or other death row inmates may be, they lack the premeditated and calculated horror of a killing carried out, not by society's unfortunates, high on drugs, but by sane and sober members of its political elite; or the remote-control obliteration of tens of thousands of men, women and children in a distant land who are considered to be an obstacle to the interests of America's profit-hungry ruling class. On the scales of history, the latter crimes are infinitely more abhorrent.

Taking place against the backdrop of the planned assault against the Iraqi people, the execution of Tucker assumes emblematic significance. Earlier in the day, Sen. John McCain of Arizona appeared on *Good Morning America* and stated in a matter-of-fact manner that large numbers of Iraqi people would probably die in the course of US bombing attacks. That, he shrugged, was an unfortunate consequence of war. Needless to say, the interviewer did not challenge him on this point or indicate the slightest discomfort with his remarks.

In a more confident time American presidents coined names for their visions of society—the New Deal, the Fair Deal, the New Frontier, the Great Society. There is only one fitting name for the present state of the social

order—the Brutal Society.

But it would be profoundly mistaken to believe that the Brutal Society expresses the aspirations of the American people as a whole. Broad layers of the US population are not rubbing their hands in anticipation of death in the Middle East, or in Texas. Despite attempts by the corporate elite to impute its own bloodthirstiness to the populace as a whole, recent polls show that even in Texas growing numbers are uneasy about the government's death-row assembly line, and would seek different options if given the choice. Nor is there any evidence of widespread support for the Clinton administration's war drive against Iraq. Many are ashamed and sickened by what they are seeing.

Disenfranchised by the dominance of the two big business parties, confused by decades of red-baiting and official reaction, politically disarmed by the treachery and impotence of the trade unions, the working people in the United States have not yet found their voice. While masses of people are not, at this point, expressing outraged opposition to the policies carried out in their name, that time—the day of political reckoning—is not as far away as many might imagine.



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