

# *Furman v. Georgia*

William O. Douglas



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## **OVERVIEW**

In this 1972 decision, the United States Supreme Court held that the imposition and carrying out of Georgia's death penalty in the three cases considered in this decision constituted cruel and unusual punishment in violation of the Eighth and Fourteenth Amendments. The Court did not, however, find that the death penalty could never be imposed or carried out without violating the United States Constitution. While Georgia's death penalty statute was unconstitutional as applied in the three cases the Court reviewed, the Court suggested that, at least in theory, imposing the death penalty could be constitutional. A portion of the decision follows.

**GUIDED READING** As you read, consider the following questions:

- What were the Court's major objections to the application of the death penalty in these cases?
- What protections must be included for a death penalty statute to be constitutional?

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MR. JUSTICE DOUGLAS, concurring.

In these three cases the death penalty was imposed, one of them for murder, and two for rape. In each the determination of whether the penalty should be death or a lighter punishment was left by the State to the discretion of the judge or of the jury. In each of the three cases the trial was to a jury. They are here on petitions for certiorari which we granted limited to the question whether the imposition and execution of the death penalty constitute "cruel and unusual punishment" within the meaning of the Eighth Amendment as applied to the States by the Fourteenth. I vote to vacate each judgment, believing that the exaction of the death penalty does violate the Eighth and Fourteenth Amendments...

That the requirements of due process ban cruel and unusual punishment is now settled. *Louisiana ex rel. Francis v. Resweber*, 329 U.S. 459, 463, and 473-474 (Burton, J., dissenting); *Robinson v. California*, 370 U.S. 660, 667. It is also settled that the proscription of cruel and unusual punishments forbids the judicial imposition of them as well as their imposition by the legislature. *Weems v. United States*, 217 U.S. 349, 378-382. Congressman Bingham, in proposing the Fourteenth Amendment, maintained that "the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States" as protected by the Fourteenth Amendment included protection against "cruel and unusual punishments:"

"[M]any instances of State injustice and oppression have already occurred in the State legislation of this Union, of flagrant violations of the guaranteed privileges of citizens of the United States, for which the national Government furnished and could furnish by law no remedy whatever. Contrary to the express letter of your Constitution, 'cruel and unusual punishments' have been inflicted under State laws within this Union upon citizens, not only for crimes committed, but for sacred duty done, for which and against which the Government of the United States had provided no remedy and could provide none." Cong. Globe, 39th Cong., 1st Sess., 2542.

Whether the privileges and immunities route is followed, or the due process route, the result is the same.

It has been assumed in our decisions that punishment by death is not cruel, unless the manner of execution can be said to be inhuman and barbarous. In *re Kemmler*, 136 U.S. 436, 447. It is also said in our opinions that the proscription of cruel and unusual punishments "is not fastened to the obsolete but may acquire meaning as public opinion becomes enlightened by a humane justice." *Weems v. United States*, supra, at 378. A like statement was made in *Trop v. Dulles*, 356 U.S. 86, 101, that the Eighth Amendment "must draw its meaning from the evolving standards of decency that mark the progress of a maturing society."

The generality of a law inflicting capital punishment is one thing. What may be said of the validity of a law on the books and what may be done with the law in its application do, or may, lead to quite different conclusions.

It would seem to be incontestable that the death penalty inflicted on one defendant is "unusual" if it discriminates against him by reason of his race, religion, wealth, social position, or class, or if it is imposed under a procedure that gives room for the play of such prejudices.

There is evidence that the provision of the English Bill of Rights of 1689, from which the language of the Eighth Amendment was taken, was concerned primarily with selective or irregular application of harsh penalties and that its aim was to forbid arbitrary and discriminatory penalties of a severe nature:

"Following the Norman conquest of England in 1066, the old system of penalties, which ensured equality between crime and punishment, suddenly disappeared. By the time systematic judicial records were kept, its demise was almost complete. With the exception of certain grave crimes for which the punishment was death or outlawry, the arbitrary fine was replaced by a discretionary...amercement. Although amercement's discretionary character allowed the circumstances of each case to be taken into account and the level

of cash penalties to be decreased or increased accordingly, the amercement presented an opportunity for excessive or oppressive fines.

"The problem of excessive amercements became so prevalent that three chapters of the Magna Carta were devoted to their regulation. Maitland said of Chapter 14 that 'very likely there was no clause in the Magna Carta more grateful to the mass of the people.' Chapter 14 clearly stipulated as fundamental law a prohibition of excessiveness in punishments:

"'A free man shall not be amerced for a trivial offence, except in accordance with the degree of the offence; and for a serious offence he shall be amerced according to its gravity, saving his livelihood; and a merchant likewise, saving his merchandise; in the same way a villein shall be amerced saving his wainage; if they fall into our mercy. And none of the aforesaid amercements shall be imposed except by the testimony of reputable men of the neighborhood.'"

The English Bill of Rights, enacted December 16, 1689, stated that "excessive bail ought not to be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted." These were the words chosen for our Eighth Amendment. A like provision had been in Virginia's Constitution of 1776<sup>4</sup> and in the constitutions of seven other States. The Northwest Ordinance, enacted under the Articles of confederation, included a prohibition of cruel and unusual punishments. But the debates of the First Congress on the Bill of Rights throw little light on its intended meaning. All that appears is the following:

"Mr. SMITH, of South Carolina, objected to the words 'nor cruel and unusual punishments;' the import of them being too indefinite.

"Mr. LIVERMORE: The clause seems to express a great deal of humanity, on which account I have no objection to it; but as it seems to have no meaning in it, I do not think it necessary. What is meant by the terms excessive bail? Who are to be the judges? What is understood by excessive fines? It lies with the court to determine. No cruel and unusual punishment is to be inflicted; it is sometimes necessary to hang a man, villains often deserve whipping, and perhaps having their ears cut off; but are we in future to be prevented from inflicting these punishments because they are cruel? If a more lenient mode of correcting vice and deterring others from the commission of it could be invented, it would be very prudent in the Legislature to adopt it; but until we have some security that this will be done, we ought not to be restrained from making necessary laws by any declaration of this kind."

The words "cruel and unusual" certainly include penalties that are barbaric. But the words, at least when read in light of the English proscription

against selective and irregular use of penalties, suggest that it is "cruel and unusual" to apply the death penalty - or any other penalty - selectively to minorities whose numbers are few, who are outcasts of society, and who are unpopular, but whom society is willing to see suffer though it would not countenance general application of the same penalty across the board. Judge Tuttle, indeed, made abundantly clear in *Novak v. Beto*, 453 F.2d 661, 673-679 (CA5) (concurring in part and dissenting in part), that solitary confinement may at times be "cruel and unusual" punishment...

The Court in *McGautha v. California*, 402 U.S. 183, 198, noted that in this country there was almost from the beginning a "rebellion against the common-law rule imposing a mandatory death sentence on all convicted murderers." The first attempted remedy was to restrict the death penalty to defined offenses such as "premeditated" murder. But juries "took the law into their own hands" and refused to convict on the capital offense...

"In order to meet the problem of jury nullification, legislatures did not try, as before, to refine further the definition of capital homicides. Instead they adopted the method of forthrightly granting juries the discretion which they had been exercising in fact." *Ibid.*

The Court concluded: "In light of history, experience, and the present limitations of human knowledge, we find it quite impossible to say that committing to the untrammelled discretion of the jury the power to pronounce life or death in capital cases is offensive to anything in the Constitution." *Id.*, at 207.

The Court refused to find constitutional dimensions in the argument that those who exercise their discretion to send a person to death should be given standards by which that discretion should be exercised. *Id.*, at 207-208.

A recent witness at the Hearings before Subcommittee No. 3 of the House Committee on the Judiciary, 92d Cong., 2d Sess., Ernest van den Haag, testifying on H. R. 8414 et al., 10 stated:

"Any penalty, a fine, imprisonment or the death penalty could be unfairly or unjustly applied. The...vice in this case is not in the penalty but in the process by which it is inflicted. It is unfair to inflict unequal penalties on equally guilty parties, or on any innocent parties, regardless of what the penalty is." *Id.*, at 116-117. (Emphasis supplied.)

But those who advance that argument overlook *McGautha*, *supra*.

We are now imprisoned in the McGautha holding. Indeed the seeds of the present cases are in McGautha. Juries (or judges, as the case may be) have practically untrammelled discretion to let an accused live or insist that he die...

Mr. Justice Field, dissenting in *O'Neil v. Vermont*, 144 U.S. 323, 340, said, "The State may, indeed, make the drinking of one drop of liquor an offence to be punished by imprisonment, but it would be an unheard-of cruelty if it should count the drops in a single glass and make thereby a thousand offences, and thus extend the punishment for drinking the single glass of liquor to an imprisonment of almost indefinite duration." What the legislature may not do for all classes uniformly and systematically, a judge or jury may not do for a class that prejudice sets apart from the community.

There is increasing recognition of the fact that the basic theme of equal protection is implicit in "cruel and unusual" punishments. "A penalty . . . should be considered 'unusually' imposed if it is administered arbitrarily or discriminatorily." The same authors add that "[t]he extreme rarity with which applicable death penalty provisions are put to use raises a strong inference of arbitrariness." The President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice recently concluded:

"Finally there is evidence that the imposition of the death sentence and the exercise of dispensing power by the courts and the executive follow discriminatory patterns. The death sentence is disproportionately imposed and carried out on the poor, the Negro, and the members of unpopular groups."

A study of capital cases in Texas from 1924 to 1968 reached the following conclusions:

"Application of the death penalty is unequal: most of those executed were poor, young, and ignorant...

"Seventy-five of the 460 cases involved codefendants, who, under Texas law, were given separate trials. In several instances where a white and a Negro were co-defendants, the white was sentenced to life imprisonment or a term of years, and the Negro was given the death penalty.

"Another ethnic disparity is found in the type of sentence imposed for rape. The Negro convicted of rape is far more likely to get the death penalty than a term sentence, whereas whites and Latins are far more likely to get a term sentence than the death penalty."

Warden Lewis E. Lawes of Sing Sing said:

"Not only does capital punishment fail in its justification, but no punishment could be invented with so many inherent defects. It is an unequal punishment in the way it is applied to the rich and to the poor. The defendant of wealth and position never goes to the electric chair or to the gallows. Juries do not intentionally favor the rich, the law is theoretically impartial, but the defendant with ample means is able to have his case presented with every favorable aspect, while the poor defendant often has a lawyer assigned by the court. Sometimes such assignment is considered part of political patronage; usually the lawyer assigned has had no experience whatever in a capital case."

Former Attorney General Ramsey Clark has said, "It is the poor, the sick, the ignorant, the powerless and the hated who are executed." One searches our chronicles in vain for the execution of any member of the affluent strata of this society. The Leopolds and Loeb's are given prison terms, not sentenced to death.

Jackson, a black, convicted of the rape of a white woman, was 21 years old. A court-appointed psychiatrist said that Jackson was of average education and average intelligence, that he was not an imbecile, or schizophrenic, or psychotic, that his traits were the product of environmental influences, and that he was competent to stand trial. Jackson had entered the house after the husband left for work. He held scissors against the neck of the wife, demanding money. She could find none and a struggle ensued for the scissors, a battle which she lost; and she was then raped, Jackson keeping the scissors pressed against her neck. While there did not appear to be any long-term traumatic impact on the victim, she was bruised and abraded in the struggle but was not hospitalized. Jackson was a convict who had escaped from a work gang in the area, a result of a three-year sentence for auto theft. He was at large for three days and during that time had committed several other offenses - burglary, auto theft, and assault and battery.

Furman, a black, killed a householder while seeking to enter the home at night. Furman shot the deceased through a closed door. He was 26 years old and had finished the sixth grade in school. Pending trial, he was committed to the Georgia Central State Hospital for a psychiatric examination on his plea of insanity tendered by court-appointed counsel. The superintendent reported that a unanimous staff diagnostic conference had concluded "that this patient should retain his present diagnosis of Mental Deficiency, Mild to Moderate, with Psychotic Episodes associated with Convulsive Disorder." The physicians agreed that "at present the patient is not psychotic, but he is not capable of cooperating with his counsel in the preparation of his defense"; and the staff believed "that he is in need of further psychiatric hospitalization and treatment."

Later, the superintendent reported that the staff diagnosis was Mental Deficiency, Mild to Moderate, with Psychotic Episodes associated with Convulsive Disorder. He concluded, however, that Furman was "not psychotic at present, knows right from wrong and is able to cooperate with his counsel in preparing his defense."

Branch, a black, entered the rural home of a 65-year-old widow, a white, while she slept and raped her, holding his arm against her throat. Thereupon he demanded money and for 30 minutes or more the widow searched for money, finding little. As he left, Jackson said if the widow told anyone what happened, he would return and kill her. The record is barren of any medical or psychiatric evidence showing injury to her as a result of Branch's attack.

He had previously been convicted of felony theft and found to be a borderline mental deficient and well below the average IQ of Texas prison inmates. He had the equivalent of five and a half years of grade school education. He had a "dull intelligence" and was in the lowest fourth percentile of his class.

We cannot say from facts disclosed in these records that these defendants were sentenced to death because they were black. Yet our task is not restricted to an effort to divine what motives impelled these death penalties. Rather, we deal with a system of law and of justice that leaves to the uncontrolled discretion of judges or juries the determination whether defendants committing these crimes should die or be imprisoned. Under these laws no standards govern the selection of the penalty. People live or die, dependent on the whim of one man or of 12.

Irving Brant has given a detailed account of the Bloody Assizes, the reign of terror that occupied the closing years of the rule of Charles II and the opening years of the regime of James II (the Lord Chief Justice was George Jeffreys):

"Nobody knows how many hundreds of men, innocent or of unproved guilt, Jeffreys sent to their deaths in the pseudo trials that followed Monmouth's feeble and stupid attempt to seize the throne. When the ordeal ended, scores had been executed and 1,260 were awaiting the hangman in three counties. To be absent from home during the uprising was evidence of guilt. Mere death was considered much too mild for the villagers and farmers rounded up in these raids. The directions to a high sheriff were to provide an ax, a cleaver, `a furnace or cauldron to boil their heads and quarters, and soil to boil therewith, half a bushel to each traitor, and tar to tar them with, and a sufficient number of spears and poles to fix their heads and quarters' along the highways. One could have crossed a good part of northern England by their guidance.

"The story of The Bloody Assizes, widely known to Americans, helped to place constitutional limitations on the crime of treason and to produce a bar against cruel and unusual punishments. But in the polemics that led to the various guarantees of freedom, it had no place compared with the tremendous thrust of the trial and execution of Sidney. The hundreds of judicial murders committed by Jeffreys and his fellow judges were totally inconceivable in a free American republic, but any American could imagine himself in Sidney's place - executed for putting on paper, in his closet, words that later on came to express the basic principles of republican government. Unless barred by fundamental law, the legal rulings that permitted this result could easily be employed against any person whose political opinions challenged the party in power." *The Bill of Rights* 154-155 (1965).

Those who wrote the Eighth Amendment knew what price their forebears had paid for a system based, not on equal justice, but on discrimination. In those days the target was not the blacks or the poor, but the dissenters, those who opposed absolutism in government, who struggled for a parliamentary regime, and who opposed governments' recurring efforts to foist a particular religion on the people. *Id.*, at 155-163. But the tool of capital punishment was used with vengeance against the opposition and those unpopular with the regime. One cannot read this history without realizing that the desire for equality was reflected in the ban against "cruel and unusual punishments" contained in the Eighth Amendment.

In a Nation committed to equal protection of the laws there is no permissible "caste" aspect of law enforcement. Yet we know that the discretion of judges and juries in imposing the death penalty enables the penalty to be selectively applied, feeding prejudices against the accused if he is poor and despised, and lacking political clout, or if he is a member of a suspect or unpopular minority, and saving those who by social position may be in a more protected position. In ancient Hindu law a Brahman was exempt from capital punishment, and under that law, "[g]enerally, in the law books, punishment increased in severity as social status diminished." We have, I fear, taken in practice the same position, partially as a result of making the death penalty discretionary and partially as a result of the ability of the rich to purchase the services of the most respected and most resourceful legal talent in the Nation.

The high service rendered by the "cruel and unusual" punishment clause of the Eighth Amendment is to require legislatures to write penal laws that are evenhanded, nonselective, and nonarbitrary, and to require judges to see to it that general laws are not applied sparsely, selectively, and spottily to unpopular groups.

A law that stated that anyone making more than \$50,000 would be exempt from the death penalty would plainly fall, as would a law that in terms said that blacks, those who never went beyond the fifth grade in school, those who made less than \$3,000 a year, or those who were unpopular or unstable should be the only people executed. A law which in the overall view reaches that result in practice has no more sanctity than a law which in terms provides the same.

Thus, these discretionary statutes are unconstitutional in their operation. They are pregnant with discrimination and discrimination is an ingredient not compatible with the idea of equal protection of the laws that is implicit in the ban on "cruel and unusual" punishments.

Any law which is nondiscriminatory on its face may be applied in such a way as to violate the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. *Yick Wo v. Hopkins*, 118 U.S. 356. Such conceivably might be the fate of a mandatory death penalty, where equal or lesser sentences were imposed on the elite, a harsher one on the minorities or members of the lower castes. Whether a mandatory death penalty would otherwise be constitutional is a question I do not reach.

**Source:** *Furman v. Georgia*, 408 U.S. 238 (1972)