

Do I favor the death penalty?

No. Not because I don't think some people deserve it, but rather because it's neither effective as a deterrent nor cost efficient. We need to have many safeguards in place to avoid taking the life of an innocent person, but even if we were to cut the appeals process in half, it would still cost more to execute a person than to incarcerate him or her for life.

There are even more serious issues.

We've heard numerous accounts of prisoners being freed on the basis of DNA science that was not available when they were convicted. Some of them had been convicted on the basis of eye-witness identification, typically accepted by judges and juries as irrefutable, although research has shown that eye-witness identification is anything but foolproof. Just one example: Suppose you and I are standing at a bus stop and I ask you the time. Later that day you collide with someone who is running from the scene of a crime. A week later you are shown a group of photos, including mine. Unless the fleeing felon was clearly of a different race, or much younger, or in some other instantly-obvious way different from me, there is a strong chance you might identify me as the culprit.

Another problem is that the threat of the death penalty can be used to panic an innocent arrestee into a false confession, or an innocent defendant into a guilty plea. Perhaps the victim of this injustice "only" gets a long sentence, perhaps life, behind bars, but that's still a miscarriage of justice. The possibility of getting a reversal or new trial is minimal for someone who confessed to a crime then entered a guilty plea.

Even scientific evidence is far from infallible. Laboratories misinterpret test results, some investigators have used criteria that are little better than superstitions to conclude that a fire was an arson, expert witnesses are sometimes unaware of important facts. You may have seen a documentary on the case of a child who died of injuries received when she was attacked by dogs. An expert witness testified that photos from the hospital showed wounds that were too "clean" to have come from dog bites, saying they were consistent with knife wounds. The parents were convicted of killing her, but when the case was re-examined later it was revealed that the photos were taken after physicians had trimmed away the ragged flesh in preparation for closing the wounds in their efforts to save the child's life.

The parents' convictions were reversed and they were released from prison. After all they had suffered, they had at least some chance to build happy lives again.

Once carried out, the death penalty cannot be reversed. That alone is a compelling reason to abandon it totally and permanently.

Being a death-penalty nation does not help the international image of the United States. Some countries have refused to extradite to the U.S. because of our use of the death

penalty, or have refused to extradite specific individuals until American prosecutors agree not to seek the death penalty. Among leading industrialized nations, only the United States and Japan still employ the death penalty. But if you were to make a list of nations we Americans tend not to hold in high esteem, you'd find that most of them use the death penalty. I'm not eager to offend anyone, so I'll leave out specifics. If you want more, just do a quick internet search.

To be sure, there are criminals whose actions fill us with revulsion and make us want revenge, who are reviled and hated by other convicts when they are sent to prison. Society, and our criminal justice system, should not be driven by a primitive need to "get even." Life in prison without parole works just as well as a deterrent and does just as well to protect society.