



EXECUTION IN TEXAS: THE OVERVIEW

EXECUTION IN TEXAS: THE OVERVIEW; Divisive Case of a Killer of Two Ends as Texas Executes Tucker

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Saying "I love all of you very much" and smiling as lethal chemicals were pumped into her body, Karla Faye Tucker was executed tonight in Texas, becoming the first woman put to death by the state since the Civil War.

The execution ended a case that attracted an extraordinary amount of attention around the world and led to fierce debate about redemption on death row. The prospect of executing a woman clearly exposed a societal raw nerve, but it also prompted many death-penalty supporters to insist that Ms. Tucker had gained undeserved sympathy because of her sex and her doe-eyed good looks.

Ms. Tucker, 38, who murdered two people with a pickax in Houston 15 years ago, came to be known recently, through relentless media coverage of her death row interviews, as a soft-spoken, gentle-looking, born-again Christian pleading for mercy.

But her final appeals to the Supreme Court and to Gov. George W. Bush for a reprieve were denied today. She became the second woman executed in the United States since the Supreme Court allowed the death penalty to resume, in 1976.

Ms. Tucker was pronounced dead at 6:45 P.M. Witnesses to the execution said she coughed twice shortly after the injection was administered, groaned and soon stopped breathing. Her eyes remained open throughout.

"I am going to be face to face with Jesus now," Ms. Tucker said, according to a transcript of her last remarks. "I will see you all when you get there. I will wait for you."

Among those who witnessed the execution at Ms. Tucker's request were her husband, Dana Brown, who is a prison minister; her lawyer; her sister and Ronald Carlson, the brother of Deborah Thornton, one of her victims, who had lobbied to spare Ms. Tucker's life.

Among those watching from a separate room for victims' relatives were the husband, son and stepdaughter of Mrs. Thornton. Those members of the Thornton family supported the execution.

"Justice for Deborah Thornton is complete," said Mrs. Thornton's husband, Richard, speaking to reporters 45 minutes after the execution. "I want to say to every victim in the world, demand this. Demand this. This is your right."

Mr. Brown, who once ministered to Ms. Tucker and then married her in prison, appeared a few minutes after Mr. Thornton did. He said he was "losing a wife, losing someone who was precious to the human race."

The execution ended a day of furious maneuvering by Ms. Tucker's lawyers in venues from Austin to Huntsville to Washington.

The Supreme Court, without comment and without dissent, today twice turned down Ms. Tucker's request for a stay of execution as she sought to challenge the constitutionality of Texas' clemency process. Governor Bush, who had the legal authority to issue a one-time, 30-day reprieve but who has not done so for any of the 59 men executed during his tenure, tonight turned down Ms. Tucker's request for such a reprieve.

Mr. Bush, speaking to reporters in Austin, said he had "sought guidance through prayer" in making his decision.

"May God bless Karla Faye Tucker," he said, "and God bless her victims and their families."

The scene outside the red-brick prison unit containing the death chamber, known here simply as The Walls, was one of bedlam. Hundreds of reporters and protesters, both supporters and opponents of the death penalty, converged on Huntsville. "Axe and ye shall receive," said one sign. "Execution is not a solution," proclaimed another.

Shortly after prison officials emerged to announce that Ms. Tucker was dead, a loud cheer went up from many in the crowd, and some sang the song with the refrain, "Na na na na, hey, hey, hey, say goodbye." Some opponents of the execution broke into tears, but others said they felt joy because they believed Ms. Tucker had gone home to Christ.

Several European reporters offered broadcasts that described Texas, in condemnatory tones, as one of the world's execution capitals. In Texas, which put 37 men to death in 1997, executions have become almost routine in recent years, many drawing scant attention from the news media or protesters. But there was nothing routine about Ms. Tucker's case.

From the outset, death-penalty supporters said Ms. Tucker had captured a ludicrous amount of attention that they said should have been directed instead at the horror of her crime. Even Texas officials who staunchly defend the death penalty seemed taken aback by the uproar over her case.

Victor Rodriguez, chairman of the state's Board of Pardons and Paroles, which voted 16-0 on Monday to deny Ms. Tucker's petition for clemency, said, "I didn't see anywhere near, I didn't see one small percentage of the interest we have in this case," in other clemency petitions the board has handled.

The Governor's office said Mr. Bush had been flooded with phone calls and faxes in recent days, most seeking mercy for Ms. Tucker. But the Governor insisted throughout that her case would be handled no differently from any other.

The pardon and parole board has not granted a clemency request in more than a decade, a fact that formed the basis for one of Ms. Tucker's appeals to the Supreme Court and to state courts in Texas. She said the clemency process was unconstitutionally vague, with no clear standards for how an inmate might gain mercy.

Ms. Tucker was only the second woman put to death in the United States since the Supreme Court cleared the way for reimposition of the death penalty 22 years ago. Margie Velma Barfield, a 52-year-old grandmother, was put to death by North Carolina in 1984 for lacing her fiance's beer and food with rat poison.

The last execution of a woman in Texas was in 1863, when Chipita Rodriguez was hung for the ax murder of a horse trader.

Since the Supreme Court allowed capital punishment to resume in 1976, 431 men have been executed. Texas, the state with by far the most active execution chamber, has put 144 men to death in the modern era of capital punishment.

Ms. Tucker's troubled life and religious conversion are recounted in a book, "Crossed Over: A Murder, a Memoir," by the novelist Beverly Lowry (Alfred A. Knopf, 1992). Ms. Lowry wrote that Ms. Tucker was "a dooper at 8, a needle freak behind heroin by the time she was 11." Ms. Tucker recounted in the book that she first had sex at the age of 11 or 12 and later became a prostitute.

"My mother and I were really close," Ms. Tucker said. "We used to share drugs like lipstick."

Ms. Tucker was convicted in the 1983 killing of Jerry Lynn Dean, a 27-year-old cable-television installer she was angry with for having left a leaky motorcycle in her living room. She also admitted to the killing of Mrs. Thornton, 32, an office worker who had met Mr. Dean at a party a few hours before the murder and was in bed with him when Ms. Tucker and her boyfriend at the time, Daniel Ryan Garrett, broke into the apartment to steal motorcycle parts.

Mr. Garrett was also sentenced to death, but died of liver disease before Texas could carry out his execution.

As Richard Thornton watched the execution, according to Vicente Arenas, a reporter for KTRK-TV in Houston who was there, he said in an ambiguous reference: "Here she comes, baby doll. She's all yours. The world's a better place."

Ms. Tucker's final statement referred to the families of her victims, her husband and the prison warden:

"Yes sir, I would like to say to all of you, the Thornton family and Jerry Dean's family that I am so sorry. I hope God will give you peace with this.

"Baby, I love you. Ron, give Peggy a hug for me. Everybody has been so good to me. I love all of you very much. I am going to be face to face with Jesus now.

"Warden Baggett, thank all of you so much. You have been so good to me. I love all of you very much. I will see you all when you get there. I will wait for you."

In recent days, as controversy swirled over Ms. Tucker's case, death-penalty supporters stepped up their demands that she be executed.

"There is a public campaign to spare the life of Karla Faye Tucker," said Dianne Clements, president of Justice for All, a victims' rights group in Houston. "This campaign is based on fraud, lies, ignorance and sexism."

The American Civil Liberties Union, in a statement today condemning the scheduled execution, said it was more basic than that. "The A.C.L.U. opposes the execution of Karla Faye Tucker, not because she is a woman, not because she is a born-again Christian, but because the death penalty is wrong," the statement said. "The fact that a white woman has now drawn a ticket in this deadly lottery does not make the system any less racist or unfair."

Ms. Tucker's final media interview in prison, conducted a week ago, was aired this morning on the Christian Broadcasting Network's "The 700 Club."

"I am going to be thinking about certainly what it's like in heaven," Ms. Tucker said of her impending execution. "I am going to be thinking about my family and my friends and the pain. I am going to be thankful for all the love."