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OPINION

S.C. death penalty is traumatic for those who have to carry out executions | Op-Ed

BY RON MCANDREW

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Soon, state employees in South Carolina will escort a perfectly healthy prisoner to an execution chamber, strap him to an electric chair or another device to hold him still, and either electrocute or shoot him to death.

It's hard to imagine a more pointless execution than this, or a more needlessly cruel act of official power. It's been 10 years since the last execution in S.C., and frankly, it seems like it really hasn't made a difference in terms of crime rates, or the reality of punishment. What it will do is inflict serious trauma on the many correctional staff responsible for carrying it out.

I speak from experience. I oversaw the final three electric chair executions as warden of the Florida State Penitentiary, and shadowed five lethal injection executions in Texas as Florida transitioned to that practice. I'm a law-and-order guy, an Air Force veteran and a lifelong conservative who voted for President Trump. My opposition doesn't come from any bleeding heart concern for those who've taken innocent lives. It comes from my first-hand knowledge that participating in executions is devastating for the state employees who do so.

Each time an execution was scheduled, I worked with my staff to manage the process in minute-by-minute detail. Despite meticulous preparation, one execution went horribly wrong, and the prisoner's head caught fire and filled the execution chamber with smoke. Another prisoner bled profusely from his nose during the procedure, which turned out to be Florida's last electrocution. After that, I helped Florida transition to lethal injection. Unfortunately, I soon learned that while lethal injection executions may look more peaceful to the witnesses on the other side of the glass, it's just as traumatizing for those of us whose job it was to end the prisoner's life.

Now the state has also introduced the firing squad. I know there are many qualified men and women who can place a bullet on a target. That's not the issue. It's one thing when armed soldiers or law enforcement must use deadly force to subdue an aggressor. It's quite another thing to kill someone who is no longer a threat to others. The burdens state workers are being asked to take on are significant, and unnecessary.

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The reality is that even when things go smoothly on the surface, the process of killing another human being is traumatic for those involved. If things go awry, the harm is far worse. I still have nightmares and flashbacks from my participation in executions. I also saw the damage executions caused to my staff — not only those who worked directly on execution teams, but many others throughout the prison system. As the warden, I became well aware of the impacts: substance abuse, domestic troubles, depression, even suicide. Some left correctional work altogether.

Over time, I realized executions serve no purpose in our justice system other than as tools for politicians' use. The prisoners I helped kill were no danger to anyone in prison, and their executions were an excuse for elected officials to pound their chests. Yet that political gain exacted a heavy price from state workers.

The pointlessness and the traumatizing impact of the practice might well provide a talking point for a governor or a prosecutor to claim they are “tough on crime.” But in reality, there is no good reason for S.C. to resume executions.

I know those brave men and women who work in South Carolina's prisons are professional and will do the job demanded of them. But S.C.'s leaders should protect the safety and well-being of its hardworking correctional staff. That means they should not expose correctional staff to the trauma of carrying out executions.

Ron McAndrew served as the Warden of the Florida State Penitentiary from 1996 to 1998, and is a founding member of the Board of Advisors of Death Penalty Action.

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