

Death to Killers or Death to Justice?

APR. 15, '65—Imagine that you are a mother to four. Your two younger children, your husband, and yourself are sleeping on an ordinary Sunday evening, only to be awakened by thieves. They demand money, but you plead innocent of having much. Regardless, you are tied up and sit in sickening horror as you hear screams and gunshots throughout the house. Then they come for you.

This is the true story of Bonnie Clutter, who was murdered in her home in Holcomb, Kansas along with her daughter, son, and husband. Perry Smith and Richard Hickock, the men convicted for the crime, went to the gallows early yesterday morning. Their executions ended a five-year period of a widespread terror and many hours of investigation and trial, a well-deserved relief for the devastated community.

According to a confession by Smith, the crime began when Hickock heard a rumor in prison about a large sum of money hidden in the Clutter household. Hickock formed plans to make a robbery and leave “no witnesses” when he left prison. Smith, also on parole, was the designated assistant, and they together committed the murder: tying up and shooting each of the four inhabitants of the Clutter house, even though they carried no money and had pleaded for their safety. A difficult investigation led by sheriff Alvin Dewey ensued. The inmate in prison with Hickock revealed them as likely suspects; a quick investigation and multiple retrials after their arrest saw them guilty under the law, resulting in their deaths yesterday.

During the long months of the initial confusion, a winter descended upon Holcomb; a frosty, hostile environment that keeps people inside and away from each other, worried about catching a deadly cold from suspicious neighbors. Visitors even reported seeing “fully clothed people, even entire families, who had sat the whole night wide awake, watchful, listening.” Fear ran high and trust ran low, and this volatile situation held the town in paralysis until the murderers were in custody.

Now imagine the sleepless night of a worried citizen, wondering if his or her family were to survive the night; multiply that by a few thousand for the sentiment of all of Holcomb. Such a horrific act—murder of four and dread for thousands more—cannot be tolerated. The death penalty is extremely effective in such situations: it is brutal and final, just like the crimes it punishes. A suitable match.

Some have suggested improved education is a better, alternative answer. This seems reasonable: Smith and Hickock had a primary and secondary school education, respectively, due to lack of money.

But humanity and morals cannot be taught: they are experienced. Lowell Lee Andrews, also condemned to death, was “an honor student majoring in biology” at the University of Kansas. He was well-educated and wealthy, yet killed his family in cold blood—indicating that schooling does not equal moral rectitude. Even the most sweeping policy changes—never mind their convolution and crawling speed—cannot help such ill-minded people.

Critics also suggest that death can do nothing to heal a society; the following murders of four Walker family members were eerily similar to that of the Clutters. Perhaps years cannot clean the blood of the innocent. People can fade, but scars of a catastrophe cannot.

Hickock himself stated that “Revenge is all [capital punishment] is, but what’s wrong with revenge? Well, I can see...they’re mad ‘cause they’re not getting what they want—revenge.” Although it cannot affect the crime, one criminal is eliminated. Out of the picture. As with a squashed bug, there is a certainty that there will be no future harm done—a fact, a peace of mind, a little comfort. Hickock is right—nothing in the past can or will change, but the future can be affected.

It is a sociopolitical compromise, a sacrifice for the greater good. There were “fourteen [murder victims] and five of [the murderers]”—punishing the perpetrators of atrocious crimes like these do not even satisfy the age-old dictum of justice: “an eye for an eye.” Protecting capital punishment preserves the core element of the democratic and judicial systems—the majority opinion—along with order and calm.

The above statistic also hones in on the reasoning behind the death penalty: it was created as a terrifying punishment for terrible crimes; this crime violates Man’s fundamental right to life. These people command fear in their cruelty; the government commands fear in its iron fist. It is a fair system in light of our current political ideals, reassuring society and allowing it to move on. And this is what Holcomb needs the most: to mourn, reflect, recover, heal, reform, progress, learn to laugh again.