

# opinion/editorial

## Death penalty is symbol of uncivilized

To the right is a photograph of where seven human beings, now on Nebraska's death row, might sit when they take their last breaths.

It is a stark instrument of death, designed for no purpose other than the state-sanctioned action of burning life from a body. It is our opinion this death machine should join the guillotine and the hangman's noose in museums, where they all can serve as reminders of a time when man was less civilized.

In 1979, that was the opinion of a majority of our state senators, when they passed a bill replacing the death penalty with a mandatory 30-year prison sentence.

But that was not the opinion of our governor, who vetoed the bill after the legislative session ended. The veto probably would not have been overridden, because of the slim margin by which the bill passed.

Ironically, the month after Gov. Charles Thone vetoed the repeal bill, Florida carried out the first involuntary execution since 1968, and the first execution since Gary Gilmore turned down his right to appeal.

Now, some of the men on Nebraska's death row are running out of appeals, and Thone will have to back up his decision in vetoing the bill by signing death warrants. Nebraska could have its first execution since 1959, when mass murderer Charles Starkweather was fried.

Arguments against the death penalty are

abundant. First, the obvious: More than seven murders have been committed since Starkweather's death, and some of the most brutal killers were found insane and not imprisoned. Obviously, at best, the penalty can be applied only arbitrarily.

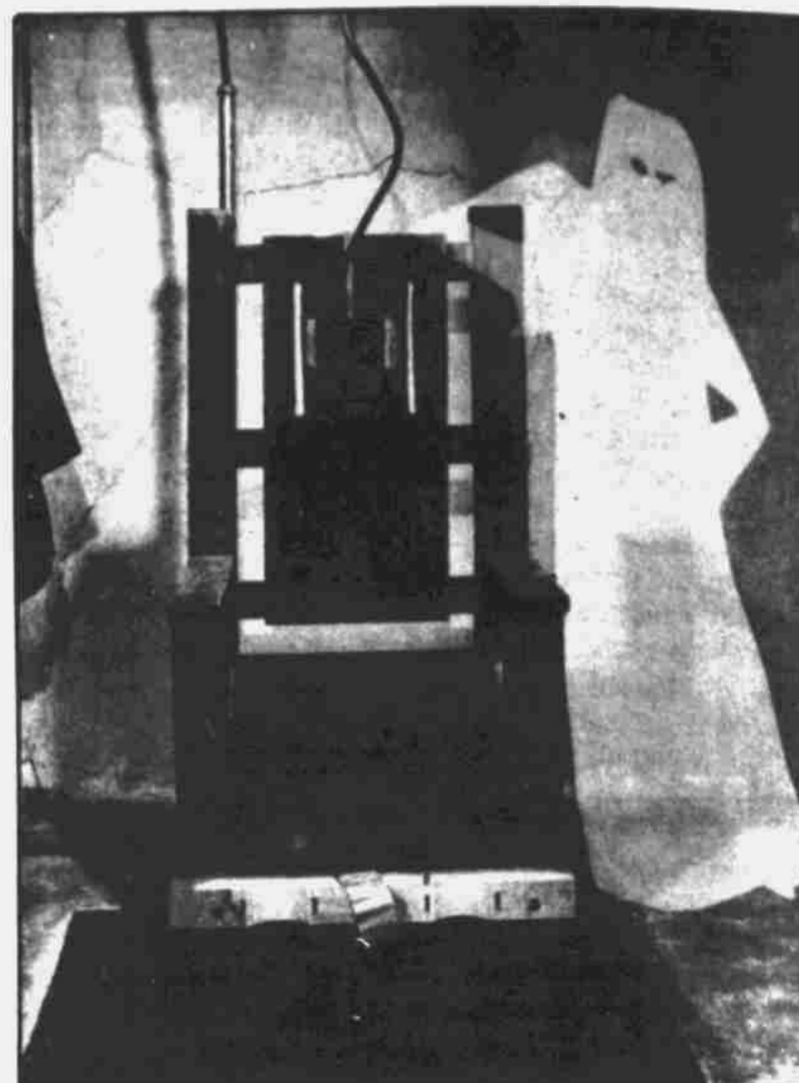
Secondly, the possibility exists that our imperfect judiciary system could execute an innocent person. One such error is too many.

But the biggest problem with the death penalty is that its presence on the books retards improvement of our penal system. The ultimate (alleged) deterrent, because of its finality, is the centerpiece of the system.

Using that device as the centerpiece of the system costs Nebraska and other states hundreds of thousands of dollars to pay defense attorneys during endless appeals of death sentences. That money could be better spent either upgrading law enforcement agencies or studying the causes of homicide, but only after the death penalty is removed will the money be available.

And only after the penalty is removed may legislatures and courts begin effective work toward a more perfect system of justice, under which killers are not treated arbitrarily and those convicted of other crimes are not thrown into a penal system that teaches crime rather than protects society.

And only after the penalty is removed may we call ourselves civilized.



## Early survival training required for living alone

BOSTON—Our friend is taking a new course in life. She is Learning to Live Alone.

She has, we tell each other, all the prerequisites for enrollment—the right background, the right training:

As a young woman she had graduated from parents to husband without a day of private schooling.

For 19 years she had majored in togetherness.

**ellen goodman**

When her marriage ended six months ago, it was only natural that she would embark on a crash course in independent studies.

Because our friend is a tough grader, she has told us: "I flunked marriage." The truth is that she dropped out, that they both dropped out. But the sense of failure is an honest one.

There was something else. In those last months of marriage, she was haunted by the idea that sooner or later she would have to be alone and that she was unprepared. She had missed some sort of survival training that should

have been a required course when she was younger. She expressed a sense of growing urgency. She had to learn about it now . . . while she still could.

So, today our friend is a determined student, even a grind at times, compelled by the need to pass this course in adult education.

Well, we are both graduates and post-graduates and we understand as we watch. She has done her homework, passed the quizzes, crammed for mid-terms. Eaten and cooked three-course meals by herself. Spent an entire weekend alone.

We go down the checklist, nodding with approval at our friends studies. She has gone back to basics. Even the new man who had met her and cared for her understood that she was not ready for doubles. She was still learning, slowly, about number one.

The two of us, her friends, quote statistics at each other and at her. Twelve percent of the population lives alone at one time or another. More than 20 percent of the households in America consist of one person. One out of three marriages ends in divorce. The average wife outlives her husband by a decade.

We are realists, pride ourselves on it, and the figures tell us that sooner or later the odds are aloneness. We have en-

couraged her to accept it. We have offered her a bumper-sticker truth: You have to be able to live with yourself to live with anyone else.

It occurs to me that this is our security. If one generation wanted to learn typing or teaching as "something to fall back on," now we regard Learning to Live Alone as some sort of strange security.

We take it for granted. We encourage each other and our children to learn it when they are younger. We understand when our friends enroll for refresher courses.

But I wonder about it all. Not so long ago, aloneness was regarded as a temporary condition. It was suspect. At the time of the American Revolution, less than 4 percent of the households contained only one person.

Even now other places and other cultures, aloneness is an oddity, an accident, an illness more than a luxury. Through human history, people have lived in clusters where their only privacy was in their thoughts.

It's possible that aloneness is, in part, a modern American elective. We fall into it and, yes, we sign up for it in droves: The working young, the divorced, the widowed. Those who can afford to live by themselves choose to.

The reality resounds through the course-of-life catalog. In fact, like our friend, we are driven now by an uneasy feeling that togetherness may be only a pause between single states. The anxious sense of what is basic has shifted. The bottom line seems to have moved.

Yet I wonder sometimes whether we struggle to protect ourselves from loneliness by liking it. Whether this independent study is an advance or a retreat. I wonder whether it is some American madness or self-improvement bravado.

Yes, I guess it is necessary for our friends to learn to live alone now. But if it felt good, would she have to study so hard?

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**daily nebraskan**

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