

Execution

Protesters denounce execution

BY BRAD DAVIS
Assignment Reporter

For Abby Swatsworth it's simple — even her 7-year-old knows the death penalty is wrong. "You can't teach them after they're dead," Swatsworth said, repeating her daughter's words. Swatsworth and about 20 other people gathered at the north steps of the State Capitol Tuesday morning to protest the execution of Robert E. Williams.

About 50 other death penalty protesters congregated in front of the Nebraska State Penitentiary as they listened to a recording of Williams singing Christian songs and reading from the Bible.

Monday night, tearful and reflective opponents of the death penalty asked how many men had to die before people realized killing was wrong as they sang Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind" at a prayer vigil for Williams at the Newman United Methodist Church.

Protesters said the state had not realized that, in their view, the killing of a human being was wrong.

One thought was echoed by many who stood in front of the penitentiary protesting Williams' electrocution Tuesday: How could the state kill one of its own in the name of all Nebraskans?

Williams died at 10:23 a.m.

A belief in the power of learning and change, particularly the spiritual change many say Williams experienced, is why many people say they oppose the death penalty.

Nelson Potter, philosophy professor and co-chairman of Nebraskans Against the Death Penalty, said he regretted the loss of Williams, whom he said had "a kind of warmth, friendliness and kindness."

"One of the sad things about Williams' execution, and the execution of Willie Otey (who died in Nebraska's electric chair in 1994), was that these were individuals who had reformed — made themselves into something inside the walls (of the prison)," Potter said.

The Rev. Andy Hird from the All Souls Village of Hope street outreach program said Williams was also a role model for young black men.

"They can see what he's done in the last 20 years," Hird said. "We forget about his effort to reach young people and take his hate and anger and use it for good."

Marj Manglitz of Lincoln, who works with the United Nations Association, said Williams helped young people in prison by stopping potential riots and demonstrating his Christian faith.

Dan Wysong, a student at Union College, said his Christian faith was why he opposed the death penalty.

"Killing people is wrong no matter who is doing it. What it (using the death penalty) says about us as a nation — that we could just sit there or cheer — scares me."

After Williams had been executed, Marylyn Felion, Williams' spiritual adviser and witness to his death, came out of the penitentiary and embraced Peterson.

"I just witnessed a birth into heaven of the most good and beautiful man I've ever known," Felion said as she began to cry. "This is an act of violence and despicability by the state of Nebraska — I am ashamed to be in the state of Nebraska."

Death sentence protects citizens, proponents say

BY JOSH FUNK
Assignment Reporter

A small, mild-mannered crowd of death penalty proponents gathered Tuesday outside the Nebraska State Penitentiary to support the execution of Robert E. Williams.

The death penalty protects law-abiding citizens, upholds the laws of society and eliminates criminals, supporters said.

But the current system of appeals needs revision, said Larry Ball, head of the Nebraska Plainsmen, a citizen rights group that supports the death penalty.

"We're here because those three women couldn't be," Lincoln construction worker O.J. Ojeski said, referring to Williams's victims.

Supporters held signs that read: "Uphold the law! Fry the bastard!" and "20 years later justice is done ... medium rare!"

Despite these signs and the cries of "fry him" from passing traffic, the crowd was somber as they awaited the execution.

Supporters argue that the death penalty protects citizen's rights.

Everyone is born with certain rights and attributes that cannot be denied, Ball said.

When individuals cannot defend their rights, government must, he said.

"The death penalty makes the statement that we are serious about protecting rights," Ball said.

Anyone who commits a heinous act should face death, said Tom Roti, a Lincoln night grocery store manager and protester.

Roti, the first death penalty supporter at the penitentiary, stood holding a sign that quoted Bible verses talking about vengeance.

Other supporters also used the Bible to support their view of the death penalty.

"The Bible calls for it as vindication of the social covenant," Ball said.

Not all supporters agree that the death penalty acts as a deterrent, but they still argue its usefulness.

"The death penalty makes the statement that we are serious about protecting rights."

LARRY BALL
Nebraska Plainsmen head

"It doesn't deter crime, but it does get rid of bad people," Ojeski said.

Some death penalty supporters are upset at the cost of jailing convicts.

"They get better medical coverage than people on social security," Ojeski said. "That money could be used for something else, like lowering tuition."

Under the current appeals system convicted inmates spend 20 years on death row before their execution and some death penalty supporters feel this is too long.

"They are in there too long," Roti said. "There should be a time limit on appeals."

Some supporters would go even further.

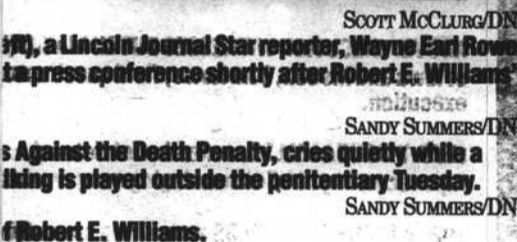
"Executions should be done within a year of their conviction," Ball said. "Many innocent people die because we do not execute these people."

At past executions the crowds were much larger, 600 at John Joubert's in 1996 and almost 2,000 at Harold Lamont Otey's in 1994; but on Tuesday 80 protesters showed up for Nebraska's first morning execution.

Both sides of protesters were separated by a snow fence and a 50-foot-wide dead zone to prevent conflicts.

"Executions should be done in the light of day and in public to make a statement to others," Ball said.

"The dignity of man does not apply to murderers."



SCOTT McCLURG/DN
A Lincoln Journal Star reporter, Wayne Earl Rowe, speaks at a press conference shortly after Robert E. Williams' execution.
SANDY SUMMERS/DN
A woman, likely a protester, cries quietly while a recording of Williams' singing is played outside the penitentiary Tuesday.
SANDY SUMMERS/DN
A close-up of Robert E. Williams.

Christian faith

Because of his turn to faith, Stevens said, Williams was forgiven in God's eyes.

But Williams never forgave himself. He begged his friends to pray for the families of his victims. He grieved on holidays because of the empty places at the dinner table he had created, Stevens said.

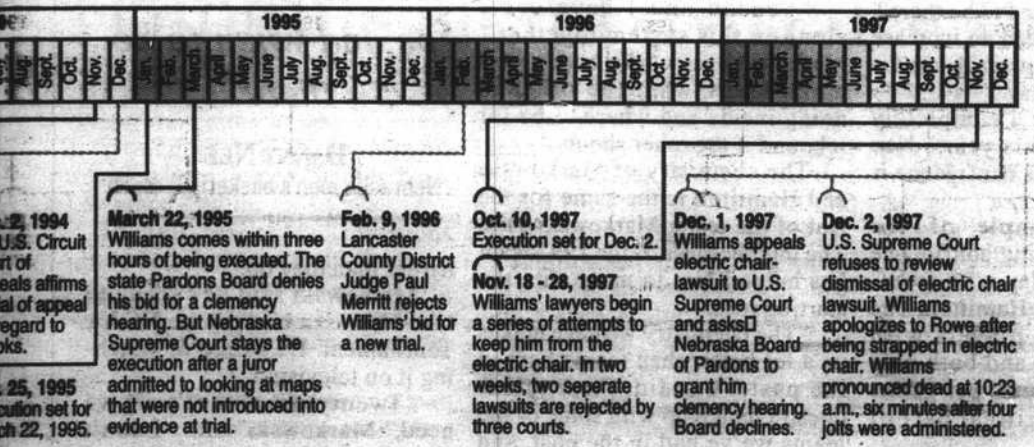
Forgiveness from the victim's families took Williams off their hook, and onto God's, she said. However, she said, Williams was not free of the state's sentence.

"Bob deserved punishment," she said. "Our society had to go through with today because that is the rule of the land."

And witnessing her friend's execution has not changed her faith, only reaffirmed it.

"As close as I was to Bob, as much as I am going to miss him — he was a dear friend and a dear brother — I did not shed a tear," she said. "I had the peace of God with me."

And, Stevens said, it was with Williams as well. "God is very real and very involved with anybody's life who will turn to him wholeheartedly," she said. "The peace was absolutely real that was with him. God truly gives peace that defies understanding."



AARON STECKELBERG/DN

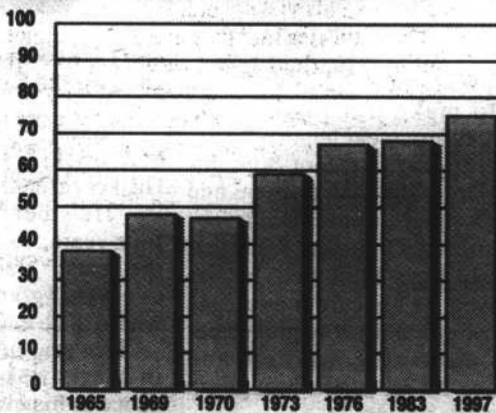
Capital punishment facts for the United States

Nebraska ranks 24th in the nation among states according to the number of persons on death row in comparison with the number of persons in its total population.

The percentage of Americans who support capital punishment has risen considerably over the past three decades. Now nearly 75 percent of all Americans support such action.

Nebraska is but one of the 35 states that uphold capital punishment and currently have inmates on death row.

Percentage of U.S. citizens who believe in capital punishment



How states rank for death row inmates per resident

States	Number of people per person on death row
1 Nevada	18,000
2 Oklahoma	27,000
3 Alabama	28,000
4 Arizona	35,000
5 North Carolina	39,000
6 Florida	41,000
7 Mississippi	42,000
8 Tennessee	50,000
9 South Carolina	51,000
10 Texas	51,000
11 Delaware	52,000
12 Missouri	56,000
13 Pennsylvania	57,000
14 Ohio	62,000
15 Idaho	63,000
16 California	67,000
17 Georgia	67,000
18 Louisiana	68,000
19 Illinois	68,000
20 Arkansas	72,000
21 Indiana	130,000
22 Oregon	133,000
23 Kentucky	169,000
24 Nebraska	150,000
25 Virginia	155,000
26 Utah	200,000
27 Montana	220,000
28 Maryland	298,000
29 New Mexico	343,000
30 South Dakota	366,000
31 New Jersey	420,000
32 Connecticut	468,000
33 Washington	503,000
34 Colorado	956,000

States and their standings on capital punishment



SOURCE: DEATH PENALTY INFORMATION CENTER, THE HARRIS POLL AND THE WORLD ALMANAC
AARON STECKELBERG/DN