

Capital punishment must be abolished to save taxpayers' money, conscience



AARON COOPER is a senior English major and a Daily Nebraskan columnist.

Imagine someone, man or woman, sitting alone in a jail cell for the rest of his or her life. Imagine this person is on death row, awaiting an execution date, which has just been set for a few months from now.

He or she does not sleep more than two hours a night, if at all, does not eat much, cannot think of anything but the end. He or she is trapped in a world where every passing second is like an increasing number of stab wounds that penetrate just deep enough to cause searing pain but not enough to kill.

Imagine this person is innocent.

A dramatic example, you say? Maybe. But the fact is that this precise scenario has happened in the United States at least Twenty-three times since 1900. 23 "accidents" during this past century alone, and those are just the ones that have been proved.

Imagine now that this is your mother, your cousin or your best friend.

This could even be you some day.

Never going to happen, you might say? As long as capital punishment exists in the United States, all the DNA experts, psychologists, witnesses, lawyers and judges cannot guarantee it will never happen again.

Is this a small price to pay for justice? Would you like to be No. 24?

Three hundred fifty prisoners since 1900 have been found not guilty while on death row awaiting execution.

Last year, Missouri executed Alan J. Bannister after 14 years worth of evidence proved that Bannister should not have been executed. The state helped convict him of first-degree murder by arguing that he had carried out a contract killing.

The evidence backed up Bannister's testimony that no such "contract" ever existed and that Bannister had visited the victim with the intent of intimidation. Bannister wanted to defend himself after he was previously stabbed and threatened by the victim's circle of associates.

Bannister's sentence should have been immediately reduced to life imprisonment, but over the course of 14 years, he and his family endured two previous execution stays before he finally was executed in October 1997.

If those responsible for Bannister's execution ever realize the injustice that has taken place, I ask only how they plan to undo the damage that has been done to the U.S. justice system and carried out upon him.

This example of gross and fatal negligence constitutes the epitome of "cruel and unusual" punishment.

Financially, capital punishment is a joke on the American taxpayer.

"The death penalty is not now, nor has it ever been, a more economical alternative to life imprisonment," said Spangenberg and Walsh in an article from the Loyola of Los Angeles Law Review.

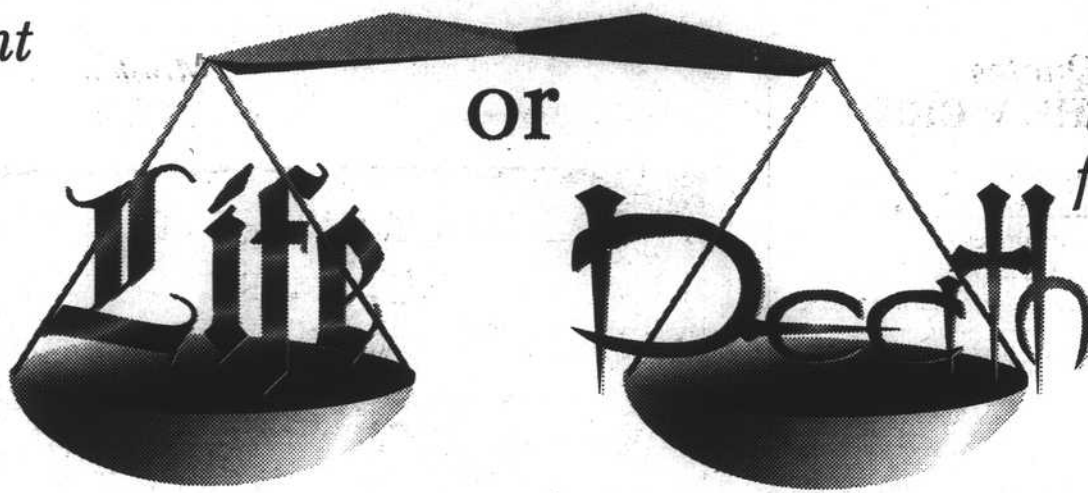
A study by the New York State Defenders Association found that, on average, the cost of a capital trial alone is more than twice the cost of life imprisonment in America.

Studies done concerning Florida's employment of the death penalty show that each execution costs the state approximately \$3.2 million, nearly six times the cost of a sentence of life imprisonment.

California spends \$90 million annually beyond ordinary costs of its justice system on capital punishment alone, with \$78 million of that total being incurred at the trial level.

The figures go on and on, but it comes down to the fact that the United States has spent nearly \$1 billion on the death penalty since just 1976. Think of all the extra police, state, prison and law enforcement workers who could have been employed with that money, especially in the states where they are needed most.

Think of all the prisoners set free early because of restricted budgets that could have been kept in prison. In Texas, the death penalty



costs three times as much as a sentence of life imprisonment. To top that off, prisoners in Texas serve an average of only 20 percent of their sentences, and re-arrests are common.

Between 1977 and 1993, the average time an inmate spent on death row before execution was 6.1 years. In Nebraska, it was 12.4 years. During that time, there were 2,716 inmates under a death sentence in the United States, and only 285 were executed.

Capital punishment is inefficient. It costs taxpayers, the federal government and state governments often three to six times as much as sentences of life imprisonment. While the average inmate may serve at least six years on death row, some have served more than 20.

If the system works well, then why are so many prisoners kept around for so long? If they were proved guilty "beyond a reasonable doubt," then why are they allowed so many appeals, motions, stays of execution, and grants of clemency?

Simple. The system is faulty beyond any stretch of statistics and the imagination. We've got the blood of 23 innocent victims on our hands to prove it.

At least one study conducted by Robert Dann in Philadelphia (1935) has shown that the number of homicides during the 60 days after an execution increased an average of 4.4 over the number of homicides during the 60 days prior to an execution.

This concept of executions bringing about more homicides was labeled by William Bowers and Glenn Pierce as the brutalization effect.

The state murders, so why can't I?

Cooper's Law: No government in any nation can expect its citizens to obey its authority when it punishes those who commit murder by carrying out the very act its laws are meant to prevent: murder.

This will continue to be one of the strongest arguments for the abolition of the death penalty as long as capital punishment is naively employed in the justice system of the United States.

Killing another person will not bring back the victims of our nation's murderers. Yet, even through the perspective of an abolitionist, it is hard to justify clemency in such cases as with convicted mass murderers and serial killers such as Timothy McVeigh and Ted Bundy, who commit such brutal and inhumane acts of violence that far exceed the sole act of murder.

But keeping the death penalty around because of a few extreme cases seems barbaric and illogical, along with the overwhelming evidence that the death penalty has failed America. Thinking of a mother who has to tell her 4-year-old son that his father was executed and that he was actually "innocent" should be enough to open the eyes of Americans who think capital punishment is in our nation's best interest.

That will never be true.

TASHA KUXHAUSEN is a sophomore news-editorial major and a Daily Nebraskan columnist.

When I hear about someone torturing a child, raping a woman or butchering a family, my stomach churns. The way I see it, a person who does any of these things doesn't deserve to live.

I'm not alone in my belief. Many people are motivated to seek the death penalty because of revenge and strong emotions.

Some would say that taking a murderer's life is justified as "an eye for an eye," quoting Exodus 21:24 of the Bible. I've made it clear in my past columns that the Bible is very contradictory in several ways, and this is another example.

So, although capital punishment is basically "an eye for an eye," the Bible passage alone can't be the reason for the death penalty. I choose to favor capital punishment for many reasons.

The death penalty is a consequence for an act that is deemed horrific in nature by the law. I feel that any person who commits such a horrific act as murder doesn't deserve the precious gift of life.

Some argue that criminals can be rehabilitated, or at least left in prison to think about their acts. The fact is that the criminal still gets to live.

Though they're behind bars, criminals have some privileges that they shouldn't. Some write books about their lives, and others have the opportunity to use computers. Some of my friends don't even have computers.

I don't think horrible criminals have the right to breathe, let alone write a book and profit from it.

It is also questionable whether criminals can be changed. Take Charles Manson, for example. He carved a swastika in his forehead.

Manson also wrote a

book about his ordeal and tried to make a profit, although he didn't see any money from it in the end.

He was interviewed a few times and was asked how he felt about his murderous history. He said he didn't regret what he'd done and, if he had the chance, he'd do it again.

Manson has been in jail for more than 20 years, and he doesn't show any signs of rehabilitation. Unfortunately, California revoked the death penalty while Manson was on death row, and although California has since reinstated it, he still can't be put to death.

John Joubert was a murderer who claimed until his execution that he was a changed man and had found God. If I were facing death, I would say anything to save my life. Anyone can pretend to be sincere if he thinks that it will get him something in return.

Another notorious example of a psychotic killer is Ted Bundy.

He killed more than 50 women, yet he wore a haunting grin at his trial. He also remained on death row for 10 years.

There is the argument that executions are so much more expensive than a criminal's life imprisonment, but the continuous appeal process

Death penalty the best punishment for violent murderers in the United States



adds too much to the dollar amount.

Bundy killed more than 50 innocent women and still got to live 10 extra years and managed to waste taxpayers' money with court costs in the process.

Criminals of his nature should be executed as soon as possible. The death penalty should be carried out in a more timely fashion so that people will respect the laws and know that punishment is more than words on a page.

As for those who think that the death penalty is inhumane, have I got news for you. What Manson, Bundy and Joubert did was inhumane.

Why do people of this sick nature deserve any humane treatment? Besides, criminals are punished more humanely today than a few hundred years ago.

People who were caught stealing in some countries used to have their hands cut off. Others were beheaded or tarred and feathered. Witches were burned at the stake. Today we try so hard to be easier on criminals.

Lethal injection is a common form of execution because it is supposedly the most painless. Why shouldn't murderers and rapists feel pain? They caused their victims excruciating pain, not to mention the pain that the victims' families will feel forever.

This leads me to the ultimate reason for the death penalty: justice for victims. The late syndicated newspaper columnist Mike Royko once said, "Murder is the most terrible crime there is. Anything less than the death penalty is an insult to the victim and society. It says ... that we don't value the victim's life enough to punish the killer fully."

In the case of the Oklahoma City bombing, 168 people were killed. To let Timothy McVeigh live would be a slap in the face to most of the victims' families.

Some of the families of the bombing victims support the death penalty for McVeigh, while others feel that by giving him death, he is escaping the punishment of incarceration forever.

Sarah Oviatt, a student here at the university, lost her uncle in the Oklahoma City bombing. She told me that she is in favor of the death penalty.

However, she told me, "Whether he is executed or incarcerated doesn't matter, because he will be judged by God in the end."

I would rather have him executed right away and get him on his way to be judged by God. A murderer doesn't deserve to take the space in the prison that another, less-dangerous criminal could have.

As far as the government judging who will live and who will die, some feel that the government doesn't have that right. But where capital punishment is legal, the government has the right, and I believe the duty, to punish those who purposefully kill another human being.

The government is not "playing God," as I have heard many say. The criminal knew the consequences and still did the crime. He chooses his own fate.

Once a person's life is taken, I feel that the criminal loses all human rights.

Now I want you to picture a child walking home from school. When he is finally out of sight from the school, a truck pulls up next to him.

The driver offers the child a ride home, mentioning that the child's parents sent him. The trusting 8-year-old consents and disappears into the vehicle.

But the driver doesn't take the child home. He drives to the woods on the edge of town and turns off the engine. He rips the clothes off the child's body and sodomizes him.

The child is beaten to death with a hammer once the man is finished with the child's company. The child's body is thrown over a bridge into a river, and the child's blood colors the water red.

Now, imagine that the child is your brother or sister. He or she will never again get to take part in simple pleasures of life such as breathing, talking, eating and sleeping. But his killer will if he lives in prison.

I don't think that's fair.

