



MINISTRY
AGAINST THE
DEATH
PENALTY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Statement from Sister Helen Prejean on the Federal Government's Execution of Wesley Purkey

It's become increasingly clear this week that the federal government has gone rogue, executing our fellow citizens in violation of the law after cutting corners to get them into the killing chamber. Congress needs to act as a check on both the executive and judicial branches by launching an investigation into misconduct that has occurred surrounding these executions.

Wesley Purkey was executed early this morning after another unsigned 5-4 decision was issued by the U.S. Supreme Court at 2:30 am. The Court's majority short-circuited the judicial review process by overriding an appeals court before that lower court had even heard arguments. Justices Breyer, Ginsburg, Sotomayor, and Kagan again strongly noted their dissent.

One might think that the execution was legal since the Supreme Court gave the go-ahead, but the federal government's execution warrant had expired at 11:59 pm last night – a full 8 hours before Purkey was executed. The Department of Justice claims that the government has the authority to execute a person even after their death warrant has expired. This is being reported as fact, but that is not the case – it is purely the DOJ's self-serving opinion, not settled law. The government was put on notice that it did not have authority to execute Purkey and went ahead anyway. This execution was legally dubious, if not outright illegal.

Then there's the egregious prosecutorial misconduct that was uncovered hours before the execution. Wesley Purkey's attorneys had raised a mental competency question, alleging that he could not rationally understand why he was being executed due to advanced dementia. The government stonewalled requests for an evaluation all the while having a brain scan in its possession that showed significant abnormalities in Purkey's brain. Withholding evidence in a death penalty case is among the most serious forms of attorney misconduct and all lawyers involved in this incident should be investigated and, if appropriate, held in contempt as well as sanctioned.

The deeply flawed execution process the DOJ is overseeing is not about justice, nor about the victims' families. It is a flexing of political muscle by an administration which is an habitual offender when it comes to the abuse of power.

Those of us who work day in and day out to end this monstrous practice of state-sponsored killing will redouble our efforts. I pray that some decent public officials will join us in holding our government to account for its misconduct.

Sister Helen Prejean is known around the world for her tireless work against the death penalty and her bestselling book Dead Man Walking. Her organization, the

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Ministry Against the Death Penalty, is based in New Orleans but its reach is both national and international.

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