

World press decries Harris execution

Robert Alton Harris was executed by the state of California on April 21, the 169th person to be given the death penalty since the U.S. Supreme Court restored capital punishment in the United States in 1976. While international media underlined the barbarous nature of capital punishment, the New York Times pointed, in its coverage on April 22, to the conflict between local federal judges and the Supreme Court:

"The sunrise death of Mr. Harris for the 1978 slaying of two teenage boys followed an extraordinary series of events in which various judges of the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, in San Francisco, issued four orders during the night to stay Mr. Harris's execution. A continent away, Justices of the United States Supreme Court remained awake throughout the night and early morning, rejecting each stay with mounting anger. At 8:45 a.m. Washington time, the High Court—its patience exhausted—issued its final order. In an unsigned opinion, the Court said no further stays could be issued by any federal judge without the explicit permission of the Supreme Court."

German Labor Minister Norbert Blüm, April 22:

The death penalty has no role in the civilized world of today, and "the sadistic torturing of human beings" as in this spectacular case, was "an execution in stages and almost done like an entertainment show."

London Times editorial, "Agony on Death Row," April 22:

"The gassing of Robert Harris in California was an obscene spectacle. He took 11 minutes to die, his convulsions watched by a panel of 50 witnesses. Before the cyanide pellets were finally dropped into acid, he was subjected to a macabre legal farce, as repeated stays of execution were upheld and then overturned. Having said goodbye to fellow inmates, he was already strapped inside the gas chamber when news of another delay came through. He was taken out, put in a waiting room, and sent back to the chamber again 50 minutes later. In any other country, such an on-off-on 'mock execution,' a form of psychological torture, would be universally condemned as a cruel violation of human rights.

"His execution, ending a 25-year moratorium in California, opens the way for the judicial killing of over 300 convicts in the state, some of whom have been on Death Row for almost two decades—about the time that most murderers serve in jail in states where capital punishment has been

abolished. . . .

"Amid growing public despair over rising crime, judges and governors are striving to outdo each other in their enthusiasm at election time for the death penalty. But when politicians use human lives to boost their standing in the polls, the proper separation of the judiciary from the political process starts to break down. In America no less than in the Third World, human rights must stand above the baying for revenge by the mob.

"By any definition, gassing a man to death is cruel and unusual punishment. How can any state tolerate the gas chamber after the Nazi Holocaust? Other methods of execution are no less barbaric. . . .

"The United States is the only western nation to practice capital punishment on a large scale. In so doing, it comes close to violating its own human rights undertakings. In 1977, President Carter signed two international conventions, the American Convention on Human Rights and the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. . . . Neither convention was ratified. Neither has been complied with since."

Montreal Globe and Mail editorial, "American Justice Dies Another Death," April 23:

"It is not for his sake that we grieve; it is for America's. It is not the cruelty of his execution that is so appalling, as the mighty efforts expended to cloak a killing no less cold-blooded in the procedures of a civil society. . . . We need surely not refer again to the evidence that its application falls on racial minorities in grotesque disproportion to their conviction rates. And we refuse to rely on the signal absence of any proof of its deterrent power—for that is to accept that it is at worst ineffective in preventing murder. . . . Safety lies in a society that teaches in its every word and deed that life is sacred; that people are ends in themselves, not means to an end; that each individual is endowed with all the attributes of humanity, including the capacity to suffer; that true consciousness of another's humanity makes the infliction of pain impossible."

The editorial quotes George Bernard Shaw: "Capital punishment and murder are not opposites that cancel each other out, but similars that breed their kind."

Unità, Italy, "The Long Night of the Barbarians," guest commentary by U.S. civil rights leader Amelia Boynton Robinson, April 22:

"This American democracy, which produced such great men as Martin Luther King, cannot allow death as a system of power, genocide as a system of power. . . .

"If Italy (a country where right and culture have a historical tradition) condemns the use of a gas chamber to carry out justice, it must also condemn the world economic system which is based on usury against Third World countries and starvation of million of children."