The Death Penalty Is One Link in a Self-Defeating Chain of Violence

Glen Anderson
May 18, 2001

Decades ago Iran was briefly a democracy. Iran wanted to control its own oil resources, which were dominated by a British oil company. In 1953 the U.S. and British governments overthrew Iran's democracy and installed the Shah, a dictator who let us take the oil and supported U.S. geo-political interests in the region. The Shah brutally tortured people who disagreed with him but the U.S. government supported him with massive amounts of modern military weapons.

In 1979 the people of Iran overthrew the Shah and vented their anger at the U.S. by holding some U.S. government personnel hostage.

The U.S. government retaliated against Iran by arming its enemy, Iraq, which was fighting a war with Iran. The U.S. government provided military weapons to Saddam Hussein.

When Iraq threatened U.S. oil interests in Kuwait, the U.S. government made war on Iraq. The U.S. government trained its soldiers to kill and sent them to the Persian Gulf area. Among the soldiers the U.S. military trained to kill was Timothy McVeigh.

Later the U.S. government decided to arrest the leader of a small religious cult in Waco, Texas. The U.S. bypassed many nonviolent opportunities and instead surrounded the cult's house with massive amounts of deadly force and heightened the paranoia of the cult members inside. Finally the U.S. government used violence, and all of the cult members -- including children -- died.

Timothy McVeigh -- back from the Gulf War -- was outraged at this violence and reacted as he had been taught -- through violence. He retaliated by bombing the U.S. government's building in Oklahoma City, killing many people. He thought this would send a symbolic political message.

To retaliate, the U.S. government is killing Timothy McVeigh -- also to send a symbolic political message.

Ironically, killing Timothy McVeigh does not shame him. Instead, it emulates him by adopting his method. Executing Timothy McVeigh also makes him a martyr for those who share his political beliefs.

U.S. politicians and news media have whipped up hysteria and blood-lust demanding killing as the solution. The U.S. government's decision to kill for a political purpose makes McVeigh a role model for another cycle of people whose pain and anger are out of control -- showing them by government example that killing is a good solution if you are angry enough.

The death penalty is yet another link in a chain of violence. What goes around comes around.

Nearly 50 years ago the U.S. government launched a sequence of events rooted in greed and violence -- insensitive to the suffering of other people. We overthrew a democracy, armed dictators, and used deadly violence. Each time the evil our government practiced resulted in an evil reaction, and our government responded with yet another round of evil.

Here we go again. It is utter nonsense to think that another cycle of killing will lead to healing. More killing just causes more killing. What evil will be unleashed by our government's glorification of violence? How much disillusionment and anger will this add to our society? How will unstable people react? How many innocent people will die when McVeigh's fellow extremists retaliate?

When will decent Americans rise up and stop the chain of violence?