

Joseph Rudolph Wood's Tortuous Death: Arizona's Two-hour Execution and the "Brutalization of America"

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Joseph Rudolph Wood was put to death by the state of Arizona on Wednesday. The 55-year-old's execution was the third in the space of six months in which the condemned was subjected to a prolonged, agonizing lethal injection procedure. The previous atrocities occurred in Ohio and Oklahoma. In Wood's case, the gruesome ordeal spanned nearly two hours.

The US Supreme Court gave the go-ahead for the execution on Tuesday, lifting a stay put in place by the US Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals. The condemned man's attorneys had argued that he had a First Amendment right to information about the untested lethal injection protocol Arizona would utilize to kill him. But the US high court justices rejected this argument despite the very real possibility that Wood would be subjected to a torturous death.

Joseph Wood was put to death using an experimental combination of midazolam and hydromorphone, the same drug cocktail that in January had subjected Dennis McGuire to 25 minutes of torture before he died in an Ohio death chamber. As in other states, Arizona has been improvising its lethal injection protocol in the wake of a European ban on the export to the US of lethal chemicals used in executions.

The *Arizona Republic's* Michael Kiefer wrote of Wood's execution: "He gulped like a fish on land. The movement was like a piston: The mouth opened, the chest rose, the stomach convulsed... It was death by apnea. And it went on for an hour and a half."

The execution of Joseph Wood is not a barbaric aberration in an otherwise humane and civilized society. It exemplifies in concentrated form the violence and brutality meted out on a regular basis by the ruling establishment in 21st century America.

Across the country on a nearly daily basis, police beatings and shootings are captured on video and posted on the Internet for all to see. Last week, the New York City Police Department choked Staten Island resident Eric Garner to death. On July 1, a California Highway Patrol officer tackled a great grandmother on a freeway onramp and struck her repeatedly on the head. Over the July 4th weekend, police in Chicago shot five people, two of whom died.

This year alone, lethal police shootings have taken place in a large majority of US states, with multiple shooting deaths in California, Washington, Utah, Oklahoma, New Mexico,

Texas, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Kentucky, Virginia, New York and New Jersey.

The US military is arming paramilitary police squads in communities throughout the country, while SWAT teams are being deployed to carry out raids on homes in the dead of night. The police department in Albuquerque, New Mexico, which has killed 26 people since 2010, recently agreed to purchase at least 350 additional AR-15 assault rifles.

Capital punishment is only the vilest excrescence of a prison system in which more than 2 million people are locked up in horrifying conditions. A recent review by the *New York Times* of the Rikers Island complex revealed that over an 11-month period, 128 inmates were beaten so severely by prison guards that their injuries “were beyond the capacity of doctors at the jail’s clinics to treat.”

Immigrant children crossing the border, fleeing violence and poverty in Central America, are housed in prison-like conditions, without access to proper food or sanitation, while the authorities debate the best way to deport them.

In Detroit, an unelected emergency manager and a bankruptcy judge preside over the destruction of workers’ pensions and health benefits and the shutoff of water for tens of thousands of households.

These realities expose the lie behind Washington’s posturing as a “beacon of democracy” to the world. The brutality of the American state, the build-up of its repressive powers, the indignities it inflicts on a daily basis on large parts of the American population reflect a society riven by social contradictions for which the ruling class has no solution—other than more repression, leading to dictatorship.

The homicidal violence of local police and the institutionalized murder carried out in execution chambers are responses to a massive growth of social inequality, which has produced a society so unequal that it cannot maintain the forms of democratic rule.

At one pole stands a financial aristocracy that flaunts its obscene wealth before a population increasingly driven into unemployment and poverty. The plutocrats stand above the law, while the social problems that beset the masses of people are treated as crimes, to be dealt with by means of bullets and prison cells.

The same financial elite—a parasitic and essentially criminal class—spearheads an eruption of lawlessness and war internationally, while the corporate-controlled media relentlessly promotes militarism. The entire operation is presided over by a president, Barack Obama, who asserts the right to order the murder of US citizens, and acknowledges having done so.

Eight decades ago, the ruling elite responded to the breakdown of capitalism in the Great Depression—and the growth of mass working class resistance—by instituting social reforms such as Social Security. Today, under conditions of the greatest crisis of US and world capitalism since the 1930s, the ruling class has no reforms to offer. It responds with an assault on all of the past reforms and social gains of the working class—including Medicare and Social Security.

US Ninth Circuit Court Chief Judge Alex Kozinski, declaring his disagreement with the ruling of a three-judge panel of his court to stay the execution of Joseph Wood, called for replacing lethal injection with the guillotine or firing squad. Executions are “brutal, savage events,” he

said, and the public had just as well get used to them.

These are not mere excrescences. They are the noxious expressions of a social system in terminal crisis. The capitalist system itself is the root cause of inequality, poverty and repression.

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