

NAACP President Sees End to Death Penalty in 10 Years

Written by Hazel Trice Edney
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The NAACP v



iews it as “lynching’s cousin”. In a nutshell, that’s the reason that NAACP President/CEO Benjamin Todd Jealous predicts the end to the death penalty in America within the next 10 years.

“We’re moving fast,” says Jealous. “This is one of our top national priorities as it has been for the last 104 years. We were founded to end lynching and lynch mob violence and we have always seen the death penalty as lynching’s cousin.”

He envisions, “We could abolish the death penalty in the next 10 years. We have abolished it in six states in six years. It’s reasonable to believe we can abolish it in eight more [states] in the next eight years and then head to the Supreme Court and have it done within 10 years.”

Jealous’ projections came during an interview last week as he and other fellow death penalty foes celebrated the Maryland legislature’s vote to repeal executions in the state. The bi-partisan support bill, signed by Gov. Martin O’Malley, signals to the rest of America that the death penalty is not only cruel and unusual punishment, but racially disparate, Jealous says:

“The death penalty from its inception was linked to lynching in this country. Across the country, the death penalty is 40 percent Black. In Maryland, it’s 80 percent Black. It’s impossible to look at the death penalty in this country and not conclude that race is at play here.”

Maryland was another major battle won, but the war against capital punishment continues to rage. So far, the states of Alaska, Connecticut, Hawaii, Illinois, Iowa, Maine, Massachusetts,

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Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Dakota, Rhode Island, Vermont, West Virginia, Wisconsin and Maryland have repealed the death penalty. Colorado, Delaware, New Hampshire and Kansas are reconsidering their death penalty statutes this year.

Racial disparity is a key reason, but not the primary reason for opposition to the death penalty. According to the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty (NCADP), “chief among the concerns is the risk of executing an innocent person which can never be completely eliminated.”

Since the 1976 reinstatement of the death penalty in America, 1,295 people have either died by lethal injection, gas chamber, electric chair or firing squad.

According to the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty at NCADP.org, The 10 top reasons for the anti-death penalty movement are:

Executions are carried out at staggering cost to taxpayers.

It costs far more to execute a person than to keep him or her in prison for life.

Capital punishment does not deter crime.

States without the death penalty have much lower murder rates. The South accounts for 80 percent of U.S. executions, and has the highest regional murder rate.

States are unable to prevent accidental executions of innocent people.

The wrongful execution of an innocent person is an injustice that can never be rectified. Since the reinstatement of the death penalty, at least 138 men and women have been released from death row nationally – some only minutes away from execution.

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Race plays a role in determining who lives and who dies.

Since 1977, blacks and whites have been the victims of murders in almost equal numbers, yet 80 percent of the people executed in that period were convicted of murders involving white victims.

The death penalty is applied at random.

Politics, quality of legal counsel, and the jurisdiction in which a crime is committed are more often the determining factors in a death penalty case than the facts of the crime itself.

Capital punishment goes against almost every religion.

Almost all religious groups in the United States regard executions as immoral.

The U.S. is keeping company with notorious human rights abusers.

The vast majority of countries in Western Europe, North America and South America — more than 128 nations worldwide — have abandoned capital punishment in law or in practice. Year after year, only three countries execute more prisoners than the United States — China, Iran, and Saudi Arabia.

Millions of dollars could be diverted to helping the families of murder victims.

Funds now being used for the costly process of executions could be used to help families put their lives back together through counseling, restitution, crime victim hotlines, and other services

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addressing their needs.

Bad lawyers are a persistent problem.

Perhaps the most important factor in determining whether a defendant will receive the death penalty is the quality of the representation he or she is provided. Almost all defendants in capital cases cannot afford their own attorneys.

Life without parole is a sensible alternative to the death penalty.

Almost every state in the U.S. now has life in prison without parole. Unlike decades ago, a sentence of life without parole generally means exactly what it says – convicts locked away in prison until they die. Unlike the death penalty, a sentence of life in prison without parole allows mistakes to be corrected or new evidence to come to light.

Armed with these arguments, opponents project a new beginning is possible within a decade with help from the Supreme Court.

“We only have to abolish it in eight total more. We’re at 18. We only have to do it in a total of 26 before we go to the Supreme Court and make the argument that the punishment’s not just cruel, but unusual and therefore abolish it in the entire country,” Jealous says.

Maryland State Conference NAACP President Gerald Stansbury says the movement is about equal protection under the law. “This decision will make our justice system fairer and more effective. I hope it will inspire leaders in other states to follow suit.”

To Gov. O’Malley, it’s simply about humanity. “There’s no such thing as a spare American,” he said during a press conference following the vote. “Every life is important.”