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# Raymond Tonkin: Pa. should retain death penalty for murder of police

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RAYMOND TONKIN

Tuesday, March 14, 2023 2:00 p.m.



In the early hours of Sept. 13, 2014, my phone rang. I answered. On the other end of the phone was a dispatcher informing me that the Pennsylvania State Police were requesting me because two state troopers had been shot outside the Blooming Grove Barracks.

I quickly dressed and headed to a local church about three-quarters of a mile from the barracks. This was the center of operations for the state police, as the barracks had been vacated with the sniper still loose in the woods. Upon entering the church, I observed several troopers in the pews with grim looks on their faces. I was informed Cpl. Bryon Dickson was shot as he was leaving the barracks to head home. As he lay helpless on the ground, he was shot again. Trooper Alex Douglass was shot when he moved to aid Dickson. Both were targeted because they were uniformed state troopers.

Douglass survived, but Dickson was dead by the time emergency responders arrived.

With members of the state police, I traveled to the barracks in an armored vehicle to observe the scene, which is vital to any prosecutor who may later have to describe the scene to a jury. That day, just inside the door from the lobby of the barracks, I saw Dickson's body covered in a yellow emergency blanket. He had been moved from the outside of the barracks by fellow troopers who bravely risked their lives in what turned out to be a futile attempt to save him.

Just before Dickson's body was removed by the coroner, Lt. Christopher Paris, now state police commissioner, led the group of troopers, myself and my first assistant, Bruce DeSarro, in the Lord's Prayer.

Forty-eight days later, Eric Matthew Frein was arrested. He was charged with the murder of Dickson and the shooting of Douglass. Frein stood trial, and a jury of 12 unanimously convicted him of charges including murder and terrorism.

The jury determined that a sentence of death was the appropriate punishment.

Now Gov. Josh Shapiro, with his call to abolish the death penalty, would release Frein from death row and into the general prison population, where he would be allowed out of his cell for most of the day. During this time, he could play chess or checkers, or enjoy team sports such as softball, football or basketball. On sunny days, he can enjoy basking in the sun. Frein could even purchase ice cream from commissary.

Meanwhile, Tiffany Dickson continues to bear the burden of the loss of her husband. His two sons grow up without their father. Douglass has undergone countless surgeries, suffered the loss of his lower leg and uses a service dog, Peter, to assist him both physically and emotionally.

The decision to impose the death penalty is left to the sound judgment of 12 citizens called to serve as jurors. There is little doubt they would rather not. However, they perform their duty and make their decision under the guidance of law in our system of justice.

Over time, the death penalty has withstood constitutional scrutiny and deemed a constitutionally appropriate sentence in cases of intentional murder. Polls show a majority of American adults support this punishment.

There are times that murder is so heinous, so calculating, so evil, that justice is rightfully served by the imposition of the death penalty. Those cases include the intentional murder of a police officer. Recently, we have seen three officers killed by gunfire here in Pennsylvania, with two here in Western Pennsylvania. Each officer was doing his duty to protect the community when they were slain. While police officer pledges to lay down their lives in service of others, it is the law that protects them.

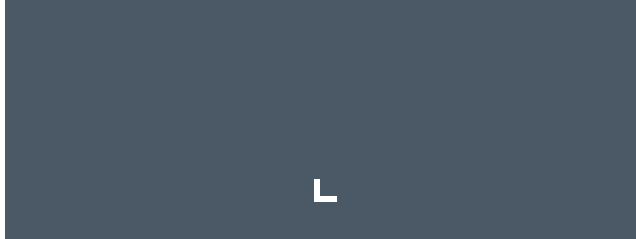
To provide that feeling of protection, Pennsylvania should retain the death penalty.

*Raymond Tonkin is the Pike County district attorney.*

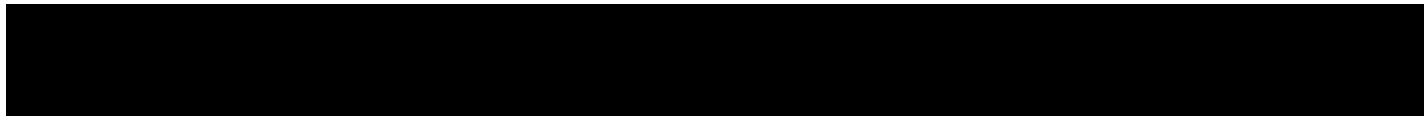
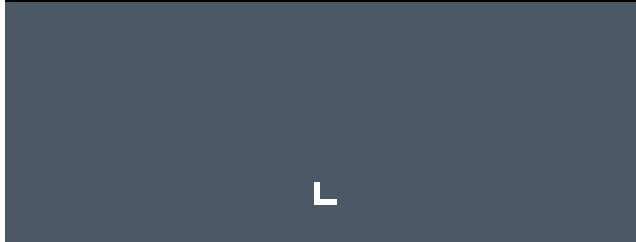
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