

“Death House” can be found in Terre Haute

Just south of Terre Haute, along U.S. 41, is the federal penitentiary. It looks like, well, a federal penitentiary. They even call it that; none of this “correctional facility” nonsense. It has been there since 1940 and is home – if you can call it that – to about 1,100 bad guys.

Among them are Brian Mitchell, the creep who kidnapped Elizabeth Smart out in Utah back in 2002, and Drew Peterson, who murdered his wife, Kathleen Savio, and a bunch of Al-Qaeda characters who have tried to blow up a lot of things, including airplanes.

But none of them is on death row. Some are serving sentences that will no doubt outlast their natural lives, but none has been assigned to die for his crime.

That’s a special place in Terre Haute, inside the great prison compound. It is the federal death row, the place to which men and women are sent by the federal government to await execution. It got a lot of attention last year when Donald Trump in his last few months in the White House pushed an orgy of executions, reviving the death chamber use for the first time in 17 years. Prior to that, the last to die at the hands of the state was Timothy McVeigh, who

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A MOMENT

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blew up the Oklahoma City federal building and killed 168 innocents back in 1995.

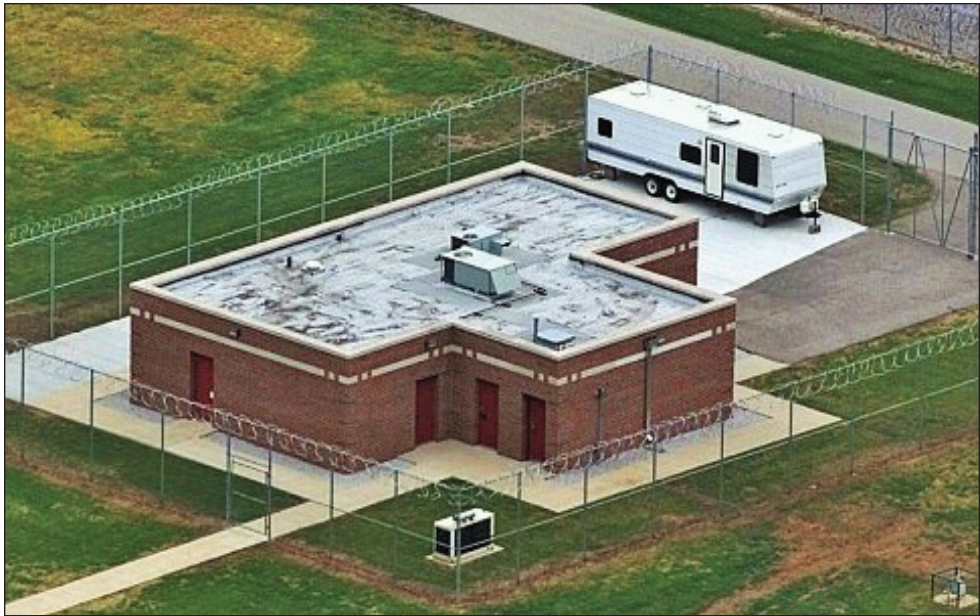
Thirteen of them – a dozen men and one woman – were dispatched by lethal injection between July of last year and Trump’s departure. Keith Nelson, Brandon Bernard, Dustin Lee Honken. You may recall some of the names because they got increasing attention as the Justice Department ramped up the pace. There was one woman – Lisa Marie Montgomery – and one Native American, Lezmond Charles Mitchell. Half of those put to death were black.

We’re talking about the feds here, but just as a side note, there are 2,551 men and women awaiting execution in state prisons across the country, although 22 of the 50 states have now permanently abolished the death penalty. As you might somehow expect, more than half awaiting death are to be sent to the execution chambers in California, Florida and Texas.

But back to Terre Haute and the feds and the 46 on death row and that grotesque little windowless cinder block building that houses the even more grotesque gurney to which the condemned are strapped before the poison is pumped into them.

Prison employees, Terre Haute newspaper and TV folks and a lot of other people in service jobs like motels and restaurants in Vigo County admitted late last year that, yes, they were exhausted by this rush to final judgment. And, in one of the most morbid and macabre of ironies, one of those year-end government killings had to be delayed because of the fear that those in attendance might become “superspreaders” of Covid. Just consider that for a moment.

But now, as we emerge from that darkness, the At-



Terre Haute, Indiana, death house

torney General of the United States has called a halt to this madness. Merrick Garland, in an underreported story a week or so ago, said that the Justice Department was suspending all executions so that they could take a measured look at all the policies and procedures that drive the feds’ pursuit of death sentences.

“The Department of Justice must ensure that everyone in the federal criminal justice system is not only afforded the rights guaranteed by the Constitution, but is also treated fairly and humanely,” Garland said, stressing that “that obliga-

tion has special force in capital cases.”

Garland’s order puts executions on hold for now, but leaves the door open for another administration to restart them. It also doesn’t put an end to federal prosecutors seeking the death penalty.

And that leads to one of the ironies of this bizarre time we share. The federal government, acting on presidential orders, is right now in court seeking the reinstatement of the death penalty against Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, the immigrant punk who, along with his dead brother, carried out the

Boston Marathon bombing eight years ago.

And thus, is raised once again, the essential debate: Is it time, once and for all, for the last nation in the Western world to abandon its bloodlust vengeance? To once and for all say that the state has no right to take a life?

All the White House would say is this: “The President is pleased the Attorney General is taking these steps because the President has significant concerns about the death penalty and how is it is implemented.”

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