

COMMENTARY

JEANNE WOODFORD | SPECIAL TO LOS ANGELES TIMES

Some death row realism

As the warden of San Quentin, I presided over four executions. After each one, someone on the staff would ask, "Is the world safer because of what we did tonight?"

We knew the answer: No.

I worked in corrections for 30 years, starting as a correctional officer and working my way up to warden at San Quentin and then on to the top job in the state — director of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. During those years, I came to believe that the death penalty should be replaced with life without the possibility of parole.

I didn't reach that conclusion because I'm soft on crime. My No. 1 concern is public safety. I want my children and grandchildren to have the safety and freedom to pursue their dreams. I know from firsthand experience that some people are dangerous and must be removed from society forever — people such as Robert Lee Massie.

I presided over Massie's execution in 2001. He was first sentenced to death for the 1965 murder of a mother of two. But when executions were temporarily banned in 1972, his sentence was changed to one that would allow parole, and he was released in 1978. Months later, he killed a 61-year-old liquor store owner and was returned to death row.

For supporters of the death penalty, Massie is a poster child. Yet for me, he stands out among the executions I presided over as the strongest example of how empty and futile the act of execution is.

I remember that night clearly. It was March 27, 2001. I was the last person to talk to Massie before he died. After that, I brought the witnesses in. I looked at the clock to make sure it was after midnight. I got a signal from two members of my staff who were on the phone with the state Supreme Court and the U.S. attorney general's office to make sure there were no last-minute legal impediments to the execution. There were none, so I gave the order to proceed. It took several minutes for the lethal injections to take effect.

I did my job, but I don't believe it was the right thing to have done. We should have condemned Massie to permanent imprisonment — that would have made the world safer. But on the night we executed him, when the question was asked, "Did this make the world safer?" the answer remained no. Massie needed to be kept away from society, but we did not need to kill him.

Why should we pay to keep him locked up for life? I hear that question constantly. Few

people know the answer: It's cheaper — much, much cheaper than execution.

I wish the public knew how much the death penalty affects their wallets. California spends an additional \$117 million each year pursuing the execution of those on death row. Just housing inmates on death row costs an additional \$90,000 per prisoner per year above what it would cost to house them with the general prison population.

A statewide, bipartisan commission recently concluded that we must spend \$100 million more each year to fix the many problems with capital punishment in California. Total price tag: in excess of \$200 million a year more than simply condemning people to life without the possibility of parole.

If we condemn the worst offenders, like Massie, to permanent imprisonment, resources now spent on the death penalty could be used to investigate unsolved homicides, modernize crime labs and expand effective violence prevention programs, especially in at-risk communities. The money also could be used to intervene in the lives of children at risk and to invest in their education — to stop future victimization.

As I presided over Massie's execution, I thought about the abuse and neglect he endured as a child in the foster care system. We failed to keep him safe, and our failure contributed to who he was as an adult. Instead of spending hundreds of millions of dollars to kill him, what if we spent that money on other foster children so that we stop producing men such as Massie in the first place?

As director of corrections, I met with some ex-offenders. I learned that the prison system paroles 300 people every week without a plan or resources for success. How can we continue to spend more than \$100 million a year seeking the execution of a handful of offenders while we fail to meet communities' basic safety needs?

It is not realistic to think that urban neighborhoods like it will ever get well if we can't — or won't — support them in addressing the problems they face.

To say that I have regrets about my involvement in the death penalty is to let myself off the hook too easily. To take a life in order to prove how much we value another life does not strengthen our society. It is a public policy that devalues our very being and detracts crucial resources from programs that could truly make our communities safe.

Woodford is the former director of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation and the former warden of San Quentin State Prison.

JACK OHMAN | THE OREGONIAN



PERRY GLANZER & WESLEY NULL

Don't defer to

When it comes to teaching about biology and religion, Dan Quinn, spokesman for the Texas Freedom Network, recently claimed, "It's time for the State Board of Education to listen to experts instead of promoting their own personal and political agendas." Of course, this means that the State Board of Education should stop listening to the Texas Freedom Network, which clearly has its own political and ideological agenda.

If Quinn is right, however, to whom should the board turn for expertise? Some state biologists claim they know the most about this disciplinary relationship, but they are wrong. Why should we trust biologists over religion professors, curriculum professors and others who spend their lives studying and teaching these subjects? We can think of many good reasons not to trust biologists on matters of religion and curriculum. A recent statement from a biologist affiliated with the 21st Century Science Coalition highlights a problem with listening to "experts" who are out of their special field. Speaking of the relationship between religion and curriculum, that biologist said, "It's time to keep religion and faith in the Sunday schools and not in the public schools." This position is a view that many legal, religious and educational experts outright reject.

Even the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled, might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization. Furthermore, many educational groups — including the American Federation of Teachers, the National Education Association and the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development — issued statements acknowledging that "schools demonstrate fairness when they ensure that the curriculum includes study about religion, where appropriate, as an important part of a complete education."

Of course, most biologists with the 21st Century Science Coalition, excluding the ones quoted above, might agree with these statements. What they probably reject is the inclusion of discussions about religion in biology texts and classes. As that biologist claim



Prisoners in the north segregation unit of death row at California's San Quentin State Prison play cards on Oct. 25, 2004.

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