

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نباشد تن من مباد بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

JEFFREY ST. CLAIR

15.03.2025

Barbarians at the Death House Gate: the Firing Squad Returns to America



Los fusilamientos del tres de mayo by Francisco Goya at the Prado. Public Domain.

What says the law? You will not kill. How does it say it? By killing!

– Victor Hugo

Brad Keith Sigmon never denied his guilt. He never claimed to be innocent in the 2001 murders of Gladys and David Larke, the parents of his former girlfriend. He didn't claim ineffectiveness of counsel. He didn't blame the murders on his crack addiction or a history of childhood trauma abuse. At the end of his trial, Sigmon stood up and confessed to his heinous

crime: “Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I am guilty. I have no excuse for what I did. It’s my fault and I’m not trying to blame nobody else for it, and I’m sorry.”

But Sigmon did object to being put to death by the state of South Carolina. As a Christian, he believed his own life had value, even after having committed an atrocious crime. He felt he still had something to contribute, even in the restricted society of prison. He feared that his execution would cause even more pain and anguish to his family.

However, his pleas to continue living were rejected, first by state and federal courts and then by South Carolina’s Governor, Henry McMaster. McMaster refused to commute his sentence or, after 23 years in prison, grant him clemency.

No confession or acts of contrition would assuage the politicians who demanded his death, an execution that even the daughter of the slain couple objected to. In the end, the only choice left to Sigmon was how he would be killed. And even that was a cruel choice, a final infliction of mental torture.

The state of South Carolina presented Sigmon with three options: be burned to death in an ancient electric chair, endure prolonged spasms and seizures as poison is injected into his body or have his heart blown apart by a firing squad. According to Sigmon’s lawyer, Gerald “Bo” King, Sigmon eventually made the harrowing decision to be executed by firing squad, fearing that he would “burn and cook him alive” and that the drugs used in lethal injections result in a painful and protracted death, assuming his executioners could find a vein into which to drip the deadly poison. In South Carolina’s three previous executions by lethal injection with phenobarbital, it took the condemned at least 20 minutes to be pronounced dead.

Brad has no illusions about what being shot will do to his body,” said King. “He does not wish to inflict that pain on his family, the witnesses, or the execution team. But, given South Carolina’s unnecessary and unconscionable secrecy, Brad is choosing as best he can. There’s no justice here. Everything about this barbaric, state-sanctioned atrocity – from the choice to the method itself – is abjectly cruel. We should not just be horrified – we should be furious.”

+++

Sigmon was an Army brat from South Carolina, born to a teenage mother and abusive, alcoholic father, whose escalating violence was eventually directed at Sigmon and his younger siblings. The Sigmon family moved from Army base to Army base, including a stint in the Philippines.

The marriage ended in divorce, and Brian divided his time between living with his mother and father until high school, when he dropped out two months shy of graduating to get

married. The young couple soon had a son and by all accounts Sigmon was a dutiful and attentive dad.

But the marriage was not a happy one, marred by marital spats and Sigmon's increasing use of alcohol and cocaine, and ended in divorce. Sigmon racked up numerous arrests for drunk driving and was shot in the stomach four times while attempting to break into his estranged wife's home. The couple's son was also shot in the altercation.

In 1998, Sigmon entered a relationship with Rebecca Barbare. The couple lived together in a trailer in Greenville, South Carolina for three years. But in 2001, Barbare split, moving in with her parents, David and Gladys Larke, in the Greenville suburb of Taylors. Sigmon took the breakup badly. He called her obsessively, begging her to resume their relationship and followed her around in his car, obsessed that she might be seeing another man.

+++

On the night of April 26, Sigmon was drinking and getting high with a friend named Eugene Strube. Sigmon spent the night ranting about Barbare, eventually telling Strube that he was going to the Larke's house the following day after Barbare took her children to school, "tie her parents up," and wait for Barbare to get home. Strube had apparently heard this kind of talk with Sigmon before and wrote it off as a drug-fueled bluster. But the following morning, Sigmon, still high, broke into the Larke home carrying a baseball bat, which he used to savagely beat David and Gladys to death in a frenzy of violence, hitting each of them in the head at least nine times, shattering their skulls.

Sigmon found David's gun in the Larke house, sat in a chair as David and Gladys bled to death and waited for Rebecca to come home. Sigmon forced Rebecca at gunpoint into her Honda SUV and planned to take her to North Carolina. But Barbare jumped out of the car and fled. Sigmon fired multiple shots at her as she ran away. One shot hurt her foot, but Barbare managed to escape. After a three-day manhunt, Sigmon was found and arrested in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, and soon extradited back to South Carolina, where he was charged with two counts of capital murder and one count of kidnapping.

These were brutal, senseless crimes, driven by passion and jealousy, and committed while in a cocaine haze. His trail was swift. Sigmon admitted his guilt and the only real defense his lawyers offered against the imposition of the death penalty was that Sigmon had been unbalanced by the breakup of his relationship with Barbare, acted under the influence of drugs and had been a model prisoner while in jail. It wasn't enough to sway the jury, which voted unanimously to sentence Sigmon to death.

+++

Over the next decade, Sigmon's lawyers filed numerous appeals in state and federal court challenging his conviction and death sentence. All were rejected. After the Supreme Court denied Sigmon's final appeal on January 11, 2021, Sigmon was served with a death warrant, scheduling his execution for February 12, 2021. But a week before he was slated to be put to death, the South Carolina Supreme Court issued a stay of execution, ruling that the state of South Carolina lacked the necessary supply of lethal drugs needed to kill Sigmon. Since the state's last execution in 2011 of Jeffrey Brian Motts, it had been unable to acquire a new stockpile of phenobarbital, after pharmaceutical companies in the US had stopped shipping drugs for the purpose of executions. At the time, death by lethal injection was South Carolina's only legal form of execution.

And so matters sat until May 14, 2021, when South Carolina's Governor signed Act 43, which revived death by electrocution as the state's primary means of execution and legalized death by firing squad as an alternative option. In March of the following year, the state's Department of Corrections announced it had prepared procedures to perform executions by firing squad. After a series of lawsuits, the South Carolina Supreme Court ruled in 2024 that executions by electrocution and firing squad didn't violate the constitution's prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment and ordered the the state's Corrections Department to carry out six executions within the next year, each state murder to take place 35 days apart. South Carolina's first execution in 13 years took place on September 20, 2024 when, after a new supply of phenobarbital had been acquired through dubious means, 46-year-old Freddie Eugene Owens was put to death by lethal injection.

The second in South Carolina's assembly line of executions took place on November 1, 2024, when Richard Moore was poisoned to death. An autopsy revealed that the execution of Moore required two pentobarbital doses and that his lungs were filled with fluid, "an excruciating condition known as pulmonary edema." Despite Moore drowning to death in his own fluids, the state of South Carolina proceeded to kill Marion Bowman Jr. on February 16, also by lethal injection. Sigmon's name was next on the execution list.

+++



Death chamber in Columbia, South Carolina, showing the state's electric chair and a firing squad chair, left. Photo: South Carolina Department of Corrections.

Shortly before 6 pm on March 7, Brad Sigmon was led into the death chamber at Broad River Correctional Institution in Columbia. Three prison guards had volunteered to shoot Sigmon from behind a wall 15 feet away from where he was strapped to a chair, a red target on a white circle taped to his chest, a few feet away from the electric chair that had last been used to kill James Reed in 2008.

Sigmon was dressed in a black jumpsuit to conceal the blood from his shooting. His legs and wrists were strapped to the chair. Two minutes before a fusillade of bullets killed Sigmon, a hood was placed over his head and a sling tied his jaw shut. The prison warden read the execution order as Sigmon's chest rose and fell with deep, anxious breaths. His shackled arms trembled. Then there was the crack of gunfire and his chest exploded, as three expanding .306 bullets blew through the target and out his body into a steel-plated wall. His body shivered. Blood, bone and viscera flew out of his chest into a basin placed on the floor. In the words of his lawyer Bo King, "The wound on his chest opened very abruptly and violently." A minute or so later a doctor approached his body, checked for vital signs, found none and declared Brad Sigmon dead. For the first time in 15 years, a person had been executed in the United States by firing squad. At 67, Sigmon was the oldest person ever executed by the state of South Carolina.

+++

Sigmon's last statement calling on his fellow Christians to rise up against the death penalty was read by his attorney, Bo King:

I want my closing statement to be one of love and a calling to my fellow Christians to help us end the death penalty. An eye for an eye was used as justification to the jury for seeking the death penalty. At that time, I was too ignorant to know how wrong that was. We ... now live under the New Testament, where [Jesus preached} You have heard that it has been said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ but I say unto you that you do not resist an evil person. Whosoever shall smite me on the right cheek, turn to him the other one as well.” Nowhere does God in the New Testament give man the authority to kill another man: ‘Did not Moses give you the law? Yet none of you keep with the law.’ We are now under God’s grace and mercy.

But the teachings of the radical Palestinian prophet of the Galilee have rarely been mirrored by the religious institutions that claim to worship him as a deity. It is true that the Emperor Constantine, after declaring Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire in 313 AD, outlawed crucifixion. But he still ordered the execution of thousands of people, including his son, Crispus, who he killed with poison (the lethal injection of its time) and wife Fausta, who he ordered plunged into a bath filled with boiling water.

Today’s Christian Nationalists, who have taken political power in many states and are deeply embedded in the judiciary and federal government under Trump, rarely dip into the gospels, preferring the stern, retributive justice prescribed by the Old Testament (except when it might be applied to them). These politicians want to make punishment by the state cruel and *usual*. This is what we have come to as a society in regression, a rogue nation, drunk on its own perverse piety—and there will be much more of it to come, as Oklahoma, Utah, Idaho and Mississippi have all re-legalized executions by firing squad with other states set to follow suit.

The firing squad has been the preferred method of execution by imperial powers since at least the age of Napoleon, where its brutality as a means of political repression was immortalized by Goya’s *Los fusilamientos del tres de mayo*, depicting the execution of suspected Spanish resistance fighters by French soldiers during the Peninsula War. It has been used to kill deserters, mutineers, resistance fighters, political opponents, and deposed rulers. During discussions between Churchill, Stalin and FDR at the 1943 Tehran Conference about the fate of Germany after the Nazis were defeated, Stalin proposed executing all 50,000 to 100,000 members of the German General staff before firing squads. Churchill, the man who oversaw the deaths of hundreds of thousands of civilians from southern Africa to the Indian subcontinent to Dresden, feigned shock, but Stalin’s admirer FDR quipped, “Perhaps 49,000 would be enough.”

There was no rational excuse for Brian Sigmon's murder of David and Gladys Larkes and even less of a reason for South Carolina's premediated killing of Sigmon. He posed no threat to anyone. He'd been a model prisoner for more than two decades. The daughter of the Larkes opposed his execution. His murder would provide no closure for the murder of the Larkes, if state killings ever provide closure or compensate for the deaths of the people they killed. The only real claim the state made for killing Sigmon was that it would provide a deterrent to other would-be murderers. But there's no evidence to back this up and plenty of statistics to dispute it.

Brad Sigmon was executed to exhibit the power of the state over its citizens. By choosing to be put to death by firing squad, Sigmon forced the State of South Carolina to put this power on full and grotesque display. There was no hiding behind the supposedly humane method of filling an IV with poison and injecting it into a vein through a needle and a tube. There was no illusion in this execution. Sigmon wasn't put to sleep. He had his heart blown out of his chest in front of 14 witnesses.

If the execution of Brad Sigmon serves as any kind of deterrent, it should be as a moral deterrent to future executions and the merciless political forces that order the pulling of the triggers.

MARCH 14, 2025

Jeffrey St. Clair is co-editor of *CounterPunch*. His most recent book is [*An Orgy of Thieves: Neoliberalism and Its Discontents*](#) (with Alexander Cockburn). He can be reached at: sitka@comcast.net or on Twitter [@JeffreyStClair3](#).