

Closing Remarks by Former Illinois Governor George Ryan

George Ryan

Follow this and additional works at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/law-review>

Recommended Citation

George Ryan, *Closing Remarks by Former Illinois Governor George Ryan*, 53 DePaul L. Rev. 1719 (2004)
Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/law-review/vol53/iss4/14>

This Comments is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Law at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in DePaul Law Review by an authorized editor of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact digitalservices@depaul.edu.

CLOSING REMARKS BY FORMER ILLINOIS GOVERNOR GEORGE RYAN*

ANDREA LYON: It is my great honor to introduce to you the former Governor of the State of Illinois, George Ryan. As I'm sure you're all aware, Governor Ryan pardoned four inmates in the first of two historic speeches on January 10th and 11th of this year, the first at this law school where he pardoned four people on the basis of innocence and a second at Northwestern Law School where he commuted the sentence of the remaining death row inmates to life. What he's done has been hailed everywhere as courageous, as [an] act of conscience, an adjective that I agree with. It's been deprecated by some as having some selfish motives, which I cannot discern what [those] would be.

We asked Governor Ryan to deliver the closing remarks of this assembly because of what he learned about the death penalty and because of his recognition of that silent aggravator of race. In fact, on January 10th he said of the more than 160 death row inmates, thirty-five were African-American defendants who had been convicted or condemned to die by all white juries. More than two thirds of the inmates on death row are African Americans. But before I turn the podium over to Governor Ryan, I would like to beg this audience's indulgence for just a moment. As some of you know, one of the men that Governor Ryan pardoned on January 10th because of his innocence was my client Madison Hobbly and I can't begin to describe to you, Governor Ryan, what it was like to drive to Pontiac and to take home this man who I had been fighting for, for a decade, from before I was dying my hair, Governor—

GOV. GEORGE RYAN: It looks better than mine.

ANDREA LYON: —and to take him off death row, I cannot begin to describe to you what it was like to take him home and to make him a real dinner that he had with my family and with his friends and his family, what it was like to see him sitting on the couch in my living room holding his mother's hand. Matt wasn't able to be here today Governor. He lives in Maryland now and he sent me a letter and I'd like to read it to you.

* This is an edited transcript of the presentation given by former Illinois Governor George Ryan, Closing Remarks at the Race to Execution Symposium at DePaul University College of Law on October 25, 2003.

Dear Governor Ryan. I cannot begin to describe how grateful I am to you that I'm free today. Just the thought of where I was eleven months ago along with the sixteen years prior to that, I thank God for giving you the heart and the courage to pardon me. Today I'm sharing a wonderful and free life with my wife Kim. Apart from sharing my life with my wife whom I appreciate and love dearly and working a full time job assembling and shipping electronic equipment which I enjoy doing, all in all things are going good for me thanks to God.

I would like to end this letter by saying great men do great things and what you did for me was definitely the great and right thing to do. I thank you from the bottom of my heart a thousand times. I promise you that I will live a life that you will be proud to have given back to me. God bless you.

GOV. GEORGE RYAN: Thank you. Thank you very much. Andrea thank you for that kind introduction and those words from Madison, and they're heartfelt and I appreciate the words, thank you very much. And welcome to all of you folks from wherever you may be, even the folks in Illinois. Always good to see a good crowd and a lot of young people and to have an opportunity to share some of my thoughts with you and to talk a little bit about a topic I think we're all interested in, in one way or another. And that's certainly the case with me.

I thought I'd start out with maybe just a little bit of history about myself. Most of you may know [that] it wasn't too long ago that I was an avid, hard-core supporter of the death penalty, and it was a system that I believed in very much and thought it was a necessary part, the death penalty was a necessary part, of a system that worked just fine. I was raised in a little town about sixty miles south of here called Kankakee—conservative little town, Republican, and the death penalty was never really talked about or discussed in any circles that I was involved in, and it was never a part of any discussions any place.

But it was one of those things that if you saw it on television—well “somebody got executed today,” they must have been pretty bad. They must have committed a bad crime and we need to have that in place to keep the system running and to keep the streets safe, and so I believed in it but it was always kind of in the abstract because I never paid any attention to it. And in all the times that I ran for public office in the State of Illinois, nobody ever questioned my position on the death penalty. It was never brought up in any debates, it was never discussed, it was never asked about where I stood on the death penalty, and I never really asked myself, frankly.

But, back in 1977, when we reinstated the death penalty in the State of Illinois, I was a member of the Illinois General Assembly, and I

voted green to reinstate the death penalty, pushed my button green, and as the debate went on, somebody on the opposite side of the argument got up and said, "For those of you that are voting green here today, I want to know how many of you would want to be the executioner and to pull the switch and to execute and kill somebody?" Well that was a pretty sobering thought and I thought about it, and that really started me to think a little bit about the system. I thought well, I don't want to be the executioner. Somebody must do that but it won't be me. But I still believed it was a necessary part of it so I left my vote green and it passed and became law—the new death penalty law. Little did I know that some twenty-five years later I would become the executioner for the State of Illinois as Governor, and that's when I really started to understand what this system was really all about.

Six years ago, as I campaigned for governor, I never believed that I'd be standing before a group like this or that I'd be out talking about abolition of the death penalty or talk[ing] about a moratorium, it never entered my mind and I never got any idea that I would be talking about the injustice of our capital punishment system and of our capital system altogether. And so, you never know where life is going to take you and what road you're going to go down, but whatever path it is, you ought to know what you're talking about, and you ought to be involved in it.

In January of 1999, I took office as Governor of the State of Illinois and, within a matter of weeks, I learned that it was an innocent man that [was] nearly executed and killed for a crime that he didn't commit and he spent fifteen years on death row. I'd been Governor, got elected in January, and in February my wife and I were sitting in the mansion in Springfield, Illinois watching the news. I don't do that very often, less and less each day. But I was a new Governor and I thought I'd better keep up with the news. And here comes a little fellow by the name of Anthony Porter that had just been released from prison (and he had a little Lincoln stove pipe hat on and a big grin on his face) who just spent I don't know, fifteen, eighteen years in prison for a crime he didn't commit. He was happy to be out. But I'm never convinced that he knew why he was there. Got a very low IQ, got no business being on death row, maybe in prison, but certainly not on death row, and that's the reason that he got off was—because he had a low IQ.

And some folks like Andrea who did a great job not only with Madison Hobbly and the people that she's worked with but lots of other folks. And I wanted to say that Andrea has been on the scene,

she's dedicated to her job and I've watched her work and she's been an inspiration to me and I hope to you folks that are here today, because I don't know anybody that's more dedicated than Andrea is and I want to say thanks to you for all your help here Andrea.

But this little guy was just happy to be out of prison and I said to my wife, "How does that happen? How does a man sit in prison for eighteen years for a crime he didn't commit in the greatest country in the world with supposedly the best system, and a system that I had a great deal of belief in? How does that happen in this country?" I still don't understand how it happens. I see it everyday, innocent people, fifteen, eighteen, twenty years sitting in prison on death row for a crime they didn't commit. Now what kind of a country is this? I don't understand that part of the system.

So I said to my wife, "You know there's really something wrong here," and of course the more I got to looking into it, the more I realized two things: If you're a minority and you're poor, the whole deck is stacked against you. You haven't got a chance. It's bad enough if you're middle class and white but [I've] got to tell you it's terrible if you're poor and black or poor and [of color]. There's just no chance for you in this system. And of course, again, nobody really pays any attention to it. It's kind of in the abstract with a lot of people. I always ask my friends now that I see, "How many of you know somebody on death row?" And they say, "I don't know anybody on death row. Did you ever?" "No." "Ever know anybody that's gone to prison?" "No, didn't know anybody."

So you know that's kind of the way I was. I never knew anybody on death row 'til I met this fellow, Anthony Porter, and I met Anthony Porter and he spent eighteen years there. But I can't imagine—well, I can imagine. The problem is that there are too many people like George Ryan was a few months ago or a few years ago [who] believed [the death penalty] was an important part of the system, and they haven't taken the time to look at it because first of all, their everyday [lives don't] warrant it, they don't have any personal interest in it. But if you ask that question of a minority, "Do you know anybody on death row?" you'll get the litany. They'll tell you about their brother, their cousin, their son-in-law, their aunt, their father, somebody that's had a tough time with the system and ended up on death row, because that's the majority of the people [who] are there now. And so I look[ed] at that system and said, "I don't know how I could believe in this system but it must be an aberration." It's got to be an aberration. I was elected in January, this happened in February.

Well, poor Anthony Porter was forty-eight hours away from death. We had measured him for his suit, his burial suit, and we had taken his meal, his menu order, his last meal. And if it hadn't been for not the system, not the attorneys, not the prosecutors or the defense attorneys, but journalism students from Northwestern University and other folks that were involved, poor Anthony Porter would be dead and gone by now. He wouldn't be around and who knows where this whole debate would have gone with me, I don't know. But thank God he was found innocent, the journalism students went to work and found [the] killer and got a taped confession of the real killer. And so I [thought] this was kind of an aberration in our system that I believe so much in, that maybe things like that will happen once in a while.

But don't you know that it's thirty days later in March and I get my first death penalty case that comes to my desk. The [Illinois] Supreme Court had set the date for a fellow by the name of Andrew Kokoraleis, a Greek fellow, and he supposedly committed, and he did commit, a horrendous crime against a young woman, pulled her off the street and raped her and mutilated her, did a lot of strange things and threw her back on the street dead. And so the death warrant came to my desk signed for him to be executed. So I said to myself, this fellow could be another Anthony Porter. How do I know he's guilty? Anthony Porter was guilty and spent eighteen years in prison, went through a jury system, found guilty by a jury, went through all of the appeals systems, still going through the appeal system when he got released and was never really found to be—and he was found guilty and almost executed but he was really innocent. And how do I know that Andrew Kokoraleis hasn't gotten the same situation?

So I went to work and called in the prosecutors and the defense lawyers and did a whole study, the prison review board, I brought those people in and we did a whole story on Anthony Kokoraleis. I wanted to make sure he was guilty if he was going to be executed and I was going to execute him. Well, you just ask a lot of people and it seemed if we were going to have the death penalty, Andy Kokoraleis, was a fellow that it was meant for if we were going to have the death penalty. And I had to ask myself if he was in fact guilty, and that was the big question with me. Well, I was convinced after a lot of discussion with people, I talked with people in the community and some told me that in the name of justice he ought to be executed because of the terrible thing he did. [I] said, "Is he guilty?" "Well, we assume he's guilty." I had religious leaders that came in and said, "You shouldn't do it on moral grounds. You should not execute this man, you ought to put him in prison for the rest of his life."

Well, in the end, I ultimately sat in judgment of Anthony Kokoraleis, and signed his death warrant, and he was executed. And that's what really started to bother me. It's a gnawing that I've still got with me, [it] still bothers me that I executed this man. And so that's when I decided that I should take a little harder look. But it wasn't long after . . . we executed Anthony Kokoraleis that one of the local newspapers here did a whole series on the death penalty and came up with a lot of things. It was some more troubling evidence that the system that I believed so much in was really faulted and bad and they had put a lot of criminals in jail and [of those] put on death row, a lot had been freed. And in the system, it was very badly broken, and at that point, three more people were freed that had been found guilty by a jury and continued to be found guilty by the review courts but in fact were innocent and released from prison.

Then came the story from the newspaper, and in the story they said that there were thirty-three death row inmates [who] had been [poorly] represented in trial. Now here's people . . . on trial for their [lives] and the attorneys that represented them had either been disbarred or suspended from the practice of law at some point after their trial. They weren't very good lawyers. They weren't paid for what they did, and they were just people who kind of filled in the courtroom. Some slept through it, some came in drunk. Some were addicts, drug addicts, came in high to the courtroom to defend a person for his life in the best system in the world. I don't understand how that happens either. I'm a pharmacist. I don't know how all these things work in the courtroom, but I'm learning a lot.

I also found that thirty-five African Americans, as Andrea pointed out, had been tried by all-white juries. So I tried to imagine myself or somebody else that's white being in a courtroom with an all-black jury and how [it] would feel. You'd be probably pretty uncomfortable. So I thought about that. How would you like to be a person of color and have nobody in that jury box to even resemble you, look like had maybe a little sympathy for you in some fashion just based on what your race is? I don't know how they'd call that a jury of your peers, but evidently they don't or they do and get away with it. The other thing that bothered me was that forty-six inmates were on death row and they had been convicted on the testimony of a jail house snitch. Now, I don't know of any worse testimony than to tell somebody, "Here is your get out of jail early card, if you tell me what I need to know about Andrea, and I'll let you [get] six months or a year off your sentence." It's just unbelievable that in this system . . . that could happen, that you could bribe somebody to tell [you] what you want to

hear so you can nail somebody else. I don't know how that happens in the best system in the world.

So our record was a disgrace in Illinois. It was a shameful, shameful record on the capital punishment system of this state. In my first year as Governor, the justice system in this state had exonerated more people than it executed. People had been found guilty, twenty-five people since 1977 when I cast that green vote until I became Governor, twenty-five people on death row, thirteen had been exonerated and twelve had been executed. And these thirteen were all found guilty once again through the system, but were exonerated—some by the system and some without the system. But I was [the] Governor . . . [and] had to give the final order on execution, and when I thought about it, I thought, I'm the fellow that has to order the injection of a poison into a man's veins that's strapped to a gurney, shoved into a cold antiseptic room with a bunch of people standing around him, and a gallery of witnesses to watch the guy die. In America we do that. In America we do that, unbelievable. It is absolutely unbelievable.

I've visited death row and I've been to see the death chamber. I would never want to witness an execution, and I've turned down the opportunity on a couple of occasions. But if you can imagine a human being shoved into a room, strapped down with some guy standing there with his rubber gloves on, ready to inject you so you can quiver and die while an audience watches, some even cheer. So I said to myself, "This is America." That shouldn't be. Why should we have a system like that? Now we're talking about not only just killing people but maybe the possibility of killing some innocent people. And [there] wasn't anything courageous or outstanding about what I did. I really had no choice. I said, "Until this system is fixed, until I can be certain that we're not going to execute somebody [who is] not guilty, then I'm going to call a moratorium and we're going to put a stop to this death machine in Illinois."

The question was always in my mind whether it was the right thing to do or not because most of the people around me, staff folk, were also kind of conservative Republicans who kind of flocked together, and they were all after me not to do it. And I had a couple of prosecutors on my staff, and before it was over, we converted them all, but it was a tough battle for me. And I had a lot of problems, not problems, but a lot of discussions and late-hour nights talking to these folks. We decided that I shouldn't make the decision about who should live or die, and when you talk about thirteen out of twenty-five that are exonerated, that's like flipping a coin to say, "Do they live or

do they die?" And that's the kind of decision that we make. It's not fair and the [in]accuracy is just unbelievable.

But stopping the killings was really only the beginning. When I called the moratorium, I appointed a board, you saw a couple of them here today. I know Scott Turow was just in here ahead of me. Scott was a former U.S. prosecutor; he was like me. He was a hard-core believer in the death penalty. And as he served on this commission, he changed his tune and his thoughts and his ideas and he saw how bad it really was. And now I think he's an abolitionist, I'm not sure. But he's pretty close if he isn't. He is.

I appointed a very dedicated, knowledgeable group, and I tried to be fair in my appointments. I put defense lawyers on, I put prosecutors on, I put former federal judges on, I put former Senator Paul Simon on the commission to give it some flavor outside of the people that work in it everyday, we put a couple of business people on that commission and I spent two hard years. This wasn't a cursory group that sat down and said we're going to do this, they worked almost every day. They met at some point and talked and sat in the back part of my office, in the Governor's office, and talked about this whole system and came up with eighty-five different ideas and thoughts to make the system better.

Now I always say that and then I say to myself, how the hell do you make the death penalty system better and why would you want to? Well I guess what I mean is that it makes it better that you lessen the chance that you're going to execute an innocent person and that makes it better, but it doesn't mean that you're not going to execute, it just means that maybe you're going to make it a little tougher to execute somebody like an Anthony Porter who's innocent.

And so they put together their system and their ideas and presented them to me and I took them to the Illinois General Assembly, where I had a Republic[an] Senate and a Democrat[ic] House and I was in the last months of my term, the last weeks of my term as Governor. And I couldn't pass through the Republican Senate, couldn't even get them out of the committee, the bills that we had presented to make some of these changes, some of these eighty-five changes. I didn't expect to get them all but it sure would have been nice if we could have gotten some of the videotaping ones and do away with jail house snitches and single witnesses to send somebody to death row. If we could have just a more reasonable, I mean they're all reasonable but they just seemed like it's a no-brainer. It would be an easy thing to vote for, it doesn't make you look like you're soft on crime and that's the other part of the problem. That's another whole problem, there's politics behind all

of this, but I couldn't pass it because the Republican Senate, or basically the President of their Senate, absolutely was a staunch death penalty supporter and just wouldn't let the bills out.

And so I had to make a decision as we got down to the closing days of my administration. The 13th of January was my last day and I think it was on the 11th at Northwestern University that I commuted the sentences of 167 members of death row, and it was here I think the day before, that was on a Friday the 10th, that we pardoned four people on death row [who] had been put there by some rogue cops in District 2 here. They were tortured to confess to crimes they didn't commit. Now these weren't four people at the same time, these were four individual people [who] had been sent to that same police district at different times and treated in the same way. They were beaten, they were bagged, that's where they take a typewriter cover and stick it over your head till you pass out and stick you with an electric cattle prod to wake you up and ask you to sign the confession. Three of them signed the confession and one didn't. One of them even scratched into the seat with a paper clip of a bench that he had been tortured to confess but he wasn't guilty. And he also scratched it on the wall of the hearing room. And there's never been any action taken. I think there's an investigation [of] the police commander now, there's still no action taken on what he did. He headed up that group and the policemen [who] were involved in it have been fired, so there's no question that what went on went on. These are four individual cases, and as Andrea said, she had one of them and she did a great job and I was one of those—there are some good things about being Governor and that was one of those days when I felt pretty good about what I did, especially for those four.

I commuted the sentences of 167 people with some reservation myself. We have—how much time do I have here?

ANDREA LYON: (OFF THE MIC.)

GOV. GEORGE RYAN: —church at ten in the morning. We had a fellow that lived right next door to my wife and I, his name was Steve Small. Steve's great-grandfather was Governor of the State of Illinois and he was a fine young man, had a nice family, and when I was going to Springfield, he kind of looked after Laura Lynn, and he'd blow the snow off my sidewalks, help me with my kids when [we] were gone, just a good neighbor, but he had a lot of money, a lot of money. Then he ended up with more money because they sold all their interest in cable television and radio and TV stations they had around the country and Steve decided that he wanted to—he was going to stay in Kankakee and do what he could to make [the] place a little better to

live in. He bought an old Frank Lloyd Wright house and he went over to Europe and he bought all of the things that he needed to restore that house back to its normal state.

And [he] went in and talked with his accountant one day and his accountant said before the end of the year you'd better go buy whatever you want because next year there's going to be more taxes on all these luxury items like cars and boats. And so he went out and bought a big yacht down in Florida and he bought a fancy car that he was touring around in Kankakee in, about [a] \$300,000 car. Now there aren't a lot of those in Kankakee, as a matter of fact, I think that was the only one in Kankakee, Illinois. But he pulled up into his Frank Lloyd Wright house, there was an electrician up working on the lights. And he looked down and he said, "Who the hell is that guy?" He said, "Oh that's Steve Small, he just inherited a lot of money." He said, "Yeah, I can tell by that car. He's really got a lot of money."

Well, Steve was at home one night and he got a call from who he thought were the Kankakee police. They said, "Somebody's broken into your Frank Lloyd Wright house. We need you to come over and sign a complaint against him." He got out of his bed, told his wife, "I'll be back in a few minutes and walked down to his garage, opened the door, they put a gun on him, threw him in the trunk, and took him out in the country after he called his wife to put together a million dollars in ransom. And they buried him alive. And the fellow that buried him was also from Kankakee, and he and his family I knew, so I knew both sides of this operation, the fellow that killed our friend Steve Small and [I] felt very bad about it. I knew the kid that killed him was a kid by the name of Danny Edwards. Danny Edwards' mother and father I've known, watched for years and knew the family—in my little town that's what happens. And so I had to make, he was part of that decision that I had to make.

Interestingly enough, when I was talking about commutation, I got a letter from Danny Edwards, the killer. He and his girlfriend were found guilty and he was sentenced to die and she was sentenced to life in prison, another [un]fair part of the system. But he wrote me a letter and said, "Don't do me any favors. Leave me on death row, but you can do whatever you want with the rest of those guys, but leave me on death row because I'll take my chances with the justice system." So I never answered his letter but it wasn't long 'til I had talked about pardoning some of these folks and I got another letter from Danny Edwards. And he said, "I didn't realize how much power you got as Governor." He said, "You know what you could really do is pardon me and my girlfriend and I could travel with you as you travel

around the states talking about people who have been convicted wrongly.” And he said, “You know we could travel around and talk about that together and you could use me as an example. But in either case if you can’t pardon me, again I ask that you don’t commute my sentence because I want to stay on death row. I don’t want to spend the rest of my life in an 8 x 12 cell and I’ll take my chances where I am.” Well, I didn’t answer that letter either but that’s where he is today. He’s in an 8 x 12 cell in Pontiac, Illinois; I believe and I think that’s worse than death frankly. If you have to spend the rest of your life in a little cell, 8 x 12, and if you’re a good boy maybe you can get out for an hour a week or something. But those were some of the decisions.

One more decision that affected my decision some, I had a lot of things that really bothered me because I was hot and cold on the commutation and I’d meet with the families of the victims and they’d say, “What are you going to do? We want you to study all of these cases and then decide one by one which ones you should commute because the person that killed my loved one is absolutely guilty.” I had one fellow that came to me, he wanted a private meeting with me, and we set it up and I met with him. His sister was very, very vocal about any commutations or pardon. She wanted the guy that killed her mother and dad, she wanted him executed without question. He said to me, “What are you going to do?” And I said, “I got to tell you, frankly I don’t know.” He said, “Well let me tell you, I sat under the kitchen table of my house and watched these two guys kill my mother and dad and I want them executed.” I said, “Sounds like a good reason for execution but I got to tell you, I don’t know yet what I’m going to do. I have no idea. But sounds like maybe this is a good reason to use the death penalty,” and I had emotions that were like this on a daily basis—do I or don’t I?

I not only met with the victim’s families, but I met with the incarcerated families as well, and, strangely enough, they’re normal people like the victim’s families and they’ve got children, they[’ve] got mothers, they[’ve] got fathers, they[’ve] got brothers, they’re part of our society, and they’re human beings, and they’re lined up to die. I had a fellow that I went to high school with, black fellow, his name was Claude Lee. Claude and I played football together back in, that was in the late ’40s frankly, and in those days you socialized with blacks in school and talked with them, but when school was over, they went home and I went home. But we were friends in school, wasn’t anything racist about it, never thought about it in that fashion, Claude was a friend of mine.

And when I ran for Governor, Claude came to me and said, "You know I'm a Democrat but I'm going to help you 'cause we've been friends." So he worked a couple of precincts for me and I got elected and always thanked him. Well, the day that I met with the victims, with the incarcerated families, I went around the room and each person got up and said who they were, talked about the person that was in jail, and I came to this fellow and he got up and he said, "My name is Claude Lee." I looked at him. I didn't recognize him. He had aged considerably, had a beard, gray. And I said, "Claude I didn't recognize you." I apologized for not recognizing him.

Well he said, "I want you to know that my son is guilty of what he did. He shot a cop in Kankakee point blank, stopped on a normal, routine traffic stop, pulled a gun out from underneath the seat, and when he came up to the car, he shot him in the face and killed him." And Claude said, "My son is guilty." He said, "There's no question about it. But he's also sick. He's been sick for a long time, little unstable, maybe we shouldn't have let him be out, maybe we should have done some other things, but we didn't." And he said, "Are you going to kill my son?" I said, "Claude, I really don't know what I'm going to do. I haven't made up my mind how I'm going to handle this yet." But it had a big impact on my decision and those words still echo in my head, "Are you going to kill my son?" Who am I to kill anybody's son? Who am I, Governor? You kill because you're Governor? You kill because you're President? I don't think so. But our system says you do. And it's an awesome responsibility for anybody to have.

Claude Lee's son is still alive, and I've seen Claude since, and he thanks me every time he sees me, and it's a very emotional thing. So I had a great deal of concern about what I did even after I did it. I wondered if I had done the right thing. But before I did it, I said to myself, "I got the power now as Governor to commute the sentences of everybody on death row and if I pick and choose and make a mistake, then I'm going to be looking over my shoulder and living with it for the rest of my life." Let's assume that an innocent person gets executed and I did nothing to stop it when I had the power to do it. And so that's when I decided that I could not say guilty, guilty, innocent. I said they're all, maybe ninety-nine out of a hundred in there, are guilty, but if there's one innocent, we shouldn't kill them. And besides, what kind of a society kills their citizens? Why do you do this? What brings us to the point where we think death is the only answer? My wife and I have six children and fourteen grandchildren and I'm always asked what would you do if it were one of yours?

I don't know how I'd feel, but I don't think that I would demand death. Because people tell me the reason they want the death penalty is because it brings an end to their grief, to their misery, except, of course, at Christmas, Hanukah, New Year's, their birthday, so there really never is an end to their grief. And how do you put aside the murder of your daughter by killing somebody else? That never made sense to me. Why do you make another family and another whole group of people miserable? And so that was the fact . . . that brought me where I am today on this whole bit with the death penalty and why I did what I did with the 167 people that were on death row.

I've come full circle now in this whole process. I'm an abolitionist. I think the [death] penalty ought to be eliminated altogether. I don't think there's any reason to have it. And so, I saw no sign of reform from the Illinois General Assembly although the Democratic Senate and the Democratic House and the Democratic Governor, and there's still isn't a whole lot of hope for a lot of—at least there's is a friend of mine, Neal Jones. And Neal promised me when I left that that would be his number one priority to make some of those changes that are necessary to make and they are in the process of doing that, an unfortunate situation.

But I think that I made the right decision, and I think that there's no question that these are some very difficult times. And our society should be raising questions about morality and justice and fairness, especially in light of what goes on in capital punishment. But in my view, I think now is really the time for us as a nation and as a country to become kind of a beacon. I've been in Europe and worked on an international moratorium with the European community just a couple of weeks ago, trying to get a resolution through to the United Nations for a moratorium to stop the death machine all over the world and study the systems and find out if there's something they can do to improve them or to abolish them.

And the other part of it is, once you stop the system, once you stop the death machine, it's pretty tough to start it up again because you got the same kind of political pressures that you got to stop it. And so, we need to change some laws and we need to continue to try for abolition, and part of the argument I heard when I was in Europe a couple of weeks ago was that basically, from Amnesty International, [which] was against my position, that they're afraid we were going to lose and it will set our movement back several years if we do lose.

I don't agree with that, and I always like to correlate that with a fellow by the name of Abraham Lincoln who we're pretty proud of here in Illinois. I think Abraham Lincoln without question is one of

the greatest men that ever lived, certainly the greatest President. And if you think about the time that he led this country through, the worst time in the history of America, families killing families in a battle, a bloody battle, more people killed in that [than] in all the wars—in the Civil War. That his party was against him, his Cabinet was against him, the press was against him. He had no friends any place, and the country was broke[n], but he persevered, he stayed the course, he kept plugging along just like he did when he ran for office seven or eight times before he got elected.

And I said to myself, “What would have happened to Americans if Abraham Lincoln hadn’t been elected president? Would there have been somebody else that would have come along and picked up that cause and changed the life for a whole race of people?” Changed their lives totally, changed the world—one man, Abraham Lincoln. And it was because he persevered. He tried and he tried and he tried and he kept on until he succeeded, and I feel that’s what we have to do with this movement for abolition. We have to continue to try. We’re going to lose. We’re going to lose and we’re going to lose, but we[’ve] got to try and we[’ve] got to try and we[’ve] got to try.

I told Andrea earlier, before we came in here, that if this system is going to change, it’s going to change because young people, students, not only law students, but young people have a different thought about it than us old, gray-haired folks. They have a different thought about punishment and life generally, and most of the young people really aren’t big supporters of the death penalty. Now it may be a long time before they make the change, but I think that’s where it’s going to happen, and I’ve addressed a lot of audiences at the law schools around America and I always get a great reception from the young people here because they[’ve] got a different thought about it and that’s what’s going to happen.

You know Abraham Lincoln said [that] the differences between history’s most historic accomplishments and its most staggering failures is often simply the village’s will to persevere. And if we give up now and we don’t continue to try to do what we think is right then we’ll never succeed. Now, there isn’t any question that this system is not only faulted, it’s bad—from the arresting police officers to the highest court in the land, there [are] problems that need to be addressed. And in this country, there isn’t any reason that they can’t be addressed. There isn’t any reason that people can’t come out of the abstract like I do and get involved in this movement because someday you never know who’s going to be involved in it. Maybe you will know somebody on death row. Maybe you don’t know [him] today

but there will come a time, like [for] me, that you will. And you'll have a different thought about it and so will America.

So I appreciate the opportunity to come by here this afternoon and congratulate Andrea for this great job she's doing with this new center she's got started and for all of the help that she's given me over the years and the direction people like Andrea that keep me going and inspire me to do what I do. Thank you very much. Questions, are we taking any questions?

ANDREA LYON: We can if you want to.

GOV. GEORGE RYAN: I will. I'd be glad to. Thank you.

ANDREA LYON: Governor Ryan said that he's happy to take a few questions so if somebody would like to ask some questions he'd be glad to answer them.

AUDIENCE: As you've learned if you're in a war you want (inaudible) but I wanted to tell you that when you said (inaudible) at Northwestern sorry, (inaudible) Madison Hobbly is it, the angel of death (inaudible) it's time to go and I would have said take me, take me. Thank you.

GOV. GEORGE RYAN: Thank you.

ANDREA LYON: They're an emotional crew, what can I tell you. Does anyone else have any questions they'd like to ask?

AUDIENCE: Governor you were in the process of making your decision, but before you made it, did you hear from the Governors of any other states trying to influence your decision?

GOV. GEORGE RYAN: No, I had a lot of questions about other Governors—if I had any advice for them—and I really don't. I think probably one of the toughest jobs of being Governor is [that] I had to make some decisions about who lives and dies, is that you're the last person on the death penalty list. And so each Governor has to be comfortable with [his or her] situation and I guess all of them believe that their system is flawless and so they don't—I mean I can't believe that myself but they haven't had the experience I think maybe I've had or they haven't had the chance to look at it.

I think the only fellow was [in] Maryland that was showing that the system was so racist that he called a moratorium and he got beat and the new Governor came in and lifted the moratorium. I think that happened. And I don't know whether he got beat because he did the moratorium, I'm not saying that, I don't know. But I know there's an awful lot of politics in this whole death penalty situation. I mean I think there's people probably, for religious beliefs or whatever, [who] really that are elected probably don't believe in the death penalty sys-

tem but they'd rather be elected than be shown to be soft on crime. That's when they're afraid of you when they think you're soft on crime.

AUDIENCE: As a young person I just want to say that I agree with [your feeling] that young people are opposed to the death penalty and I think that was very brave what you did overturning all those death sentences to a life sentence. And I just wanted to say that I hope you continue to influence more people, I hope that our current Governor will consider what you did and really think about it because, like I said, it's very brave and took a lot for you do that.

GOV. GEORGE RYAN: Well thank you for the kind words. The new Governor, my successor, has said he would leave the moratorium in place, but what that means is, even if he said he was going to lift the moratorium, it would probably be ten, twelve, fifteen years before a Governor in this state would be confronted with a decision if it holds true to the way the system works today. And so he decided to leave the moratorium in place, which is good. What I'd like to get is another major state, I was hoping maybe Gray Davis before he turned the reigns over to Arnold would say, you know I'm going to do not only a moratorium, but I've going to do some commutations. He's got one of the biggest death rows, it is the biggest death row in the country, four hundred and some people or maybe six hundred I don't remember, but I'd like to see Gray Davis do that. If you have any influence with him you ought to call him. Yes.

AUDIENCE: (Inaudible) second thoughts about the prison system and the general trend where the laws are going in general?

GOV. GEORGE RYAN: Absolutely it gets scary everyday. The laws we [have], the power [we] give to prosecutors and to law enforcement all in the name, now it's in the name of patriotism. I used to believe in all that stuff. I used to think that was okay but I think that we have to guard against lawlessness in the best way we can, but I don't think we should be taking away personal freedoms. When you look at the abuses that are in the system and the power that's involved with the prosecution, the arresting officer, to the prosecutor, to the judges and to the resources, the resources that are involved, Andrea and I were talking about that and you know public defenders get paid nothing. She was talking about [how] they[ve] got a school now for investigators for defendants and [if] you want an investigation as a defendant, you can't afford to have one. In the mean time, the prosecution has got thirty-five people out running around at the taxpayers' expense turning over every stone that they can. And I don't know

what's fair about that. I don't know in a system that's supposed to be the best and the fairest, I find it to be just really, totally unfair.

And at some point, but again it's a system that most people don't get caught up in so they don't understand it, they don't know. Say well he got charged, he must be guilty, and if he's got nothing to hide, why does he care what they look at? Well, I told you I'm a pharmacist, so I don't know much about that, but the other thing is, and I don't want to step on anybody's toes here, but I don't understand how attorneys can practice in this system without dissent—knowing how bad it is. I'm talking about any kind of lawyer, defense lawyer, prosecutor, how they tolerate, if they know what I know, how do they tolerate it and not complain and not set up some kind of protection within their own group? If I had a sixty-percent success rate in filling prescriptions as a pharmacist, I wouldn't be around very long. And the pharmacists probably would make sure I wasn't around very long. And so I don't understand thirteen out of twenty-five people that were almost executed, and we give it a yawn and a nod, I don't understand that. And that's why I'm on this soap box to have more people hopefully give an understanding of what it's really all about and to take some action and get out and stimulate young people like her and hopefully we've inspired her. Yes.

AUDIENCE: A lot of what we've been focusing on for the past couple of days deals with the broader social issues of race and class and the effect that those have on the criminal justice system. And I'm curious as to your thoughts, and maybe fears that, do you think that abolition of the death penalty could lead to taking the spotlight away from those broader issues at all?

GOV. GEORGE RYAN: Well, I don't know. Let me tell you, when I started into this process with the 167 to commute their sentences, I had the records pulled on every one of them. In my office was a list about this long of three ring binders that had the history of every prisoner on death row, each had their own binder. And we did the social background and research and I spent a lot of hours looking at every one of them and they all had the same common thread that they were mistreated by their parents if they had any, they were subjected to alcohol and drugs as young people and violence, and it was in the background of almost everybody that was there. And I think it's absolutely a factor in what makes people tick and what makes them do the things they do.

My theory is . . . that you just don't kill somebody if you're mentally solid, straight. You just don't walk up to somebody and shoot them and kill them and cut their throat; . . . and those are actions that, what

normal person would do that? So if they're not normal, then they must be mentally deficient in some fashion or they must be alcoholics and drug addicts, and that's what I found when I researched all that. And the victims' families said to me: "Study these cases one by one and make your decision, don't commute them all." I did just that, I studied them one by one, every one of them. They don't believe it, but I did, I looked at every one of them. I spent a lot of time with our staff and people and I found this common thread that ran through all of it.

So how was I going to say that one is guilty and one isn't? I have no idea. I don't know. But I know that we're talking about killing people that had been mistreated. Mother is [a] prostitute, lived with men [who] beat them. One mother put beer in her baby's bottle at two or three months old, drugs, so why—to kill those people just didn't make sense to me, any of it. And were they, like I said I would guess that 99% of them are guilty, but I commuted them. But I . . . have no reason to kill them. I have no reason to kill them. Yes.

ANDREA LYON: We'll have one more question and then . . .

AUDIENCE: Has this experience kind of liberalized your ideology on the government's responsibility to invest in impoverished people, impoverished communities to kind of cut off the problem at its source?

GOV. GEORGE RYAN: Well, you talk to my Republican friends, they'd say I sure changed on that issue. But in my early days, I did take on the gun lobby at one time when I ran for Lieutenant Governor. But yeah, I think that there's no question that I have a different view as I said from the time that I started to find out about it. And if I hadn't seen Anthony Porter on the news that night, I don't know if I'd have done much then. But it was so obvious that the system was broken that it didn't really matter what your political views were to me, it was doing what was right and what had to be done and that's what I was elected to do. And I'm not trying to be, make myself sound like a hero, 'cause I'm not. I think anybody in the position that I was in would have done the same thing and maybe in a different way, but they would have pretty much put a stop [to it]—I think at least [would have] called a moratorium. I don't know how many of them would have commuted the sentences, but yeah, it's liberalized the whole thought.

And I'll tell you what else. I think we've opened up a debate on a world-wide basis, I know we have. And that's why we've got the momentum on this issue now, and we've got to keep it going, and we've got to keep the ball in the air or we're going to lose it. Right

now there's the twelve or thirteen states that don't have the death penalty, and I understand that the Attorney General of the United States is in every one of those states trying to pass the death penalty law to reinstate the death penalty there. I'm not sure I understand why, but that's what I hear he's doing, in states that haven't got it, and you heard that.

ANDREA LYON: We thank the Governor very much.

GOV. GEORGE RYAN: Thanks all of you for your time. Enjoy Saturday night in Chicago.

