



PUBLIC

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Further information on EXTRA 152/99 (AMR 51/175/99, 29 October 1999) - Death penalty / Legal concern

USA (Oklahoma) Cornel Cooks, aged 43

At a hearing on 16 November 1999, the Oklahoma Pardon and Parole Board voted 5-0 to deny clemency to Cornel Cooks. He remains scheduled to be executed on 2 December. He was sentenced to death in 1983 for the rape and murder of 87-year-old Jennie Ridling, white, at her home in Lawton, in October 1982.

At the end of the hearing Cornel Cooks was brought into the room and spoke for about 20 minutes to request clemency. Wearing handcuffs, leg shackles and a belly chain, he expressed remorse and apologized to Jennie Ridling's relatives (none of whom was present), and to his own family. He told the hearing that at his trial 16 years ago he had wanted tell the jury of his remorse, but had been told by his lawyer "that wasn't the right thing to do". In his statement to the clemency hearing, he reportedly said "I never meant to kill. I just don't think being executed is the right answer here. There is so much in prison a person could do if he wanted to... I know in my heart I'm not a cold-blooded person." He said that he felt unable to express himself fully because of his lack of education.

Earlier in the hearing, Assistant Attorney General (AAG) Bill Humes urged the Board to deny clemency:

"This morning you have heard from Mr. Cooks' representatives. They have presented a myriad of reasons why they believe clemency should be recommended. Among those reasons offered: Mr. Cooks' low intellectual functioning; the fact he had a less than ideal childhood; the fact he made the decision to abuse alcohol and drugs. It is plain that he is remorseful and that he received ineffective assistance of counsel at his trial. But, let me tell you here and now that if you believe these are adequate reasons for clemency, you should be prepared in the next year or so to grant or at least recommend clemency over and over and over. We estimate within the next year 15 to 20 people will come before you with death sentences, asking for clemency. I guarantee you, you will hear stories much like Cornel Cooks' from each and every one of them.

And it's rather obvious that most murderers, most murders are not committed by people who are well educated, who are affluent, who are intelligent, who are unafflicted by psychological or emotional problems. Instead, as these men and women come before you in the next year or so and plead for clemency, you are going to see a common thread that weaves through their lives. You will hear and see stories of troubled childhoods, you will see drug and alcohol abuse, you will see and hear claims of learning disabilities, psychological disabilities, emotional disabilities and various things."

The AAG then went on to attack Amnesty International's action on behalf of Mr Cooks, as he had in an earlier clemency hearing for Scotty Moore (see update to EXTRA 56/99, AMR 51/90/99, 7 June 1999).

"I imagine that you members of the board have received letters from supporters, perhaps from around the United States, perhaps from around the world. The last time I appeared before this board was in conjunction with Scotty Moore's clemency hearing. I told you then I had a feeling that these letters were something

more than expressions of direct concern for Scotty Moore. I told you that probably most of the people that wrote those letters wouldn't know Scotty Moore if they saw him."

The AAG then showed the Board a copy of Amnesty International's Urgent Action for Cornel Cooks which he had obtained and read parts of it to the Board to demonstrate what he considers to be a "political" action.

"What is evident is that most of these letters are more about a political viewpoint and the general opposition to the death penalty than they are about Cornel Cooks. Don't misunderstand me, I think these people have a right to voice their opposition to the death penalty. But, this isn't the proper forum. This is where people who are intimately involved with this case come forward to tell you why or why not you should vote for clemency."

In July, AAG Humes received the Appellate Award for Outstanding Advocacy in Capital Cases from the national Association of Government Attorneys in Capital Litigation (see *Oklahoma shamelessly celebrates its violation of international law and deepens its isolation*, AMR 51/120/99, 2 August 1999).

FURTHER RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send faxes/express/airmail letters in English or your own language, in your own words:

- acknowledging the problem of violent crime, and expressing sympathy for the victims and their families;
- pointing out that there are increasing numbers of such relatives in the USA who are speaking out against the death penalty, saying that executions do not ease their pain, and serve only to deepen a culture of violence;
- expressing your own opposition to the death penalty, explaining that more than half the countries of the world have abandoned this punishment;
- urging the Governor to do all in his power to stop the execution of Cornel Cooks and all other death sentences that come before him.

Please do not mention AAG Humes' comments relating to Amnesty International at this stage. A separate response to these will be issued in due course.

APPEALS TO:

The Honorable Frank Keating
Governor of Oklahoma, State Capitol
Room 212, Oklahoma City, OK 73105, USA

Faxes: + 1 405 521 3353

Salutation: Dear Governor

COPIES TO: diplomatic representatives of USA accredited to your country.

You may also write brief letters of concern (not more than 250 words) to:

"Your Views", The Oklahoman, PO Box 25125, Oklahoma City, OK 73125, USA

Faxes: + 1 415 475 3183

Letters to The Editor, Tulsa World, 315 South Boulder Avenue, Tulsa, OK 74103, USA. **Faxes: + 1 918 581 8353**

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY.