Voices **VERN PIERSON AND ANNE MARIE SCHUBERT** GUEST CONTRIBUTORS

Death sentences shouldn't be overturned lightly

Gavin Newsom should be wary of handing out blanket commutation for those facing execution.



KENT NISHIMURA Los Angeles Times

NEWSOM'S 2019 execution moratorium stated it would not release anyone nor alter any sentence.

PRESIDENT TRUMP was right to cancel plans to livestream the execution of Fort Hood murderer Nidal Hasan. Carrying out a lawful sentence should be a solemn responsibility, never a public spectacle. California Gov. Gavin Newsom should exercise restraint of his own by rejecting blanket commutation of the state's death sentences.

As a society, we must respect the gravity of justice, especially when government exercises the power to take a life — or to replace a death sentence imposed by a jury and judge. Both decisions demand humility and respect for families forever changed by murder.

One of us is an elected district attorney; the other is a former elected district attorney. We both support capital punishment for the most heinous crimes. Our experience has taught us that justice requires both resolve and restraint.

We have sat with murder victims' families, listened to their anguish and despair, and prepared them for the painful road ahead. We have warned that they would hear horrific details of their loved one's murder and might see crime scene and autopsy photographs documenting their child's final moments. No family should endure such suffering.

We have promised to do everything within our power to secure justice. We have asked families to trust a system in which evidence would be heard, a jury would reach its verdict, and a judge would impose a lawful sentence. Above all, we have assured them that their loved one's life mattered and would never be forgotten.

That trust carries obligations long after the verdict. Trump's reversal honors an important one: Punishment should be carried out with dignity.

Hasan murdered 13 people and wounded 32 others in 2009. His crimes warrant the gravest accountability. They never justified turning his death into entertainment. Transparency requires independent observation, accurate reporting and public scrutiny. It does not require distributing footage of a person's death to a worldwide audience, where it can be replayed, manipulated and circulated indefinitely.

Canceling the broadcast leaves the death sentence intact. It demonstrates that supporting capital punishment and rejecting spectacle are entirely consistent. The Fort Hood victims deserve to be remembered for their lives, rather than through images of their murderer's final moments.

In California, Newsom faces a different decision: whether to commute the death sentences of the state's condemned prisoners. Each arose from an individual case, with distinct evidence, victims and legal history. Juries heard the evidence; judges imposed sentences subject to judicial review. Blanket commutation — occasionally exercised by outgoing governors, such as Illinois' George Ryan in 2003 and North Carolina's Roy Cooper in 2024 — substitutes an individual executive's stance for those individual judgments.

California voters have repeatedly chosen to retain capital punishment.

They rejected repeal in 2012 through Proposition 34 and again in 2016 through Proposition 62. In that same 2016 election, they approved Proposition 66 to reduce delays in death penalty appeals and carry out lawful sentences. Blanket commutation would replace the judgments of juries and judges with one governor's opinion and disregard voters' repeated decision to retain the death penalty for the most heinous crimes.

Consider 8-year-old Michael Lyons, who disappeared after school in Yuba City in 1996. Robert Boyd Rhoades sexually assaulted, tortured and murdered him. A jury returned a death verdict, affirmed by the California Supreme Court in 2019.

Or consider 12-year-old Polly Klaas, abducted at knifepoint from a slumber party in 1993 and murdered by Richard Allen Davis. A jury returned a death verdict; the trial judge declined to reduce the penalty, and the California Supreme Court affirmed. Blanket commutation would replace that judgment because the governor opposes the death penalty, rather than because he identified grounds for mercy particular to Polly's case.

Clemency is a legitimate constitutional power. It can correct injustice or recognize circumstances warranting mercy. Credible claims of wrongful conviction and other grounds for relief deserve serious consideration. But the authority to grant clemency carries a responsibility to exercise it wisely and justly. That requires examining each case on its merits, not treating hundreds of distinct judgments alike. How do we explain otherwise to the families we asked to trust the system?

Newsom's 2019 execution moratorium expressly stated that it would neither release anyone nor alter any sentence. Blanket commutation would abandon the second assurance. And families also deserve candor about what "life without parole" means. Newsom's parole board has created a pathway toward possible release for eligible prisoners serving that sentence. Although its current rules exclude prisoners who have already received a commutation, they can seek further clemency from a governor. For families, that uncertainty means more anguish: another hearing, another account of their loved one's murder, another plea for accountability. Will they be forced to fight this battle again?

Victims' families do not all agree about capital punishment. Some support clemency; others oppose it. Their voices deserve to be heard as individuals. Their losses should never become material for an execution broadcast or be brushed aside in pursuit of a political legacy.

The president's decision does not settle the debate over capital punishment. It does show that public officials can reconsider how they exercise extraordinary power. Newsom should do the same before making an irreversible decision across hundreds of cases.

Justice requires resolve to hold murderers accountable and restraint in exercising power. Trump has abandoned the spectacle. Newsom should abandon blanket commutation and give each case, and each family, the individual consideration they deserve.

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DIEGO FEDELE Getty Images

PEOPLE GATHER at an overlook as smoke rises from a Russian drone strike that hit a warehouse in Kyiv, Ukraine, in August.

Voices **JON DUFFY** CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Trump is making Putin's war easier

LAST WEEK, Ukrainian forces defending their country from Russia's invasion suddenly found their ability to coordinate operations disrupted. Satellite communications used to control Ukrainian interceptor drones defending cities against Russian attacks had been restricted. Ukrainian military personnel reported failed missions and lost drones. According to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, the restrictions allowed some Russian attack drones to evade interception.

Starshield, the military satellite communications service developed by SpaceX, has been provided to Ukraine under U.S. government control since late 2024. Reuters has reported that the order to restrict its capabilities that support Ukraine came from the White House. President Trump denies ordering the restrictions. Zelensky says Ukrainian tests found that the limitations applied inside Ukraine but not in European Union territory, contradicting SpaceX's explanation that the disruption was merely a technical problem.

There is an enormous difference between the United States declining to provide additional military assistance to a country fighting for its survival and deliberately interfering with its ability to defend itself.

The disruption fits a broader pattern of Trump administration decisions that have constrained Ukraine while offering concessions to Russia. Earlier this month, American officials warned Ukraine to stop attacking Russian oil refineries or risk losing access to critical U.S. weapons and intelligence. Those strikes have damaged Russia's ability to sustain its war.

Just weeks after signing bipartisan legislation intended to tighten U.S. sanctions on Russia, Trump reached an agreement with Russian President Vladimir Putin to ease restrictions on Russian diesel exports. Then, on Friday, Trump waived major provisions of the same new sanctions law, declaring that doing so served the national interest. The administration is also pressing European allies to resume buying Russian natural gas as part of a prospective peace agreement.

Putin's envoy welcomed the sanctions relief, even as the Russian president reaffirmed his territorial ambitions and his forces continued attacking Ukrainian cities and power facilities.

Since returning to office, Trump has shown open hostility to Zelensky, questioning his legitimacy as president and publicly suggesting Ukraine should replace him. Trump has repeatedly portrayed the leader of the invaded country, rather than the invading dictator, as the obstacle to peace.

Putin has spent more than two decades consolidating authoritarian rule and presiding over elections that offer Russians no meaningful opportunity to remove him from power. His opponents have been imprisoned, driven into exile or killed. In 2022, Putin launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine intending to subjugate an independent nation. Russian forces have since destroyed Ukrainian cities, massacred civilians and forcibly deported children.

The people of Ukraine are fighting to keep Putin's regime from deciding their future. Ukraine is not a perfect democracy, and Zelensky is not beyond criticism. But the right to choose their own government belongs to Ukrainians, not to the Russian president.

Ukrainians are doing the fighting themselves, paying for their independence with their own lives. They are not asking American soldiers to fight their war. They are asking for the means to defend their country.

Americans can reasonably disagree about how much assistance we should provide Ukraine and what a negotiated settlement might look like. But repeatedly constraining Ukraine while relieving pressure on Russia is something altogether different.

For 250 years, Americans have insisted that people have the right to govern themselves rather than submit to a distant ruler. Russia's invasion of Ukraine challenges that principle and the prohibition against territorial conquest that the U.S. helped make central to the international order after World War II.

There is also a compelling American strategic interest in Ukraine's survival. For more than four years, Ukrainian forces have inflicted enormous losses on Russia's military without American troops entering the fight. Supporting that resistance has weakened a major American adversary while helping defend the security of our European allies. In Ukraine, our national interests and professed principles point in the same direction.

Russia understands that calculation. According to U.S. intelligence reporting, Russia has provided Iran with information useful for targeting American forces in a war Trump himself launched. Moscow is helping Tehran attack and degrade U.S. military power without risking Russian troops in a direct confrontation. It is the same strategic logic that makes American assistance to Ukraine so valuable: weaken an adversary by helping another country fight it. Yet Trump has publicly dismissed reports of Russian assistance while offering Moscow economic relief.

Trump says he doesn't want to drive Russia "away from the bargaining table." Yet his concessions to Moscow have done little to bring the war to an end. These are deliberate choices he is making, not unavoidable compromises forced upon him by circumstances.

Putin is trying to conquer a sovereign nation and impose his will on its people. Ukrainians have spent more than four years fighting to prevent him from succeeding.

It is incomprehensible why the president of the United States would make Putin's task easier. And it is indefensible that he keeps doing it.

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