

THE CONSTITUTION PROJECT



Safeguarding Liberty, Justice & the Rule of Law

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Gov. White Urges Clemency for Mentally Ill Texas Death Row Inmate

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- Former Texas Governor Mark White joined thirty former federal and state judges, prosecutors and other legal practitioners in asking for clemency for Scott Panetti, a mentally ill Texas death row inmate scheduled for execution on December 3.

"I know very well that in so many instances, there are incredibly close and difficult calls that have to be made to either allow or prohibit the death penalty from being carried out," said White, who oversaw 19 executions while serving as governor.

"But Scott Panetti's plea for clemency is no such case," White said. "He is a severely mentally ill man. His trial was a sham. And executing Panetti would say far more about us than it would about the man we are attempting to kill. I strongly urge the Board of Pardons and Paroles and Governor Perry to commute Panetti's death sentence to life imprisonment without parole."

Panetti has suffered from serious mental illness for more than three decades. He was hospitalized more than a dozen times for psychosis and delusions in the 14 years prior to committing the murder for which he was convicted and sentenced to death. At his trial, he represented himself wearing a purple cowboy costume and attempted to call over 200 witnesses, including John F. Kennedy, the Pope, and Jesus Christ.

In a [letter](#) organized by The Constitution Project and delivered yesterday to Governor Rick Perry and the Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles, White and the others wrote, "Although Mr. Panetti committed a tragic crime, because of his severe mental illness and the uncertainty of his capital trial, at which he represented himself, we believe the most fitting punishment in his case is life in prison."

"Our concern is that the criminal justice system recognizes both the diminished culpability of a person with severe mental illness, like Mr. Panetti, and the absence of penological value in carrying out a death sentence in a case of such extreme mental illness," the former judges and prosecutors told Perry and the parole board.

Religious leaders, mental health organizations and experts, the American Bar Association and others also petitioned the parole board for clemency. More information about Panetti's case, including legal documents and complete listing of the clemency letters, is available from [Texas](#)

[Defender Service](#). In addition, Panetti's sister started an [online petition](#) to call attention to the case.

Panetti was sentenced to death for the 1992 murder of his parents-in-law, which he committed in front of his estranged wife and their three-year-old child.

White is co-chair of The Constitution Project's Death Penalty Committee, which released a [comprehensive report](#) on the administration of capital punishment in May.

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[About The Constitution Project](#)

Created out of the belief that we must cast aside the labels that divide us in order to keep our democracy strong, The Constitution Project (TCP) brings together policy experts and legal practitioners from across the political spectrum to foster consensus-based solutions to the most difficult constitutional challenges of our time. TCP seeks to reform the nation's broken criminal justice system and to strengthen the rule of law through scholarship, advocacy, policy reform and public education initiatives. Established in 1997, TCP is based in Washington, D.C.