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Description

The execution of a Georgia man touched off protests around the world and renewed calls to re-examine the use of the death penalty in the United States. Although Americans' support for the death penalty has been dropping, a majority still favor the death penalty for the most heinous crimes.

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Citation

MLA
Troy Davis Execution Renews Debate Over the Death Penalty.

BRIAN WILLIAMS, anchor:
Now to the story back in this country that began this broadcast last night, the execution of a Georgia man that touched off controversy around the world and raised the question that still hasn't been answered, may never be answered. Did an innocent man die late last night for a murder he never committed? NBC's Savannah Guthrie, who, as a lawyer has covered her share of crime and punishment controversies, is with us here in New York tonight. Savannah, good evening.

SAVANNAH GUTHRIE reporting:
Good evening, Brian. This was a terrible crime. A police officer who had come to the aid of a homeless man being beaten by a group of men was shot dead on the street. But the Troy Davis case is gathering worldwide headlines tonight because of persistent questions about whether he really was the man who pulled the trigger.
To his last breath, Troy Davis, convicted of killing an off-duty police officer in 1989, maintained his innocence.

Mr. JON LEWIS (WSB Radio): He said, 'I want to say something to the MacPhail family. I did not take your son, father, brother.'

GUTHRIE: Many believed he was innocent. For four hours after his scheduled execution, thousands of people all over the world held their breath during final appeals. There was lingering doubt about the conviction even from world leaders. No DNA linked Davis to the crime, and seven of nine eyewitnesses recanted their testimony. But shortly after 10 PM, the U.S. Supreme Court denied Davis' appeal, and at 11:08 he was pronounced dead. Today, a renewed debate over the death penalty. President Jimmy Carter released a statement saying, "We hope this tragedy will spur us as a nation toward the total rejection of capital punishment." Thirty-four states have the death penalty. This year 35 people have been executed in the U.S. Texas leads the way with 11 executions.
WILLIAMS (Republican Candidates Debate – 9/7/2011): Your state has executed 234 death row inmates, more than any other governor in modern times. Have you--have you struggled to sleep at night with the idea that any one of those might have been innocent?

Gov. RICK PERRY (Republican Candidates Debate – 9/7/2011): No, sir. I've never struggled with that at all.

WILLIAMS (Republican Candidates Debate – 9/7/2011): What do you make of that dynamic that just happened here, the mention of the execution of 234 people drew applause?

Gov. PERRY (Republican Candidates Debate – 9/7/2011): I think Americans understand justice.

GUTHRIE: Last night Texas put to death a white supremacist gang member for the infamous dragging death of an African-American man. There were no 11th hour attempts to save his life. Last fall, a Gallup poll found that 64 percent of Americans favor the death penalty, but that support has been dropping since 1994. Opponents point out that DNA tests and other evidence have overturned too many cases. In almost 40 years, more than 130 people on death row have been released with evidence of their innocence.

Mr. BARRY SCHECK (Innocence Project): We simply should not have a system where we execute people where there are serious and substantial doubts based on objective physical evidence, based on everything we know about the difficulties of eyewitness identification.

GUTHRIE: Bottom line, a majority of Americans still believe for the most vicious crimes the death penalty is what constitutes justice. And there's one more note on the Davis case. You cannot say this man did not get a day in court. Nearly two decades of appeals. And, in fact, the U.S. Supreme Court took the rare step of granting him a hearing on that new evidence, but the lower court judge who ultimately heard the changed testimony of the eyewitnesses ultimately decided to stand by the death sentence in this case, and so did the Georgia Parole Board, who looked at it for year, examined the evidence, heard from the witnesses and ultimately decided to continue with the death sentence. Brian.

WILLIAMS: It's a lot, and it does bear repeating. You're right. From the president through opinion polls that aren't what they were a decade, two decades ago, we are a majority death penalty nation.

GUTHRIE: It's right. And there have been, obviously, huge changes. We see fewer death sentences being handed out every year.

WILLIAMS: Right.

GUTHRIE: And there is this growing doubt. I think jurors in these trials seem to have a higher standard now. They want to see more in the way of scientific evidence. They want more certainty when it comes to the death penalty cases. And, in fact, just looking at the evidence in this case rather closely, I wonder whether a jury today would have convicted and sentenced to death on this same evidence. I think our country is changing, but the bottom line is it's still a majority death penalty favoring nation.

WILLIAMS: And that's a--that's a fascinating question. Always a pleasure to have you. Thanks for your reporting tonight. Savannah Guthrie.