



Death Penalty Information Center

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SUPREME COURT RULES TEXAS MAN WITH SEVERE MENTAL ILLNESS MAY NOT BE EXECUTED

WASHINGTON, DC –The U.S Supreme Court has ruled that Texas may not execute a severely mentally ill man who was allowed to defend himself at his trial despite his schizophrenia, 14 stints in mental hospitals, and a belief that the devil compelled his actions. In its 5-4 decision in *Panetti v. Quarterman*, the Court held that the lower court had used the wrong standard in judging Panetti's competency. Panetti, whose mental illness has worsened during his 12 years on death row, believed his approaching execution was part of an evil conspiracy to keep him from spreading God's word.

"The Court's ruling today is consistent with a long history of society's revulsion at executing the insane," said Richard Dieter, the Death Penalty Information Center's Executive Director. "As our knowledge of mental illness deepens, it makes less sense to apply society's worst punishment to those who have little understanding of the world around them."

In 1986, the U.S. Supreme Court held in *Ford v. Wainwright* that it was unconstitutional to execute an inmate who was presently insane. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the 5th Circuit ruled that Panetti could be executed because he was aware that he committed a crime and that he was to be punished. The question for the Supreme Court in *Panetti v. Quarterman* was whether mere awareness of one's acts can be equated with mental competence, or whether the person also needs to rationally understand what is taking place. In writing about this question for the majority, Justice Anthony M. Kennedy noted, "Gross delusions stemming from a severe mental disorder may put an awareness of a link between a crime and its punishment in a context so far removed from reality that the punishment can serve no proper purpose. It is therefore error to derive from *Ford*, and the substantive standard for incompetency its opinions broadly identify, a strict test for competency that treats delusional beliefs as irrelevant once the prisoner is aware the State has identified the link between his crime and the punishment to be inflicted."

Looking beyond this decision, the American Bar Association has passed a resolution calling for an end to executing those with serious mental illness. An almost identical resolution has been endorsed by the American Psychiatric Association, the American Psychological Association, and the National Alliance on Mental Illness, which urged the Justices to take Panetti's case.

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