

Hello, and welcome to the Death Penalty Information Center podcast, examining the status of the death penalty in each of the states. In this podcast, we will examine the history of the death penalty in Iowa.

In the nineteenth century, Iowa became the first state to abolish and then reinstate the death penalty. An abolition bill was passed in 1872 with the support of Quaker and Unitarian groups, and the state's largest newspaper. In voicing its support for abolition, the Des Moines Register called the death penalty "uncivilized and impossible to enforce."

In the mid-1870s, however, a crime wave swept the state. Mobs often took the punishment of offenders into their own hands by lynching suspected murderers. None of the perpetrators of these lynchings was ever prosecuted. In 1878, in response to the rise in crime and the perceived lack of law enforcement control, the legislature reinstated Iowa's death penalty. From 1878 to 1965, 36 executions took place in Iowa, averaging less than one execution every two years.

In 1964, Democrats won control of both houses of the Iowa legislature, and Democratic Governor Harold Hughes was reelected. Hughes, a strong opponent of capital punishment, had attempted to block the 1963 execution of a federal inmate Leo Figura, but the execution was carried out. No one since Figura has been executed in Iowa.

In 1965, Hughes took action to end the death penalty in his state, advocating for abolition legislation and commuting the death sentence of Leon Tice. In his statement on the commutation, Hughes said, "I believe that no one can read the whole story of the defendant's life...without reaching the conclusion that the society itself bears some stern responsibility in the tragic events for which the defendant stands convicted."

Hughes was not the only force behind the repeal of Iowa's death penalty in 1965. The Des Moines Register, the state's leading newspaper, was a vocal proponent of abolition, just as it was nearly a century earlier. A majority of Iowans, 57%, were in favor of ending the death penalty. Public support for repeal was driven by low crime rates across the state and the influence of the civil rights movement. The Iowa Democratic party included repeal of the death penalty in its party platform in 1964 and brought that platform to fruition one year later when the legislature overwhelmingly passed a bill to end capital punishment.

The most serious attempt at reinstating the death penalty in Iowa came in 1995, following the widely-publicized rape and murder of nine-year-old Anna Marie Emby the year before. Emby's parents became outspoken supporters of the death penalty, and the murder made crime a top issue in the 1994 gubernatorial election. Republican Terry Branstad, a death penalty supporter, won the election and supported a reinstatement bill the following year. However, religious groups from a variety of denominations organized opposition to the bill and successfully lobbied against it.

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