



## The Death Penalty on Trial: Crisis in American Justice

By Bill Kurtis

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### The Death Penalty on Trial: Crisis in American Justice By Bill Kurtis

Bill Kurtis, anchor of the wildly popular true-crime TV series *Cold Case Files* and *American Justice*, used to support the death penalty. But after observing the machinations of the justice system for thirty years, he came to a stunning realization that changed his life: Capital punishment is wrong. There can be no real justice in America until it is abolished.

In *The Death Penalty on Trial*, Kurtis takes readers on his most remarkable investigative journey yet. Together, we revisit murder scenes, study the evidence, and explore the tactical decisions made before and during trials that send innocent people to death row. We examine the eight main reasons why the wrong people are condemned to death, including overzealous and dishonest prosecutors, corrupt policemen, unreliable witnesses and expert witnesses, incompetent defense attorneys, bias judges, and jailhouse informants. We see why the new jewel of forensic science, DNA, is revealing more than innocence and guilt, opening a window into the criminal justice system that could touch off a revolution of reform. Ultimately we come to a remarkable conclusion: The possibility for error in our justice system is simply too great to allow the death penalty to stand as our ultimate punishment.

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

After 30 years as a CBS reporter and producer, Kurtis, who now hosts *American Justice* on A&E, re-examines his lifelong support of the death penalty, arguing eloquently that the risk of executing the wrong person is too great to let capital punishment stand. His reflections are motivated by the 2003 actions of then governor George Ryan of Illinois, a conservative Republican who commuted the sentences of the state's 164 death row inmates. Ryan's actions followed the exoneration through DNA evidence of 13 death row inmates. Kurtis frames his argument around two trials in which the wrong men were first convicted and then exonerated. Kurtis puts his reportorial skills to work, reconstructing in detail one case involving a brutal rape/murder, and another the stabbing of a mother, her two children and another child. Kurtis uses graphic, deeply disturbing descriptions of these murders as bases for arguing that inconceivable acts of violence can create a visceral sense that the death penalty is justified. Kurtis's refusal to shrink from this reality makes his indictment all the more compelling. This is not a book about abstract notions or legal technicalities; Kurtis examines our criminal justice system and finds it too "rife with the potential for error... to make death its product."

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From [Booklist](#)

Media celebrity and attorney Kurtis presents a carefully crafted perspective on the current state of the death penalty in America. Starting with Illinois governor George Ryan's sudden mass emptying of that state's death row, Kurtis goes on to present two case studies that illustrate the legal problems with capital punishment as currently executed in America. By choosing two specific cases, both fraught with errors in evidence, prosecutorial zeal, defense incompetence, and a host of other substantive and procedural problems, Kurtis shapes a solid, thoughtful case for his opposition to the death penalty. But by presenting as normative only these two cases, Kurtis leaves himself open to counterarguments based on other equally limited cases, such as those of John Wayne Gacy and Timothy McVeigh. Nevertheless, Kurtis' book is an important contribution to the debate on crime and punishment, and it is a strong and useful resource for students examining legal and social issues of the day. *Mark Knoblauch*

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Review

"A carefully crafted perspective on the current state of the death penalty in America..." -- *Booklist*, September 15, 2004

"Bill Kurtis has turned out an important message and a gripping read." -- *Walter Cronkite*

"Every book in the vein of Kurtis' combination expose/philosophical tract deserves a wide readership..." -- *Houston Chronicle*, November 12, 2004

"Kurtis manages to breathe an element of suspense and keep the reader's interest with informative writing." - *Nashville Tennessean*

"Kurtis offers his own courageous act in crafting a persuasive book, significant for its potential to educate a wide audience." -- *New York Law Journal*

"No matter where you stand on capital punishment, *The Death Penalty on Trial* is required reading." -- *Chicago Sun-Times*, November 7, 2004

"[Kurtis] argu[es] eloquently.... Kurtis puts his reportorial skills to work." -- *Publishers Weekly*, September 27, 2004

"a powerful indictment of the death penalty by a man who once supported it... most compelling." -- *Huntington News (WV)*, October 28, 2004

"engrossing... exhibits the classic hallmarks of the best journalism... and makes addictive reading." -- *Scott Turow*

AAA warning of what can go wrong in a death penalty case, the lessons hit home like a hammer. -- *Trial*, July 2005

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#### **Danny Chamberland:**

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