

## PERSPECTIVE

## Rauner's wish to resurrect death penalty deeply flawed

By Scott F. Turow

Gov. Bruce Rauner seems to be one of the few people in Illinois who misses the death penalty. There has been no mass outcry for its reinstatement from the law enforcement community or from the people of Illinois, who seem content to avoid the harsh injustices and added expense that capital punishment brought with it.

There has never been convincing evidence that capital punishment deters people from becoming murderers. Rather, our experience since the death-penalty moratorium confirms that there is not a correlation between the murder rate and executions.

Whatever its motivation, Rauner's proposal to restore the death penalty for mass killers and people who murder law enforcement officers reflects a lack of experience with the issue. The late U.S. Sen. Paul Simon a co-chair of the 13-member death-penalty review commission, warned us in 2000 that states cannot create a death penalty that protects only peace officers. Firefighters will be the next to demand the same protection; after them it will be the EMTs.

Historically, the death penalty has always escaped its boundaries. As soon as it exists, it expands. A death-qualifier for multiple murders will soon face demands that it be enlarged to include torture murders, child murders or terrorist murders. Every person has a different moral sense of what is the worst of the worst. And when capital punishment exists, each constituency demands that its own sense of morality be vindicated.

We will soon be back to where we were, with the inevitable return of what is truly the worst of the worst for any system of justice: sentencing the innocent to die, which has happened too often in the highly charged atmosphere of capital cases.

Finally, a "beyond any



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Gov. Bruce Rauner has proposed reinstating the death penalty for mass killers and people who kill law enforcement officers.

doubt" legal standard is entirely unworkable. By focusing on the quality of the evidence, rather than the nature of the crime, this standard seems distressingly irrational in practice. An 18-year-old who is video recorded shooting two rival gang members will be eligible for the death penalty. And someone like Timothy McVeigh, who murdered 168 people in 1995 by blowing up the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, Okla., would not be, since the case against McVeigh did not include beyond-any-doubt proof such as DNA or other doubt-free foren-

sic evidence. Worse, our judges have no experience applying such a standard. Our courts of review would wrestle for many years trying to figure out what such an unprecedented standard means. While that is going on, we will have yet another de facto moratorium, because no one can be put to death when the meaning of the governing standard is unclear.

The "new" death penalty will only further erode confidence in our government and our politicians, who make promises to voters in an election year, only to find that what they swore to enact is unwork-

able and cannot be implemented without years of litigation and delay. In the meantime, citizens of Illinois will have to pay the exponentially larger costs of capital punishment — for capital defense counsel, who almost always are hired at public expense; for the countless appeals that death-penalty cases bring that strain the budgets of prosecutors' offices; for the increased costs of confinement of death-sentenced inmates, who have reduced incentives to behave in the penitentiary; and even the expense of refurbishing our death chambers.

An Illinois native, Washington Post columnist George Will remarked a while ago, "The death penalty is just another government program that has failed." It was bad enough the first time around. Re-implementing a failed system riddled with race and class bias in practice invites comparison to that familiar definition of psychosis: repeating the same behavior and expecting a different result.

Scott F. Turow, a Chicago attorney and best-selling author, served on the Illinois Commission on Capital Punishment.

## Going viral: The good, the bad, and the food for thought

By Viorica Marian

More than 25 million. That's how many people saw my joke on Twitter.

"I once taught an 8 a.m. college class. So many grandparents died that semester. I then moved my class to 3 p.m. No more deaths. And that, my friends, is how I save lives."

I expected a few likes from fellow professors on my sleepy Twitter account with barely 60 followers. Instead, the tweet went viral, with more than 920,000 combined retweets and likes. It crossed platforms to Instagram, where it became a meme, with many more millions of views. Reddit, Facebook — suddenly it was everywhere.

Thousands of comments and an endless stream of direct messages poured in. Most thought it was funny. Many tweeted pithy replies like "Teachers save lives" and "Not all heroes wear capes." The Daily Mail wrote an article about it and Twitter spotlighted the tweet in its promotion materials.

The internet seemed to be having a collective laugh, and it was heartwarming to see young and old alike all over the world relate across countries, languages, cultures, and generations.

## Power of a single tweet

As a scientist, I've written hundreds of research articles over the years and have spent two decades in the laboratory. Yet, if you combine all I have ever written, all my research put together, it still would not reach as many eyes as this one tweet.

The backlash, however, was just as swift. The following Monday, a Chronicle of Higher Education piece took aim at the tweet. Critics wrote that the tweet trivialized the challenges students face in college, that it was disrespectful to students whose relatives really did die, and that it lacked empathy for those who were facing hardships.

And although I posted a response to clarify that students who have extenuating circumstances are accommodated to meet

their needs, and that those who have personal, family, or health difficulties should talk directly with their professors or contact the campus counseling, health, or students with disabilities offices for help, it wasn't long before the name-calling and threats began.

Such pushback is not only a demonstration of our collective tendency to find fault with, well, everything and look for the cloud in every silver lining, but is also a symptom of our increasing inability as a society to engage in conversation with those with whom we disagree.

The result is an online culture that often seems divided into "snowflakes" and "bullies," one in which it is becoming increasingly hard to find the middle ground between extremes and the commonality between different kinds of people. The dichotomy hurts everyone and is spilling into everyday life and influencing how we interact with each other.

## The ugly side

In the Twitterverse, anything can, and probably will, get trolled. Knee-jerk reactions on social media can be like arming a toddler with a machete. Which is why the same good judgment we must use in our day-to-day lives is also required in our online lives. Because while social media can give rise and power to entire social movements and can expose abusers, it can also facilitate professional suicide and singlehandedly end careers.

If my fleeting internet fame as the Kardashian of academia for a day taught me anything, it's that social media can be incredibly powerful. Of course I had already witnessed its effects on politics, entertainment and society as an outside observer, but it was very different to experience it firsthand.

This culture of volatile discourse can have a disproportionate effect across genders and groups. Those likely to be more sensitive to the opinions of others, or to take things more personally and closer to heart, may become less likely to speak up and contribute what they have to say. And

when voices that are more measured, more thoughtful, more tentative or from a different walk of life are less likely to participate in public discourse, what is lost is an accurate reflection of society.

This voice silencing matters. If enough voices are extinguished or otherwise opt out of public discourse, the narrative becomes skewed in favor of those who are loudest, more extreme, more belligerent.

## When is enough enough?

I received so many hostile messages, insults and threats that at one point I considered deleting the tweet. But not only were screenshots of the tweet already circulating outside my control on other platforms, removing the tweet would in essence be equivalent to stifling my voice, which was the very opposite of what I believe in.

As it is, not all voices are equally represented in public discourse. Social media provides a way to shift the balance to increase the representation of women and underrepresented groups. And the public discourse of the present becomes the history of tomorrow. Which means that those who have a voice get to write history.

And while tweeting a joke does not change the world, this joke is part of my voice. It reflects my sense of humor and my life. It may have a little bite to it, as jokes often do; but as far as bites go, this was barely a nibble. Any teacher who has taught teenagers or young adults long enough knows that students sometimes skip classes, especially the early morning ones. And if the joke contributed to promoting an honest discussion about the challenges students face and a way to address them fairly, even better.

The repercussions of this one tweet and of more people from all walks of life now following my Twitter account is that my voice can reach more people, and more diverse people, than ever before. Certainly more than I ever could inside the university classroom where I teach. Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and the internet in general have become classrooms and town

halls of their own for billions of people.

As a result, I can now use my voice to talk about things I have spent hundreds of thousands of hours studying — about language science and science in general. About bilingualism and the value of learning languages. About education and equal rights.

Which is precisely why I believe in the upside of social media. In using it to learn, connect, laugh, share, commiserate. To join our individual voices so their message is stronger and heard further.

My individual voice is that of a woman. A scientist. A teacher. A parent. An immigrant. Contrary to what the critics of my tweet may think, I understand hardship. I came to the United States alone, as a teenager, with \$2.41 in my pocket, and worked multiple jobs to put myself through college and graduate school. And my beloved grandfather passed away while I was in college. I get it. I do.

A sense of humor was at times the only thing I felt I had.

At a time in which trolling is the norm and the choice is to suffer through it or opt out, a change is needed in how we interact with each other. If we pre-emptively silence ourselves due to consequences that might occur, only the loudest will have a share of voice, a seat at the table, and a contribution to the public narrative. Indeed, it's time to shift how we engage with those we don't necessarily agree with so that the results are not harmful, but constructive.

Yes, it can be scary to speak up in a public forum, to tweet, to post, to write publicly and to talk in front of an audience. But for every person who does not do it, someone else has the floor. So speak we must. That is something I believe in with all my heart. Because the alternative to saying something is saying nothing, and the alternative to consequences is to be inconsequential.

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