

Expert Available for Comment:

CORINNA BARRETT LAIN

Death Penalty Expert, Law Professor, and Author

Author of: [*Secrets of the Killing State: The Untold Story of Lethal Injection*](#)
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CORINNA BARRETT LAIN is the S. D. Roberts & Sandra Moore Professor of Law at the University of Richmond School of Law. She is one of the nation's leading authorities on the death penalty, and has published numerous articles, essays, and blog posts about lethal injection over the last decade. Her work has appeared in the most prestigious law journals in the country, including the *Stanford Law Review*, *University of Pennsylvania Law Review*, *Duke Law Journal*, *UCLA Law Review*, *Vanderbilt Law Review*, and *Georgetown Law Journal*, among other venues, and has been cited in a concurring opinion of the United States Supreme Court.

Lain is a frequent presenter on the death penalty at both national and international conferences, and is one of the leading voices on criminal justice in Virginia more broadly. She is the co-author (with Ron Bacigal) of Thomson-Reuters's *Virginia Practice Series* on criminal law, a four-volume treatise that serves as the authoritative guide for Virginia criminal law and procedure for the bench and bar. In 2023-2024 alone, the *Virginia Practice Series* was cited 25 times by Virginia appellate courts, including five times by the Supreme Court of Virginia.

Lain graduated *summa cum laude* from the College of William and Mary, and received her J.D. from the University of Virginia, where she served on the managing board of the *Virginia Law Review* and was elected to Order of the Coif. She clerked on the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals and then prosecuted for three years before joining the Richmond Law faculty in 2001. Lain is a former sergeant in the Army and a recipient of the University of Richmond's Distinguished Educator Award. She has published opinion pieces in [*The Guardian*](#), [*The Christian Science Monitor*](#), [*The Conversation*](#), and [*The Richmond Times-Dispatch*](#), and has been quoted in numerous venues, including [*Bolts Magazine*](#), the [*Phoenix New Times*](#), the [*Washington Post*](#), [*ABA Journal*](#), [*The Marshall Project*](#), [*NewsNation*](#), [*The Post and Courier*](#), [*Scientific American*](#), [*Slate*](#), [*Stateline*](#), and [*The Week*](#). In addition, Lain has been interviewed by the [*BBC*](#), [*NBC News*](#), [*NPR's All Things Considered*](#), [*Fox News \(Phoenix\)*](#), and [*ABC News \(Phoenix\)*](#), and has appeared on [*C-SPAN*](#) and numerous podcasts, including [*NPR's Thoroughline*](#), [*He's Just*](#), [*Public Defenseless*](#), [*Faithful Politics*](#), [*Supreme Myths*](#), and [*Extrema Ratio*](#) (Bologna, Italy). For more, visit her website [here](#).

In *Secrets of the Killing State: The Untold Story of Lethal Injection*, Lain pulls back the curtain of secrecy, presenting a view of lethal injection that states have worked hard to hide. In the popular imagination, lethal injection is a slight pinch and a swift nodding off to forever-sleep. It is performed



Corinna Barrett Lain Photo by Megan Garrison Photography

by well-qualified medical professionals. It is regulated and carefully conducted. And it is the most “humane” form of capital punishment. In reality, not one of those things is true.

The story of lethal injection is a story of state law-breaking and cover-ups, fake science and torturous drugs, gross incompetence by woefully inept executioners, and a stunning indifference to the way prisoners die at the hands of the state. Lain’s meticulously researched and utterly compelling exposé takes readers on an unprecedented journey into the notoriously secretive world of American executions, using shocking revelations about lethal injection to shine a light on the American death penalty more broadly and show that the state at its most powerful moment is also the state at its worst.

THEMES THAT PROFESSOR LAIN CAN DISCUSS:

- What Donald Trump’s executive order on “Restoring the Death Penalty” means, and what it can and cannot do both legally and as a practical matter.
- Why lethal injection is not, as people think, like putting down a beloved pet.
- What the problems with lethal injection are, how they came about, and why they matter.
- How lethal injection came to be, and what that tells us about the real work it is doing.
- What prison officials have done behind closed doors: broken state and federal laws, falsified prescriptions, injected the wrong drugs, and more.
- What we know about the newest execution innovation—nitrogen gas.
- Why states are turning to the firing squad, and why prisoners may choose it.
- How executions impose trauma on the prison personnel forced to conduct them, and the implications of that phenomenon.
- How states use secrecy—including but not limited to secrecy statutes—to hide the reality of lethal injection from the American public.

A Conversation with Corinna Lain about *SECRETS OF THE KILLING STATE*

Q: *Why is your forthcoming book, Secrets of the Killing State, so timely in 2025?*

A: We are at the precipice of a massive historical moment for execution methods. For the last 45 years, lethal injection has been the primary execution method, accounting for 98 percent of all executions over the last decade. In the last year, that has begun to change as the problems with lethal injection have turned states to other execution methods—some old, some new. People know that lethal injection has problems, but they don’t know what those problems are or why they matter. My aim is to change that.

In addition, Donald Trump issued an executive order to “restore” the death penalty on his first day in office, instructing his attorney general to get states the drugs they need for lethal injection. Understanding why this is misguided has never been more urgent.

Q: *Why is lethal injection so problematic?*

A: States can’t get the drugs. They can’t get qualified medical professionals to do it. And they can’t get access to the veins. In addition, lethal injection retains the delicacy of a medical procedure, with its need for precision and care, but adds some things and takes away others to suit the execution setting’s needs, resulting in an exceedingly delicate procedure that is also exceedingly error-prone. On top of all that,

there are problems behind these problems that are inherent in the project of using therapeutic drugs to kill. States can't fix the problems with lethal injection, so they use secrecy to cover them up instead, and that adds complications of its own.

Q: *We know how to euthanize pets. Why is lethal injection so different?*

A: Lethal injection is nothing like putting down a beloved pet. For the first 30 years of lethal injection, the drugs weren't the same. That is still true in some states. And even where states are using the same drug, that drug is a compounded sterile injectable, not a manufactured drug like in the euthanasia setting. Then there are the differences in expertise, scientific backing, and physiology. Lethal injection is a totally different ballgame. But it *looks* like animal euthanasia, and that is doing a lot of work for executing states.

Q: *What's the takeaway of Secrets of the Killing State?*

A: This is not a book where I make an argument and try to convince readers that I'm right. My approach is to relentlessly document the facts and let readers come to their own conclusions. But it would be hard to walk away from reading this book and think lethal injection is humane. And it would be hard not to go a step further and conclude that lethal injection is broken and cannot be fixed.

There are bigger takeaways too—ones that go to the heart of whether states should be executing at all. One of the most striking is the overwhelming sense that states cannot be trusted with the ultimate exercise of power. Those who support the death penalty tend to focus on whether the prisoner deserves to die. But there's another question we should be asking: whether the state deserves to take that life. The revelations in this book make the case that the answer is "no." Studying executions also gave me a front row seat as to who these people are *at the end*, and the takeaway there is that the person that states think they are killing is almost always long gone by the time of their execution. The phenomenon of redemption on death row is my focus in the epilogue, which has serious implications for people of faith.

Q: *How has studying executions changed your views, if at all, about the death penalty?*

A: I'm a former prosecutor. I have seen firsthand the pain of victims of violent crime, and my heart goes out to the family members of those who are slain. But I have come to conclude that the death penalty is also terrible for these family members, who put their lives on hold for a decade or more waiting for the person's execution (and necessarily so, serious legal errors take time). That's not closure. It's the exact opposite. Then, if and when the time does come, the cold-hearted killer that families expect to see is simply not there anymore. In our mind's eye, we tend to freeze these people in a single moment in time. I myself have done so. But time works changes, and studying executions has been a potent reminder that humans have the greatest capacity to change of all.

TO BE IN TOUCH WITH PROFESSOR LAIN:

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