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## ANTI-DEATH PENALTY

# Prison Helps No One

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## [Daniel Sturm](#) Interviews Staughton Lynd

After more than a decade of failed attempts to abolish the death penalty in Ohio, a theater play brought the issue back to the front pages. *Lucasville: The Untold Story of a Prison Uprising* opened April 11 in Portsmouth, a few miles south of the Southern Ohio Correctional Facility where one of the nation's deadliest prison riots took place in 1993 during which nine prisoners and one correctional officer were killed.

The play questions the death penalty convictions of five inmates involved in the siege and exposes the racist and unjust elements of the capital punishment system in the United States. The person who brought the issue into the headlines is Staughton Lynd, a civil rights attorney and historian who continues to make regulating Ohio's prisons and abolishing the death penalty his full-time struggle. In the 1960s Lynd was the director of the Mississippi Freedom Schools and taught history alongside Howard Zinn at Spellman College. When the steel mills closed in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Lynd represented the workers. He then turned to the prison industrial complex that had risen in the steel industry's wake.

Based on Lynd's book, *Lucasville*, a definitive history of the rebellion, the story begins in April 1993 when prisoners take over a cellblock in the correctional facility. About 2,000 law enforcement officers surrounded the prison during the 11-day riot, in a stand-off that was covered by national media, though not always with accuracy. The *Columbia Journalism Review* wrote that, "Reporters vied for atrocity stories. They ran scary tales—totally false, it was later found—that spread panic and paranoia throughout the region."

The play focuses on the trial of five prisoners accused of murdering Correctional Officer Robert Vallandingham. George Skatzes, Siddique Abdullah Hasan, Jason Robb, James Were, and Keith Lamar are all currently on Ohio's death row and pursuing appeals. *Lucasville* challenges the audience to decide whether the right men were convicted.

*STURM: Can you describe what triggered the rebellion?*

LYND: The Muslim prisoners who first seized officers in L block and made them hostages had in mind a brief, bloodless disturbance. They hoped to make authorities in Columbus overrule Warden Tate's insistence on testing for TB by injecting a substance under the skin containing phenol, a form of alcohol. But within moments, events spun out of control. What all witnesses describe as "chaos" ensued. Officers were severely beaten. The prisoners in rebellion thought several of the injured officers might die and went to some risk to take them to the yard where they could be recovered and receive medical attention.

Warden Tate encouraged informants, even creating a special post office box to receive their communications. Six supposed "snitches" were murdered by fellow prisoners during the first hours of the uprising. The prison administrators created their share of unintended consequences, too. As Sergeant How-ard Hudson testified, their hostage negotiating manual directed that prison negotiators should deliberately stall, in order to wear down the resistance of the hostage takers. This approach caused the authorities on the first full day of the occupation to turn off the water and electricity. Three days later, the authorities' refusal to restore these utilities became the immediate cause of

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hostage officer Robert Vallandingham's murder.

*Your book documents how the Lucasville Five were singled out as organizers of the uprising and spokespeople for the prisoners. You show how they were convicted for Vallandingham's murder, despite compelling evidence of the defendants' innocence. What corrective action do you propose?*

I have come to believe that there were individuals on both sides during the rebellion who sought to avoid bloodshed. In negotiating a settlement and peaceful surrender, the Lucasville protagonists brought their confrontation to an end with significantly fewer deaths than in earlier prison rebellions at Attica (1971) and Santa Fe (1980). The behavior of the prisoners might be compared to the actions of soldiers pinned down by enemy fire on an unexpected battlefield. Most of the 407 men in L block. Their motivation in staying in L block was to protect their property and to help fellow prisoners survive.

What distinguished some from others, was whether they thought mainly about themselves or guided their actions by the perceived welfare of the entire convict body. This understanding of the Lucasville events is what leads me to propose a general amnesty, as at Attica. Case by case adjudication of individual guilt or innocence misses the essential character of the tragedy. Those convicted of murder, assault, or kidnapping have already served almost 15 years in solitary confinement. It is enough.

*Supporters of Sister Helen Prejean, and others, propose life without parole as an alternative to execution. What's your comment?*

It seems to us, as Quakers, that there is in every human being the possibility of change, of redemption. But no one has a crystal ball or measuring instrument that makes it possible to know for sure when such change has truly occurred. In our society, persons who may be poorly educated have a hard time finding work and then may commit a crime. When they "max out," or are paroled, they are even less prepared to obtain a livelihood and live a normal life. In Boston last fall, someone asked me about those who were psychologically unprepared for freedom and the likelihood that they might repeat the crimes that land them behind bars. As I pondered a response, another member of the audience volunteered an answer. He said he had spent most of his life in maximum security prisons. In his opinion, some prisoners need mental health assistance before they can safely be released. But prison, this person emphasized, helps no one.

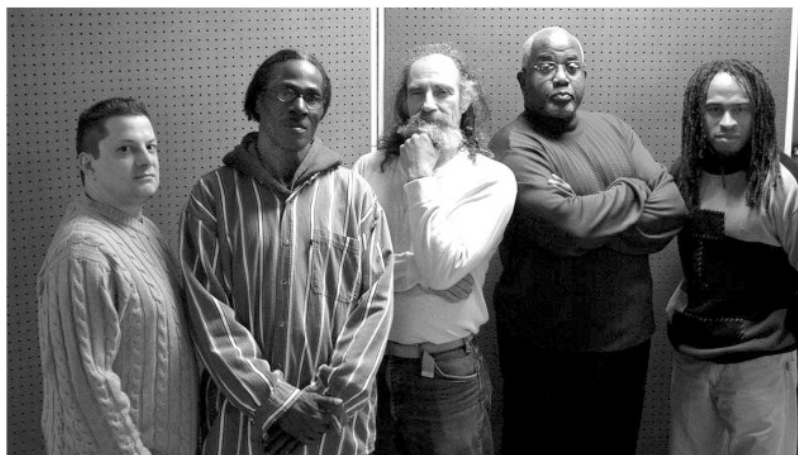
*Maryland, New Jersey, Connecticut, Illinois, New Mexico, and North Carolina are likely to ban executions and California has ordered an investigation of the death penalty system. Yet, Ohio Governor Ted Strickland, a Democrat, has called the capital justice system "fair and impartial." Can your play can help abolish the death penalty?*

I think that would be excessive pride. That question connects in a funny way with my research as an historian. I have had occasion to try to understand where slavery, racism, and the thirst to kill come from in this country. The best historical essay I ever wrote was "The Compromise of 1787." It had to do with the fact that in the summer of 1787 the Constitutional Convention met in Philadelphia and drew up a new Constitution and 90 miles away in New York City the Continental Congress, the then existing national governance, passed the so-called Northwest Ordinance, which banned slavery north of the Ohio River.

Traditionally, what history textbooks say is, "Well, the folks living in New York City struck a great blow for freedom, but alas, the people meeting in Philadelphia compromised with the peculiar institution." I showed that that was nonsense. The Continental Congress had a Southern majority at the time. The real meaning of the Northwest Ordinance was not that it would be banned north of the Ohio River, but that slavery would be recognized and tolerated south of the Ohio River.

As a matter of fact, it's clear from the speeches and writings of various political figures of the day that Southerners had a good deal of hope that the tremendous population explosion into what later became Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana would slope north over the Ohio River so that these states, too, would be settled primarily by Southerners and, when push came to shove, would vote with the South. As it turned out, that hope was not realized. But there's a substantial southern influence along the northern bank of the Ohio River in southern Ohio. Cincinnati became the racist city it has been for almost 200 years—presently providing one-fourth of the men on Ohio's Death Row. The Indiana towns across the river from Louisville, where my father grew up, and Alton, Illinois, where anti-slavery editor Elijah Lovejoy was murdered, became similar hotbeds of violence. So I know firsthand the kind of racist jokes and songs and what have you that came out of that milieu. So we're

really dealing with a state that is divided between blue and red. Everything south of Columbus is more southern than northern. That's the best explanation for Ohio Governor Ted Strickland's action.



Actors portraying the Lucasville 5—photo by Daniel Sturm

*Is this still representative of Ohio's current population? Or is racism a vestige of an older generation?*

If it is vestigial, it is still very strong. I don't know if you've read Ann Hagedorn's book about the anti-slavery movement in Ripley, Ohio, *Beyond the River: The Untold Story of the Heroes of the Underground Railroad*. Ripley is halfway between Cincinnati and Scioto County, near where Lucasville and the Southern Ohio Correctional Facility are located. Ripley was the scene of an anti-slavery movement that began ten years before William Lloyd Garrison first published the *Liberator*. As Hagedorn describes, it was at Ripley that a famous incident (Eliza crossing the ice), later recounted in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, occurred. Abolitionist John Rankin had a house on a hilltop above Ripley where he left a lantern on all night. It is said that when a woman named Eliza and her infant child reached the northern shore of the Ohio, soaked and freezing, they were met by a professional slave catcher named Shaw, who seized escaping slaves and returned them to the South for money. Shaw is said to have been so moved by Eliza's bravery that he pointed to the light from the lantern and told her to go there for help. So, there have always been people in Portsmouth who are as liberal as anywhere else in Ohio, but they have been a distinct minority.

*How does your fight to end the death penalty connect with the upcoming play?*

They are very much connected in my mind in that, if we could line up the adult population of Ohio and ask, "Are you for or against capital punishment," there's every reason to believe that more people would be for it than against it. At the same time that we press the governor, a Methodist minister and a former psychological counselor at Lucasville, to take action, we need to win converts particularly in the southern part of the state. As my wife Alice found out, 25,000 signatures were collected in a couple of months after the April 1993 surrender in support of the death penalty and an abbreviated appeals process for persons sentenced to death. It'd be nice if we could collect 25,000 signatures on a petition against the death penalty in the area south of Columbus.

*Describe the most dramatic moments in the play.*

There is a moment in the play, as in the book, when the authorities choreograph a situation. George Skatzes is taken from his cell and not permitted to return. Anthony Lavelle, who then becomes the government informant, concludes that Skatzes has become an informant. But when he is finally permitted to return several days later, Skatzes (an Aryan brother) goes up to Hasan (a black Sunni Muslim Imam) in an adjoining cell and grabs hold of the bars and says, "You don't know me and I don't you. I didn't tell them anything." After a moment, Hasan says, "I believe you." It was a dramatic moment in life and hopefully it will be a dramatic moment in the play.

*You have accepted a minor role in the play as a judge. What triggered your interest in that part?*

I have a limitless belief in the "integrity and impartiality" of judges so I thought I could demonstrate my "gratitude" by playing one of these bastards. I have in mind particularly Judge Fred Cartolano who presided over the trials of both

James Were and Siddique Abdullah Hasan. There is this wonderful line in the play where Hasan tries to present evidence of the causes of the riot so the jury will understand a little better what made people act as they did. The judge rolls his eyes and says, "Riots are not created by the prison. Riots are created by the inmates."

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***Daniel Sturm is an independent journalist and media scholar who covers under-reported social and political topics in the U.S. and Europe. He has written on racism, human rights, the environment, and local politics.***

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