January 25, 2021

President Joseph Biden  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, DC 20500

cc:  
Vice President Kamala Harris  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, DC 20500  

Acting Attorney General Monty Wilkinson  
U.S. Department of Justice  
950 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20530-0001

Ambassador Susan Rice  
Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Biden:

We are a group of current and former elected prosecutors, Attorneys General, and law enforcement leaders, and former United States Attorneys, Department of Justice (DOJ) officials and judges, writing to urge you to begin your administration by making your commitment to justice clear: immediately take all actions within your power to end the federal death penalty once and for all. We applaud your stance against the death penalty and also believe that this is a critical moment in our nation for action. We need definitive and lasting steps that go beyond a moratorium that future administrations can readily undo. As such, we call on you to take action in a multifaceted and expansive way to: commute the sentences of all those on federal death row and withdraw current death penalty warrants, dismantle the death chamber at Terre Haute, encourage DOJ leadership to instruct all federal prosecutors to not seek the death penalty in future cases, support and incentivize state efforts to end capital punishment, and support legislation to end the federal death penalty.

Over the past year, we witnessed thirteen federal executions, all an assault on human dignity and an affront to American values. This killing spree laid bare the unacceptable injustices embedded in our nation’s use of the death penalty: we watched as our government killed people with severe intellectual disabilities, people who had worked for decades to take responsibility for their crimes
and rehabilitate, and a woman with an unspeakable history of abuse and trauma. These tragedies demand bold and definitive action. And at a time when racial injustice, trust in law enforcement, and our nation’s reputation in the eyes of the world are all in dire need of repair, anything short of these steps would fail to move our nation forward or attend to these pressing crises. We should not leave the lives of all people still on federal death row — and many more who will become entangled with the federal system — in the hands of future administrations. Nor should we continue to part company with other Western democracies in our willingness to implement a failed death penalty system. We ask you to choose justice, mercy, and compassion for our nation.

Many have tried for over forty years to make America’s death penalty system just. Yet the reality is that our nation’s use of this sanction cannot be repaired, and it should be ended. The death penalty raises serious concerns in tension with the constitutional ban against cruel and unusual punishment and the guarantees of due process and equal protection under the law.¹ It is unequally and arbitrarily applied, ineffective at improving public safety, and a waste of taxpayer resources; and its use presents the perilous risk of executing an innocent person.²

We also now know that we have not executed the worst of the worst, but often instead put to death the unluckiest of the unlucky – the impoverished, the poorly represented, and the most broken. Time and again, we have executed individuals with long histories of debilitating mental illness, childhoods marred by unspeakable physical and mental abuse, and intellectual disabilities that have prevented them from leading independent adult lives. We have executed individuals with trial lawyers so derelict in their duties and obligations that they never bothered to uncover long histories of illness and trauma. We have also likely executed the innocent.³

Race also plays a deeply disturbing and unacceptable role in the application of the death penalty. Studies have documented that defendants of color are disproportionately likely to be sentenced to die – this is particularly and uniquely true when the victim is white.⁴ The pernicious and racially disparate legacy of the death penalty is incontrovertible: people of color have accounted for a disproportionate 43% of executions in the United States since 1976, and 55% of defendants currently awaiting execution are people of color.⁵ Moreover, there are stark disparities in executions relative to the race of the victim: since 1976, a total of 21 white defendants were executed for crimes perpetrated against a Black victim; in contrast, in that same time period, 297 Black defendants were executed for crimes perpetrated against a white victim. Strikingly, while about 76% of all death penalty cases involve white victims, only one-half of all murder victims are white.⁶ This research underscores the systemic racism evident throughout our justice system.

The federal government should not ignore these issues in the best of times, but these concerns are especially acute in the midst of a global pandemic and calls for racial justice that have led to an ever-deepening erosion of trust in government and our criminal legal system. Our nation’s use

² Id.
³ Andrew Cohen, Yes, America, We Have Executed an Innocent Man, The Atlantic, May 14, 2012 (available at https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2012/05/yes-america-we-have-executed-an-innocent-man/257106/).
⁶ Id.
of the death penalty separates us from many other democratic nations. Germany abandoned the death penalty after the Holocaust and enshrined protecting human dignity as a core value of its justice system. Italy abolished the death penalty to reckon with the horrors of fascism. Abolition of the death penalty was part of how these nations said “never again” to atrocity and oppression – and it is time for our nation to revisit its place in this history.

For all these reasons, we ask you to not only support federal legislative efforts to end capital punishment, but to take all steps in your power to disassemble the machinery of death and ensure future presidents cannot execute the dozens of people on federal death row at will. Every individual who remains on death row remains in peril. Every federal prosecutor who still seeks death sets in motion the wheels of a failed system and the government-sanctioned taking of the life of a fellow American. And keeping intact the death chamber at Terre Haute leaves the stage still set for unspeakable cruelty that says more about us as a society than it does about those we execute.

We call on you to begin your administration with these bold steps towards mercy and justice.

Most respectfully,

Hector Balderas  
Attorney General, New Mexico

Diana Becton  
District Attorney, Contra Costa County, California

Wesley Bell  
Prosecuting Attorney, St. Louis County, Missouri

Buta Biberaj  
Commonwealth’s Attorney, Loudoun County, Virginia

Shay Bilchik  
Former Administrator, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice

Chesa Boudin  
District Attorney, City and County of San Francisco, California

RaShall M. Brackney  
Chief, Charlottesville Police Department, Virginia

Aisha Braveboy  
State’s Attorney, Prince George’s County, Maryland
Bobbe J. Bridge  
Former Associate Justice, Washington State Supreme Court

Jim Bueermann  
Former Chief, Redlands Police Department, California  
Former President, National Police Foundation

Chris Burbank  
Former Chief, Salt Lake City Police Department, Utah  
Vice President of Law Enforcement Strategy, Center for Policing Equity

John T. Chisholm  
District Attorney, Milwaukee County, Wisconsin

John Choi  
County Attorney, Ramsey County, Minnesota

Jerry L. Clayton  
Sheriff, Washtenaw County, Michigan

Dave Clegg  
District Attorney, Ulster County, New York

Tristram J. Coffin  
Former U.S. Attorney, District of Vermont

William M. Cohen  
Former Assistant U.S. Attorney, District of Columbia

Shameca Collins  
District Attorney, Sixth Judicial District, Mississippi

Laura Conover  
County Attorney, Pima County, Arizona

Brendan Cox  
Former Chief, Albany Police Department, New York  
Director of Policing Strategies, LEAD National Support Bureau

John Creuzot  
District Attorney, Dallas County, Texas

William B. Cummings  
Former U.S. Attorney, Eastern District of Virginia
Satana Deberry  
District Attorney, Durham County, North Carolina

Parisa Dehghani-Tafti  
Commonwealth’s Attorney, Arlington County and the City of Falls Church, Virginia

Steve Descano  
Commonwealth’s Attorney, Fairfax County, Virginia

W. Thomas Dillard  
Former U.S. Attorney, Northern District of Florida  
Former U.S. Attorney, Eastern District of Tennessee

Thomas J. Donovan, Jr.  
Attorney General, Vermont

Michael Dougherty  
District Attorney, Twentieth Judicial District, Colorado

Frank Dubofsky  
Former Judge, Colorado Court of Appeals

Jean Dubofsky  
Former Justice, Colorado Supreme Court

Matthew Ellis  
District Attorney, Wasco County, Oregon

Keith Ellison  
Attorney General, Minnesota

Charles W. Fels  
Former Assistant U.S. Attorney, Eastern District of Tennessee  
Former Assistant U.S. Attorney, Middle District of Tennessee

Kimberly M. Foxx  
State’s Attorney, Cook County, Illinois

Gil Garcetti  
Former District Attorney, Los Angeles County, California

Stanley Garnett  
Former District Attorney, Twentieth Judicial District, Colorado
José Garza
District Attorney, Travis County, Texas

George Gascón
District Attorney, Los Angeles County, California
Former District Attorney, City and County of San Francisco, California
Former Chief, San Francisco Police Department, California
Former Chief, Mesa Police Department, Arizona

Sarah F. George
State’s Attorney, Chittenden County, Vermont

Joe Gonzales
District Attorney, Bexar County, Texas

Deborah Gonzalez
District Attorney, Western Judicial Circuit, Georgia

Eric Gonzalez
District Attorney, Kings County, New York

Mark Gonzalez
District Attorney, Nueces County, Texas

James P. Gray
Former Judge, Superior Court of Orange County, California

Joseph R. Grodin
Former Associate Justice, California Supreme Court

Andrea Harrington
District Attorney, Berkshire County, Massachusetts

Scott Harshbarger
Former Attorney General, Massachusetts
Former District Attorney, Middlesex County, Massachusetts

Jim Hingeley
Commonwealth’s Attorney, Albemarle County, Virginia

Natasha Irving
District Attorney, Sixth Prosecutorial District, Maine

Kathleen Jennings
Attorney General, Delaware
Peter J. Kadzik  
Former Assistant Attorney General, Office of Legislative Affairs, U.S. Department of Justice

Melinda Katz  
District Attorney, Queens County, New York

Peter Keisler  
Former Acting Attorney General, U.S. Department of Justice

Robert Klonoff  
Former Assistant to the Solicitor General, U.S. Department of Justice  
Former Dean, Lewis & Clark Law School

Justin F. Kollar  
Prosecuting Attorney, Kauai County, Hawaii

Lawrence S. Krasner  
District Attorney, City of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Miriam Aroni Krinsky  
Former Assistant U.S. Attorney, Criminal Appellate Chief, and General Crimes Chief, Central District of California  
Former Chair, Solicitor General’s Criminal Appellate Advisory Group, U.S. Department of Justice

William Lansdowne  
Former Chief, San Diego Police Department, California  
Former Chief, San Jose Police Department, California  
Former Chief, Richmond Police Department, California

Stephen G. Larson  
Former Assistant U.S. Attorney, Central District of California  
Former Magistrate Judge, U.S. District Court, Central District of California  
Former Judge, U.S. District Court, Central District of California

John Leonardo  
Former U.S. Attorney, District of Arizona

Chris Magnus  
Chief, Tucson Police Department, Arizona

Beth McCann  
District Attorney, Second Judicial District, Colorado
Mary McCord
Former Acting Assistant Attorney General for National Security, U.S. Department of Justice
Former Principal Deputy Assistant Attorney General, National Security Division, U.S. Department of Justice

Brian Middleton
District Attorney, Fort Bend County, Texas

Stephanie Morales
Commonwealth’s Attorney, City of Portsmouth, Virginia

Marilyn J. Mosby
State’s Attorney, Baltimore City, Maryland

Charles Oberly
Former U.S. Attorney, District of Delaware
Former Attorney General, Delaware

Jody Owens
District Attorney, Hinds County, Mississippi

Jim Petro
Former Attorney General, Ohio

Joseph Platania
Commonwealth’s Attorney, City of Charlottesville, Virginia

Bryan Porter
Commonwealth’s Attorney, City of Alexandria, Virginia

Abdul Pridgen
Chief, Seaside Police Department, California

Karl A. Racine
Attorney General, District of Columbia

Kwame Raoul
Attorney General, Illinois

Ira Reiner
Former District Attorney, Los Angeles County, California
Former City Attorney, Los Angeles, California

Margaret Richardson
Former Chief of Staff and Counselor to the Attorney General, U.S. Department of Justice
Murray Richtel
Former Judge, Twentieth Judicial District Court, Colorado

Mimi Rocah
District Attorney, Westchester County, New York

Rachael Rollins
District Attorney, Suffolk County, Massachusetts

Jeff Rosen
District Attorney, Santa Clara County, California

Marian T. Ryan
District Attorney, Middlesex County, Massachusetts

Dan Satterberg
Prosecuting Attorney, King County, Washington

Eli Savit
Prosecuting Attorney, Washtenaw County, Michigan

Lois Schiffer
Former Assistant Attorney General, Environment and Natural Resources Division, U.S. Department of Justice

Mike Schmidt
District Attorney, Multnomah County, Oregon

Kevin Sharp
Former Judge, U.S. District Court, Middle District of Tennessee

Carol A. Siemon
Prosecuting Attorney, Ingham County, Michigan

Norm Stamper
Former Chief, Seattle Police Department, Washington

David E. Sullivan
District Attorney, Northwestern District, Massachusetts

Shannon Taylor
Commonwealth’s Attorney, Henrico County, Virginia

Brett L. Tolman
Former U.S. Attorney, District of Utah
Raúl Torrez
District Attorney, Bernalillo County, New Mexico

Gregory Underwood
Commonwealth’s Attorney, City of Norfolk, Virginia

Matthew Van Houten
District Attorney, Tompkins County, New York

Cyrus R. Vance
District Attorney, New York County, New York

Phil Weiser
Attorney General, Colorado