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Statement by District Attorney Seth Williams on Ruling in
Terrance Williams Homicide Case

The well-deserved death sentence imposed by a jury on a vicious double murderer has been unjustly overturned by a Philadelphia judge, 28 years after the crimes, and I have directed my assistants to file an immediate appeal with the Pennsylvania Supreme Court.

The judge accuses police and prosecutors of “suppressing” evidence that the victim, 56-year-old Mr. Amos Norwood, may have had homosexual proclivities. That alleged evidence, says the defendant, could have supported his claim that he himself was abused by Mr. Norwood, and that Norwood was therefore an “unsympathetic” victim.

But how in the world could the prosecutor have “suppressed” information that was in the defendant’s own head? If the defendant was really involved with Mr. Norwood, who would know better than the defendant? Only one other person could have known the truth – and he is dead, because Terrance Williams tied up his hands and feet, gagged him

with a sock, beat him to death with a tire iron, burned his body beyond recognition, and then took his car to go on a gambling spree in Atlantic City with the victim's credit cards.

In her entire 45-minute ruling, the judge never once mentioned that fact. She never once mentioned that Terrance Williams himself has never testified that he was abused. In fact, at his trial he took the stand and swore under oath that Mr. Norwood and he were total strangers, and that he had nothing to do with the murder.

The judge also disregarded another crucial fact. The prosecution did turn over the only information it has ever possessed regarding a sex-for-hire relationship between the defendant and Mr. Norwood. Two witnesses told police that the defendant claimed Norwood was gay, that he was going to extort money from Norwood, and that Norwood had previously paid him on one occasion. The government gave the defense both of those statements – almost three decades ago.

Now, on the eve of execution, the judge says the prosecutor should also have turned over a few handwritten notes and scraps of paper suggesting that Norwood may have touched a 17-year-old boy, and that he may have had homosexual tendencies. But the police cannot report every unsubstantiated rumor they hear in the course of investigating a murder, merely to satisfy the defense desire to smear the victim.

All the safeguards of our legal system have been created to protect the innocent. This man is not innocent – even he has finally admitted what he did. Now his sentence is vacated because the victim was supposedly “unsympathetic.” But since when is it OK to beat people to death based on rumors?

I also have to address another person who was unfairly victimized here – the trial prosecutor. She left this office over 20 years ago, before I even started. But she had a distinguished career here, and since that time she has carried on her public service in the U.S. Attorney's Office, where she has practiced before federal judges, always with an unblemished record. She tried to substantiate the rumors about Mr. Norwood. But nothing she could have suspected would have come anywhere close to what the defendant says he knew all along.

I do not speak out on this case in order to celebrate the death penalty. I am almost always against using the death penalty. When I took office I specifically created the Capital Case Review Committee to more thoroughly inspect our use of the death penalty. I have invoked it in only a tiny fraction of the worst cases. But this is about process, and I am not going to walk away from doing my job. I will not abdicate my responsibility when the decisions are tough. This is about preserving the integrity of the jury's verdict and sentence.

Before this improper, last-minute hearing, this case went through every court all the way up to the United States Supreme Court. Those courts addressed exactly the issue here – whether the defendant would have gotten the death penalty if the jury had heard evidence that the victim was “unsympathetic.” They all rejected that argument. Now a county judge in Philadelphia is overruling all those courts.

As I have said, we can have a reasonable debate about the death penalty. But then let's have that debate. Don't make villains out of the victim, or the lawyers. And don't offer brutal murderers what they don't deserve.

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