

The Washington Post

*A Friend in the Electric Chair*⁷⁻²²⁻⁸⁹

WE PUBLISH today, on the opposite page, an eye-witness account of the recent execution of Horace Dunkins in Alabama. Writer Dale Aukerman had corresponded with him on death row for eight years and was familiar not only with the convict but also with his trial and sentencing. The case is disturbing for a number of reasons. Mr. Dunkins was mildly retarded. Though convicted, he never confessed. Mr. Aukerman makes a case that Mr. Dunkins did not receive the effective assistance of counsel at trial. In addition to these factors, the execution itself was particularly grisly. Mr. Dunkins did not die with the first burst of electricity—prison officials had misconnected the electric chair—and after nine minutes, he had to be jolted again.

All this has happened before, of course. People of subnormal intelligence are put to death without qualms if a jury so directs, and the Supreme Court only last month found the practice perfectly constitutional. Men are executed who protest their innocence to the end, and court-appointed lawyers with no experience in death-penalty cases often make mistakes at trial. Even the malfunctioning of the electrical system is not unprec-

edented. In 1946, a Louisiana man named Willie Francis survived an electrocution and was returned to his cell. The governor simply set another date six days later, and the U.S. Supreme Court ruled 5 to 4 that there was nothing constitutionally cruel and unusual about making a man who has had his head shaved and been strapped into the chair and severely shocked go through the whole thing a second time.

Constitutional or not, the deliberate, sanctioned killing of another human being is repulsive. The convict need not be retarded, protesting and poorly represented to make his execution offensive. Like Justices Brennan and Marshall, we believe that the death penalty is abhorrent no matter what the circumstances of the offender or the nature of his crime. This is not out of sympathy for a killer but out of a profound respect for the dignity of human life and a deeply held belief that a civilized society should not exact such a penalty.

Mr. Dunkins' death was uncommonly cruel, and his friend's account makes the event more poignant. But every execution is a killing—by court order—and every one is cause for shame.