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Live and let die

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THE ISSUE: Gov. Bob Riley refused to block the execution of Daniel Lee Siebert, despite pending legal challenges to lethal injection.

Gov. Bob Riley is right on at least one point: Daniel Lee Siebert was sentenced to die for crimes that were "monstrous, brutal and ghastly."

Siebert was convicted in the 1986 strangling death of his girlfriend, Sherri Weathers, a 24-year-old student at the Alabama School for the Deaf in Talladega. Also killed were Weathers' 5-year-old son, Chad; her 4-year-old son, Joey; and their neighbor, Linda Jarman. Far from declaring his innocence, Siebert has claimed he committed a number of other murders as well.

Monstrous? Brutal? Without question.

And, yet ... Riley's refusal Monday to postpone Siebert's execution was disappointing. Riley said delaying Siebert's execution, which is scheduled for Thursday, would be tantamount to "commuting his sentence to life in prison, and that is not the sentence he was given by a jury."

Riley saw no need to put off the execution while a challenge to lethal injection is pending in the U.S. Supreme Court. Last month, Riley granted a 45-day reprieve to Death Row inmate Tommy Arthur to give the state time to tweak its lethal injection procedures. Now, he said, the state is prepared to provide extra safeguards to make sure inmates really are unconscious when they are put to death - one of the chief issues involved in the ongoing lawsuits over lethal injection. That's good enough for Riley.

Yes, making sure condemned inmates are unconscious is a good thing. But isn't making sure Alabama's death penalty procedures fall within the parameters of the U.S. Constitution an even better thing?

Complicating Siebert's case is the fact he is terminally ill. He is expected to die in a matter of months, if not weeks, from pancreatic cancer. If he is not put to death this week, he may not live to see the Supreme Court resolve the questions about lethal injection. He may die before the state of Alabama can kill him.

That's a "risk" Riley should be willing to accept. Until federal courts have ruled on lethal injection, Alabama simply has no business putting people to death.

The same day Riley refused to call off Siebert's execution, the Georgia Supreme Court granted a reprieve to a Death Row inmate there because of the ongoing litigation over lethal injection. The Alabama Supreme Court

should do likewise.

Not because Siebert doesn't deserve to be punished - or, for that matter, to die - for his crimes. But the state must dole out its punishments in a morally and legally acceptable way, even for people who've done things as monstrous as Siebert.

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