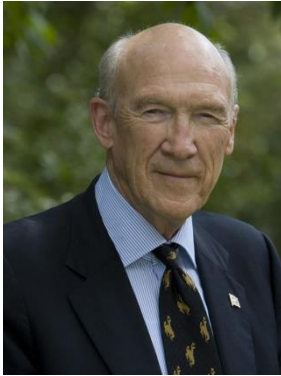


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The Better Angels of Our Nature –

A Call to End Life Without Parole for Children

By Former U.S. Senator Alan Simpson (R - WY)



Most folks who know me are aware of the 18 years I spent as a United States Senator from Wyoming, during which time I served in the leadership as Assistant Republican Leader under a great man, Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole.

Before I served our great nation, I too was a juvenile offender who committed serious crimes, risking my own life and the lives of others. With minor changes in the facts of the crimes, I could have spent years – or perhaps my entire life – in the clink. Instead, as a result of God’s grace and with the help of others, I have been able to use my experiences to the benefit of my community and our nation. I am living

proof that youth possess a unique capacity to grow and change. The child who seems hopeless today could go on to change the world.

That’s why I strongly support the work of the Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth (CFSY) which is actively working to end the practice of sentencing children to die in prison. In their new publication – *Righting Wrongs: The 5 Year Groundswell of State Bans on Life Without Parole for Children* – the CFSY highlights the incredible bi-partisan support and momentum for ending this terrible practice. I have worked alongside them in helping to usher in some of this change and the public perception around the children who receive these sentences. Certainly, we must hold children accountable for the serious crimes they commit, but we can do so in a way that allows opportunities for them to prove that they deserve a second chance later in life.

Nationwide, 17 states have banned life-without-parole sentences for crimes committed by people younger than age 18. The U.S. Supreme Court has also recognized that children are “constitutionally different” from adults in a series of rulings that have scaled back the use of extreme sentences on children. That court has made clear that because children’s brains are not fully developed, they are less deserving of the most severe punishments, including life without parole, which is defined as “cruel and unusual punishment” and is in effect, a death sentence for a child.

My list of childhood offenses is long. When I was a high school student in Cody, Wyoming, some friends and I intentionally went to an abandoned old barracks structure to cause damage. We decided to torch this property, a crime that now is punishable by years in prison if no one is injured and up to life in prison if the arson causes someone’s death. Luckily for me, no one was injured.

But my stupidity did not end there. My friends and I often played a dangerous game with guns. We hid in the rocks and shot .22 shells close to one another with the goal of coming as close as possible to each other without actually striking anyone. The bullets we stole from a local hardware store. Again, I am damn lucky that no one was killed or seriously injured.

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Still, that was not enough. My friends and I raised hell in our community, firing our .22 caliber rifles at mailboxes, blowing holes in several, and someone killing a cow. We also fired at a road grader. Federal authorities charged us with destroying government property and I pleaded guilty. I was sentenced to two years of federal probation and required to make restitution with my own money. That would require me to get a job. I sure did!

My parole officer – a great guy – would often check on me while I was in the local pool hall, and I always told him that I was on my way to choir rehearsal. One night, as I arrived very late at a club in Laramie, Wyo., that was popular with African-Americans, I saw a fellow student leaving. It was obvious he had been in a knife fight, so I asked him what happened. He said he had uttered a racial slur and I responded that if that was his attitude, he was sure in the wrong club. He attacked me and I shoved him down, just as the police arrived.

Police assumed I was responsible for the guy's knife wounds. When they attempted to arrest me, I belted the officer. How dumb can you get? He responded by striking me with his "billy club," and I still bear the scar as a reminder of that night. They took me to jail. My wife of 60 plus years – who was then my girlfriend – refused to bail me out, so I spent the night there. That's when I decided to marry her. She was sure as hell smarter than I was!

I was already in my 20s, and it was only then that I began to creep toward maturity. I decided I wanted to avoid further tangles with the law and become a productive member of society. I began to realize that my attitude was ignorant, stupefying, arrogant, hostile and cocky and that I no longer wanted to live that way. I had begun to grow up.

I went on to graduate from the University of Wyoming with a bachelor's degree, then a law degree. I served in the U.S. Army in Germany and then in various state-level attorney positions, as a U.S. Commissioner, a private attorney and a member of the Wyoming House of Representatives. My wife, Ann, and I also raised three wonderful children.

When I announced my candidacy for the U.S. Senate, my former probation officer, J.B. Mosley, was in the crowd. He had always believed in my capacity for redemption and he met Ann and told me he was proud of me. Against his wish, I introduced him when I spoke and told how he had helped to change my life. It was very moving for me. And just as redemption was possible for me, so is it also possible for other youth who are convicted of serious crimes.

We are all sinners, but salvation and redemption is there for all of God's children. Forgiveness, tolerance, rehabilitation and restoration are at the core of our beliefs and those of most major religions. We know most every human is worth more than the worst thing they have ever done.

There is Biblical evidence of these traits. Moses committed murder and yet served as a successful prophet and lawgiver. He is now remembered for his close relationship with God and for leading the people of Israel from slavery into freedom. David was guilty of killing and yet he was the beloved second king of Israel and an ancestor of Jesus. The Apostle Paul was considered a murderer who went on to become one of the most important figures of the apostolic age.

It is against this backdrop that I appeal to the "better angels of our nature" and call on legislators across our great nation to pass legislation that bans life without parole sentences for children. The release of CFSY's publication is certainly cause to celebrate the tremendous progress that these states have made, but it is also a call to elected leaders in every other state to take up

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and pass similar legislation. Every child has the potential for redemption and rehabilitation. We should at least give them the opportunity to demonstrate as much, and to show they are deserving of a second chance. We must remember that mercy is justice too and that if our children are not deserving of our mercy, then who amongst us is?

Respectfully and sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "A. Simpson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Former U.S. Senator Alan Simpson