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Even with heinous crimes, death penalty not the answer. A government should not sink to level of criminals.

A government should not kill its own people. In the 21st century, in a civilized country, this truth seems basic.

Yet on Tuesday, an Iowa jury ordered the death penalty for Angela Johnson, a 41-year-old mother of two. She joins her former boyfriend, Dustin Honken, in a sentence of death for murdering five people in 1993. If executed, they will be the first people sent to death by an Iowa jury since 1963.

The couple's crimes are heinous. Their execution-style killings included the slaying of two children. They deserve to spend the rest of their lives staring at the walls of a prison, thinking about their wrongs. They deserve never to walk free again.

What they did is unthinkable.

But what's even more unthinkable: the U.S. government killing its own people.

A government should not administer "eye for an eye" punishments for criminals. Juries do not order rapists to be raped or those guilty of assault to be beaten. The government should rise above the level of its criminals, not mete out equal retaliation.

Strapping a person to a table, inserting a catheter needle into his arm and administering lethal doses of drugs is wrong. Public employees shaving a person's head, strapping him to a chair and electrocuting him is cruel and unusual punishment. Locking someone into a gas chamber while an audience watches him die is an act one might expect to be committed by terrorists in some other country.

Not in the United States. Not in a country that properly protects the rights of everyone, even the convicted, even those among us who have committed the most despicable acts.

Killing a killer accomplishes nothing.

The victims will not be brought back to life. The families of the victims will continue to grieve. It will not deter others from committing crimes. In the long run, the death penalty will bring more media attention to Honken and Johnson, something neither deserves.

If these two criminals are executed, the United States will not be a better place. Two more people will be dead. And this time the blood will stain the hands of the U.S. government.