The death penalty is one of the most hotly contested issues of our time. Both those for and against capital punishment present passionate arguments in support of their positions. The topic is particularly difficult because no matter what happens, a life has been lost. The point of debate is whether it is right to take another life in response to a murder? Is it better to use the classic law of “eye for eye”, or is it better to show mercy to those who are unable to show it themselves? These are the kinds of questions that fueled the debate for years and will continue to in the future. Opponents of the death penalty call for mercy, but I call for justice, and sometimes it is impossible to have both.

The goal of the death penalty is to punish those who have committed severe crimes, usually murder. The most persuasive reason to support capital punishment lies with the victim’s family. Imagine yourself in the place of those who have lost a loved one as a result of a violent crime. It is a fact that some of the families call for mercy at the murderer’s trial, but for many, justice is not served until the killer is put to death for his or her crime.

Consider the case of eight-year-old Cary Ann Medlin, who was kidnapped, raped and then strangled to death by Robert Glen Cote in 1979. Cary Ann Medlin was riding her bike when she was hit and taken into Cote’s car. As the killer later confessed, Cary Ann’s words to him were “Jesus loves you” (http://www.geocities.com/carymedlin/carymedlin.html). This case demonstrates the innocence of life that can be taken, and that where people like Robert Cote are concerned, the death penalty is the only just response. What mercy is there for a man who raped and murdered an eight-year-old girl? The family of the victims waited in agony for 20 years as the decision to put Cote to death was debated in the courts, and he was finally killed in April of 2000 under the watch of Medlin’s family.

The only question in this case is that it took so long for Cote to be put to death. The punishment for the rape and murder of a child to which he confessed in 1979, should not be delayed by legal maneuver and appeals. For 20 years the family agonized over seeking justice for their eight-year-old daughter. Robert Glen Cote deserved to die.

Stories like Cary Ann Medlin’s stir up the emotional justification for the death penalty, but there is also justification in numbers. The first fact that needs to be pointed out, and is very often not made clear enough, is that the death penalty is not common and reality is only used for extreme cases. Since 1967, there has only been 1 execution for every 16,000 murders, making it less than one percent of murder cases (Death Penalty Information Center). In the late 90’s, 90-95% of the crimes that were put to death were murder.

Another misconception is that the inmates on death row are just unlucky and are being put to death for crimes they could be excused of. The statistics show, however, that these people are in no way excused from the community. Death row inmates are 250 percent more likely to kill another inmate while in jail, and 67 percent have had prior felony convictions. Nineteen to fifteen percent of those on death row have committed at least one other murder than the one or ones that they have been sentenced to death for. For 11 of 40 inmates released from North Carolina’s death row in the early 90’s have returned to jail (www.prodeathpenalty.com).

One of the reasons released after the reform in North Carolina, Tommy Neelid, was back in jail in 1992 for beating a man to death. The reality is that since the U.S. Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in the case of Gregg v. Georgia in the late 70’s, very few people have been put to death and those that have most likely got what was coming to them.

Those opposed to the death penalty often claim that it is more expensive to kill an inmate than to give him or her life without parole. The figures that justify this argument are not accurate, because the cost of living can vary tremendously between prisons. In order for there to be a sound comparison between putting someone to death and living them out in life, one must take into account the type of prisoners who are being executed. Death row inmates are not “average” inmates. Therefore, it doesn’t make any sense to use the “average” cost of a federal prison inmate to calculate living expenses. It costs $50,000 a year for an inmate to live in a maximum security prison than in the general prison population, and the people who are found in maximum security are the very people who are candidates for death row. Using the numbers for a maximum security inmate, capital punishment turns out not to be more expensive, but is actually a bit cheaper (www.prodeathpenalty.com).

Public opinion supports the government’s use of capital punishment in response to violent crimes. According to a Gallup poll in February, 67 percent of Americans are in favor of the death penalty, and only 25 percent are opposed (www.pollster.com). The death penalty is seen as a necessary evil as well as a deterrent for future crimes. The country as a whole agrees that some crimes demand the ultimate punishment in order for justice to be served.

We see this debate everyday in the news, particularly in recent days with the extensive media coverage of Timothy McVeigh and his execution. The news media and the media itself is not being honest about the cases to the citizens of the United States. We are not being told the whole truth about the cases to the citizens of the United States. We are not being told the whole truth about the cases to the citizens of the United States.

There is no fundamental difference between murder and capital punishment. Though the latter is said to be the former, it does not mean that George Bernard Shaw explained that violence begets violence when he said, “murder and capital punishment are not opposites that cancel one another, but similar that breed their kind. It is the deed that teaches not the name to give it.” The institution of capital punishment teaches people to accept the very violence it claims to punish. It denudes life in general. Contrary to popular belief, capital punishment does not deter would-be criminals, does not save taxpayers money and has taken the lives of innocent people. Capital punishment is barbarous inhumanity that human beings are intellectually incapable of many things.

Since the re-institution of capital punishment in the United States in 1976, 702 people have been executed. Though capital punishment is intended as a crime deterrent, a 2000 New York Times Survey found that the 12 states without the death penalty have consistently lower homicide rates than the 38 states that implement the punishment. In fact, in 1990, the south ern United States, where 80 percent of the country’s executions take place, had a murder rate higher than that of the nation as a whole. The Northeast, where only one percent of the country’s executions take place, had the lowest murder rate of all regions.

Since 1995, police chiefs have continually ranked capital punishment last among a list of crime deterrents. Ranking higher than capital punishment are crime prevention strategies such as reducing handgun availability, simplifying court rules, bettering the economy, and lengthening prison sentences of convicted criminals. Those who make it their profession to impede crime report that capital punishment is ineffective as a crime prevention measure, yet the institution remains.

The cost of housing countless prison inmates for lengthy sentences is only a fraction of the cost of exterminating them. In fact, the increased expenditure in capital punishment cases begins before sentencing is even considered. The cost of a criminal trial where the death penalty is sought is more expensive than all other criminal trials. Complicated pre-trial motions, lengthy jury selections that include question pending juries about their ability to consider capital punishment for the defendant, and expensive expert witness such as DNA specialists, contribute significantly to the cost of a capital punishment trial. Thus, even in cases where the death penalty is sought but not applied, the expenditures are still greater in all other criminal cases. Professor James Acker, an expert on capital punishment at the State University of New York in Albany, estimated the financial worthlessness of the death penalty saying, “if the ultimate punishment were life in prison to begin with you wouldn’t have all the added expense of a death penalty case.” (NY Daily News, 10/19/99).

As staggeringly unfortunate as the financial strain caused by capital punishment is, the economic pitfalls are insignificant when we consider the risk of executing an innocent defendant. In 25 years of capital punishment there are 502 executions where it is possible that the verdict in every trial was just. Unless human beings have absolute infallibility, there is certainly room for error in the justice system. It has been estimated that at least nineteen executions in the past 25 years ended the lives of 19 innocent men. The advent of DNA testing has allowed many wrongfully accused death-row inmates to prove their innocence.

The number of inmates released from prison after discovery of their innocence has nearly doubled from 2.7 to 5.4 in 1994 to 2000. The falsibility of the justice system begs our society to forgo implementing the irreversible punishment of death, but capital punishment continues to be applied.

With evidence indicating that the death penalty has no positive effect on the deterrence of crime, that it drains state funds dramatically and that it is responsible for the deaths of innocent people, why does it remain a hallmark of American justice? Capital punishment is barbarous, primitive, ritualized killing. As the species given what Aristotle calls “logos” – speech and reason – it is unnatural for us to resort to primitive behavior. We have been given the intellectual ability to find ways other than killing to resolve problems and punish criminals, yet we choose death instead. Some herald the revenge that capital punishment offers as the institutions justification, but what is the value of a revenge that extinguishes life? When we carry out a death sentence, we believe that the criminal is getting his due, but, as Albert Camus once said, “capital punishment is the most premeditated of murders, to which no criminal deed, however calculated can be compared. For there is no equivocation, the death penalty would have to punish a criminal who had warned his victim of the date at which he would inflict a horrible death on him and who, from that moment onward, had continued him at his mercy for months. Such a monster is not encountered in private life.”

The value of one human life is no greater or less than the value of another. By protecting ritualized killing with federal and state laws, we are nationally subscribing to the idea that human life can be measured. Each and every life is endangered when we decide that even one is expendable because we are reflections of each other; how we value someone else is ultimately how we value ourselves. As human beings, we are competent enough to rise to the challenge of punishing without killing. By invoking the death penalty, we threaten the intrinsic value of life and become the very criminal we wish to exterminate.