

Death on the Menu

Staff Writers

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Texas may have streamlined its death-penalty appeals process down to almost nothing. But even as court-appointed appeals lawyers miss filing deadlines, the Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles reviews life-and-death matters over the fax machine (actual meetings are too much trouble), one part of the process gets careful attention: condemned prisoners' last meals.

As if the subject were restaurant row instead of death row, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice's Web site spells out in macabre detail what inmates ask for — and what they actually get — just before taking their lethal injections.

"Three fried chicken breasts, three jalapeño peppers, five rolls and one soda," reads the entry for Willis Barnes, executed in September 1998 for a strangling death. "Shrimp and salad" were the unorthodox choices of Pedro Muniz, put to death in May 1998 for the rape and slaying of a college student. "Shrimp not available," the Web site notes. "Served cheeseburger, French fries and cola." Pretty close.

"It boils down to what we have available in the kitchen," explains Public Information Officer Larry Fitzgerald, adding that prison cooks try to fill the inmates' requests. But "if they order a T-bone steak . . . well, we don't serve a T-bone steak in the prison system. I don't think the taxpayers of Texas would sit still for feeding steak to inmates."

Stephen Bright of the Southern Center for Human Rights agrees there's no way Texas taxpayers would pop for an inmate's final T-bone. But in the case of murder-for-hire killer Andrew Cantu (baby-back pork ribs, hard-shell tacos, corn tortillas, French fries, salad with ranch dressing, red and green chile sauce, jalapeños and tomatoes boiled with garlic and cumin, root beer and chocolate ice cream), Bright also notes a chilling irony: "They may have fed him" — and how! — "but they didn't give him a legal review." Cantu was executed in February 1999, after his court-appointed lawyer missed two deadlines to file a writ that might have forestalled his fate.

Illinois just suspended executions after several inmates scheduled to die recently had their convictions overturned; some were cleared of involvement in the crimes for which they nearly died. "And Illinois," Bright adds, "is a model state compared to Texas."

Now, the express line on Texas' death row opened long before Governor George W. Bush earned the distinction of having signed more death warrants than any living elected official in the United States. (Betty Lou Beets, a great-grandmother with a history of being beaten and sexually abused, was scheduled to die Thursday for the killing of her husband.) But the GOP presidential candidate "is not paying attention to anything," Bright says. "He's not taking time out from his campaign to review any cases . . . at the clip they're going, it would be a full-time job."

Meanwhile, Fitzgerald, the spokesman for the Texas prison system, is proud of the year-old Web site: "We were getting so many calls from reporters asking literally the same questions over and

over and over — last meals? who's scheduled for execution? — by putting it on the Web site, it quite honestly saved us a lot of time.”

—**Bobbi Murray**

satan's spawn

Cyberspace, the final frontier — for legions of loyal Trekkies who cruise unofficial *Star Trek* sites constructed by fans. And one mysterious enemy, as OffBeat found when we stumbled on a Web site named Satantrek.com.

“Do not be fooled by the silky carress [sic] of Satantrek,” exhorted Pastor Zachary Smith at the site, which was sponsored by “The Church of the Mighty Lamb.” And a Mighty Peculiar Lamb, at that — the Satantrek people kept count of the number of “Trekkies [sic]” they had saved by weaning them from the evil series (102,398). It also ran photos of *Star Trek* crew members with colorful captions like “Satan's Whore!” (*Voyager* Captain Janeway) and “Satan's Robot Whore” (the reforming Borg babe whose name is “7 of 9”); the site's Captain Jean-Luc Picard had “666” scrawled across his bald pate.

Other *Star Trek* characters were variously denounced as a “secular humanist witch” and, in the case of the android Mr. Data, “practically a walking vibrator.” The final page featured an animated Damned Soul/unrepentant *Trek* fan engulfed in flames and running — presumably for all eternity.

But the fiery sinner's sprint abruptly ended last week when the Satantrek site suddenly disappeared into a fiber-optic wormhole. Gone — along with a host of links billed as favorites of Christ Jesus. OffBeat will sorely miss “Winnie the Pooh is a PERVERT!” (never wears pants), “Sporks Promote Transsexualism” (forks are clearly male, spoons are female) and “My Little Pony is a Whore” (with character names like Cherry Treats and Merry Moments, you can't guess why?).

Also vanished is the “Church of the Mighty Lamb” home page, which “welcomed all who are interested in being SAVED by CHRIST JESUS. However, Catholics, Jews, the handicapped and all other troublemakers should go elsewhere.” The page displayed a snapshot of Pastor Zachary Smith and his congregation standing in the church parking lot in Gilford, Arizona. One problem: Gilford, Arizona, is not listed in the Arizona telephone directory, or on maps.

Could Satantrek have been a hoax? Was the site crushed by *Star Trek* franchise owner Paramount Studios, which is notoriously lacking in any sense of humor about *Trek* portrayals? A *Star Trek* publicist declined comment.

From where we sit, the Church of the Mighty Lamb looks like the Church of the Mighty Scam — but only Pastor Smith, and God, know for sure. And they ain't talking.

—**Bobbi Murray**

public e-enemy no. 1?

If Senator John McCain's New Hampshire pitch relied on innocuous ideas like campaign-finance reform and military pay, in South Carolina last Saturday his shtick was anti-abortion and what he calls his "veritable crusade" against kids' access to Internet pornography.

To be sure, McCain needed to put on his most hard-right face to counter George W. Bush's more-conservative-than-thou attack. But at least in the case of Internet censorship, McCain wasn't just whistling Dixie. For several years, the senator has been pushing for Internet filtering in public libraries and schools. "The leading voice of filtering and blocking legislation in the current Congress," ACLU associate director Barry Steinhardt calls McCain.

McCain's original bill, S.1619, also known as "The Internet School Filtering Act," died in the Commerce Committee. Undaunted, McCain re-introduced essentially the same bill last year as S.97, renamed "The Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA)." Co-sponsored by that champion of free speech and open-mindedness, Jesse Helms, CIPA requires public libraries, elementary schools and secondary schools to "filter or block access to material that is obscene and to child pornography." Institutions that do not comply forfeit their federal e-rate funds, which subsidize Internet wiring.

The ACLU and the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) are troubled by the technical shortcomings of filtering software. Says Steinhardt, "Not only do they block material that is legally obscene, but also perfectly innocent material."

In 1998, the ACLU successfully represented a group of Web authors whose sites were blocked by Loudoun County, Va.'s use of a filtering package called "X-Stop" in libraries. Among the censored Web-page topics: safe-sex education, books for gay and lesbian teens and the American Association of University Women in Maryland.

McCain staffer David Crane insists filtering technology has vastly improved. "All of the major companies provide menus to their customers that allow them to go through and say, 'We want to block out drug information, hate speech, violent content, pornography, what have you,'" he says.

"That's putting way too much faith in the technology," responds EFF strategic-initiative director Alex Fowler. "With the Internet, you're talking about a global medium in which you have content in dozens of different languages. There's no technology that allows the user to have such nuanced control."

While hardly liberal on Internet filtering, McCain's opponents stop short of his extreme solutions. Vice President Al Gore has proposed that e-rate schools and libraries "come up with [their] own plan for protecting children from objectionable Internet content." Even Bush, who has "no problem" with sledgehammer fixes like the TV V-chip, has called for parental, rather than government, controls.

—Rico Gagliano