

**DECEMBER 13**

# At the gates of San Quentin

**N**o buzzards were gliding overhead, but several helicopters circled, under black sky tinged blue. On the shore of a stunning bay at a placid moment, the state prepared to kill.

Outside the gates of San Quentin, people gathered to protest the impending execution of Stanley Tookie Williams. Hundreds became thousands as the midnight hour approached. Rage and calming prayers were in the air.

The operative God of the night was a governor. "Without an apology and atonement for these senseless and brutal killings, there can be no redemption," Arnold Schwarzenegger had declared. Hours later, a new killing would be sanitized by law and euphemism. (Before dawn, a newscast on NPR's "Morning Edition" would air the voice of a media witness who had observed the execution by lethal injection. Within seconds, his on-air report twice referred to the killing of Williams as a "medical procedure.")

But at the prison gates, there were signs.

"The weak can never forgive."

"No Death in My Name"

"Executions teach vengeance and violence."

But for the warfare state – with the era of big government a thing of the past except for police, prisons and the Pentagon – vengeance and violence are rudiments of policy, taught most profoundly of all by the daily object lessons of acceptance, passivity and budget.

The execution was scheduled for 12:01 a.m.

Twenty-five minutes before then, people outside the gates began to sing "We Shall Overcome."

"We shall live in peace..."

Overhead, the helicopters kept circling; high-tech buzzards.

"An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind," said one sign.

Elsewhere in the crowd, another asked: "Are we blind yet?"

At seven minutes to midnight, it occurred to me how much the ritual countdown to

## **MEDIABEAT 2005 | NORMAN SOLOMON**

execution resembles the Doomsday Clock invented by atomic scientists several decades ago to estimate the world's proximity to nuclear annihilation.

From the stage, speakers praised Williams' renunciation of violence, his advocacy for nonviolence.

At two minutes before midnight, a TV news correspondent stood on the roof of a white van, readying a report for the top of the hour. At midnight the standup report began. It ended at 12:02 a.m.

A speaker called for a national moratorium on the death penalty in the United States. "No to Death Machine Careerism," a sign said.

"As you do unto the least of these, you do unto me," another sign said.

Full silence took hold at 12:24 a.m.

Then, an old song again. "... We shall ... overcome ... some ... day."

An announcement came at 12:38 a.m.; Stanley Tookie Williams was dead.

The country was no safer. Just more violent.

The sanctity of life was not upheld, just violated.

"It's over," said a speaker. "But it's not over."

From San Quentin to Iraq, death is a goal of policy. In the name of murder victims, the state murders. In the name of the fallen, more kill and fall.

*Norman Solomon is the author of "War Made Easy:  
How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death."  
For information, go to: [www.WarMadeEasy.com](http://www.WarMadeEasy.com)*