

My *Century* article on death-penalty abolition & life without parole

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In May, a federal jury sentenced the surviving Boston Marathon bomber to death. Dzhokhar Tsarnaev's lawyers had acknowledged his guilt and focused on humanizing him in hopes of avoiding a death sentence and getting instead a life sentence without the possibility of parole. The jury went the other way—a decision that met a lukewarm response on the streets of Boston. “They ought to demonstrate a little humanity,” one man told the *New York Times*.

Later that month, Nebraska's legislature abolished the death penalty and, like many states before, replaced it with life without parole (LWOP). State senator Ernie Chambers called the vote a chance to bring Nebraska “into the light of civilization and humane justice.”

It's a familiar theme: executions are barbaric; LWOP is the humane alternative. For 40 years, this idea has dominated the rhetoric and policy making of death-penalty opponents in the United States. So last fall when Pope Francis censured LWOP as a “hidden death sentence,” he was going pretty sharply off the script. We're accustomed to contrasting the two punishments. The pope equated them, denouncing both.

He has a strong case... [Read the rest of my article](#) from the new issue of the magazine.