

# 100 CLEMENCY FOR BLACK WIDOW

STEPHEN ROME 74.2.2009  
□ New York correspondent *The New York Times*

GREY-HAIRED grandmother Betty Lou Beets is a dab hand at embroidery. But she is better known for weaving a far more sinister web.

Beets, 62, will today become the 120th person executed in Texas under the governorship of Republican presidential contender George W. Bush.

She will be the fourth woman executed in the US since the Supreme Court allowed capital punishment to resume in 1976.

Beets, dubbed the "black widow", is scheduled to die by lethal injection after the Texas parole board yesterday unambiguously rejected her plea for clemency.

Fifteen years after being convicted of the shooting murder of her fifth husband, Dallas fireman Jimmy Beets, she claims to have been a victim of domestic violence who acted in self-defence.

Prosecutors believe Beets also shot dead her fourth husband, a crime for which she was charged but never tried. She was convicted of shooting and wounding her second husband.

The bodies of husbands number four and five were found buried in the yard of Beets's trailer home. She had told neighbours they had left her.



Murderer, Beets

Her sole motivation, prosecutors say, was greed. The death of her fifth husband left her about \$US110,000 (\$177,000) better off.

Beets and her lawyers, who asked for her death sentence to be commuted to life in jail, say she was abused by her husbands for decades.

Her trial lawyer, a drunk who consumed a bottle of Wild Turkey a day, was later jailed for taking bribes in connection with another death penalty case.

"This is not a capital case," Beets told Texas newspaper the Athens Daily Review. "It's about domestic violence. You don't kill the one that survives it."

"I'm asking you to let me live."

she begged Mr Bush in a message broadcast on top-rating television program Good Morning America. "I'm asking for mercy. And I'm asking for that compassion. And I'm praying you will allow it for me."

Her use of the word compassion was telling. Critics of Mr Bush argue his claim to "compassionate conservatism" is undermined by his headline support of the death penalty.

Her plea also recalled the case of Karla Fay Tucker, a double murderer executed in Texas two years ago. Mr Bush was harshly criticised for mocking her clemency plea in a magazine interview.

Yesterday's recommendation to reject the clemency plea takes the issue of Beets's fate out of the hands of Mr Bush, who would have had the next word on the matter.

Since Mr Bush took office in 1995, he has spared only one condemned prisoner.

Meanwhile, the US Supreme Court has dismissed the appeal of a death row inmate in Alabama who argued the electric chair constituted cruel and unusual punishment.

The 5-4 ruling means Alabama and the two other states that use the electric chair — Nebraska and Georgia — can continue to do so. But Georgia will soon make lethal injection its main form of execution.

# Woman executed as Bush fights for life

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DESPITE last-minute appeals, 62-year-old great-grandmother Betty Lou Beets is dead, lethally injected in a Texas prison.

George W. Bush, Texas Governor and self-styled compassionate conservative who approved the execution, continues to fight for his political life in his presidential nomination campaign against John McCain.

Beets is the 206th person to be executed in Texas since 1982.

A prison spokesman said Beets was administered lethal drugs at 6:08pm local time and declared dead at 6:18pm. She declined to make a final statement.

Beets was sentenced in 1985 for killing her fifth husband, Dallas fireman Jimmy Don Beets, whose body was found buried in the front yard of their mobile home.

She was charged, but not tried, for killing her fourth husband, Doyle Barker, who disappeared in 1981. Authorities found Barker's body under a tool shed outside her home during the investigation of Beets's death.

Her appeal lawyers say she was a victim of emotional torment by Beets and suffered physical, sexual and psychological abuse in her four previous marriages and during her childhood.

Sons of both men were at the execution, saying they had forgiven



Lethal injection: Beets

her, but that her execution was "the right thing."

"I can only pray and hope now she can hear me and I forgive her," said James Beets.

Doyle Barker's son, Rodney, said: "The state of Texas did the right thing tonight by putting Betty Lou to death. At least I know justice was done tonight."

Beets's execution comes at a time when Illinois has declared a moratorium on executions.

Since the death penalty was introduced there, 12 people have been executed but 13 who have now been proven innocent have been

released from death row. As Texas Governor, Mr Bush has speeded up the execution process and now 120 people have died during his term.

Mr Bush insists he is convinced that in every execution he has approved, the person was guilty.

In a country where 80 per cent of the people support the death penalty and not one leading politician opposes it — not John McCain, Al Gore, Bill Bradley or Bill and Hillary Clinton — Mr Bush may not suffer any political fallout.

Mr Bush can hide behind the 18-member Pardons Board — his appointees. Under Texas law he can only grant clemency on the majority recommendation of the board.

The board unanimously rejected Beets's clemency plea and denied, 13-5, her plea for a 180-day stay so that evidence that she had been a battered wife could be considered.

Mr Bush could have granted her a 30-day stay, but he approved the execution.

It seems the defence of Beets, claimed by Amnesty International to be learning-disabled and hearing impaired, was seriously flawed — a familiar pattern in Texas, according to opponents of the death penalty.

Through the neglect of Beets's trial lawyer, E. Ray Andrews, she was denied the defence of battered-wife syndrome. She was also painted as a black widow, who cold-bloodedly killed two husbands for their life insurance.

But it seems Mr Andrews, an

alcoholic who later would serve a prison sentence for soliciting a payoff as a district attorney, was responsible for the black-widow tag.

He told a reporter he had met Beets in late 1984, several months before her arrest. A fire had damaged her trailer home and she wanted help dealing with her insurance.

Beets told Mr Andrews her husband had disappeared more than a year before.

"This prompted me," Mr Andrews said, "to inquire about possible insurance policies or pension plans of which she might have been the beneficiary.

"I distinctly recall that I was the one to suggest that she may have been entitled to benefits arising out of her husband's disappearance."

On ABC's Good Morning America last week, Beets, her voice cracking, said: "I'm asking you to let me live. I'm asking for mercy."

Mr Bush was appearing on the same show as part of his presidential campaign. He said he had no unilateral right to spare an inmate's life.

"The thing I consider is whether or not a jury has heard all the facts and whether or not the person is guilty of the crime committed and whether or not the person has had full access to the court."

The system may have failed Beets on two out of these three issues. But it doesn't matter to her now. She's dead.