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Getting to the truth about Barksdale

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When a loved one dies, his family wants closure. This seems especially true for Farron Barksdale's family.



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Barksdale died over a year ago in the custody of the state of Alabama. The 32-year-old inmate was found unconscious in his cell at Kilby Prison, where he was serving a life sentence without parole after pleading guilty to the murder of two Athens police officers.

For some, this column should end here. Convicted felons aren't worth the newsprint.

For others, Barksdale's life had a God-given intrinsic worth, even though he himself had committed the horrible evil act of killing. Even his life-without-parole prison sentence was, in a sense, an assignment of value.

For me, all of this means that the state has a clear obligation to discover and to reveal the complete truth about Barksdale's death.

Here's what we knew before this week. Barksdale had been transferred to Kilby three days before he died. An autopsy report said he died of pneumonia, complications from hypothermia and blood clotting. It also said inexplicable bruises covered portions of his body, but for some reason these weren't deemed relevant to his death.

Then earlier this week, Times reporters Keith Clines and Bob Lowry reported something new. A letter from another Kilby inmate has triggered the reopening of the Barksdale case by the Alabama Bureau of Investigation and the Department of Corrections' Department of Investigations and Intelligence. It was written by J.D. Bennett, who claims that Barksdale was brutally beaten by four racist, black prison guards who - his words - "prey on whites."

If Bennett's allegations are true, if there is a gang of guards at Kilby who prey on prisoners for any reason, they should be prosecuted. And if this gang is motivated by hatred of whites, they should be fired, arrested and charged with hate crimes in Barksdale's death.

"The allegations in the letter should be taken seriously," Sarah Geraghty of the Southern Center for Human Rights said to me a few days ago.

Indeed. Whatever happened to Barksdale, for whatever reason, clearly shouldn't have happened.

What complicates matters is that Department of Corrections officials have refused to release any of the incident and investigative reports related to Barksdale's death. They claim it would violate Alabama law to do so.

In fact, it wouldn't, according to a recent ruling by the Circuit Court of Montgomery County. Barksdale's family and the citizens whose taxes paid for his incarceration have a right to know how he died - and if possible - who, if anyone, is to blame.

"This isn't Communist China," lawyer Jake Watson told me earlier this week. Watson represents Mary Barksdale, Farron's mother. "This is supposed to be the United States of America."

Yes, and in the Land of the Free, public records are supposed to be subject to the public's inspection. Governmental actions are supposed to be transparent.

In these United States, government officials are supposed to be accountable to the people, not free to obfuscate the truth.

By now, you'd think the Corrections Department would have figured out that Barksdale's death isn't going anywhere. In fact, the effort to keep its details secret has given his case a life span that has extended well beyond his death.

Just as with the innocent Abel of the Old Testament, brutally murdered by his brother, Cain, Barksdale's blood cries out for justice.

It doesn't matter that Barksdale was guilty of murder. In a civil society, everyone is entitled to justice, murderers and murder victims alike.

Which means that Farron Barksdale's family has a right to know what happened to him. So does the public. And the Department of Corrections has an obligation to tell us.

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