Just a decade ago, crafting the case against the American death penalty might have seemed a quixotic exercise. Nationwide, there were more executions carried out and more death sentences rendered in the late 1990s than in any other period since the reinstatement of capital punishment in 1976.1 Thirty-eight states had active death penalty statutes at the turn of the century, another high-water mark in the modern death penalty era.2 In the political arena, a Texas governor renowned for signing death warrants without blinking was an early favorite to win the 2000 presidential election.3 In short, the “machinery of death,” to quote the late Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun, was churning in full force.4

Fortunately for those skeptical of the machinery’s merit, times have changed. Though the death penalty remains both popular and functioning in many states, particularly in the South, the golden age of the late 1990s has given way to a new wave of reflection, criticism and opposition. For the first time in a generation, the ultimate question of capital punishment—whether governments should kill people for killing other people because killing people is wrong—has entered an unpredictable stage in the United States.

Despite the entreaty reproduced above, which exposes the pitfalls of capital sentencing, the Court of Appeals of New York declined to address the ultimate question in People v. Taylor.5 Instead, the court affirmed and

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2 The thirty-eight death penalty states in 1998 were the following: Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Illinois, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Virginia, Washington and Wyoming.
5 9 N.Y.3d 129 (N.Y. 2007).
applied People v. LaValle, in which it found a procedural flaw in New York’s 1995 death penalty statute. Lawmakers in Albany have yet to respond to LaValle by passing a new and improved statute, so with the Taylor decision emptying New York’s death row, capital punishment is now officially off the books in the Empire State. Though major news outlets often present that development in its provincial context, the reality is that New York and other states abandoning capital punishment are intricately connected to the national debate.

The Eighth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution prohibits cruel and unusual punishment, and for the past fifty years the Supreme Court has interpreted that prohibition in light of the nation’s “evolving standards of decency.” The Eighth Amendment therefore bans not only those sanctions outlawed at the time of the Constitution’s framing, but also all sanctions that offend contemporary conceptions of appropriate punishment. In assessing contemporary conceptions, the Court has relied principally on the objective evidence of state legislation; simply put, if the state legislatures

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7 Taylor, 9 N.Y. 3d at 138.
8 U.S. Const. amend. VIII.
10 The heavy reliance on state legislation appears in the context of both opinions of the Court and plurality opinions. See Gregg v. Georgia, 428 U.S. 153, 173 (1976) (plurality opinion) (Stewart, J., Powell, J., and Stevens, J.) (“The most marked indication of society’s endorsement of the death penalty for murder is the legislative response to Furman [v. Georgia, 408 U.S. 438 (1972)]. The legislatures of at least 35 states have enacted new statutes that provide for the death penalty for at least some crimes that result in the death of another person.”); Coker v. Georgia, 433 U.S. 584, 593-94 (1977) (plurality opinion) (White, J.) (“In reviving death penalty laws to satisfy Furman’s mandate, none of the States that had not previously authorized death for rape chose to include rape among capital felonies. Of the 16 States in which rape had been a capital offense, only three provided the death penalty for rape of an adult woman in their revised statutes—Georgia, North Carolina and Louisiana. In the latter two States, the death penalty was mandatory for those found guilty, and those laws were invalidated by Woodson and Roberts. When Louisiana and North Carolina, responding to those decisions, again revised their capital punishment laws, they re-enacted the death penalty for murder but not rape….Georgia is the sole jurisdiction in the United States at the present time that authorizes a sentence of death when the rape victim is an adult.
across the nation overwhelmingly reject a practice, then the Court considers that practice cruel and unusual punishment. And though the Court has entertained considerations such as international opinion as well, it has

1 See Atkins, 536 U.S. at 316-317, n. 21 (“[W]ithin the world community, the imposition of the death penalty for crimes committed by mentally retarded offenders is overwhelmingly disapproved.”); Simmons, 543 U.S. at 575-577 (“Our determination that the death penalty is disproportionate punishment for offenders under 18 finds confirmation in the stark reality that the United States is the only country in the world
made clear that state legislation is the dominant factor.  

In the past decade, the Court has applied this states-based formula twice: first to abolish the death penalty for mentally retarded offenders, and then again to abolish the death penalty for juvenile offenders. On both issues, thirty states banned the practice in question when the Court intervened, and on both issues, the Court held that the thirty states’ prohibitions demonstrated that the practice in question, then continuing in the remaining twenty states, violated the Eighth Amendment. Now, even if a state such as Alabama wishes to execute a mentally retarded offender or a juvenile offender, the Constitution prohibits it, largely on account of the positions of thirty states as distant as Alaska and Hawaii. Given that framework, thirty has emerged as something of a magic number in the national movement for total abolition.

So where do the state legislatures stand on the ultimate question of capital punishment? With the Taylor decision in October 2007, New York became the nation’s thirteenth abolitionist state. New Jersey then repealed its death penalty through legislation in December 2007, emerging as the fourteenth abolitionist state. Maryland nearly joined the 2007 trend, with abolition legislation dying in committee in the state senate despite strong support from both the governor and the legislature’s lower chamber. Out west, New Mexico’s house and Montana’s senate passed abolition measures in 2007, as did legislative committees in Colorado and

that continues to give official sanction to the juvenile death penalty. Only seven countries other than the United States have executed juvenile offenders since 1990: Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and China. Since then each of these countries has either abolished capital punishment for juveniles or made public disavowal of the practice.

12 See, e.g., Atkins v. Virginia, 536 U.S. at 312 (“We have pinpointed that the clearest and most reliable objective evidence of contemporary values is the legislation enacted by the country’s legislatures.”)


15 Atkins, 536 U.S. at 314-15; Simmons, 543 U.S. at 564.

16 The number had been set at twelve since New York reinstated the death penalty in 1995.


18 Maryland Daily Record Staff, Mixed results mark Maryland session’s end, MARYLAND DAILY RECORD, Apr. 13, 2007.
Though those state legislatures began their death penalty assessments by grappling with everything from execution methods to budget concerns, all eventually came to contemplate the more fundamental question at stake.

The flurry of activity in state legislatures across the nation, which has continued in early 2008, suggests that even if the magic number of thirty remains a long way off, the debate over the American death penalty is back—and in all its complex dimensions. As such, the editors of the *Journal of Law and Social Change* regard this piece, originally a bold argument in New York’s highest court, as a valuable contribution to the continuing national exchange on capital punishment.

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