

INDETERMINATE SENTENCE PAROLE RELEASE REVIEW
(Penal Code Section 3041.2)

GREGORY COATES, B-68775

First Degree Murder

AFFIRM:

MODIFY:

REVERSE:

_____ X _____

STATEMENT OF FACTS

On January 22, 1975, Gregory Coates broke into a friend's house through a window. Once inside, he encountered his friend's mother, Jean Stephens. While the details of the murder are somewhat unclear, Ms. Stephens' 12-year-old daughter found her mother's dead body in a back bedroom when she got home from school. Ms. Stephen's nylon stockings had been pulled down around her ankles and her blouse was open and pulled back. An investigator reported that a sexual assault was committed. Ms. Stephen's head had been wrapped in a pillowcase and some clothing and appeared to have been bludgeoned. There were bite marks on her stomach. She had been shot in the face twice.

Several months later, on May 4, 1975, Mr. Coates broke into his father's house and waited for his stepmother, Betty Coates, to come home. Betty arrived home and reportedly told Mr. Coates to leave. Mr. Coates left, but returned later through a window and approached Betty in her bedroom. He raped her. According to the investigator in this case, Mr. Coates struck his stepmother against a doorjamb, knocking her unconscious. Then, in an effort to suffocate her, Mr. Coates placed a plastic bag over her head and tied a towel over her nose and mouth. Finally, he poured gasoline on Betty's body and set it on fire. The fire department came to put out the fire and discovered Betty's body.

GOVERNING LAW

The question I must answer is whether Mr. Coates will pose a current danger to the public if released from prison. The circumstances of the crime can provide evidence of current dangerousness when the record also establishes that something in the inmate's pre- or post-incarceration history, or the inmate's current demeanor and mental state, indicate that the circumstances of the crime remain probative of current dangerousness. (*In re Lawrence* (2008) 44 Cal. 4th 1181, 1214.) Additionally, I am required to give "great weight to the diminished culpability of juveniles as compared to adults, the hallmark features of youth, and any subsequent growth and increased maturity of the prisoner" when determining a youthful offender's suitability for parole. (Pen. Code, § 4801, subd. (c).)

DECISION

The Board of Parole Hearings found Mr. Coates suitable for parole based on the length of incarceration, his remorse, acceptance of responsibility, self-help programming, and good behavior in prison.

I acknowledge that Mr. Coates was 17 and 18 years old when he committed these murders. His father was an alcoholic who abused Mr. Coates' mother. His parents divorced when he was nine years old and his father later married Betty Coates. Mr. Coates reported that his stepmother sexually molested him and forced him to have sex with her from the ages of 12 to 15. He left home at 15 and got his girlfriend pregnant at 16. He was married and attempting to raise an infant at a very young age. When the Board asked Mr. Coates to describe himself at 17 and 18, he reported that he was "angry, confused, resentful, entitled ... very jealous of people who had the American family, apple pie and everything." Over his very lengthy incarceration, Mr. Coates has made efforts to improve himself. He is now 61 years old and has been incarcerated for over 43 years. He has obtained his high school diploma, earned several vocations, and has participated in self-help classes, including Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Anger Management, and other programs. I carefully examined the record for evidence demonstrating Mr. Coates' increased maturity and rehabilitation, and gave great weight to all the factors relevant to his diminished culpability due to his age at the time of these crimes, his hallmark features of youth, and his subsequent growth in prison during my consideration of his suitability for parole. However, these factors are outweighed by evidence that he remains unsuitable for parole.

Mr. Coates committed two atrocious murders. Ms. Stephens was a neighbor, the mother of one of his friends, and someone even Mr. Coates described as a "major source of support" to him as he tried to raise his child. Despite this, he decided to burglarize her home, and when caught, knocked her unconscious, either raped or attempted to rape her, and killed her. He was able to evade suspicion and was not caught until after he had killed his stepmother in a similar manner more than three months later. This was an equally heinous murder – he raped his stepmother, knocked her unconscious, suffocated her to death, and lit her on fire. Many attended Mr. Coates' recent parole hearing and have written to oppose parole in this matter. They spoke of the continued effect these crimes have had on their lives and their community. Without question, these crimes remain especially shocking and disturbing.

Mr. Coates' understanding of his reasons for committing these crimes is simply inadequate. He told the Board that he broke into Ms. Stephens' home to take a gun. He said that he was jealous of their "perfect family" and didn't think they would miss anything. When asked about the reasons for the sexual element of this crime against Ms. Stephens, he reported that he had "no good reason" and "wanted release." He said, "I hadn't had sex with my wife since the baby was born and she was laying there, she was a pretty woman. She never gave me any intentions of that was okay, but I took it upon myself to take advantage of a defenseless woman." He said that he killed her because he "didn't want to get caught." He said, "The rage was within me. I was angry at the world. I stole, I cheated, I didn't even care about myself."

Mr. Coates reported that he hated his stepmother, Betty, from the outset because he felt that she had taken his father away from his family. He has claimed, apparently since 2012, that she sexually abused him from the ages of 12 to 15. He reported that just before he killed her, they had consensual sex and that he became angry when she refused to help him with his wife and child, so he hit, choked, and strangled her. When asked why he set her on fire, he said, "I had that anger toward her, I had that anger toward that house." He said he was taking revenge on his father, who left the family, refused to pay child support, and instead supported Betty.

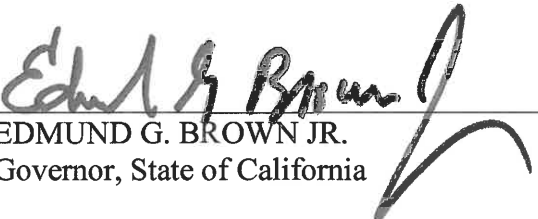
These statements do little to explain the sexual violence employed by Mr. Coates or the brutality of his murders. It is very hard to understand how Mr. Coates can claim that the sole reasons he sexually assaulted Ms. Stephens while she was unconscious on the floor were his sexual frustration and the fact that he thought she was pretty. It is equally difficult to reconcile Mr. Coates' claim of being sexually abused by his stepmother as a child with his claim that they had consensual sex before he strangled her to death and set her body on fire. This does not ring true. He had previously said that he raped his stepmother before killing her. Both these murders show an unbelievable level of sexual violence that he just can't seem to explain. And while it does seem that Mr. Coates was very angry and troubled by his parents' divorce and his father's subsequent marriage, I believe he has to do much more to understand and explain these horrible and totally unusual crimes.

Mr. Coates has spent a very long time in prison – over four decades. While early in his incarceration Mr. Coates was disciplined repeatedly for fighting and other violations, he has been free from serious rule violations for over 32 years. He has made admirable strides to improve his conduct and better himself. Yet, I believe Mr. Coates has more work to do. Mr. Coates' participation in self-help programming has been limited and sporadic. Even he notes that his willingness to be honest about his past and genuinely engage in self-help groups is recent. I encourage Mr. Coates to continue to make efforts to understand, in a comprehensive manner, the reasons he committed these crimes so that he can show that he will never return to such violence in the future.

CONCLUSION

I have considered the evidence in the record that is relevant to whether Mr. Coates is currently dangerous. When considered as a whole, I find the evidence shows that he currently poses an unreasonable danger to society if released from prison. Therefore, I reverse the decision to parole Mr. Coates.

Decision Date: September 7, 2018


EDMUND G. BROWN JR.
Governor, State of California