

# Virginia Gov. Robert McDonnell won't stay execution of Teresa Lewis



## [Former chaplain pleads for convict's life](#)

The Rev. Lynn Litchfield, former chaplain at Virginia's Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women, is among the people trying to convince Gov. Robert F. McDonnell (R) to spare the life of a woman facing execution on Sept. 23.

By [Maria Glod and Anita Kumar](#)

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Saturday, September 18, 2010

RICHMOND -- Virginia Gov. Robert F. McDonnell said Friday evening that he will not spare the life of a 41-year-old woman who is set to become the first woman executed in the state in nearly a century.

Teresa Lewis, [who conspired with two men to carry out the 2002 murders of her husband and stepson](#), is scheduled to be killed by lethal injection Thursday in Virginia's death chamber. Her appeal is pending before the U.S. Supreme Court.

Lewis's supporters have argued that she does not deserve to die because she is borderline mentally retarded and was manipulated by a much smarter conspirator. They say it is unfair that Lewis was sentenced to death while the two men who fired the shots received life sentences.

Prosecutors and police have portrayed Lewis as the scheme's cold mastermind, who plotted the killings of her husband, Julian Lewis, and his son, Charles "C.J." Lewis, to collect insurance money. They say she gave her conspirators \$1,200 to buy guns, set up an alibi for herself during an earlier, failed attempt to have her husband killed, then left the door to her trailer unlocked so the gunmen could slip in.

McDonnell, a death penalty supporter, said in an interview at the state Capitol late Friday that clemency petitions present some of "the toughest decisions" a governor faces. Over the past few

weeks, he said, he has read court transcripts and documents submitted by Lewis's attorneys, although he has not talked directly with the families involved. He said Lewis's gender did not enter into his decision.

In a statement announcing the decision, McDonnell said Lewis had admitted the "heinous crimes" and noted that no medical professional has concluded that she is mentally retarded under Virginia law. "I find no compelling reason to set aside the sentence that was imposed by the Circuit Court," McDonnell said.

McDonnell previously has rejected clemency petitions from two other death row inmates.

McDonnell's denial of the clemency petition means that Lewis, a mother and grandmother, is likely to become the first woman executed in the United States since September 2005, when Frances Newton was killed by lethal injection in Texas for the shooting deaths of her husband and two young children. Since 1900, 50 women have been executed across the country, according to the District-based Death Penalty Information Center. Eleven women have been executed since capital punishment was reinstated in 1976.

In a recent interview at the Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women, Lewis said that she is sorry for the pain she has caused and that she thinks about her crime every day. "Even though I didn't pull the trigger, I deserve punishment for what I have done," she said.

Lewis said she has prayed that her sentence be commuted to life in prison but has come to terms with the fact that she may be put to death. If she was allowed to live, she said, she would pray with and counsel other inmates. "I have accepted that it could happen," Lewis said of execution. "I know it's a reality. I'll go home to be with Jesus."

It was early the morning of Oct. 30, 2002, when Lewis's conspirators, Matthew Shallenberger and Rodney Fuller, arrived at her Danville trailer. They awakened her, and she slipped out of bed. Shallenberger, who was Lewis's lover, opened fire on Julian Lewis, a Vietnam veteran who worked as an electrician at the nearby Dan River textile plant. Fuller shot C.J. Lewis, an Army reservist who was visiting.

Fuller made a deal with prosecutors for a life sentence, and Shallenberger later received the same punishment. Teresa Lewis pleaded guilty to capital murder and the judge, finding that she was the "head of this serpent," sentenced her to death.

In recent weeks, Lewis's attorneys and supporters contend that evidence that emerged after the sentencing shows that Shallenberger, who has since committed suicide, was the true mastermind. He bragged to a former girlfriend that he used Lewis and wanted the insurance money so he could move to New York and deal drugs. Lewis's IQ puts her just above the legal definition of mental retardation, and Shallenberger was much more intelligent.

Before the decision was announced, McDonnell said he considered arguments about Lewis's mental capacity and the fact that both gunmen were sentenced to life. "The test for me really is: . . . Is there anything that would be a miscarriage of justice in letting the execution go forward?"

Kathy Clifton, Julian Lewis's daughter and C.J. Lewis's sister, has not said whether she thinks Lewis should be executed for her crimes. She said that decision rests in the hands of the courts and the governor.

"I don't hate Teresa," Clifton said. "I forgive her. I've had to because if I hadn't it would have killed me."

No woman has been executed in Virginia since 1912, when Virginia Christian, 17, was electrocuted for the murder of her employer, Ida Belote. The two fought after Belote accused Christian of stealing a gold locket, accounts at the time said.

*Glod reported from Washington.*