

Is there an official U.S. manual on how to conduct a hanging?

David Kenway

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Dear Cecil:

In 1939 a U.S. marshal in the territory of Alaska received a prisoner plus a judge's order to hang him. According to an article I read [in Alaska Justice Forum, Spring 1996], the marshal had no experience with hanging and found a federal publication to provide guidance. The story is ambiguous about whether there was an official federal manual on hanging or various published aids available for marshals. Did such a manual exist, what did it contain, and does the federal government still provide manuals on capital punishment methods?

Cecil replies:

The federal government has manuals for everything, David. Egg grading. Blueberry loss adjustment. (Don't ask me.) And yes, once upon a time, hanging.



To be clear, the article you mention doesn't say the marshal found a federal publication. Rather, it reports, "I think they got a few books out of libraries somewhere, probably from the U.S. Marshal Service, to tell them how a hanging was to be set up and carried through." And why not? Libraries were the Google of the 20th century, just as talking to actual human beings was the precursor to Facebook.

Illustration by Slug Signorino

You may ask: Who needs a manual for hanging? How complicated can it be? Depends on what you've got in mind. If the only goal is death and never mind whether it's cruel or unaesthetic, you can simply tie a noose around the prisoner's neck, hoist away, and wait while he or she slowly strangles.

A less appalling method is to break the prisoner's neck, normally by dropping from a height, causing immediate unconsciousness and quick death. In the early days, though, drops were relatively short, often less than three feet, which didn't always produce the intended result. Prisoners often still strangled and once in a while survived, leaving the authorities with the decision of whether to rehang them or to interpret the event as a message from above and commute their sentences.

A better approach was needed, and the so-called long drop, usually of seven to ten feet, gained favor in the mid-19th century. But while more is better, too much — depending on the condemned's size and musculature — is really bad, as decapitation can result. To help themselves and their colleagues consistently determine the proper drop height, in the late 1800s executioners began to develop charts known as "drop tables," correlating prisoners' weights with how far they needed to fall.

The tables were refined over the years, but hanging disasters have never gone away. An infamous screwup happened at the Nuremberg war crime hangings in 1946, when several Nazi prisoners were executed using too short a drop, leaving them dangling but, for an excruciating interval, not dead. One struggled for 24 minutes before dying. Conversely, in 2007, Iraqi executioners hanged Saddam Hussein's half-brother, Barzan Ibrahim al-Tikriti, using a drop of nearly eight feet and yanked his head off.

Another critical element is the rope. Over time standards were developed not only for length and thickness but also material, noose design, and lubrication, since the noose must tighten smoothly at the instant of maximum extension. The rope has to be strong enough to survive the drop without breaking, but not so thick that tightening is impeded. The traditional

hangman's knot wasn't always used: British standards called for a noose formed with a brass ring or eyelet to minimize friction, allowing the rope to slide quickly through and (ideally) produce a firm snap of the neck.

Finally we come to the scaffold, which must be structurally sound, capable of supporting several people plus the momentum of the dropping prisoner, and equipped with a smooth-acting and reliable trapdoor. Various designs have been used over the years; those preferring the tried and true might turn to the official British scaffold design, first published in 1885.

We spent some time hunting for whatever hanging guidance might have been available in the U.S. in 1939, and frankly there may not have been much. The best we could do was a rough plan of a scaffold drop in the 1892 book *My Experiences as an Executioner* by the British hangman James Berry.

Matters were put on a more systematic basis in 1944 when the U.S. War Department published official pamphlet number 27-4, *Procedure for Military Executions*, which provides everything from rope specifications to instructions on what music to play before and after. Of particular interest are the detailed dimensioned drawings and bill of materials for a complete scaffold — one trip to Home Depot and any competent carpenter could build one. Conspicuously omitted are drop tables and details of hangman's knots; possibly because of the 1946 Nuremberg fiasco, these were included in the 1947 edition.

No federal hanging manual is currently available that we could find, presumably because hanging by the U.S. military has been discontinued and is no longer specified for federal crimes. However, although we didn't look, we wouldn't be surprised to learn there were federal manuals for other methods of execution, since we're one of the few remaining countries on earth where guidance on this subject is still in demand.

Cecil Adams

Send questions to Cecil via cecil@straightdope.com.

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