

## **The Jury Made the Correct Decision in the Casey Anthony Capital Murder Trial: Addressing the Requirements for Establishing Criminal Culpability**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper utilizes transcripts from the Casey Anthony capital murder trial to evaluate the prosecution's effort at establishing criminal culpability. More specifically, the legal concepts of mens rea, actus reus, concurrence, causation, harm, scienter, and motive are analyzed. An argument is made that the jury made the correct decision in acquitting Casey Anthony. The prosecution's use of circumstantial evidence also is addressed. It is argued that the circumstantial evidence introduced at trial was not sufficiently compelling to meet the burden of proof beyond a reasonable doubt.*

**Keywords:** Casey Anthony, capital murder, elements of crime, due process

### **1.0 Introduction**

On 16 June 2008, Casey Anthony took her daughter, Caylee, out of her parents' home where the two were living. Casey spent most of the next 31 days at the home of Tony Lazaro, a new boyfriend she met on Facebook. During this time, Casey never mentioned to anyone that her daughter was missing. She told Tony that her daughter was in the care of a nanny. On 15 July 2008 three-year-old Caylee Anthony was reported missing in Orlando, Florida. On 14 October 2008, her mother, Casey Anthony, was arrested and charged with first-degree murder (a capital offense), aggravated child battery, and four counts of lying to the police. The case captured the attention of the American public, especially as it entered the trial phase. This paper is not a rehash of all the details of the investigation and interrogation of Casey Anthony. Here, the elements of the crime of first-degree murder are addressed and an argument is put forth that in light of the prosecutor's approach to testimony and evidence presentation, the jury made the correct decision in acquitting Casey Anthony of murder. For a detailed discussion of the mechanics of the case from initial missing persons reports to acquittal, see Baez (2012).

### **2.0 Crimes That Casey Anthony Actually Committed**

Before embarking upon a discussion of the legal elements of criminal culpability, it is important to first point out the transgressions committed by Casey Anthony that are indisputable. First, we know that on 15

June 2008, Caylee Anthony was seen alive for the last time. It was not until 16 July 2008 that she was reported missing by her grandmother. This means that Casey Anthony knew that her daughter was missing for over one month without reporting it to the authorities. During this time, it has been documented that Casey was involved in various partying, tattooing, and other types of shenanigans not conducive to a mother who was distraught by having her child abducted. Some reasonable people might come to the conclusion that this does make her a questionable mother. However, shoddy parenting is not a capital offense nor does it establish beyond a reasonable doubt that she was guilty of first-degree murder.

## **2.1 Lies, Lies and More Lies**

During the missing person phase of the case, Casey repeatedly lied to the police (a crime in the U.S. called obstruction of justice). For example, she told the 911 dispatcher that she knew who had her daughter. She identified a nanny, Zenaida Fernandez – Gonzalez (a.k.a. Zanny the Nanny) as the culprit. She also told police during the search that she had received a call from Caylee. At one point, Casey led police to an apartment where she said Zanny lived. This also turned out to be a lie as it was reported later that the apartment identified had not been occupied for several months. Finally, Casey lied to the police about working at Universal Studios. She even lied about the date Caylee disappeared. Originally, Casey indicated that Caylee disappeared on 9 June. It was later determined that Caylee was at her grandmother's house (Cindy Anthony) on 15 June and was safe and sound. Finally, she lied about informing workers at Universal Studios concerning Caylee's disappearance.

There are several situations where Casey intentionally committed the crime of obstruction of justice by attempting to thwart investigators in the search for Caylee. Therefore, it is conceded here that Casey was a habitual liar, guilty of obstruction of justice, and probably mentally unstable. The prosecutor attempted to use this as circumstantial evidence to point toward first-degree murder and aggravated child battery charges. Basically, circumstantial evidence is evidence that is not direct. It requires the jury to interpret and make inferences. It is considered to be much weaker than physical evidence or eyewitness testimony.

To summarize, Casey is admittedly guilty of multiple crimes. She did lie to police about the following: 1) being an employee at Universal Studios pursuant to the missing persons report; 2) she said she left Caylee at an apartment complex with Zanny which caused police to pursue the phantom babysitter; 3) she told police that she informed two Universal Studios employees of Caylee's disappearance when she had not; and 4) she said she had talked on the phone with Caylee during the 31 days between her disappearance and the time that she finally reported the missing girl. However, while these are indeed crimes, none of them satisfy the constitutional requirements necessary for establishing culpability to the level of first degree murder.

## **3.0 The Basis of the Right to a Jury Trial in the United States**

The right to a trial by jury for a criminal defendant is guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution. More specifically, the Fifth Amendment extends this right. The Fifth Amendment states in part... "Nor be deprived of life, liberty, or property without due process of law. Due process, in this context, essentially means that before convicting the defendant of a criminal offense, the government must respect all the legal rights that a person is guaranteed. Due process may be viewed as a rulebook of sorts, a series of steps that the state must go through before condemning a person to death. Since the ratification of the U.S. Constitution in 1787, due process has come to be interpreted by the Supreme Court as including the right to a trial by jury.

Similarly, the Sixth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution also addresses the right to a jury trial and due process steps. For example, the Sixth Amendment states in part... "In all criminal prosecutions, the accused shall enjoy the right to a speedy and public trial, by an impartial jury of the state and district

wherein the crime shall have been committed... and to be informed of the nature and cause of the accusation; to be confronted with the witnesses against him; to have compulsory process for obtaining witnesses in his favor, and to have the assistance of counsel for his defense.” Stated more succinctly, Casey Anthony has a right to have a public trial with an impartial jury in Florida and to have her attorney discredit witnesses who are trying to have her put to death. It is on the basis of these two constitutional amendments that Casey's life was spared.

#### **4.0 Essential Elements of a Crime**

To convict a defendant of a criminal offense, the prosecution has an enormous burden of proof. The following elements must be established beyond a reasonable doubt: actus reus, mens rea, concurrence, causation, harm, and scienter. If the jury has a reasonable doubt, then it has the moral and legal obligation to acquit the defendant. In addition, to qualify for the death penalty, the prosecution must show that the crime was heinous, cruel and atrocious or premeditated, cold and calculated.

##### **4.1 Actus Reus: The Physical Component of Crime**

Actus reus is Latin for "guilty act" (Black's Law Dictionary, 2009). That is, for a prosecutor to establish actus reus for the crime, she would have to show that a person deliberately engaged in an act that is prohibited by law. The physical component of the crime is completely independent from the mindset or motivation of the criminal.

In the Casey Anthony case, the prosecutor argued that Casey was guilty of suffocating Caylee using duct tape. She was then accused of keeping the body in the trunk of her car, waiting several days and then disposing of it a couple of miles away. The major problems with establishing this element included the following: 1) no murder weapon was ever found; 2) even if duct tape was the murder weapon, it contained no DNA evidence from Casey or Caylee; 3) no fingerprints were ever found on the duct tape that linked it to Casey; 4) no cause of death was ever established; experts disagreed on whether or not Caylee was even suffocated. In fact, chief medical examiner, Dr. Jan Garavaglia, listed Caylee's death as "by undetermined means." Similarly, forensic pathologist, Dr. Werner Spitz, indicated that he could not determine Caylee's manner of death; 5) the body was found several months after being reported missing and was badly decomposed. Therefore, death could have been caused by any number of factors including accidents such as drowning; 6) Casey never made a confession; 7) there were no eyewitnesses to either kidnapping, transporting the body, abuse, or murder; and 8) due to extreme decomposition, there was never any scientifically substantiated physical evidence on the skeleton. As a result, given that no cause of death could be identified, it is completely impossible to establish actus reus (guilty act) without asking the jury to go from circumstantial evidence to criminal culpability in an astonishing example of an inferential leap.

For justice to have been truly served, the case should have stopped right there. Without actus reus, it is illogical to assume that a jury could return a guilty verdict for first-degree capital murder that would ultimately lead to the sentence of death. In fact, it could be argued that the charge should never have been brought in the first place. This tempts one to address the concept of prosecutorial misconduct and malicious prosecution which is beyond the purview of this paper.

##### **4.2 Mens Rea: The Guilty Mind**

Mens rea stands for guilty mind (Black's Law Dictionary, 2009). From a criminal liability standpoint, mens rea generally means that a person not only committed the guilty act (actus reus), but also had evil intent. That is, the person had a criminal objective and knowledge of the wrongfulness of the act at the time of its commission. In most cases, a guilty act devoid of a guilty mind does not lead to a criminal conviction. While some crimes can be prosecuted successfully without a guilty mind, most cannot. Statutory rape, for

example, does not require intent. If a person has consensual sex with an underage “victim” that person is guilty of statutory rape whether or not they had the guilty mind to go along with it. This is known as a crime involving *strict liability*.

In Florida, a person is guilty of first-degree murder if she either: a) engaged in premeditated murder --when a person kills another human being pursuant to a preplan and scheme; or commits felony murder --when a person kills another human being while engaged in the commission, or attempted commission, of another crime (e.g., abuse of an elderly person, piracy, arson, kidnapping, aggravated child abuse, etc.). In the Casey Anthony case, the prosecutors charged her with aggravated child abuse. This means she was being charged with willfully causing great bodily harm to a child. If found guilty of aggravated child abuse, combined with the fact that Caylee died, she could be found guilty of first-degree murder and therefore executed. However, one of the elements of the crime of aggravated child abuse is the *willful* component. This is the component that relates to mens rea. In order to show that she willfully and intentionally caused great bodily harm to a child, the prosecutor must show that it was intentional and knowing.

Once again the prosecutor’s case fell apart completely with reference to Casey Anthony. As discussed above, actus reus was not established. Therefore, it is irrelevant as to whether or not mens rea was present. Furthermore, due to the fact that no criminal homicide was established (in fact, no crime at all was established with reference to Caylee's death), it is impossible to establish that mens rea/guilty mind was present in Casey.

One of the critical components of proving criminal intent is to illustrate the acts of the defendant and the circumstances that existed at the time of the alleged crime. For example, it is widely believed that while the search was on for the missing Caylee, Casey was out partying, cohabiting with a new boyfriend and being tattooed. One point that the prosecutor used was that the tattoo Casey got read “Bella Vita” (Beautiful Life). The prosecutor argued that Beautiful Life was a reference to the fact that with her offspring now dead, Casey could now live the life she wanted and be free of parental responsibilities. The prosecutor must show this to the jurors so that they will draw the inference that Casey intended all of the adverse results.

Stated differently, the prosecutor in the case, as a way of establishing Casey's mindset at the time of the death of Caylee, pointed out that Casey was out partying, getting a Beautiful Life tattoo, and that this implies that she had criminal intent necessary to commit first-degree murder via the willful and intentional infliction of severe bodily trauma on the three-year-old child. Even a casual observer of this process would have to come to the conclusion that the prosecutor’s case was frivolous at best.

#### **4.3 Concurrence of Actus Reus and Mens Rea**

The concurrence requirement means that the criminal intent and the mens rea of the offense must coexist within a reasonable time frame with the criminal act so that they occurred nearly simultaneously. Consider a hypothetical situation involving an estranged ex-husband who waits outside his ex-wife’s home. He intends to kill her as soon as she steps out of the trailer. While waiting for her to come out, he consumes massive quantities of adult beverages planning the attack. However, she never materializes and the man becomes frustrated and drives home. The next day the man is driving down the street with a hangover while adjusting his radio and inadvertently runs over a pedestrian. The pedestrian is his ex-wife. In this case, he has committed the actus reus (guilty act) and had the mens rea (guilty mind) the night before, but the two did not concur with each other in time. As a result, the man could not be convicted of murder.

In light of this fact, the prosecutor must show that a) Casey committed the aggravated child battery leading to severe bodily trauma (i.e., felony murder); and b) had the criminal intent at the time of the murder. As discussed above, the cause and time of death could not be established. Therefore, it is impossible to establish what Casey’s mindset was precisely at the time of Caylee’s death. Despite the fact that she was partying, cohabiting, and getting tattooed during the *general* time that Caylee was killed, this does not

establish that she had the criminal intent necessary to commit felony murder. Of course this point is moot in light of the fact that actus reus was never established.

#### **4.4 The Principle of Scierter**

Scierter is Latin for knowingly (Black's Law Dictionary, 2009). In essence, it is the requirement whereby the prosecutor must show that the defendant had knowledge of the fact that the behavior was unlawful and that it could lead to consequences that are adverse. For example, in order to convict someone of receiving stolen property, the prosecutor must show that the defendant had knowledge that the property was in fact stolen. Another example would be if a person is driving along the road, picks up a hitchhiker, and takes that person across the Canadian border, the driver may be charged with aiding and harboring a convicted felon. However, to be convicted of that crime the prosecutor must show that the driver knew the hitchhiker was in fact a convicted felon before giving him the ride.

This principle is most salient in situations where a defendant engages in a seemingly innocent act (e.g., receiving property, giving a hitchhiker a ride) but does so with forbidden intent. Therefore, given the fact that Casey was never charged with committing an innocent act with criminal intent it is irrelevant to this case. It does not need to be established.

#### **4.5 The Principles of Causation and Harm**

The prosecutor must prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the wrongful act was the probable cause of the harm. For example, if following a heated argument in a restaurant, a man follows an elderly woman to her house and begins to make menacing gestures in the driveway resulting in cardiac arrest from fear, the stalking restaurant goer could be charged with assault and involuntary manslaughter. The reason is that menacing gestures were probably the cause of the woman's cardiac arrest.

In the Casey Anthony case, the prosecutor must show that Casey's behavior was probably the cause of death. Once again, due to the fact that there was no cause of death established, it is impossible to ascertain whether or not Casey was the cause of the adverse conclusion to Caylee's life.

#### **4.6 Motive**

Oftentimes motive and intent are used interchangeably. This is not technically correct. Intent is the mental component for engaging in an illegal act whereas a motive is the reason or cause for initiating an illegal act. If, for example, a man pulls into a crowded parking lot, gets out of his car, then begins shooting people in the parking lot, it would be relatively easy to prove intent. The fact that he withdrew a firearm and started shooting people establishes that he had the guilty mind necessary to establish mens rea. However, all other things being equal, there is no motive as to why he started shooting. On the other hand, if later we find out that the man had recently lost his job, got divorced, was diagnosed with terminal cancer and felt as though all of humanity and the gods were against him, we would then have his motive: revenge.

A motive is not a necessary element to establish criminal liability. However, motives typically are used to establish intent. In the Casey Anthony case, for example, the prosecutor asked the jury to believe that Casey committed first-degree murder via aggravated child battery, in order to be free of the "stifling shackles of parenthood." If, hypothetically, Casey had written in her diary how much she would like to be rid of her child, this may establish a motive for first-degree murder. She did not do anything like this nor did she confess. Between the times that Caylee disappeared and the time that she was reported missing, Casey was known to have partied and got a tattoo that read "BeautifulLife." The prosecutor argued that the tattoo was indication of a motive to kill Caylee. BeautifulLife was implied to mean that life without Caylee would be simpler and more fun-filled. This simply required too much of an inferential leap for the jury.

## **5.0 Circumstantial Evidence and the Death Penalty**

### **5.1 Summary of the Prosecutor's Circumstantial Evidence**

As noted above, the elements of criminal culpability were not met. In light of that fact, the prosecutor was forced to rely on a much weaker and less successful approach to securing Casey's death: circumstantial evidence. The circumstantial evidence required irrational extrapolations and was extremely weak. While there were hundreds of pieces of evidence presented by the prosecutor, only a few were used specifically in an attempt to persuade the jury to connect-the-dots necessary to conclude that Casey willfully caused extreme harm to Caylee. Each of these types of evidence was circumstantial requiring the jury to draw conclusions that physical evidence could not provide. Also, each one had severe and irreparable problems in terms of proving any criminal act or intent on Casey's part.

### **5.2 One Lone Hair in Casey's Trunk**

Police searched Casey's car trunk and found a single hair belonging to Caylee. The prosecution's main argument here was not only based on a lone hair, but also on "*postmortem banding*." Postmortem banding refers to the presence of a dark band around the base of the hair. The prosecutor strongly emphasized that this type of "*death band*" was proof that a) Caylee was dead; b) that Caylee had been placed in the trunk and c) that Casey was the person to have done this.

The major problem the prosecution had with this line of reasoning is that postmortem banding need not occur after death at all. In fact, the founder of the process, Nicolas Petraco, stated that a similar type of banding can occur due, not to death, but to environmental conditions. In other words, one of Caylee's hairs could have innocently found its way to the trunk and developed the band over time without requiring the presence of a dead body (Petraco, 1988).

Also devastating to the prosecution's attempt to use the single hair theory as proof of a premeditated murder, was the sheer number of hairs found. The prosecutor was forced to make a desperation argument that Caylee's dead body was put into the trunk in the Florida heat, spent several days bouncing around and decomposing, and yet yielded only a single hair. The implausibility of this line of "reasoning" should be obvious to even the most casual observer.

### **5.3 Air Sampling of the Trunk: The Prosecutor Doesn't Pass the Smell Test**

Here, the prosecution once again relies on "fairlyland science" to establish that Caylee's dead body had been placed inside Casey's trunk. Using Laser Induced Breakdown Spectroscopy (LIBS), the prosecutor argued that air samples taken from Casey's trunk proved that she had placed Caylee's body in the trunk and that during decomposition, air in the trunk had become contaminated. In a spectacularly egregious example of selective observation, the prosecutor failed to consider the impact of a bag of garbage containing rancid meat that also had been left in the trunk. This could easily have been what the LIBS test identified. This gives new meaning to the phrase "the prosecutor's evidence was garbage." Ultimately, the prosecutor desperately argued that Casey intentionally put the bag of rotting garbage in the trunk of the car to mask the air contamination caused by Caylee's decomposing body, an argument that does not prove guilt beyond a reasonable doubt.

### **5.4 Cadaver Dogs**

Cadaver dogs are specialized police dogs that are trained to detect the odor of a decomposing body. The prosecution argued that since the cadaver dog "alerted" its handler when it was presented with Casey's trunk, that this was evidence of a dead body having been there. Since a cadaver dog approached the trunk and subsequently barked, the jury was instructed to vote to execute Casey.

There are myriad problems with the approach used by the prosecution. In social science research methods there is a concept known as *reliability*. A measuring device (e.g., survey, exam, or in this case a cadaver dog's senses) is reliable to the extent that it renders similar results in repeated trials (Babbie, 2012). For example, if a person gets on her bathroom scales and gets her weight, then a few minutes later a repeated trial should result in a very similar result. The cadaver dog, however, barked at Casey's trunk one day and ignored it the next. To say that this introduces reasonable doubt into the prosecution claim is an understatement.

Similarly, the method by which the cadaver dog was introduced to Casey's car trunk was hopelessly flawed. For example, dog handlers tend to send cues to the dog (even if subconsciously) so that the dog senses when it is supposed to alert. A much more productive approach would have been to have neither the dog nor the handler know which car was Casey's. This would have ruled out "experimenter bias." Also, the police botched the "lineup" in that several cars were not simultaneously presented to the dog, only Casey's was. Had Casey been convicted this would have provided fruitful grounds for appeals based on violations of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Amendments to the U.S. Constitution (due process clauses).

A final flaw in the test using the cadaver dog involved taking the dog to the site where Caylee's body was found. Unlike Casey's trunk, this was a spot where everyone knows with absolute certainty that a dead body had been. Once at the site, the cadaver dog failed to alert thereby rendering the entire experiment with the cadaver sniffing dog useless.

### 5.5 The Computer Internet Searches

The prosecution concocted an elaborate hypothesis that Casey performed computer searches for "neck breaking" and "how to make chloroform." Once she decided on chloroform as the preferred method of sedation, she poisoned Caylee and suffocated her using the duct tape. The problem with this approach was that there was no evidence that Casey made those internet searches. In fact, another person testified to making the searches in question. Also, with reference to the duct tape, Casey's fingerprints were never found on it. Casey's DNA was never found on it. In fact, not even Caylee's DNA was found on it. Again, the jury was instructed that Caylee was suffocated with duct tape which has a powerful adhesive backing, kept for four days in a car and that no DNA was left on the tape. This strongly suggests that the duct tape was not used while Caylee was alive and that it was only introduced after she had skeletonized, thus leaving no DNA from tissue. Again we are left with substantially more doubt than is necessary to vote not guilty.

### 5.6 The Party Girl Evidence

The prosecution showed the jury pictures of Casey partying during the 31 days between Caylee's disappearance and the authorities being notified. Pictures submitted showed Casey drinking, dancing with both men and women, dressed provocatively and one photo suggested that Casey may have miscegenated. Also, as noted previously, it was revealed that she got a tattoo that read Beautiful Life. Clearly, the photos were designed to prejudice the jury. From all this the jury was supposed to connect copious and unrelated dots as follows:

- 22-year-old Casey feels stifled by living in her parents' house, being a single mother and having no husband →
- She concocts a scheme whereby she will use chloroform to poison Caylee and suffocate her with duct tape →
- She puts Caylee's body in the trunk of her car and waits a few days to figure out what to do next →
- She then takes Caylee's body to a wooded area a few miles from her parents' house →
- She spends the next 31 days partying in celebration of her newfound freedom →

- Once the 31 day period is over and the authorities begin the search, she lies repeatedly, making up stories of fake employment, nannies and kidnappings to keep the police off-balance.

How could the jury be sure this is what happened beyond a reasonable doubt? What is the evidentiary basis for this fantastic theory? Because, as the prosecution pointed out, Casey is a no good, lying slut who deserves to be executed. That is the full extent of the "party girl" evidence.

## 6.0 Conclusion: The Prosecutor's Impossible Case

The prosecutor desperately attempted to link suffocation to Casey Anthony. Suffocation is one of the single most difficult types of homicide to prove or to link to illegal behavior. The reason is that it does not leave any evidence of criminal wrongdoing behind (compared, for example, to strangulation, shooting, stabbing, etc.). The prosecutor had no credible or substantive physical evidence linking Casey Anthony to any type of murder. The jury was simply told the following: 1) a smell test suggests that a dead body had to be put in the trunk of the car -- other experts testified that this was inconclusive; 2) Casey Anthony is a liar and a bad mother who was out partying while her daughter was missing; 3) Casey did not report her missing daughter for over one month; 3) someone used Casey's computer to search for chloroform; and 5) Casey reportedly borrowed a shovel. This is a classic example of the "connect-the-dots" approach whereby the prosecutor brings up random and arbitrary points in hopes that the jury connects those dots that will lead them to vote for conviction of a woman that will lead to her ultimate execution.

The prosecutor's closing argument, if delivered more accurately and honestly, could have gone like this:

- "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury. I would like to summarize this case. Do we know whether or not a crime has been committed (i.e., actus reus)? No, we do not. Do we know whether or not there was any criminal intent by Casey Anthony (mens rea)? No, we do not. Do we have any evidence that the non-existent crime and criminal intent concurred with each other and took place at the same time? We absolutely do not. Do we know when Caylee Anthony died? No, we do not. Do we know how Caylee Anthony died? Was she suffocated? Did she drown? Was chloroform used? We have no idea. Given that we do not know whether or not Caylee was killed or died as a result of an accident, do we know what the motive was or could have been for the killing of this child? By all accounts, Casey loved her daughter. Therefore, no we do not have a motive other than the fact that she liked to go out dancing with friends and surely must have wanted to kill her child to facilitate that lifestyle. Are we able to present any credible physical evidence such as DNA or fingerprints? Of course not. Did we present frivolous, unreliable, and almost comical "evidence" using the "smell test" in a desperation effort to present an expert who says that there might have been a dead body in the trunk of Casey's car? Of course we did. Did other experts also testify that the smell could have just as easily been the smell of rotting food? Of course they did. Did we ignore established and widely accepted research methods in the use of unreliable cadaver dogs in a biased attempt to get them to "alert" their handlers when presented with Casey's car trunk? Of course we did. Did Casey Anthony ever confess to killing Caylee? Of course not, she has adamantly denies any role in the killing of her daughter. Do we have any evidence that places Casey at the scene of where Caylee's body was found? Of course not. On the basis of the "evidence" and testimony that you have been presented in this case, justice demands that you vote to convict Casey Anthony of firstdegree murder so that she may be strapped down involuntarily on a gurney and consequently have poison injected into her veins until she is dead. Thank you for your time and consideration in this matter.

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