

Bush commutes sentences of former US border agents

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WASHINGTON (AP) - In his final acts of clemency, [President George W. Bush](#) on Monday commuted the [prison sentences](#) of two former U.S. Border Patrol agents whose convictions for shooting a Mexican drug dealer ignited fierce debate about illegal immigration.

Bush's decision to commute the sentences of Ignacio Ramos and Jose Compean, who tried to cover up the shooting, was welcomed by both Republican and Democratic members of Congress. They had long argued that the agents were merely doing their jobs, defending the American border against criminals. They also maintained that the more than 10-year prison sentences the pair was given were too harsh.

Rancor over their convictions, sentencing and firings has simmered ever since the shooting occurred in 2005.

Ramos and Compean became a rallying point among conservatives and on talk shows where their supporters called them heroes. Nearly the entire bipartisan congressional delegation from Texas and other lawmakers from both sides of the political aisle pleaded with Bush to grant them clemency.

Bush didn't pardon the men for their crimes, but decided instead to commute their prison sentences because he believed they were excessive and that they had already suffered the loss of their jobs, freedom and reputations, a senior administration official said.

The action by the president, who believes the border agents received fair trials and that the verdicts were just, does not diminish the seriousness of their crimes, the official said.

Compean and Ramos, who have served about two years of their sentences, are expected to be released from prison within the next two months.

They were convicted of shooting admitted drug smuggler Osvaldo Aldrete Davila in the buttocks as he fled across the [Rio Grande](#), away from an abandoned van load of marijuana. The border agents argued during their trials that they believed the smuggler was armed and that they shot him in self defense. The prosecutor in the case said there was no evidence linking the smuggler to the van of marijuana. The prosecutor also said the border agents didn't report the shooting and tampered with evidence by picking up several spent shell casings.

The agents were fired after their convictions on several charges, including assault with a dangerous weapon and with serious bodily injury, violation of civil rights and obstruction of justice. All their convictions, except obstruction of justice, were upheld on appeal.

With the new acts of clemency, Bush has granted a total of 189 pardons and 11 commutations.

That's fewer than half as many as Presidents Bill Clinton or Ronald Reagan issued during their two-term tenures. Bush technically has until noon on Tuesday when President-elect Barack Obama is sworn into office to exercise his executive pardon authority, but presidential advisers said no more were forthcoming.

The president had made most of his pardon decisions on low-profile cases, but his batch in December created controversy.

Isaac Robert Toussie of Brooklyn, N.Y., convicted of making false statements to the Department of Housing and Urban Development and of mail fraud, was among 19 people Bush pardoned just before Christmas. But after learning in news reports that Toussie's father had donated tens of thousands of dollars to the Republican Party a few months ago, as well as other information, the president reversed his decision on Toussie's case.

The White House said the decision to revoke the pardon—a step unheard of in recent memory—was based on information about the extent and nature of Toussie's prior criminal offenses, and that neither the White House counsel's office nor the president had been aware of a political contribution by Toussie's father and wanted to avoid creating an appearance of impropriety.

In an earlier high-profile official act of forgiveness, Bush saved Vice President Dick Cheney's former chief of staff, I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, from serving prison time in the case of the 2003 leak of CIA operative Valerie Plame's identity. Libby was convicted of perjury and obstructing justice. Bush could still grant him a full pardon, although Libby has not applied for one.

Bush's batches of pardons, however, have never included any well-known convicts like junk bond dealer Michael Milken, who sought a pardon on securities fraud charges, or two politicians convicted of public corruption—former Rep. Randy "Duke" Cunningham, R-Calif., and four-term Democratic Louisiana Gov. Edwin W. Edwards—who wanted Bush to shorten their prison terms.

Clinton issued a total of 457 in eight years in office. Bush's father, George H. W. Bush, issued 77 in four years. Reagan issued 406 in eight years, and President Carter issued 563 in four years. Since [World War II](#), the largest number of pardons and commutations—2,031—came from President Truman, who served 82 days short of eight years.

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