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IN OUR OPINION

Bad justice on display

If you have ever found yourself concerned about our state getting bad press — you know, like police officers' turning attack dogs loose on school children, state troopers launching tear gas at innocent marchers or funding public schools on par with banana republics, that sort of thing — then page A12 of Monday's New York Times would have made you cringe.

In a nifty little item called the "Sidebar," Times writer Adam Liptak penned a most scathing piece titled, "In Alabama, execution without representation."

It was a brief lesson for the rest of the nation on the criminal-justice system in our state, particularly the fact that Alabama is the only state that does not make lawyers available to indigent death-row inmates.

Liptak pointed this out because next month lawyers for death-row inmates in Alabama will ask the U.S. Supreme Court to take up the case.

They will tell the nine justices that even inmates in Alabama should have legal representation.

Imagine that.

Of course, our heroic state attorney general, Troy King, will argue the opposite. As Liptak explained, King filed a brief before the U.S. Court of Appeals in Atlanta that argued, essentially, that this is the real world, not some utopia, so get used to it.

The large issue here, of course, is the pathetic state of the criminal justice system in Alabama. The editorial page of this newspaper has been against the death penalty for eons, in part because we do not feel it is possible to construct an adequate legal framework to send a person to their death, even in a Troy King-

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inspired utopia.

In the real world, Alabama's criminal justice system is a joke. Any ninny ought to understand that if you are going to involve yourself in state-sponsored revenge, you ought to at least have an abundance of safeguards in place.

We do not, as Liptak rightly said.

There's your big picture, a subject on which many barrels of ink has and will be expended.

But here's the other issue: What do you think Liptak's piece did for Alabama in the collective psyche of the nation? What's that? You don't read The New York Times? Nor do a lot of others. But you can bet that it made the rounds from New York to California and points between.

What did those millions of gentle readers pick up from Liptak's story: Alabama is not far from where it was back in the bad, old days of fire hoses and attack dogs.

Whether or not you agree with the death penalty, isn't it important to keep Alabama from looking like the Sudan of the South?

That can't be good for business.

As long as our elected leaders put politics ahead of common sense and sound judgment, the Adam Liptaks of the world will have plenty of unpleasant pieces to write about Alabama.

We got what we deserved on Monday. And we'll get it again unless we set about first to allow the indigent on death row access to legal representation and then to call a halt to executions.

—John Fleming