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Amnesty and Pardon Differ in Legal Use

Although amnesty and pardon are often used interchangeably, the two words have different legal meanings. In common usage, though, this distinction is sometimes blurred.

Amnesty is generally addressed to large groups of persons with respect to matters of conscience or political offenses. According to a series of 19th-century Supreme Court cases, amnesty is the "abolition and forgetfulness of the offense." It is usually invoked by an act of a legislature.

An executive pardon terminates punishment for an individual, without obliterating his guilt.

In his speech Monday before the American Legion national convention, Jimmy Carter said: "Amnesty means what you did was right. A pardon means that what you did, right or wrong, is forgiven. So pardon, yes, amnesty, no."