

VIRGINIA PRISON OFFICIALS LIE TO PUBLIC ABOUT ABUSES AND PRISONER BURNINGS AT RED ONION STATE PRISON (2024)

By Kevin "Rashid" Johnson

Since news broke this past October about multiple prisoners setting themselves on fire at Red Onion State Prison, Va officials have been in damage control mode trying to downplay the inhumane conditions existing in this and other remote Va prisons. I was the source of getting word out about the burnings through written and recorded reports aired on Prison Riot Radio, Prison Radio, The Virginia Defender, Interfaith Action for Human Rights, the San Francisco Bay View Black National newspaper, and so on.

From the very beginning Va prison officials lied about any prisoners burning themselves. The warden of Red Onion, David Anderson, told Phil Wilayto, editor of the Virginia Defenders newspaper, that the reports of prisoner burnings were false. (1)

Chadwick Dotson, the director of the Virginia prison system and a past Va judge from the very county in which Red Onion is located, followed suit telling the Richmond Times Dispatch newspaper that the reports were "ludicrous." (2)

Later, as the reports were confirmed to be true and over 20 media outlets picked up the story, Dotson tried a different approach, denying that the burnings were in response to conditions in the prison, and dismissed the prisoner's desperate responses to abuses there as "manipulative behavior," and stated that all they needed to do to leave Red Onion is "behave." (3)

The public simply can't believe anything Va prison officials tell them.

After spending 14 years in illegal and torturous solitary confinement at Red Onion and its sister supermax Wallens Ridge State Prison beginning in 1998, both suffering and witnessing the inhumane and racist conditions and abuses there, I knew only too well the intolerable conditions inside these remote prisons. In fact I documented MANY of them in reports and articles that can be read on my website, rashidmod.com.

It wasn't long after I returned to Red Onion in Oct 2023, that I engaged in a group hunger strike protesting the abuses there. My strike lasted 71 days. The strike succeeded in having me moved from Red Onion for several months, but I returned in Sept 2024. My return was marked by concentrated efforts to retaliate against me for the huge amount of attention my involvement in the hunger strike brought to Red Onion (4), to discourage other prisoners from interacting with me to prevent me from learning about and drawing attention to their own abuses as I am well known for and possibly initiating another group hunger strike, and to create pretexts to have me thrown back in solitary confinement and instigate violence between me and other prisoners.

I was housed in General Population (GP) for just over a month, but was ultimately put in solitary confinement after officials claimed I was trying to procure weapons to attack guards after they attempted to provoke violence between me and other prisoners by trying to spread false rumors that I am a pedophile, rapist and snitch, and telling others in the unit that my presence was the cause of heightened scrutiny of the unit by investigators, and soliciting other prisoners to take out hits on me. No weapons were recovered from me so an informant, Dennis Webb, was used to implicate me in all this in a statement he gave prison investigators that my lawyers received a copy of in litigation I had against Red Onion officials. Numerous prisoners came forward as willing witnesses and reported to my lawyers, Miriam Nemeth with the Washington, DC-based Rights Behind Bars law firm and Mark Krudys of the Richmond, Va-based Krudys Lawfirm, what Red Onion officials were attempting to incite, including inducing prisoners to take out hits on me. Furthermore, as soon as I began airing reports of the prisoner burnings and conditions at Red Onion, officials there banned my phone and JPay email access. (4) They also targeted prisoners seen talking to me or helping me get reports out. Yet the Director portrayed Red Onion as a professionally run prison.

But to return to his response to the prisoner burnings, he dismissed these obvious acts of desperation as nothing but manipulation, without even pretending to have investigated anything going on at Red Onion. In fact he deflected any informed response to or accountability for the protested

conditions there by saying he had extended invitations to members of the state's legislature to visit Red Onion. In response to his deflections, a state Delegate, Holly Seibold, who actually did visit the prison earlier in 2024, criticized Dotson's responses in a Dec 4, 2024 letter to Dotson, and described the conditions that she personally witnessed at Red Onion to be "inhumane." She also expressed that good behavior was not a basis upon which prisoners could be transferred away from Red Onion. She pointed out that both assignments to and transfers away from the prison were arbitrary.

But Dotson said, prisoners there had nothing to complain about, and inflicting severe burns to themselves was them simply being manipulative. Again, you can't believe anything Va prison officials tell you.

The state legislature isn't doing anything about the inhumane conditions at Red Onion and other remote Va prisons that have driven people to the desperate extreme of setting themselves on fire? The director of the prison system and his staff definitely aren't doing anything about it; they're merely deflecting and covering up the open racist conditions and abuses they preside over. Which leaves it to the public to hold these lawless law officials to account. Their careers need to be cut short and their presiding over and indifference to racism and abuse needs to be publicized far and wide.

Dare to Struggle Dare to Win!

All Power to the People!

Endnotes:

1. Phil Wilayto, "Crisis & Cover-up at Red Onion Super-Max," The Virginia Defender, Autumn 2024 (virginiadefender.org)
2. Luca Powell, Red Onion rumors of self-immolation 'ludicrous,' says prison chief," Richmond Times Dispatch, Nov 27, 2024
3. Elizabeth Weill-Greenburg, "Virginia Prison Director Tells Self-Immolating Prisoners to Behave," The Insider, Dec 16, 2024

4. See, for example, Phil Wilayto, "Red Onion Hunger Strike Spotlights Lack of Transparency by VADOC Leadership," The Virginia Defender, Winter 2024 (viriniadefender.org)