

# STATE LEGISLATOR WHO VISITED VIRGINIA'S RED ONION STATE PRISON DESCRIBED CONDITIONS AS INHUMANE (2024)

By Kevin "Rashid" Johnson

During Oct 2024 I was able to pierce the veil of secrecy that surrounds Virginia's remote supermax prison, Red Onion State Prison, and the extreme abuses and racism that have plagued the prison since it opened in 1998. This happened thanks to various Comrades and prisoner support outlets like Jamhar James, Prison Riot Radio and Jay Rene, Prison Radio and Noelle Hanrahan, the Virginia Defenders and Phil Wilayto, and others, who helped publicize reports I wrote and recorded about conditions at the prison and numerous prisoners who had set themselves on fire in desperate efforts to be transferred away from Red Onion.

These reports brought broad media attention to Red Onion. In response the Virginia prison system's Director Chadwick Dotson went in the media evading addressing the inhumane conditions at the prison, and deflected responsibility, by claiming numerous invitations had been extended to state legislators to visit Red Onion who were apparently unresponsive. One state legislator, Holly Seibold, who HAD visited the prison earlier in 2024 responded in a letter to Dotson on Dec 4, 2024, criticizing his response and describing her own observation of Red Onion's conditions as "inhumane." She however left it to Dotson to "fix" things there, which isn't likely to happen, as this prison, alongside its sister supermax Wallens Ridge State Prison, has been a cesspool of racism and abuse since it opened in 1998.

A large part of this situation lies in the constantly evaded but gross contrast between the racial and cultural makeup of the prisons' staff versus their prisoner populations. The prisons' staff are almost totally white and come from segregated rural communities while the prisoners are near totally urban Black and Brown. What makes the situation all the more volatile is it TOTALLY replicates the same racialized power imbalance that created and reinforced the violent racism of Amerika's historic systems of slavery and Jim Crow segregation, with the use of a politically empowered and armed population of whites to police a disenfranchised and defenseless population of people of

color. A condition that officials KNOW will and does generate racist impunity, brutality and abuse, yet they pretend not to recognize and deliberately conceal what they themselves have created.

In fact in the 2015 HBO documentary, "Solitary: Inside Red Onion State Prison," Virginia officials quite deliberately hid this blatant racial and cultural contradiction, by falsely portraying Red Onion's staff as racially diverse and it's prisoner population as majority white. This was done throughout the documentary. First there was an opening scene of a Black and a white guard escorting a handcuffed white prisoner to a solitary confinement cell. A FALSE DEPICTION. There has NEVER been more than approximately three Blacks among the prison's nearly 400 guards which is otherwise totally white. Then four handpicked prisoners were interviewed, three were white and one was Black (all had been given free televisions by the prison's administration for giving watered down interviews) - another blatant fabrication of the racial makeup of the prisoner population at Red Onion, which again has always been near totally Black and Brown.

These false portrayals of the demographic makeup of Red Onion's staff and prisoner population to the public was deliberate, and made evident that Virginia officials fear showing the true racial composition and contradiction of these opposing bodies knowing it would raise public questions and concerns about racism as a major cause of abusive conditions at these prisons and the long history of complaints of racism coming out of Red Onion. A picture is worth a thousand words.

But the key factor behind the deliberate racialized uses of these rural prisons, is there are more Blacks in the prisons than in the counties in which they are located, and these disenfranchised Blacks are used to give a false diversity to the local populations allowing the segregated white regions to receive political apportionment and funding and tax benefits that they do not warrant; benefits that would otherwise go to our own Black and Brown communities if we were still located in them. This replicates the slavery-era designation of Blacks as 3/5 human beings who therefore had no political power but were counted as part of local white populations to give them political apportionments and expanded voting power. So Virginia officials DELIBERATELY send Black and

Brown prisoners to Red Onion, Wallens Ridge and others of their rural prisons not for need of prison security but rather to give unfair economic and political advantages to these rural white communes and take these benefits away from our Black and Brown communities.

So you have an thinly disguised but EXACT replication of slavery-era policies of unjust enrichment and political empowerment of poor Southern white communities at the expense of people of color who these whites are armed and allowed to brutally police. And the practice is being more deeply entrenched with the systemic closing down of predominantly Black-staffed prisons across the state, and the increasing shift of resources and new prison construction projects to rural segregated white communities like where Red Onion and Wallens Ridge are located. (1)

The solution is to close these unneeded and wastefully operated centers of racism and abuse down. So long as they remain open they will remain "inhumane."

Dare to Struggle Dare to Win!

All Power to the People!

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1. I discuss this in my article, "Racist Politics in Virginia: Virginia's Prisons Operate Under an Apartheid System" (2024) <http://rashidmod.com/?p=3557>