

Racist Politics in Virginia: Virginia's Prisons Operate Under An Apartheid System (2024)

By Kevin "Rashid" Johnson

Minority/Majority Control

Under racist systems of control the oppressed are either the minority or the majority. Where they are the minority, as were Blacks in Amerika under chattel slavery and Jim Crow, the oppressor race is armed and mobilized to keep the oppressed in line. But when the oppressed race is the majority, as were Blacks in South Afrika under apartheid, those in power invariably have to use members of the oppressed group to repress their own people.

Under apartheid this was achieved by keeping a racist white administration in power over police and military forces composed of a largely Black rank and file. This is the exact structure operating within the VDOC.

Integrating VA'S Prison Staff After Jim Crow

The Virginia prison system has not always employed Blacks. Before the 1970s under Jim Crow segregation there were almost no Black police or prison guards. This allowed prisons to exist in close proximity to large Black communities, because Blacks were major targets of imprisonment, with no concern for Blacks working in them. Here in VA most of the state's older prisons were located near large Black communities, prisons like the Virginia State Penitentiary in Richmond, VA, Powhatan Correctional (sic!) Center (CC) in Powhatan County, Mecklenburg CC in Boydton, VA, Southampton CC in Southampton County and so on.

But the racism and abuse in these prisons and their Jim Crow practices came under attack during the 60s and 70s, as federal courts across the U.S. were compelled as a concession to the civil rights, Black Liberation and Prison Movements to abandon their hands off doctrines and open their doors to prisoner lawsuits. This forced VA to change conditions and diversify their prison staff, and also prompted the construction of more prisons near Black communities, such as Buckingham CC, Brunswick CC, Nottoway CC, etc. Although these prisons had predominantly Black staff bodies as a result of their locations, they kept a racist power base by almost invariably maintaining all-white administrations. This integration process was also later countered by concentrating the construction of new VA prisons in remote segregated white regions of the state and closing down those near large Black communities, especially VA's highest security prisons where Black prisoners are disproportionately concentrated, while whites are largely housed at lower security prisons with greater privileges.

Countering Integrated Staffing By Replacing Black-Staffed Prisons With Rural White Ones

In VA the move to concentrate prisons in rural white areas set in in the 1990s with the prison building binge that took hold during the era of federally funded increased mass imprisonment, targeted primarily at communities of color.

With the loss of jobs during this period to mountain topping and strip mining in the coal rich region of remote Wise County VA, prisons became the answer to creating new jobs to appease a newly unemployed and potentially disgruntled white southern voting base. Essentially, the plan was, as during chattel slavery, to mobilize and arm communities of poor whites against disenfranchised and defenseless poor Blacks to serve as a source of generating wealth for whites.

This was the period when VA's first and only supermaximum security prisons Red Onion and Wallens Ridge State Prisons were constructed in Wise County and opened for operations in 1998 and 1999 respectively.

The lie was fed to the public that these two expensive 1200 bed prisons were needed to house VA's huge numbers of chronically violent and dangerous prisoners and those never going home. This lie was exposed when Red Onion came under investigation the same year it opened by Human Rights Watch (HRW) who issued a scathing report the next year.

(1) The report found that VA did not have even 100 chronically violent prisoners, and the majority of the prisoners at Red Onion were set to be released in a matter of months or a few years.

With horrific racism and abuse inflicted by the prison's totally white staff against its predominantly Black prisoner population, Red Onion earned national notoriety as one of Amerika's most brutally racist prisons almost as soon as it opened for operations, thanks in part to the new HRW exposé.

With the lies used to justify Red Onion and its sister supermax exposed, VA officials scrambled to invent new justifications for the continued operations of these two wastefully expensive, inefficiently operated, and unneeded prisons.

Consolidating a Statewide Apartheid Regime

While this process played out VA officials continued to construct more prisons in similar rural segregated white regions of the state – Pocahontas CC and River North CC – while they closed down the older predominantly Black-staffed prisons like Mecklenburg CC, Powhatan CC, The VA State Penitentiary, Southampton CC, etc. But the real scandal began unfolding around 2015 as, in true apartheid style, all-white administrations began to be exported from Red Onion and Wallens Ridge to run the predominantly Black-staffed prisons across the state, *and the entire VDOC*.

I witnessed this process unfold. Having been confined at both Red Onion and Wallens Ridge from the time they first opened I was exposed to many of the staff who worked in both prisons and knew the most corrupt among them. In fact, beginning in 2004, I wrote articles and reports about many of their abuses at these prisons which can be read on my website rashidmod.com.

What is most telling was those who were transplanted from these remote prisons on the opposite side of the state (nearly 400 miles away) to serve as administrators of the Black-staffed prisons, were jumping over Blacks who'd worked for years at those prisons to take these positions. And they were being promoted at rates faster than Black prison staff to take on those administrative positions. Also they were known to be among the most notoriously abusive guards at Red Onion and Wallens Ridge. For example in 2018 a guy named Schlobaum who had been an abusive low ranking guard at Wallens Ridge in 2003 was the warden at Nottoway CC. Also Israel Hamilton who was also a low ranking guard at Wallens Ridge in 2003 was warden at Sussex 1 State Prison (SX1) in 2018.

Israel and his brother Matthew were two of the most famously racist and abusive guards at Wallens Ridge during the early 2000s. In fact Matthew was prosecuted along with two other guards in 2001 for his role in brutally beating a Black prisoner at Wallens Ridge. I discuss that incident and how the entire staff at Wallens Ridge closed ranks to help win their acquittal by bribing a hand-picked group of flunky inmates into terrorizing the jury as it toured a cellblock in the prison that the group of prisoners had been moved into for this very purpose. (2)

I confronted Israel while I was held at SX1 during 2018 in presence of a group of ranking Black SX1 guards about his history and how he'd made warden. The group was touring the death row cellblock, where I was being held without any death sentence awaiting an interstate transfer. I caught them as they were passing my cell and asked Israel why he didn't tell the group of Black SX1 guards how he was famous at Wallens Ridge for calling Blacks "nigger" and beating them while handcuffed. He just smirked. I then asked a Black lieutenant named Brown who was with the group how he had been a low ranking guard in 1999 at SX1 when I came there to go to court that year and was only now a lieutenant, while Israel who was a low ranking guard at Wallens Ridge in 2003 came all the way across the state and jumped over Blacks like him at SX1 to become warden. Israel responded that I had just explained how when I spoke about his notoriety as an openly abusive racist guard at Wallens Ridge. Brown looked flabbergasted but said nothing. But he returned to my cell later that day to remark to me that he couldn't believe Hamilton admitted being racist and promoted because of it in front of it. I replied that he had a lot to learn about the different racist types such as the proud ones like Israel Hamilton who didn't mask their racism behind fake smiles and feigned respect like the sneaky racist types do. I added too that his obvious fear to confront the racism and promotions of people like Israel was obviously why they were able to come from other remote prisons and take such promotions from the Blacks who'd worked there for years. Just like the fear he was demonstrating by expressing his disbelief about Hamilton's openly expressed racism to me instead of directly confronting Hamilton and the system itself. As Brown walked away with his head hanging down, I made clear that I understood whether Black or white, abuses would prevail under any administration. That this was the nature of U.S. prisons. But racism adds another dehumanizing extreme to it.

Likewise as I write this the warden at Nottoway CC is Clint Davis a transplant from remote Keen Mountain CC. The warden at SX1 is Kevin McCoy who was among the most racist and abusive guards that moved through the ranks at Red Onion since it first opened in 1998, and who I had written about in prior articles on abuses at Red Onion. (3) The regional

head over the two predominantly Black-stuffed Sussex prisons is Leslie Fleming, he being another career abuser from Red Onion since its earliest days.

Not to mention the top administrators at VA Department of Corrections (sic!) [VDOC] headquarters in Richmond. Randall Mathena who is now VDOC "Director of Security and Correctional Enforcement" was the assistant warden at Red Onion when it first opened in 1998 and gained its national reputation for racism and abuse. He left when the prison came under fire for these conditions then returned in October 2011 as chief warden to continue his career of presiding over the same abuses, which I also wrote about (4). Then A. David Robinson who is now VDOC "Chief of Corrections Operations" was also warden at Wallens Ridge.

And the top position of VDOC Director is now held by Chadwick Dotson who also came from remote Wise County, VA where Red Onion and Wallens Ridge are located, where he was a hanging judge that protected abusive guards from criminal prosecutions and prisoner lawsuits, while prisoners were targeted left and right for criminal prosecutions. I should add that the HQ administrative positions now held by Mathena, Robinson and others are recently invented ones. They didn't exist at all a few years ago. (5). 50 administrative positions at VDOC HQ were wholly invented to give corrupt officials central power positions where none previously existed.

Someone cut the VDOCs foot to fit some racist and corrupt shoes.

Clearly it is no coincidence that all these and many other wardens and administrators at the heads of VA's predominantly Black-staffed prisons and now VDOC headquarters come from these far-away notoriously racist prisons located in remote racially segregated rural white regions of the state.

It is an apartheid regime that has been consolidated across VA's prison system, where corrupt racist white administrations preside over a prison system where Blacks disproportionately make up the vast majority of its prisoners and greatly outnumber the staff and over prisons where there are large Black staff bodies while all new prisons are being constructed in rural segregated white regions. The result is a prison system with a consolidated statewide racist leadership structure – an administrative circle of seasoned 'Good 'ol boys.'

And I have witnessed how these administrations work together to target disliked prisoners anywhere in the state and transfer them to Red Onion and Wallens Ridge in violation of VDOC policies governing transfers, to be abused and retaliated against. Indeed I was just a victim of this very practice where I was specially targeted for a transfer from SX1 to Red Onion on Oct 30, 2023 without the required formal classification hearing, gas assaulted by a team of militaristic guards sent by Richmond HQ from Wallens Ridge to get me, and slated for placement in the secret solitary confinement program at Red Onion that has already been deemed illegal and unconstitutional by VA federal courts and is operated in defiance of VA's new solitary confinement laws that outlaw just such programs. (5)

My transfer and placement in solitary confinement at Red Onion was specifically set up and coordinated by the very racist white administrators outlined in this article at SX1, Red Onion and VDOC headquarters. All of whom I have a history of conflict with for challenging and exposing their own past abuses. It is no coincidence that months after Chadwick Dotson was appointed VDOC director I was administratively transferred to Red Onion by this closed circle of good 'ol boys.

Who needs the Klan when you have *entire* law enforcement systems like the VDOC presided over by proven racists and abusers who moved up through the ranks of a system by proving their willingness to abuse and oppress entire communities of people of color, and have now consolidated themselves in power?

The real question is what are we going to do about it?

Dare to Struggle, Dare to Win! All Power to the People!

Endnotes:

1. Jamie Fellner, "Red Onion State Prison: Supermaximum Security Confinement in Virginia" (1999) Human Rights Watch, <http://hrw.org/reports/1999/redonion>

2. Kevin "Rashid" Johnson, "Abuse Reports Culminate in Hair-Raising Assault by Red Onion State Prison Guards" (2012) <http://rashidmod.com/?p=329> (See section of this article under subtitle "Acosta Himself A Broken Victim of the System He Serves," for account of Matthew Hamilton's prosecution for the prisoner assault and coverup at Wallens Ridge.)
3. See for example, Kevin "Rashid" Johnson, "Under New Administration Torture Unit Closes and Reopens at Red Onion State Prison, and Prison Abuse on the Rise" (2011) <http://rashidmod.com/?p=317>
Kevin "Rashid Johnson, "Red Onion State Prison – Addendum #8" (Dec. 19, 2010) [Http://rashidmod.com/?p=192](http://rashidmod.com/?p=192)
4. See article cited in note 3 above, "Under New Administration Torture Unite Closes..."
1. In response to public opposition to long-standing use and abuse of solitary confinement in VA prisons, on March 23, 2023, the VA legislature passed a law limiting and regulating the use of solitary confinement (euphemistically renamed "Restorative Housing" in VA). That law (VA Code Section 53.1-39.2) requires that the VDOC director write and make publicly available all policies governing solitary confinement, strictly limit its use, and incorporate this law into those new policies. In defiance of this law Mathena and Robinson wrote and signed the updated Restorative Housing Policy (Operating Procedure # 841.4) on May 27, 2023, and explicitly **did not** base the policy on nor incorporate the new law into the policy, and further allowed the continued use of a secret long term solitary confinement program (so-called "Restorative Housing Reduction Step-Down Program") at Red Onion and Wallens Ridge. A program that was created 11 years ago in 2012 under a secret Red Onion policy that is unavailable to the public, and which the federal courts have recently ruled is unconstitutional – See *Thorpe v. VA Dept. of Corr.*, 2021 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 112284 (June 15, 2021), *affirmed Thorpe v. Clarke*, 2022 U.S. App LEXIS 16351 (4th Cir., Sept. 4, 2022). Mathena and Robinson have defied the new March 23, 2023 VA law to continue this illegal long term solitary confinement program at these two remote Wise County prisons where they were both previously employed and directly oversaw racist abuses. They then had me specially targeted for transfer to Red Onion from SX1 – in violation of VDOC transfer policies – where I was then put in for placement in the illegal solitary confinement program until I Undertook a prolonged hunger strike, along with numerous other prisoners protesting the illegal solitary confinement program among other abuses.