RACIALIZED ABUSES OF ATTACK DOGS PERSIST IN REMOTE VIRGINIA PRISONS

By Kevin "Rashid" Johnson

On December 11, 2025, the Virginia Mercury followed up on a July 2022 Business Insider investigation and report on abuses of attack dogs inside U.S. prisons, with an article on continued dog attacks in Virginia prisons and the racist targeting and verbal abuses that attended many of these attacks. (1)

This mistreatment persisted DESPITE the passage of a Va law in 2024 that was supposed to curtail the extreme uses of dogs inside the state's prisons. (2) Despite the new law and this recent media exposure, the abuses still continue, demonstrating that so long as these animals remain inside Va prisons, they will be abused.

VA OFFICIALS DEFY LAWS GOVERNING CANINE USE

The 2024 law was flouted from the outset by Va prison officials.

This law limited the uses of attack dogs inside Va prisons to violent situations where there is imminent danger of serious physical injury or death to anyone, or those involving three or more prisoners. The law also required that Va prison officials create publicly available policies governing the uses of dogs.

It should be noted that the "use" of these animals includes their presence and barking, growling and lunging at prisoners for purposes of intimidation. In fact Rick White, a past warden of Va's notoriously racist and abusive Red Onion State Prison, was quoted in the Business Insider report stating that the "use" of these dogs includes their "presence" or "in other words the implied violence of air growls and bared teeth is sufficient to frighten people into compliance." (3)

In violation of the Va law, these animals are present and "used" throughout Va's remote prisons barking, growling and lunging at prisoners during basic movement where they are going to and from work, school, meals, religious services, etc. I described this practice in a 2025 article, "Reviving Slave Hounds and Canine Crimes In Virginia Prisons." (4) So, these animals are used in defiance of limitations set by the 2024 law.

In further violation of this law, Va officials have never created a publicly available policy setting out the circumstances under which dogs are used in their prisons. Officials did write a policy about dogs that is posted on the Va prison system's website (Operating Procedure 435.3 'Canine Operations Unit'), but the policy deliberately omits stating anything about how and when these animals may be used, which means guards are allowed total discretion to continue misusing them however and whenever they want.

Two recent examples can be given of the persistent and illegal misuse of these dogs, both in their presence and in attacking prisoners. Both examples occurred at Keen Mountain, the Va prison where I am presently confined.

DEFIANT MISUSE OF ATTACK DOGS

First, on July 26, 2026, an attack dog was brought barking and growling into my own cellblock, in response to two prisoners horse playing. Everyone was ordered by guards, screaming and threatening them with the dog, to lay face down on the floor. Having witnessed, reported on, and been a victim myself of numerous dog attacks, I sat with my back against a wall, refusing to prostate myself defenseless with a carnivore

trained and used to maul Black prisoners menacing everyone in defiance of the above-mentioned state laws.

During the same weekend, an alleged minor fistfight broke out between two prisoners in another cellblock in Keen Mountain. Responding guards brought in a dog that was again barking and menacing everyone. The animal then lunged at and bit an uninvolved prisoner who had complied with the guards' orders that everyone lay face down on the floor.

WHITE GUARDS GIVEN DOGS TO ATTACK BLACK AND BROWN PRISONERS

What goes unspoken and unexplained is that and why these attack dogs are present ONLY in the Va prison system's remote Western region, where Black and Brown prisoners are disproportionately confined in prisons located in remote segregated white communities. Specifically, at Va's rural, white-staffed prisons Red Onion, Wallens Ridge, River North and Keen Mountain. Dogs are not used in ANY prisons located in Va's Central and Eastern regions which are staffed by largely Blacks and a racially diverse staff.

This is not by accident and it is a blatant continuation of the historic use of attack dogs as weapons of racialized terror by whites against people of color in the Americas. In fact the frequent use of attack dogs to mutilate Blacks during slavery was known to be an "obsession" of Southern whites. (5)

Few people know about the historic use of attack dogs as weapons of racialized terror and murder during slavery and Jim Crow segregation across the US South and the Caribbean; from their use in the mass murders and genocide of Native peoples including the Tainos of the Caribbean by Spaniards, to the enforcement of slavery against Blacks and to track and often kill escaped slaves across the US South, especially in Va; to the repression of slave resistances such as the Second Maroon War in Jamaica (1795-1796) and the Haitian Revolution (1795-1804); and to attack Black Civil Rights demonstrations during the 1960s.

As I noted in a prior report:

"The uses of dogs to attack and maul humans was deemed barbaric and inhumane during each of these periods and led to public opposition. Their uses against the Tainos and slaves was protested by such figures as the priest Bartolome de las Casas called the 'Protector of the Indians,' Voltaire, Harriet Tubman, Martin Delaney and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Public outrage at the use of dogs to terrorize and maul Black slaves was one of the main outrages that won widespread white support for the Abolition Movement against slavery. Media images of dog attacks on civil rights demonstrators in Birmingham, Alabama during May 1963 by the notoriously racist police chief Eugene "Bull" Connor galvanized international opposition to Jim Crow segregation in Amerika. Yet, today, the revival of racialized uses of dogs hidden behind razor wire and concrete walls on Va's predominantly Black and Brown prisoners has gone unchallenged.

"Interestingly, the uses of dogs to maul humans was criminalized during the US Civil War, when Confederates began using their slave hounds against Union soldiers in combat and prisoner of war camps. Some cases led to executions, such as Henry Wirz, the Confederate prisoner of war camp commander at Andersonville, Georgia, who was tried in Sept 1865 for using canines on unarmed Union prisoners of war. But these uses of dogs was criminalized ONLY when it was done to other whites" (6)

More telling is the fact that several US soldiers were court martialed in response to the 2004 international scandal and protest that arose in response to leaked photographs of soldiers menacing terrified Iraqi prisoners with dogs straining against their leashes and growling at them, which was denounced as torture and terrorism. Yet, this practice is the daily norm inside Va's prisons.

CAMPAIGN AGAINST DOGS IN VA PRISONS

At present the prisoner support organization UPROAR (Uniting Prisoners' Relatives Organizing Against Repression) is leading a campaign to remove attack dogs from Va prisons. This struggle follows in the heels of a successful prior campaign led by UPROAR to fire the Va prison system's past director Chadwick Dotson and deputy director Arnold David Robinson. UPROAR is calling for a broad coalition and all possible support and public protest to remove attack dogs (euphemistically called "patrol dogs" and "working dogs" by Va officials) from Va prisons. As demonstrated, officials cannot be trusted to limit or control the uses of these animals, and they WILL BE ABUSED, so long as they remain inside Va prisons.

Dare to Struggle Dare to Win!

All Power to the People!

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Endnotes:

1. Ben Paviour, "Dog Attacks Persist in Virginia Prisons Despite 2024 Law Change: Patrol Dogs Have Bitten Incarcerated People in the Head, Stomach, Arms, and Legs and in 2 Cases, Attacked Corrections Officers," Virginia Mercury, Dec 11, 2025 http://virginiamercury.com/2025/12/11/dog-attacks-persist-in-virginia-prisons-despite-2024-law-change

2. See, Code of Va, section 53.1-30.3 (Uses of canines in state correctional facilities; prohibited acts; policies and regulations made public; incidents of canine use reported; exception)

3. Hannah Beckler, "Patrol Dogs Are Terrorizing and Mauling Prisoners Inside the United States," Insider, July 23, 2022

4. Kevin "Rashid" Johnson, "Reviving Slave Hounds and Canine Crimes In Virginia Prisons" (2025), http://rashidmod.com/?p=3771

5. Tyler D. Parry, "Slave Hounds and Abolition in the Americas," Past and Present, number 246 (Feb 2020), http://academic.oup.com/past/article/246/1/69/5722095

6. See, Kevin "Rashid" Johnson, InsideOutsideUnity #3, http://rashidmod.com/?p=3781