

Abu Ghraib Comes to Amerika:
Torture Unit Under Construction at Virginia's Red Onion State Prison

By Kevin "Rashid" Johnson (October 2010)

Virginia Justifies a Torture Unit

This past summer a Black prisoner was strangled to death on a segregation exercise yard at Virginia's remote Red Onion State Prison. A white prisoner is alleged to have committed the killing.¹ This incident caps a long history of Red Onion officials manipulating and facilitating racial conflict between prisoners. But instead of exposing and addressing this fact, this tragedy is being used to justify the secretive construction of a torture unit at the prison.

Desires to operate such a unit have long been floated by Red Onion's Warden Tracy S. Ray, but were not pursued until now because of lack of sufficient funds and plausible justification. With this recent death, however, Ray now has both his selling point and justification. The unit has been approved, funded and is under construction in the prison's B-3 housing unit.

According to one Red Onion lieutenant, enough money is being spent on the unit's construction "to build a whole new prison."

A list of candidates for the unit has already been compiled. I've been told repeatedly that my name tops it. The list is almost entirely Black and consists of prisoners who've distinguished themselves for resisting and speaking out against the notoriously abusive and racist conditions at Red Onion.²

Although the unit's projected design and living conditions have been shrouded in secrecy to avoid outside scrutiny, leaks have come out to local attorneys who have relatives and contacts who work at Red Onion, and from minimum security 'cadre' inmates who, for pennies an hour, have been working overtime for over two months so far constructing the unit.

Assignments to B-3 will be punitive, brutal, and indefinite, and will inflict tortures designed for and used against "enemy combatants" at the Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib detention centers. Ranking Red Onion officials admit its actual purpose will be to apply, study and advance methods of mentally breaking those with dissident, oppositional and otherwise 'unacceptable' attitudes. When U.S. intelligence agencies began experiments and studies in torture after World War II,³ allegedly for use against dangerous foreign enemies, they

1 The killing is alleged to have been committed by a white prisoner who is an admitted member of a white-exclusivist gang. Many Red Onion prisoners believe the murder to have been racially motivated and facilitated by guards.

2 On numerous occasions I have documented, *in the words of the white prisoners themselves*, how Red Onion officials often use racist white inmates to antagonize and assault Black prisoners – especially by allowing them to carry weapons and bags of fermented feces onto the segregation exercise yards, to attack Blacks confined in locked fenced-in cages beside them. See, e.g. the sworn affidavit of Troy Estep which is on record in the Wise County Circuit Court, filed as Exhibit B in support of a Motion to Transfer Venue, filed on January 22, 2009 in the case of *Commonwealth of Virginia v. Kevin Johnson*, Case No. CR08F00688-00. In his affidavit Estep candidly admits dislike of Blacks and having developed this attitude from growing up in southwestern Virginia where anti-Black racism "is just part of the culture and how everyone is generally raised..." He reveals knowing many of the staff at Red Onion from society, having grown up and gone to school with many of them, and states "most of the guards and nurses and other whites who work at ROSP and WRSP feel the same as I do towards Blacks. Some are not in the open about it, like me; most conceal it when around Blacks or others who they feel will not comfortably accept this attitude." He went on to describe how guards at Red Onion deliberately manipulate racial violence between prisoners. In his own words he described how in segregation, guards punish prisoners for throwing substances on them but do not punish them for doing it to each other. He states how guards who search him before he goes to exercise allow him to carry bags of feces out to throw on Blacks, and how he'd "been documented over 20 times as having thrown feces on Black inmates in segregation." But he was never punished. He went on to admit that Red Onion officials put him in the cell next to me with intentions of provoking and facilitating him throwing feces on me.

Not coincidentally, the same White prisoner who is accused of the recent killing at Red Onion was put in the cell next to me, and we went out on exercise numerous times together, during April 2010. Guards remarked repeatedly that they expected him to "kill" another prisoner, and repeatedly referred to me in his presence as a "Black gang leader." He and I both felt guards were attempting to instigate a conflict between us and he gave me his permission to expose this.

3 As I pointed out in a prior article, see note 4, below:

After World War II western governments established an aversion to physical torture, which they embodied in the

cited the same purposes.

The implications are ominous.

Advanced Modern Torture – Amerikan Style

In a 2007 article,⁴ I showed a general parallel between the torturous conditions of modern U.S. prisons, and the advanced torture techniques (psychological warfare) developed and applied against foreign “enemies” by the CIA and U.S. military. Red Onion’s torture unit now shows a clear and deliberate link between the two, and that what began as techniques developed for Amerikan “enemies” are now being directed at Amerikan citizens. This will inevitably spread.

The CIA/military’s advanced torture methods were exposed in professor Alfred McCoy’s detailed and thoroughly documented 2006 exposé.⁵ His book traced the CIA’s efforts to develop and perfect new and less physically evident torture methods over 50 years, which included a research project (from 1950 to 1962) that cost over \$1 billion a year that sought to “crack the code of human consciousness.” The Agency tried everything from drugs (including truth serum, mescaline and LSD) to shock treatment. None of these efforts produced results.

Alongside these more invasive methods, the CIA also funded behavioral studies at top universities like Yale, Princeton, Harvard and McGill. These efforts bore fruit, beginning at McGill.

McGill’s Dr. Donald O. Hebb discovered that he could consistently produce hallucinations and psychotic breakdowns in a person within 48 hours, by cutting them off from environmental stimulation. He did this by having student volunteers lie blindfolded, with soundproof earmuffs and thick mitts on, inside a small cubicle for several days. Most of the students quit the experiment. He also acknowledged that confinement in solitary prison cells produces similar results, only more gradually.⁶

This was the first breakthrough – “sensory deprivation.”

The CIA’s second advance came from studies of “foreign” torture techniques at Cornell University Medical Center. One of the most effective methods discovered was “self-inflicted pain.” This involved making the victim stand for one or two days, which causes the body fluids to drain into the legs which then swell, causing boils that swell and burst, and hallucinations and kidney failure. The victim is told repeatedly during this

charter and treaties of their newly established United Nations. This was brought on by the embarrassment and guilt of the Allied western nations who had stood by passively while the German Nazis tortured and conducted gruesome experiments on Jews and other Germans (disabled people, dissidents) as well as Slavs, Poles, and Gypsies. On account of this, the newly established CIA became very interested in developing less physically evident methods of mentally breaking and brainwashing enemies.

4 Kevin “Rashid” Johnson, “Amerikan Prisons Are Government-Sponsored Torture,” *Socialism and Democracy*, Vol. 21, no. 1 (March 2007) (<http://sdonline.org/43/johnson.htm>).

5 Alfred W. McCoy, *A Question of Torture: CIA Interrogation, From the Cold War to the War on Terror* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006).

6 As CIA researcher Dr. Albert Biderman discovered “the effect of isolation on the brain function of the prisoner is much like that which occurs if he is beaten, starved or deprived of sleep.” op. cit. note 4. As I stated in the same article:

The Amerikan reformers who first devised the penitentiary believed that criminals could be ‘reformed’ through solitary confinement, labor and religious indoctrination. The use of solitary confinement and isolation – sensory deprivation – began at Philadelphia’s Eastern State Penitentiary in the 1820s. But what actually was discovered was that conditions of sensory deprivation in isolation caused mental deterioration and psychosis. [...]

Many modern courts have found the same conditions and injuries to prisoners from confinement in modern control units as did the high court of the 1890s in the *Medley* case...see, e.g. *Madrid v. Gomez*, 889 F. Supp. 1146 (1995): “[M]any, if not most, inmates in SHU [Special Housing Unit] experience some degree of psychological trauma in relation to their extreme social isolation and the severely restricted environmental stimulation in SHU.” This court concluded that the confinement under such conditions “may press the outer bounds of what humans can psychologically tolerate...” [...]

Another court found that “isolating human beings from other human beings year after year or even month after month can cause substantial psychological damage, even if the isolation is not total.” *Davenport v. DeRoberts*, 844 F. 2d 1310, 1313, 1316 (1989). *Id.* (for full text: <http://sdonline.org/43/johnson.htm>)

process, “You’re doing this to yourself. Cooperate with us and you can sit down.”⁷

The CIA found that combining these two techniques produced revolutionary results while leaving little evidence of abuse. The Agency found its torture model, and in 1963 encoded and distributed it worldwide in its torture handbook, *Kubark Counterintelligence Manual*.

Under General Geoffrey Miller in 2002, Guantánamo Bay was converted into a torture research lab where the CIA model was advanced even further, adding two key techniques.

The two techniques developed at Guantánamo consisted of attacks on cultural sensitivities such as Arab males’ sensitivity to gender issues and sexual identity, and targeting one’s personal fears and vulnerabilities.

By 2003, the CIA torture model was perfected at Guantánamo, combining this multi-level attack on the human psyche, namely 1) sensory deprivation, 2) self-inflicted pain; and targeting 3) cultural sensitivities and 4) personal fears and vulnerabilities.

Later in 2003 when resistance to the U.S. invasion of Iraq caught U.S. forces off guard, Miller was sent to Abu Ghraib from Guantánamo, to implement his techniques against captured Iraqis. A CD and handbook of his methods were distributed to U.S. military police, intelligence agents, and to General Ricardo Sanchez. Sanchez, Commander of U.S. forces in Iraq, ordered that Miller’s methods be incorporated into interrogations of Iraqis. It was these practices that came out in the 2004 torture scandals at Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo.

Investigations exposed an entire unit at Guantánamo, housing Arab men who’d been reduced under these techniques to the mental level of toddlers. They were found sitting on the floor, playing with toys, crying, soiling themselves, etc.

As McCoy exposed, torture experts agree that psychological (or “clean”) torture is far more dangerous, destructive and lasting than physical torture. And is far more cruel. Victims often need extensive treatment to recover from injury far more crippling than mere physical pain. Perpetrators can suffer a dangerous expansion of ego, leading to escalating cruelty and lasting emotional disorders.

The B-3 Torture Unit

B-3 will be Red Onion’s second torture unit, informally called “superseg” (segregation within segregation). The first superseg unit was constructed and opened in October 2003 in Red Onion’s C-4 unit, and distinguished itself for extensive physical abuse by guards with the complicity of medical staff. This abuse saw prisoners routinely beaten by guards while handcuffed behind their backs and leg shackled, often resulting in broken teeth and bones and dislocated joints. A Red Onion sergeant Delmer Tate was given charge of C-4 superseg. As a lieutenant now, Tate is to run the new B-3 superseg.⁸

I was among the first prisoners assigned to C-4 superseg. The conditions and brutality in C-4 were moderated following my compiling and circulating reports of the abuse to the outside and co-founding prisoner

7 “Self inflicted pain” may be applied in a variety of ways, e.g. compelling one to stand at length, kneel or sit on hard surfaces at length, remain in cramped and painful positions, etc. These are called “stress positions.” The key is that the body is used as a weapon against itself, without an external device, thus giving the impression that the victim is causing his/her own suffering. As the 1983 Honduran torture manual, modeled after the CIA’s 1963 torture handbook, teaches, “pain which he [the subject] feels he is inflicting upon himself is more likely to sap his resistances.” op. cit. note 5, p. 136.

8 Tate distinguished himself at Red Onion for abuse, and is generally disliked by prisoners. His role in abuses in the C-4 superseg unit was discussed in my October 2004 exposé of abuse at the prison, entitled “Racism and Brutality Equal Kind and Usual Punishment in Virginia.” As an article published on the internet by Fed Up!, described in 2005, “Kevin (Rashid) Johnson sent his exposé . . . to Governor Mark Warner on 31 October, 2004. The Governor routed the document to Sgt. D. Tate at ROSP. According to Johnson, Sgt. Tate is ‘both the ROSP investigator and a supervisor in the superseg unit – he has himself been involved in various prior abuses of prisoners, myself included. . .’ In fact, Tate is named frequently in Johnson’s exposé.” (“Abuse and Torture of Prisoners Continues at Red Onion State Prison in Pound, Virginia,” <http://www.thomasmertoncenter.org/projects/prisoner-rights/fedup/abuserereports.htm>)

According to ranking officials, as with the first superseg unit opened in the C-4 unit of Red Onion, guards selected for work in the new B-3 unit will be chosen based upon their history of antagonism towards prisoners. One such guard, J. Hall, is a known abusive guard notoriously disliked by prisoners. He developed especial notoriety for his having brutally beaten a fully restrained prisoner L. Nathan #251933 and knocked one of his front teeth out. Nathan had to have the other front tooth pulled also as a result of the damage caused by the assault. The attack occurred on June 12, 2008.

advocacy groups with concerned outside citizens like Fed Up!, which generated public protests.

Following such exposures of physical torture, it is a noted pattern of officials to resort to less physically evident methods of abuse and torture. This is the purpose of the new B-3 superseg unit,⁹ which is completely compatible with warden Ray's overall agenda of protecting Red Onion's image, while maintaining its oppressive designs.

The cells in B-3 are being stripped of all furniture except for a heavily fortified steel bedframe and steel toilet/sink combination. The cell's writing desks and property storage shelves are being removed. The prisoners will have nowhere to sit and write or to store their belongings (what little they may have). There will be no personal amenities in the cells such as televisions (which are allowed in all other units for religious, educational and very limited entertainment programs).

All bedding (mattress, sheets, blankets, etc.) will be removed from the cells from 6am through 10pm every day, leaving the prisoner to stand or sit on cold bare steel and concrete surfaces for 16 hours. Throughout this time the cell will be constantly illuminated with bright fluorescent lights that he cannot control nor dim.¹⁰ There is no view of the outside world from within the cells, nor on the unit's outside exercise yard.¹¹

Outside exercise will be permitted three times per week for one hour which will consist of one's standing idle inside a small dog cage, enclosed within a two-storey concrete structure that permits a view only of part of the sky directly overhead. The only clothing permitted to protect against the freezing and sub-freezing cold of winter, are thin khaki pants and shirt, a light jacket, low-top cloth desk shoes, one pair of regular socks, t-shirt and boxers. Only one layer of each clothing item may be worn, and gloves and long johns are not permitted.

No clothing will be permitted inside the cells. Only a course, loose-fitting, sleeveless, dress-like garment called a "safety smock" may be worn. Cell temperatures, especially surface temperatures, are constantly very low at Red Onion, leaving prisoners cold even when they have bedding and clothing. Many prisoners remain bundled up and wear winter skullcaps inside their cells year round – even to bed.

The cells are constructed so that verbal communication is made difficult, and positioned so prisoners cannot see each other.

Each cell in B-3 will be internally equipped with video and audio monitoring equipment that will record all activities and statements of prisoners inside the cells, including confidential legal activities and discussions. Guards working the unit will wear mobile audio-video equipment that will also monitor and record prisoner contacts and conversations with them and in their presences. This extensive surveillance is admittedly to record and study prisoners' every action and statement, and their adjustments to and the effects of B-3 on them. Prisoners at Guantánamo were subject to similar controlled studies, but not so thoroughly recorded, in the military's torture experiments.

The unit is clearly structured to inflict the multi-leveled assault on the human psyche developed and perfected by the CIA/military, and to permit extensive observation and study of its effects.

First, *sensory deprivation* is blatant. There is a total loss of the stimulation of normal social environment and relationships, with the attendant stress and chilling effect of living under constant surveillance. This alone

9 "Clean torture is not simply a psychological tool, just because it does not leave marks. The history of modern torture tells us one more important point: whenever we watch, torturers become sneaky. When the news, the media, the public, or politicians monitor what police are doing during interrogation, the interrogators literally pull their punches.

"That makes clean techniques valuable: Allegations of torture are simply less credible when there is nothing to show. In the absence of visible wounds or photographs of actual torture, who is one to believe? Clean torture breaks down the ability to communicate between the victim and the wider community. Stealth tortures are unlike other tortures because they are calculated to subvert that relationship. And frankly, people judge more by what they see than by what they only hear about. Would Americans have been so outraged by Abu Ghraib without the pictures? In fact, the army released information to the news media and public about the abuses before the famous pictures became available, but the public rarely took notice." Darius Rejali, *A Painful History: Why Have Modern Democracies Been Such Important Innovators of Torture?*

10 Compelling one to live under constant bright illumination is torture and is illegal in U.S. prisons. As the federal courts have stated "there is no legitimate penological justification for requiring inmates to suffer physical and psychological harm by living in constant illumination. This practice is unconstitutional." *Keenan v. Hall*, 83 F.3d 1083, 1090 (1996).

11 On the exercise yards prisoners will be unable to see each other.

can quickly produce extreme psychological pain and damage. There is otherwise little to nothing to do to occupy or stimulate the senses (visual, audio, olfactory, manual/musculo-skeletal).

This lack of environmental stimulation will both *create* an increased need for physical and social stimuli, while in turn *denying* both. The obvious result will be acute mental breakdowns as observed by Dr. Hebb in his sensory deprivation experiments.¹² And this addresses only *one* component of torture, namely that of sensory deprivation. I haven't as yet discussed the suffering and effects of the other three components of the CIA/military torture paradigm which will also be applied in B-3, namely "self-inflicted" pain, and attacks on cultural sensitivities and personal vulnerabilities.

The resultant 'behaviors' caused by this mental torture, will then be cited as confirmation of the disruptive nature of B-3 internees, and their "need" to remain and be in the unit. It's a self-serving and self-fulfilling process that is as predictable as breathing.

Second is *self-inflicted pain*. I've had prior experience with lengthy confinement in cells with no clothing (except underwear) and no bedding during daytime hours. During 1998 at Virginia's Greensville Correctional Center, I was kept for seven months on an admittedly illegal status, called "white cell status," very similar to what's planned for B-3. The result of such conditions is to suffer constant physical pain and fatigue, and Red Onion officials are spreading the message early on, that those chosen for B-3 will be due to their own behavior and attitudes, and only by changing them in the unit (i.e. *cooperating with their captors*) will they have any hope of being moved out of B-3.

Being made to remain in a steel and concrete cell without bedding and clothes, will compel one to stand at length on a bare cold concrete floor. Sitting on cold steel or concrete for substantial periods causes rheumatic pain deep in the joints, lower back and any body parts resting on or against these surfaces, also chronic hemorrhoids. Standing at length on these surfaces causes swelling and rheumatic pain in the legs, knees, feet, ankles, etc. Much like the torture technique studied at Cornell Medical Center.¹³

The body becomes increasingly vulnerable and sensitive to this pain and suffering, and begins to deteriorate after weeks and months of constant exposure to these conditions. Arthritis develops in joints, along with chronic musculo-skeletal aches and pains.

Increasing atmospheric temperatures inside the cells offers no relief, since it is virtually impossible to warm the concrete and steel surfaces within a prison cell, especially during spring, autumn, and winter months, when it is cool and cold outside. This because the surfaces inside the cell are part of the same concrete structure outside the prison building that absorbs outside cold temperatures.

The physical and mental pain of B-3 will come in many forms, all of which officials will persist is the fault of the prisoners, rather than that of Red Onion officials who are inflicting it.

Third, *attacks on cultural sensitivities*. A large cage is to be constructed in the middle of the unit, where prisoners brought from their cells will be strip searched. During these searches they must strip naked and manipulate their genitals and buttocks for scrutiny by male guards. This and the attendant dress-like "safety smocks" worn inside the cells is calculated to offend most prisoners, especially upon males' sensitivity to gender issues.¹⁴ Being projected as feminine or sexually submissive, especially before one's peers, is highly offensive

12 As a study of sensory deprivation under the CIA at Harvard by a team of four psychiatrists found:

1. the deprivation of sensory stimuli induces stress;
2. the stress becomes unbearable for most subjects;
3. the subject has a growing need for physical and social stimuli; and
4. some subjects progressively lose touch with reality, focus inwardly, and experience delusions, hallucinations, and other pathological effects.

13 B-3 will inflict environmentally induced "stress positions." Namely, the *inability* to sit or lie comfortably during the day will compel standing or sitting painfully for extended periods, inside the cells.

14 Psychosexual humiliation accompanied by prolonged social isolation has been found to inflict "devastating force" on those subjected to it as a form of torture. op. cit. n. 5, p. 84. It was discovered in October 2003, that prisoners at Abu Ghraib were being subjected to confinement in empty concrete cells, naked with no visual stimuli, much like the projected conditions of B-3. The Red Cross medical staff found victims of this treatment suffered after a few days "memory problems, verbal expression difficulties, incoherent speech, acute anxiety reactions... and suicidal tendencies." These practices were found to be "prohibited under International Humanitarian Law." *Id.* p. 141. Furthermore, under DOC policy prisoners are to

in male prison culture, because such prisoners are deemed weak and are those targeted with routine domination, violence and rape.

Anyone can recognize the cultural offense of living under constant audio-video surveillance. Especially having one's most private activities monitored, such as using the commode, bathing, and engaging in the natural act of masturbating – in an environment where normal sexual relations are denied (another component of sensory deprivation). These monitored activities will also be subject to observation by female employees. There will be no medical, mental health, nor legal privacy, as all contacts with such staff, attorney calls, etc. will be conducted under audio-video monitoring. Then there is the cultural clash between prisoners and staff (see note 24).

Fourth, *personal vulnerabilities will be targeted* in many ways. For example, if one delays or refuses to relinquish his bedding at 6am, he will be met with immediate force of one or more teams of riot-armored guards, who will “cell extract” him by means of tear gassing him, rushing into the cell, electrocuting him with one or more 75,000 volt electric weapons, and forcefully restraining him. They will then take the bedding.

In the process of the “cell extraction,” the guards will invariably get in sly punches, knees and kicks, grabs at the groin and throat, gouges at the eyes, and bend fingers back. All the while yelling: “Stop resisting! Stop resisting!” for effect.

The cell-extracted prisoner will then be placed into in-cell (ambulatory) restraints for up to 48 hours. This will all emphasize his vulnerability and powerlessness, and the futility of resisting or protesting being abused. At Red Onion violent force and cell extractions are the routine first resort to compelling prisoners' compliance with arbitrary demands, even when no force is needed.

In B-3 superseg, prisoners will be unable to flush their own commodes. Guards will flush them from outside the cells.¹⁵

With these few, and certainly not exhaustive, examples, one can see clearly the continued torture B-3 will inflict on its inhabitants.

Another aspect of torture in B-3 will be prisoners being confined in continued bright lighting for 16 hours per day. This condition, which is general to Red Onion (except for minimum security cadre inmates, who are able to control their in-cell lighting), has caused or contributed to prisoners' visual impairment at an unprecedented level at Red Onion.

Living under constant fluorescent lighting causes chronic eye strain, blurring and watering, and visual deterioration. Another factor that I believe contributes to this high rate of visual impairment is lack of visual stimulation in Red Onion's segregation, where no views are permitted to the outside, which denies regular stimulation and exercise of long range vision and focusing – yet another feature of sensory deprivation.

The Lies That Justify Red Onion

Before and since Red Onion opened in 1998, and its sister supermax Wallens Ridge State Prison opened in 1999, Virginia officials fed the public a steady stream of lies to justify the expensive construction and operation of these unneeded prisons. Initially it was claimed that these 2,400 supermax beds were needed to securely confine Virginia's multitudes of chronically violent and dangerous prisoners.¹⁶

Added to this was the claim that those housed at these prisons would never again see society due to long sentences. Both of these rationales were quickly exposed to be lies.

In a critical 1999 investigative report, Human Rights Watch (HRW) found that before Red Onion even opened, the DOC had a review conducted of its prisoner population, by James Austin, a national expert on prison classification systems. Austin's review found that Virginia had one of the nation's most docile prisoner populations, and that “few engage in institutional violence or escapes.”¹⁷ But what HRW's report *did* find was a retain clothing in Special Housing at all times.

15 Virginia Board of Corrections Standards requires that prisoner living areas contain a toilet that the prisoner can operate “without staff assistance 24 hours a day.” See, 6 VAC 15-31-110(A).

16 “Little information was ever provided to the public to substantiate the projected existence of 2,400 chronically dangerous inmates in Virginia.” Human Rights Watch, *Red Onion State Prison: Super-Maximum Security Confinement in Virginia* (1999).

17 Ibid. In a telephone conversation with HRW, Mr. Austin revealed, “Virginia does not have a prisoner population with high levels of assaultive behavior.” (p. 14)

high level of violence and racism inflicted on Red Onion's predominantly Black prisoner population by its near exclusively white staff.¹⁸ It also revealed that most of the prisoners were eligible for release, or otherwise did not meet the DOC's own criteria for supermax housing.

Officials repeatedly changed their own security level criteria to justify unqualified prisoners being housed at these supermaxes. As HRW found, Virginia officials kept "adjusting supermax housing criteria not to reflect genuine security and management needs, but simply to fill what would otherwise be half empty – but very expensive – facilities."¹⁹

With these exposures and attendant media criticism, Virginia officials transferred many prisoners away from the supermaxes, and intensified changes in their supermax classification criteria in efforts to qualify more prisoners for supermax housing. Still unable to create substantial numbers of supermax prisoners, they began, at an unprecedented level, contracting to house out-of-state prisoners at the prisons. Prisoners from Washington, D.C., Connecticut, Wyoming, the Virgin Islands, Maryland, and other states were brought in.

The DOC secured many of these contracts by boasting of their prison success rates in controlling Virginia's own violence and dangerous prisoners at the supermaxes. But they failed to mention that Virginia never had a substantial number of violent or dangerous prisoners to bring under control to begin with.

Immediately upon assignment to the supermaxes, the out-of-state prisoners experienced the same extreme brutality and racism as did the Virginia prisoners. However, unlike Virginia prisoners, they had a strong outside support and advocacy system in their home states that immediately went to bat for them. Resulting protests and lawsuits led to the withdrawal of these prisoners from Red Onion and Wallens Ridge – starting with Connecticut,²⁰ New Mexico and the District of Columbia.

Under these protests DOC Director Ronald Angelone resigned on May 9, 2002 and a token Black warden, Daniel Braxton, was assigned to Red Onion as window dressing. As my 2004 exposé²¹ on abuse at Red Onion revealed, abuses continued. In fact, under Braxton, abuse and racism escalated at Red Onion, and the first superseg unit opened in 2003 under his watch.

Despite losing their appeal for out-of-state contracts, and having lost all credible claims for operating even one – let alone two – supermaxes, Virginia officials were still determined to justify continuing to operate these expensive and unneeded prisons. So in 2005 they reduced Wallens Ridge's security level from supermax to regular maximum security. Subsequently they cut Red Onion's prisoner population in half, created unauthorized housing statuses like "Progressive Housing," brought in scores of minimum security 'cadre' inmates ostensibly as workers (but in actuality to fill beds), and were finally forced to eliminate Red Onion's supermax classification as well. Red Onion was then classified as a segregation prison, and the DOC officially terminated the level 6 (supermax) security level altogether in February 2007.

Outside protests continued, most of it generated by my own written reports of abuse at Red Onion. Later in 2004, Warden Bratton was replaced by Tracey S. Ray. Ray came on board with an explicit agenda to repair Red Onion's image, to curb outside protests and negative media, and emphasized using psychological coercion (especially behavioral incentives) against prisoners as control mechanisms, over brutal violence. Although it persists in many forms, physical abuse was greatly reduced under Ray's watch, and more determined efforts have been made to cover up those abuses that continue.

Ray and his appointed investigator Tony Adams actually took the time and initiative to personally monitor my communications to those on the outside, read most of my writings and reports, and implemented 'counter-intelligence' efforts to isolate me, cut my ties to the outside, frustrate my communication lines, undermine my relationships, attack my character and credibility, and censor my writings.²²

18 One prisoner was quoted as noting, "Inmate on inmate violence virtually does not exist [at Red Onion]. Inmate on guard violence virtually does not exist here. Guard on inmate violence is high." *Ibid.*, p. 15.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

20 See, e.g. Craig Timberg, "Connecticut Pulls Prisoners from Wallens Ridge," *Washington Post*, July 25, 2001, at B01.

21 Kevin "Rashid" Johnson, *Red Onion State Prison An Exposé: Racism and Brutality Equal Kind and Usual Punishment in Virginia*.

22 On April 8, 2009 at a hearing conducted in Wise County Circuit Court, (see case cited in note 2), above, Tony Ad-

Under their designs, I was also targeted with some sixteen indicted criminal charges over a three-year period. This to consume my limited resources and time in defending myself against these charges, where they knew I would not permit any attorneys to represent me. In *every* case the charges were dismissed or dropped, with me representing myself.

They also devised to get rid of prisoners' television sets that had radio units. This because a local radio station aired a program that allowed live call-ins to prisoners at Red Onion and Wallens Ridge, and gave prisoners both a voice to the outside that was exposing the prisons' conditions and efforts to challenge them, and was winning us local empathy.²³

With all prior justifications for the claimed need for Red Onion and Wallens Ridge discredited, DOC officials, with Ray and Adams at the forefront, this time sought to validate Red Onion's use as a segregation prison by '*manufacturing*' a problem with gang activity. Prior to 2004 Virginia prisons had almost no gang members or activity. First they created 'gang pods' at Red Onion and Wallens Ridge beginning in latter 2004, where they suspected rival gang members were forcibly housed together, with hopes of provoking and facilitating violent conflicts between them. Red Onion officials had already long used white supremacist inmates against Black prisoners whom they disliked.²⁴

Red Onion's white staff have no genuine experience with nor exposure to the culture of urban people of color. With the result that they actively slap gang profiles on Black and Brown prisoners for little more than expressing their own cultures in their manners of speech, dress, body language, writing styles, etc. Most of those who are gang-profiled adamantly deny gang involvement.

Many have been forced to join gangs because of false profiles by officials leading to conflicts with actual members. Adams, who was promoted under Ray from working in the prison's dog kennel to the position of investigator (and suddenly became a self-professed gang specialist), has been instrumental in the whole gang witch-hunt and facilitating racial and gang violence at Red Onion. Adams and his colleagues have not only orchestrated or tried to provoke violent conflicts by deliberately housing "documented" rivals in cells and units together and operating gang pods, but they profile and publicize prisoners as gang members upon the flimsiest evidence and often out of spite.

Adams also classifies and thereupon represses information related to Black civil rights groups and leaders as gangs and gang related.

The recent prisoner death at Red Onion occurred under these circumstances. Indeed it should be placed squarely on Adams' shoulders, where the prisoner accused of the killing is a self-admitted member of a white gang, while the Black prisoner who was killed was a "documented" member of a Black street gang. Yet they were housed by Adams in the same unit together, facilitating the fatality.

However, instead of addressing the problem at the root – namely Red Onion officials inciting and facilitating racial and gang violence between prisoners – this tragedy is being used by them to justify Red Onion's continued existence, and their constructing a torture unit which will in no way resolve the basis of what

ams admitted that he and Ray were actively involved in preventing me from compiling and circulating articles because they felt them to be "one-sided."

23 This radio program, *Holler to the Hood* airs on Monday nights on WMMT out of Whitesburg, Kentucky.

24 Much of the prisoner abuse at Red Onion was found by HRW to stem from a "clash of cultures" between the prison's almost totally white rural staff, who had no prior exposure to Blacks, and its predominantly urban Black prisoner population. This condition per se constitutes a pervasive and acute attack on many of the prisoner's cultural sensitivities. As HRW observed, "Correctional officers and other prison staff threaten inmates with abuse and subject them to racist remarks, derogatory language, and other demeaning and harassing conduct. Facility administrators and supervisory staff appear to condone such unprofessional conduct... The preponderance of inmates at Red Onion are black, and the staff is almost entirely white, drawn from the total coal-mining area in which the prison is located. They have had little to no direct contact with blacks before beginning work at Red Onion... [Many] officers are quick to use derogatory terms and slurs, quick to use force, quick to impose their authority unnecessarily and capriciously... Tensions and misunderstandings perhaps inevitably arise from a clash of cultures in which both black prisoners and white staff hold misconceptions and believe in caricatures about the other. But in a well-run facility with appropriate staff selection, training and supervision, those tensions can be minimized and kept from escalating into provocation, confrontations and violence. Unfortunately, white and black inmates alike at Red Onion describe an atmosphere of pervasive and blatant racism." op. cit. n. 16, pp. 2, 16.

occurred.

Lies and evasions are typical features of DOC public relations, and have been the bases of the justifications given over the years for the expensive construction and continued operations of Red Onion and Wallens Ridge, the real purposes of which have been to create and sustain a lucrative investment climate for various wealthy corporate interests, and to revitalize the sagging local economy in impoverished rural southwestern Virginia, with Blacks and Browns made the victims of the abusive conditions in these prisons. This is why every justification for their existence has been discredited in turn, only to be opportunistically replaced by yet another manufactured one. While attempts to expose and redress abuses and the brutal conditions in the prisons are met with the same – lies, evasions and cover-ups.

Red Onion: A Fief Unto Itself

Under Virginia laws the Virginia Board of Corrections (BOC) is the DOC's chief oversight authority. It sets out standards and goals which the DOC must apply, and the Board is to monitor the DOC to ensure its compliance.²⁵ Red Onion, however, has *always* operated completely outside and free of oversight of the BOC and any other authority. The conditions and status to be implemented in B-3 are but one example of this.

Under the BOC's written standards, there are only three "Special Housing" statuses, namely General Detention, Isolation, and Segregation.²⁶ There is *no* authority for the creation or existence of any other special housing statuses. Only on Isolation, a designated temporary punitive status imposed only for rules violations, may a prisoner's bedding be removed during daylight hours.²⁷ Prisoners are at all times to be able to flush their own commodes (see note 15). They are to have enclosed storage space inside the cell.²⁸ Cells are to have natural lighting.²⁹

Red Onion officials created the unauthorized two-phase progressive housing status to create bases for keeping prisoners at Red Onion who actually do not qualify for continued segregation confinement, and to forestall having to transfer those qualified for housing at lower security prisons. Actually, Progressive Housing embodies the conditions and privileges that prisoners are *supposed* to enjoy on segregation status. As HRW found over a decade ago, segregation status at Red Onion is actually punitive and extremely harsh. Indeed, its conditions impose sensory deprivation.³⁰

The BOC, which conducts public meetings monthly in Richmond, Virginia, is responsible for and empowered to conduct hearings and summon witnesses, in exercising and enforcing its monitoring and oversight duties within the DOC. Despite the obvious deviations of Red Onion from BOC standards, and over a decade

25 See, *Code of Virginia*, Section 53.1-2 *et seq.*

26 See, 6 VAC 150310149. *Special Housing Assignments*. Also, under DOC policy these are the only "authorized" Special Housing statuses. See DOC OP 861.3. Contrary to the conditions of B-3 this policy requires that Special Housing unites "provide living conditions that approximate those of the general offender population," "clothing that is not degrading," "access to basic personal items for use in their cell," etc.

27 See, 6 VAC 15-31-140(G) "In isolation cases only, the bedding may be removed during the daytime hours."

28 See, 6 VAC 15-31-110(A).

29 Ibid.

30 "Segregation is the *modern form of solitary confinement*; segregated inmates are almost completely deprived of the commonplace incidents and routines of prison life. In theory, administrative segregation is not a punitive measure. In practice, it can only be described as punishing. The more than 200 segregated inmates at Red Onion live in conditions designed to impose long-term social isolation and restricted environmental stimulation. Their world is austere, cramped and claustrophobic. Security procedures imposed on all inmates in segregation exceed those reasonably necessary for safety, their real purpose may be simply to intimidate and degrade. Prisoners' minimal physical requirements...are met, but little more. The facility offers nothing but bleak isolation to encourage or enable an inmate to return to general population or to enhance his ability to live peaceably once he has." *op. cit.* n. 16, p.9. In my 2007 article on prison torture, I described the acute mental deterioration I've observed in prisoners confined in segregation at Red Onion for substantial periods. "Most," I noted, "suffer a distinct regression into paranoia, irrationality, grandiose and persecutory delusions, childish attention-seeking behavior, reduced impulse control, hyper-sexuality, reduced ability to concentrate or maintain organized thoughts, compulsive and irrational searches for stimulation, gratification and attention, etc." *op. cit.* n.4. What's worse, Red Onion offers no mental health treatment. See, *op. cit.* n. 16, p. 11 and n. 4.

of incessant abuse and racism, this DOC prison has yet to be the subject of such investigative hearings and oversight.

In essence, Red Onion operates as a fief unto itself, with those who are required by law to monitor its operations and ensure its compliance with the law, refusing to do so.

Then the prison is operated by a closed system of blood relatives and friends. Nepotism and cronyism run rampant. There are so many Mullinses and Flemings in the prison, one can't count them all. From the Major, to Captains, Lieutenants, Sergeants and Corporal guards, to administrative staff, counselors, commissary, maintenance, etc. etc. staff, the Mullinses and Flemings pervade the prison. Then on both alternate shifts, two McCoy brothers are in charge of security. The prison staff is a closed society of families, friends and lovers, all of whom come from local racially segregated white communities, where racism is a general feature of local culture. There is but one Black male guard at the whole prison, and he admittedly keeps his distance from the others.

Blacks who've visited loved ones at the prison and have stayed at local hotels, used local restaurants and shopped at local stores, unanimously comment on the open hostility and unwelcome attitudes they've experienced from local whites.³¹ These are the people who run Red Onion.

It is no surprise that a Black prisoner died at the hands of a white one under supervision of Red Onion staff. What *is* surprising is that it took so long to happen.

The secrecy, lack of oversight, and corruption that pervade Red Onion is nothing new. Actually it is but a continuation of DOC practices found by the courts almost 40 years ago. As one Virginia federal court found in a landmark case, Virginia prison officials refuse to recognize

that a prison administration is not a fief unto itself. Coupled with this antiquated notion that a prison unit is not even peripherally a part of the community is the practice over the years, that has been shown to the Court in this and other prison cases, to envelop the system with a massive veil of secrecy. More concern seems to have been given to the image of the prison's administration than to granting to its inmates not only such constitutional rights as they are entitled to in spite of their incarceration, but also the basic tenets of conduct which simple fairness, interpreted by even the most uneducated be accorded them as well. These cases are permeated by an apparent lack of understanding on the part of some of the [prison administration] defendants as well as on the part of at least some of their subordinates that the retribution required by law to be inflicted upon a convict has already, within the limits of the legislatively set boundaries, been pronounced by a trial court.³²

In 2006, the Commission on Safety and Abuse in America's Prisons issued a detailed report, which exposed the conditions of abuse, mismanagement and suffering pervading U.S. prisons.³³ Members of the Commission consisted of attorneys, former judges, psychiatrists, former wardens, former mayors, etc.

Among the Commission's findings, were that extended segregated confinement, such as exists at Red Onion is general (which is now an explicitly long term segregation prison), amount to mental torture and inflict both physical and psychological damage. As this article emphasizes, these conditions will be greatly intensified in B-3 superseg. With the exception of overcrowding, all the abusive conditions found by the Commission in prisons across the country, exist with especial intensity at Red Onion, including the tendency towards secrecy.³⁴

In the report's conclusion the Commission strongly recommended public oversight of U.S. prisons.

31 Many prisoners at Red Onion discourage their loved ones from visiting them because they do not wish to have them exposed to the racial hostility of the locals.

32 *Landman v. Royster*, 354 F. Supp. 1292, 1299 (E.D.Va. 1973).

33 *Confronting Confinement* (June 2006).

34 The report quoted the U.S. Justice Department's inspector general Glenn Fine's finding that "There is tremendous pressure within an institution to keep quiet" about abuse. This is especially true of Red Onion, as HRW found when the DOC's Director refused to let HRW tour Red Onion and interview staff, as other state and federal prison systems have. "The unwillingness to let Human Rights Watch tour Red Onion, coupled with the DOC's notorious reluctance to give the press access to the facility and its inmates, suggests the DOC is uncomfortable in letting the public acquire a fuller picture of operations there." op. cit. n.16, p.3.

Which is what I have advocated and actively pursued over the years at Red Onion. But my efforts have been persecuted, censored, and I vilified and repressed by Red Onion officials. This is because they clearly have much to hide. Anyone secure in their power does not fear exposure or criticism.

After World War II, Germans who lived in communities near Nazi concentration camps were taken on tours of them. Many were shocked and appalled to discover the brutalities and tortures that were taking place in their own back yards, and swore they'd have opposed it *if only they'd have known*. This is what Red Onion officials fear. Exposure. Their experience with protest on behalf of prisoners from other states taught them that public opinion matters – a lot. Exposure is even more important in this case where advanced methods of torture are now being consciously directed at U.S. citizens. It's not going to end with just Red Onion. Nor just with prisoners. And it's not intended to. Which is why such extensive and expensive measures are being taken at Red Onion to monitor and record the effects of the B-3 torture unit on its victims. As Professor McCoy observed:

Torture is an extraordinarily dangerous thing. It taps into the deepest recesses of human consciousness, where creation and destruction coexist, where the infinite human capacity for kindness and the infinite human capacity for cruelty coexist, and it has a powerful perverse appeal. Once it starts, and both the perpetrators and the powerful who command them let it spread, it spreads out of control. I think when the Bush administration gave those orders for techniques tantamount to torture at the start of the war on terror, I think it was probably their intention that these be limited to top al-Qaeda suspects. But within months, U.S. personnel were torturing hundreds of Afghans at Bagram near Kabul, and a few months later in 2003, through these techniques, soldiers were torturing literally thousands of Iraqis. And you can see in those photos how once it starts, it becomes this Dante-esque hell, this kind of play palace of the worst recesses of human consciousness. That's why it's necessary to maintain an absolute prohibition on torture. There is no such thing as a little bit of torture. The whole myth of scientific surgical torture, which academic torture advocates in this country came up with, that's impossible. That cannot operate. It will inevitably spread.³⁵

And it's already started. From Abu Ghraib to Red Onion.

All the Power to the People!

35 Quoted from a February 17, 2006 interview of Alfred McCoy aired on the radio program *Democracy Now!*

Defying the Tomb

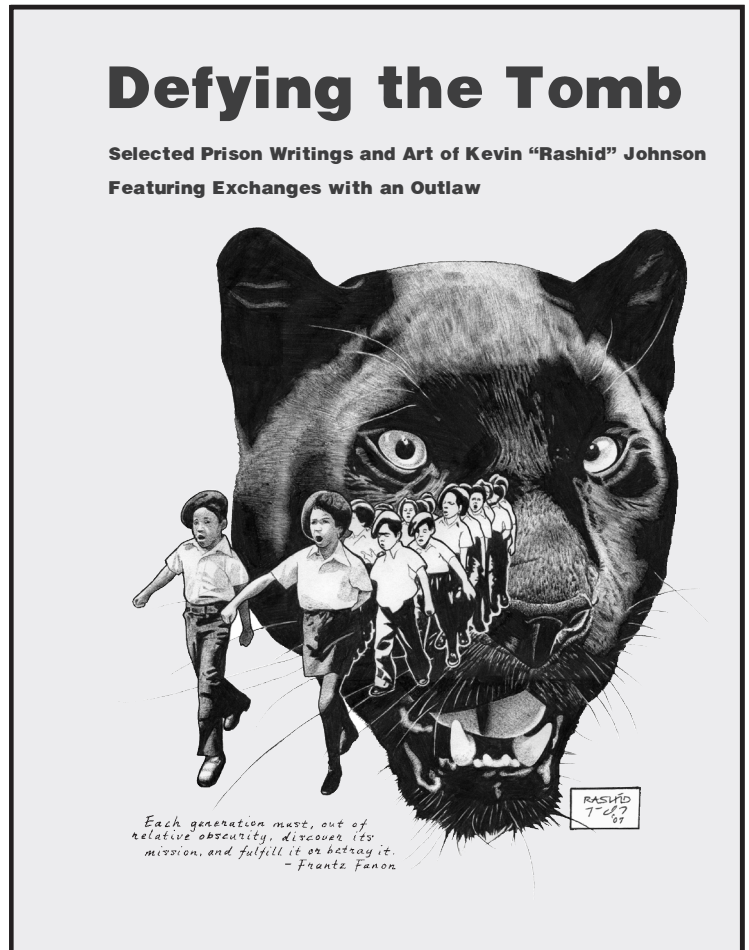
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