



Reason *in Revolt*

# JACOBIN

## The Canine Terror

Since slavery, dogs have been used to intimidate and control African Americans.

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5.19.16

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**O**n the day that Michael Brown died in August 2014, a policeman in Ferguson, Missouri guided the dog he handled to urinate on a makeshift memorial at the site where his colleagues had shot Brown hours before. The related outrage and demonstrations against police treatment in that community captured international attention.

One long-running complaint in Ferguson was that police regularly used their dogs with excessive force against only African Americans. In the recent past police in Los Angeles inflicted more injuries with dogs than guns, batons, or tear gas, and did so disproportionately against black people, who they often called “dog biscuits.”

These cases are not isolated. Dogs have been a tool for the intimidation and control of African Americans since the inception of slavery.

Federal law now states that a person faces up to ten years in prison for maiming a police dog. Government authorities have often viewed black people as more expendable than their canine attackers, which dates to a time when millions of African Americans were legally considered property.

## **A Perfect Hatred**

**D**ogs were important to both colonization and the maintenance of black chattel slavery throughout the Americas. According to some reports, indigenous peoples were literally “fed to the dogs” in the Caribbean and throughout the continental Americas.

These animals were tools of surveillance and fear, helping to annihilate indigenous populations and solidify the expansion of American capitalism through slavery.

Breeders honed dogs’ superhuman biological systems, maximizing their ability to smell, hear, outrun, outlast, signal, attack, and sometimes execute black victims.

Most feared were the “Cuban Bloodhounds,” specifically bred and celebrated for their ferocity and tenacity in subduing black rebellions. By the eighteenth century, Cuba was the epicenter for breeding and training these terrifying creatures.

Cuban Bloodhounds were physically imposing: “the size of a very large hound” with cropped ears and pointed noses. Their skins were “much harder than that of most dogs” and their “training would kill any other species of dog.”

Breeders incorporated violent racism into the training process, believing dogs could be taught to sense race. One visitor observed Cuban trainers forcing black men to abuse the dogs by whipping them daily, encouraging the dogs, still chained to the ground, to bite their abusers.

Once the dogs acquired “a perfect hatred of [their] tormentor,” the man charged with whipping the dog would run to the woods, daring it to chase him.

British and French rivals began purchasing these dogs from Spanish officials to suppress black revolts in their own colonies, granting the Cuban Bloodhound international notoriety.

Dogs were used to terrorize the maroons into surrender during the Second Maroon War of Jamaica (1795–96). In the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804), the exhibitions of canine violence proved to be one of the final horrors of French colonialism.

## **Bloodhounds in Washington**

**T**he legend of these animals’ fierceness and utility grew throughout the Americas. Between 1835–1842 the US government brought them to what is now Florida to fight the Seminole Nation, which comprised a collection of runaway slaves and indigenous peoples who united to contest the US government’s imperial expansion.

Abolitionists criticized the maneuver, citing the bloodhounds’ nefarious reputations in the earlier conflicts. From then on the Cuban hound became the preferred breed among US slavers, who increasingly deployed the animals across the South to support King Cotton.

By the 1840s the practice of keeping “slave dogs” was widespread. Newspaper advertisements — like one in the *West Tennessee Democrat* describing the “Finest dogs for catching negroes” — document the rise of professional slave hunting. Trackers interbred Cuban hounds with local dogs as slave hunting became a profitable venture for white men throughout the South.

Like their Cuban compatriots, Americans aimed to train their dogs to react to the black body as their ultimate adversary. Oral tradition and ex-slave memoirs are full of tales of these specially trained canines kept by masters or local white men.

Former slave James Brown remembered how his master’s “big bulldog” would attack black men who had the misfortune of entering the plantation unannounced. Solomon Northup recounts the presence of dogs during his escape:

. . . looking up the bayou, I saw Tibcats and two others on horse-back, coming at a fast gait, followed by a troop of dogs. There were as many as eight or ten. Distant as I was, I knew them. They belonged on the adjoining plantation.

The dogs used on Bayou Boeuf for hunting slaves are a kind of blood-hound, but a far more savage breed than is found in the Northern States. They will attack a negro, at their master’s bidding, and cling to him as the common bull-dog will cling to a four footed animal. Frequently their loud bay is heard in the swamps, and then there is speculation as to what point the runaway will be overhauled . . .

In black American folklore, freedom in Canada is linked to escape from these dogs. As Harriet Tubman supposedly sang:

Farewell, ole Master, don’t think hard of me,  
I’m traveling to Canada, where all de slaves are free.  
De hounds are baying on my track,  
Ole Master comes behind,  
Resolved that he will bring me back.

Indeed, Afro-Canadian activists often highlighted the irony of bloodhounds chasing fugitive slaves through the streets of Washington, DC — the capital of the first constitutional democracy.

An 1854 story recounted a scene near the White House: a large bloodhound frantically tracked a scent, before diving behind some boards in a lumberyard.

A witness reported hearing “the most hideous and heart-rending screams of a child . . . here, almost under the stars and stripes of a nation’s flag, which so boasts of her freedom, was . . . a scene . . . appalling and terrific in the extreme.” The slave owner scolded the once-fugitive child, “God damn you, I’ll learn you to run away!”

The witness exclaimed that his heart palpitated wildly with indignation, and the event compelled him “to read through Mrs. Stowe’s world-renowned *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.”

Stowe’s influential anti-slavery novel (published in 1852) included violent scenes of dogs being used to discipline and punish black Americans, and helped to bolster the sectionalism that led to the Civil War.

During the Civil War, African Americans took advantage of the South’s crumbling infrastructure and the Union army’s presence to abscond. This encouraged dog-wielding slave hunters to expand throughout the rural South.

But the dogs also trailed and attacked white Union soldiers escaping from Confederate prisons. These experiences gave northerners a new paradigm for understanding the horrors of southern slavery.

In response to a Confederate soldier who declared it disgraceful for the North to allow a black man to kill a white man on the battlefield, Jon McElroy, a Union soldier, retorted, “Is that as bad as running white men down with bloodhounds?”

## **Black Expendability**

**T**he Civil War ended with a Union victory, but southern police continued to use the canine to terrorize black populations.

In 1894, the Tennessee-based newspaper *Rideau Record* lauded bloodhounds as “indispensable to the complete equipment of a good police department.” The nonchalant discussion largely revolved around the ubiquitous practice of using canines to terrorize black Americans.

The report was not shy about connecting contemporary convict tracking to slave hunting: the dogs “scented the trembling darky in the thicket” when they attempted to flee their plantations. The “deep-toned, dismal howl” of their canine pursuer was “to the fleeing slave more ominous of evil and [even] more dreaded than the sharp cry of the ‘paterole’ in pursuit.”

The editorial also showcased a technique for dog training that held hauntingly familiar racial overtones. The author celebrated the skills of Jude, a bloodhound owned and trained by a rural police department near Chattanooga.

The department showed off Jude’s tracking talents, inviting locals to observe a training ritual that required “a negro to run through the woods . . . [and] after the negro had been given twenty minutes’ start, the dog was put on the trail.”

The description is captivating, as both fugitive and pursuer engage in a contest that is as much mental as it is physical. Despite the black man’s herculean efforts to eliminate his scent, Jude locates him in the branches of a tree over a mile from the starting point.

Trainers invited the faux escapee, who was under the impression that the animal would not attack him, to come down and admit defeat. But “he hadn’t got his foot on the ground before Jude made a dash for him, and the way he skinned back up that tree was a caution.”

The publication’s tone is generally lighthearted and unapologetic, and in an interesting point of comparison, the bloodhound receives a name, while the “negro” remains anonymous, reiterating the southern philosophy of black expendability that became a hallmark of the Jim Crow period.

The story was not unique to Tennessee. Other newspapers reported similar techniques: a “negro boy” given a twenty-minute head start in order to condition a young bloodhound to trail his scent, anticipating that black Americans would be the objects of the dog’s future pursuits.

Deployed dogs also reinforced a broader ideology from the slave era. They substantiated a historical understanding that even dogs themselves “knew” race. This supported the idea that

blackness was biologically immutable and allowed the harsh enforcement of segregation in the South through the 1960s.

Some early twentieth-century police manuals even promoted the popular theory that African Americans had a unique smell and produced a stronger scent than Euro-Americans.

Trainers agreed that “hounds work better when entered to one particular scent,” and advocated racialized dog training in which only black subjects were used to train bloodhound puppies to trail human subjects.

While no injuries were reported during these training exercises, the symbolism behind the pursuit of a black body was not lost on the observers who recognized the use of hounds from the slave-hunting practices prior to the Civil War.

The author of a 1903 article in the *Age* called “Slavery in Alabama” bemoaned the sharecropping system that replaced slavery in the South and preyed upon poor African-American sharecroppers by placing them in perpetual debt.

The article denounced how the workers were treated with “great severity” and received whippings for disobedience. Further, sharecroppers who attempted to abscond “were hunted down in the old slavery day’s fashion with bloodhounds.”

Indeed, the South’s obsession with bloodhounds proved robust. After a 1905 report that Mississippi was allocating state funds to train police dogs to hunt fugitives, a concerned citizen named Edward Day warned society would revert to “barbarism” if such policies went unchecked.

Day was especially concerned about the use of African Americans for bait in training sequences, citing the precedents set during slavery.

He emphasized the historical link between canines and black men in the United States: “No wonder that often in such communities at the baying of a pack of bloodhounds Negroes at their work were seen to tremble in every limb, such horror had they of being called upon to run before the dogs.”

## **Ferguson’s Dogs**

**T**he infusion of black Americans' lived experience with the presence of police dogs persisted during the Civil Rights era. By the early 1960s, images of black protesters viciously attacked by police dogs confronted Americans nationwide.

Activists seized on these emotional triggers and repeatedly highlighted the practice in public venues. John Lewis, a Civil Rights activist and repeat victim of police brutality, spoke at the 1963 March on Washington and condemned the use of "police dogs" against "young children and old women" engaged in "peaceful demonstration."

Nina Simone sang of the "bloodhounds" who pursued black people in "Mississippi Goddamn!". Margaret Walker's poem "Jackson, Mississippi" discussed how she was kept "fenced in by new white police billies, / Fist cuffs and red-necked brothers of Hate Legions, / Straining their leashed and fiercely hungry dogs. . ."

Fifty years later, studies continue to draw attention to similar instances of racialized canine violence in urban areas. A 2013 Los Angeles Police Department report revealed that a troublingly high number of African American and Latino LA residents had been bit by police dogs.

A curiously worded disclaimer read, "We want to make very clear at the outset that we are not arguing that deputies call for or deploy canines with specific, conscious intent to single out persons because of their race or ethnicity, although some of them, reflective of deplorable elements of American society, might."

The statement simultaneously forecloses on and raises the possibility of individual dog handlers' racist intentions when siccing dogs on people of color.

More recently, the Department of Justice (DOJ) reported that officers in the Ferguson Police Department (FPD) in Missouri only deployed police dogs against black victims, many of whom gave no provocation for the attack.

The victims included an unarmed fourteen-year-old African American boy who received a puncture wound from the dog bite, a sixteen-year-old male who was dragged by his legs out of a closet by a dog, and an African American man who was bitten, yet still accused of being armed even after a search turned up nothing.

The DOJ report concluded that Ferguson police “appear to use canines not to counter a physical threat but to inflict punishment.”

Modern law enforcement’s use of dogs for their effect, rather than their utility, fits neatly into dogs’ historical role of instilling fear and submission in African Americans. The police’s continuation of this tradition reveals their real mission in communities of color.