

Virginia governor commutes sentence for officer who killed unarmed man suspected of shoplifting

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On March 2, Republican Governor of Virginia Glenn Youngkin commuted the sentence of a former Fairfax County police sergeant Wesley Shifflett, who fatally shot an unarmed man suspected of shoplifting sunglasses in 2023.

The victim, 37-year old Timothy Johnson, was suspected of shoplifting, a nonviolent misdemeanor, from a Nordstrom store at Tysons Corner Mall in Northern Virginia. Shifflett was given a wrist-slap sentence of three years for the crime of recklessly handling a firearm only two days before the sentence was tossed out.

After commuting the officer's sentence, Youngkin said in a statement: "I am convinced that the court's sentence of incarceration is unjust and violates the cornerstone of our justice system—that similarly situated individuals receive proportionate sentences."

"For law enforcement, this tells them they've got a governor who has their back," said Caleb Kershner, Shifflett's attorney. During Shifflett's trial, Kershner advanced the claim that police should be given the right to shoot first and ask questions after: "A police officer is authorized—and trained—to use lethal force when he reasonably believes that he is in jeopardy of serious bodily harm or death. And that is exactly what happened in this incident."

The prosecutor in Shifflett's trial, Steve Descano, denounced Youngkin's decision, stating, "This is an insult to all Virginians who value an untainted justice system." The shooting was more accurately called an "execution" by Johnson's family attorney, Carl Crews, who said, "He could have been apprehended without a shot being fired. There were several police officers present. This could have been done."

Shifflett and two other officers pursued Johnson through a parking garage and later the woods. Both Shifflett and another officer shot at Johnson, with one bullet hitting him in the torso and eventually killing him. Audio of the incident shows the horrific moments before Johnson's execution, who screams as Shifflett aims his gun that he was "not reaching for nothing. I don't have nothing."

Youngkin narrowly won Virginia's gubernatorial race in 2021. He ran on a thoroughly reactionary platform, opposing limited public health measures to combat COVID-19 and the teaching of critical race theory in schools. He also campaigned on a ban on abortions after 15 weeks of pregnancy.

During his State of the Commonwealth speech in January to the General Assembly, Youngkin called for tax cuts and dismantling the state's environmental laws. He endorsed Donald Trump during the 2024 presidential election.

Youngkin has supported President Trump's ongoing assault on federal workers' jobs. He and other Republican governors signed a letter stating that "the federal government needs to be cut down to size. We stand ready to help." Virginia had the second most federal workers in the country before the mass firings.

Youngkin's clemency for Shifflett is part of a larger nationwide pattern. In January, Trump pardoned two D.C. officers who were convicted and suspended for their roles in the death in a car chase of 20-year old Karon Hylton-Brown. The two officers, Terence Sutton and Andrew Zabavsky, were sentenced in 2023 to four and five-and-a-half years in prison, respectively. On March 3, they were both reinstated to full police duties, according to the department.

Trump has also pardoned or commuted the sentences of all individuals who stormed the Capitol building on January 6, 2021 in support of his attempt to overturn Joe Biden's election as president in 2020. He has absurdly framed the rioters as "hostages" who are in reality his fascist shock troops.

On Monday, the *Washington Post* reported several pardoned rioters have successfully sought to extend the sway of their pardons to include the dismissal of charges unrelated to their participation in the January 6 coup attempt. This occurred even as federal authorities found vast amounts of drugs and weapons in their possession in some cases.

The police fatally shot 1,164 people in 2023, the most recent year for which reliable numbers are available. This is an increase from 1,097 the year before. The number of killings by police has continued to climb during both Democratic and Republican administrations.

During his time in office, President Biden increased funding for police departments across the country, after cynically exploiting the popular outrage surrounding the murder of George Floyd in May 2020. He later stated in 2022, "The answer is not to defund."

The Republican Party's unabashed support for police departments across the country is in line with Trump's efforts to establish a presidential dictatorship.



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