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Johnson: Pit-bull ban may reveal unwarranted prejudice

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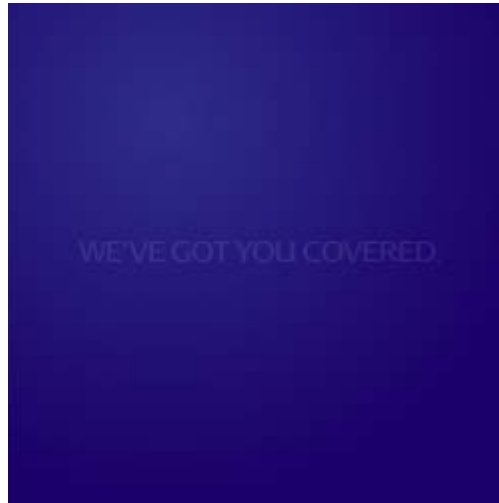


Bill
Johnson

It has to be one of the dumbest laws, ever. And I don't even own or like pit bulls. It's nothing personal, only that I'd never keep any animal that eats as much or more than I do.

Still, I can weep for the pit bulls of Denver, particularly for the puppies that never did anything other than get born into the breed.

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Yet here we have the city of Denver, newly sprung from legislative and judicial restraint, rounding up pits over the past couple of days and killing them like rats during The Plague.

A uniformed officer arrives at a home. "I'll get him," she announces to her partner. Rather than fight it all, a distraught man emerges, weighs going to jail and a fine, and in the end hands over his dog.

"I'm definitely sad," he later tells a reporter. "He's like a member of my family."

Later in the day, a woman pleads: "I don't have no dogs!

"**There ain't no dogs** in the basement!" she yells as the uniformed man and woman, responding to an informant's report of a pit bull, interrogate her. Outside, squad cars filled with police officers wait to see if they are needed.

"I'm just doing my job," the woman officer later laments.

It has been eight years since I last had a dog, God rest him. And the one thing I truly know is I would have never given him over to the dogcatcher to be killed simply because he was a beagle.

I would hardly care if a judge in the city where I lived said it was the rule and the law. Yet this has been happening since Monday in Denver, when a state law prohibiting bans of "breed-specific" dogs was overturned and the city's moratorium on pit bull confiscation and killing was lifted.

And no one much is saying a thing.

It is why we need to speak with William Suro. He is a veterinarian of 45 years, who in 1988 started the MaxFund, a nonprofit that provides medical care for injured animals with no known owners, which seeks new homes for them.

It is a shelter that has never killed a single dog.

Bill Suro, 69, for years has wrangled with Denver in the courts of legal and public opinion over the ban, passed in the wake of the pit bull killing of a young child.

"Unfair. Stupid," Bill Suro says of this week's roundup. "It remains an emotional response to a terrible thing that happened, but one that doesn't really help those hurt or killed by vicious dogs."

Bill Suro is a blunt-spoken and uncompromising defender of animals, and a man who believes in harsh punishment for those who abuse and kill them.

He has in recent hours counseled numerous terrier owners, given the shock of their lives simply because their pets *resemble* pits and were threatened with euthanasia. Denver animal control authorities acknowledge receiving and being sent on numerous "could be a pit bull" calls.

"It makes me and every animal lover and organization across this country just sick," he said. "It's crazy."

He and his wife, Nanci, over the past few months have emptied MaxFund of every pit bull they once housed, shipping them to like-minded shelters outside of Denver.

He puts the number at close to 20 pit bulls. Some owners, too, have come to MaxFund, only to be turned away. He and Nanci, he said, have done all they could.

"We would absolutely love to be the Underground Railroad for pit bulls, but we know the city would close us down."

Yes, I tell him, but aren't pit bulls actually the human flesh-ripping monsters they are portrayed to be?

Bill Suro snickers at my naivete.

"I've been a veterinarian for 45 years, and I've never once been attacked or bitten by a pit bull. There are other breeds where I have gone into an examination room and really been on my guard. I will not tell you which, but they scare me."

Cities like Denver, he says, whip up pit bull hysteria. And that is all it is, he said. People now all believe every pit bull "is a coiled and snarling attacker. It's nonsense."

Cities, he said, would be much better served if they took a simple look at canine attacks from recent years.

"Eighty percent all fatal attacks in the U.S. are caused by male dogs. I guess, given this, it would be prudent to now ban all breeds of male dogs."

Denver, he said, does not at the same time send dogcatchers to cite owners of non-neutered dogs,

"It should know there have been fatal attacks in the U.S. by Pomeranians, that half a dozen attacks that caused death or serious injuries were by cocker spaniels."

And then he raises an issue I had not contemplated, and which I do not lend much credence to. But I will give him his say because it matches what has happened the last two days in the city:

"There appears a racial end of this," Bill Suro says.

"Look at the dogs that have been impounded, and the surnames of their owners. . . . They aren't killing dogs from Cherry Creek. They pick on the easiest people to pick on, the ones who give up easiest," he said, adding that he has forwarded this claim to the American Civil Liberties Union.

What happens, I ask, when all of the Denver pit bulls have been rounded up and put down?

He would not want to be a Malamute, he said.

A male Malamute attacked and killed a 7-year-old girl in Fruita last Saturday night.

"It is not the breed," an unsmiling Bill Suro said.

Bill Johnson's column appears Wednesday, Friday and Saturday.

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