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BELGIUM WELCOMES THE LEADER OF THE FREE WORLD



**A PHOTO ESSAY BY HAN SOETE
COMMENTARY BY JOE BAGEANT**

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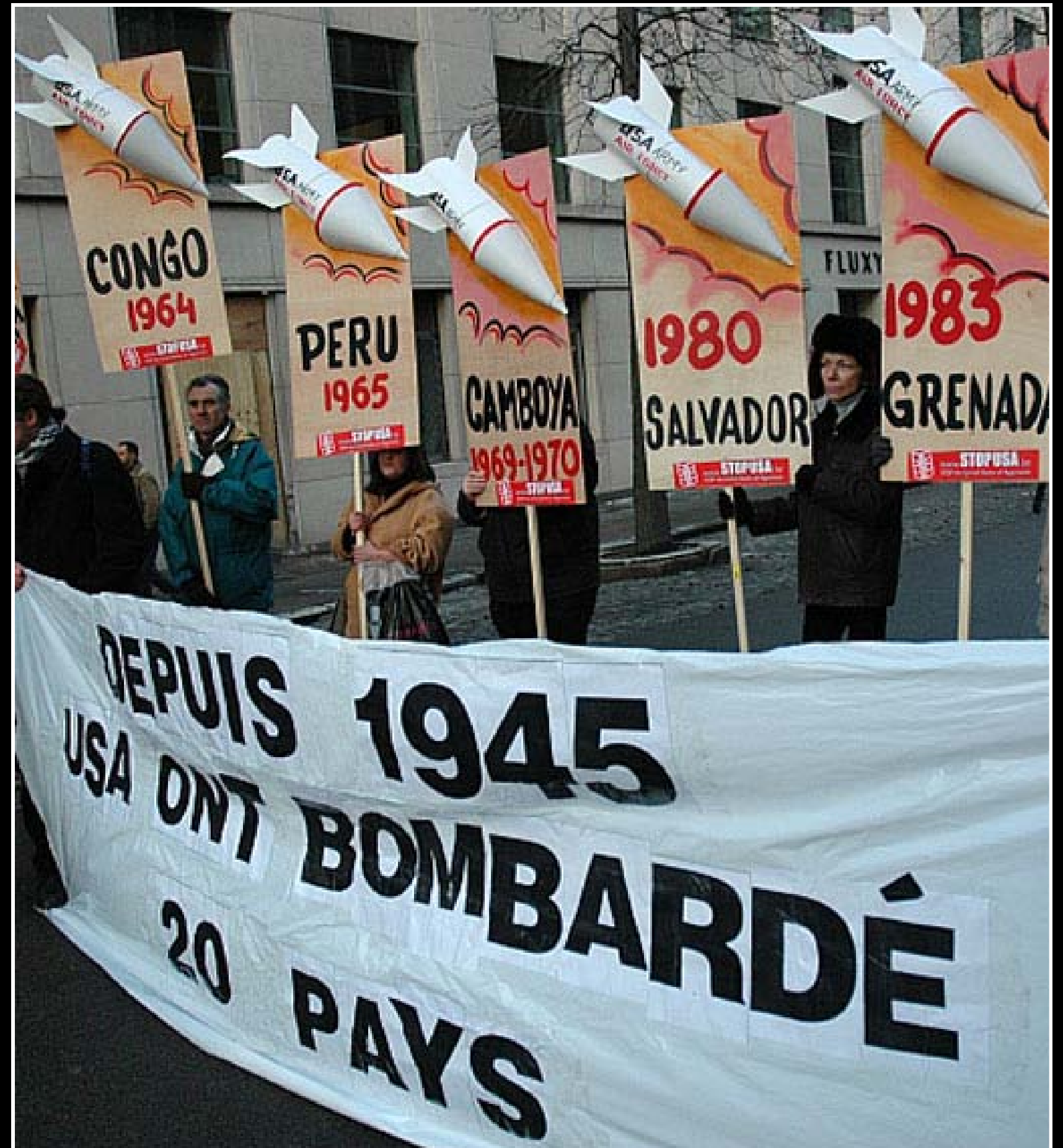
WHAT DEMONSTRATORS?

The American essayist **JOE BAGEANT** didn't go to Belgium to protest the visit of George W. Bush. But he was there in spirit . . .



UPON

first looking at Hans Soete's photos taken during President Bush's visit to Brussels, something struck me as odd. And after a few moments I realized what it was. These protesters are not enclosed inside a double-layer of razor-wire topped steel chain-link fence, otherwise known in the U.S.A. as a "Free Speech Zone." Nor were there any of the familiar rows of police with their bug-eyed Darth Vader gas masks and 180,000 volt stun guns. Not that the contrast will be noted by my fellow Americans because if you live in an average





American town you would never know Bush's Brussels visit met with any protest at all. For example, my hometown newspaper in Winchester, Virginia ran a front page story featuring Bush looking statesman-like under a massive gold chandelier at the Concert Noble Ballroom in Brussels. The accompanying text focused on an alleged thaw in European relationships with president Bush. The other



big front page photo was of happy returning GIs meeting their families again in the good old U.S. of A.

Inside the paper on the op-ed page was a huge photo of the flag-raising at Iwo Jima's Mount Suribachi (sixtieth anniversary) and a reminder from the editors of the sacrifice Americans have made for freedom around the world, and still make today in places such as

Iraq. The editors reminded us of the glory of the flag raising at Iwo Jima, and that the monument to it on the National Mall is the largest bronze statue on the planet, a testimonial to the American love of gigantism.

On the other hand, during my 60-minute drive to work the same morning I learned from the radio news that the Europeans are anxious to mend fences with the US because there is



so much trade at stake for them.

Even our artificial liberal radio, NPR (National Public Radio) made no mention of protesters, although an NPR pundit conceded that 70% of Germans dislike Bush. Turning to mainstream radio, I learned that:

1. The Euro is essentially a faulty currency that cannot be counted upon
2. That the Euro is being backed by Commu-





nist China as a potential economic weapon against the U.S.

3. The entire U.S. is in eminent danger of a biological attack

4. That Europeans are not so angry about Iraq now that we have accomplished successful democratic elections in that country

5. That actress Cameron Diaz "has plans" for actor Justin Timberlake, but to find out we



will have to tune in tonight

6. That amazing new archeological evidence shows that the Romans were in England a thousand years ago! (Holy fuck! Who'da thought?)

And the following was read aloud on talk radio from the editorial page of Washington D.C.'s other national newspaper, the Rev. Sun Myung Moon's Washington Times:

"Americans make lousy imperialists. We don't do Nuremberg rallies. Americans make pretty good soldiers, as a lot of men in Valhalla could tell you, but when the shooting stops the American GI only wants to come home, marry the girl next door, pop the top on a cool one and watch the Patriots clock the Eagles. It's what makes him distinctively American. So

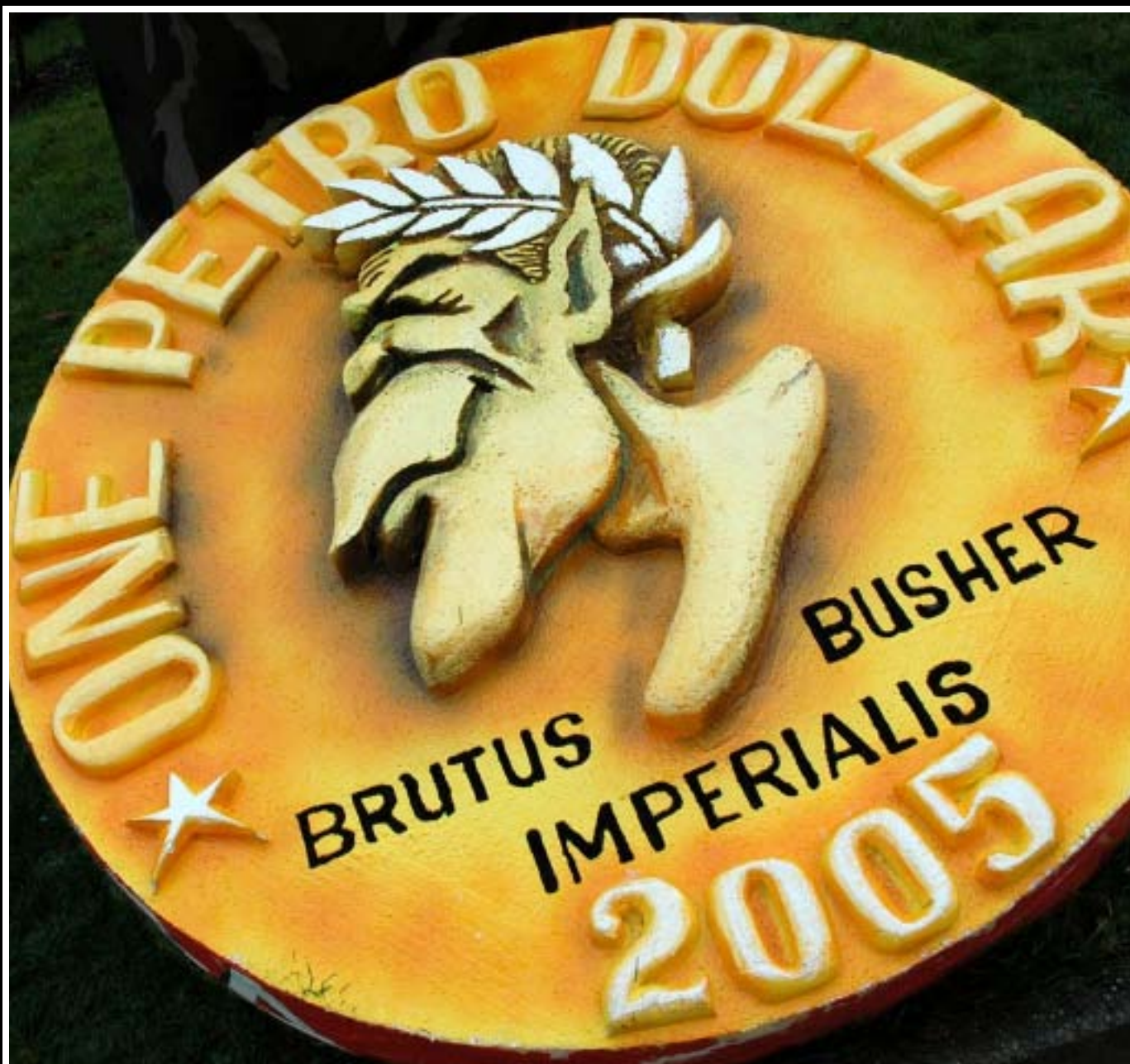


here's another round of heartfelt applause for the lousy imperialist: This Bud's for you."

Now why in the hell would anybody protest a nation as nice as all that?

Joe Bageant is a magazine editor and essayist living in Winchester, Virginia. He may be contacted at bageantjb@netscape.net.





ABOUT HAN SOETE

Han Soete is a Brussels-based journalist and media-activist who works with www.indymedia.be. He visited Seattle and New York shortly after Seattle's WTO protests to study alternative media, after which he helped launch indymedia in Belgium. He made movies about the protest against the IMF meeting in Prague (September 2000), and the first World Social Forum in Porto Alegre (January 2001).

In 2001 he began working on Media-activism, a manual for media-activists (www.media-activism.be), which was published last year by EPO. He began photo-journalism for indymedia with his report of the protests at Genoa in 2001 (<http://flickr.com/photos/hansoete/sets/74311>)

Soete, 36, works as a freelance journalist and gives workshops on media-activism. He lives in Brussels with his girlfriend Mara and year-old son, Jef. He may be contacted at han@indymedia.be

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