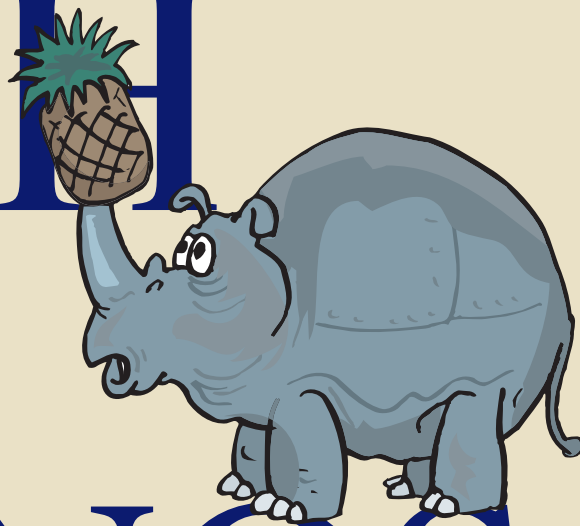


JOE BAGEANT

DINING
WITH
THE
RHINOS



“If American politics are a pendulum, then that swing has been a mighty damned short one of late, somewhere between corporate feudalism abroad, and a domestic form in which rhinos happily play video games and watch football while their kids charge around on the ever expanding rhino empire’s wars for oil and turf and more slave labor”

ColdType

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DINING WITH THE RHINOS

Thanks to an online friend, I recently rediscovered Eugene Ionesco's play *Rhinoceros* – the one about being fully human in a totalitarian state. Berenger, the play's protagonist, is a humanist stranded in a society slowly becoming monsters. Rhinoceroses to be exact, a symbol for a herding mindless ugliness in an unthinking stampede. Ultimately Berenger is the last pink flesh and blood man left in a stampeding rhinoceros herd, and comes to grasp that the stampede itself is what it is all about. It is the stampede, the mindless charging off together that causes the metamorphosis of people into rhinos.

Americans at the time, 1959, saw *Rhinoceros* as a play about their favorite theme, individualism. Ionesco tried to tell critics that it was a play “not merely against conformism but mainly about totalitarianism,” and that the very notion of a government or state proclaiming individualism as one of its national virtues is in itself absurd. To which U.S. critics replied that totalitarianism cannot happen here because America is a nation of individualists, thus proving Ionesco's point. Whatever the case, I had drinks and bar food with the rhinos last night at a bar called King Harry's (not the real name) and I can assure you they are having the time of their lives, snorting and bel-
lowing and charging everything in sight.

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King Harry's is not the working class tavern I usually patronize, but one of those faux English pubs frequented by local business types, which here in Virginia is to say blood spitting neo-conservative Republicans. Rhinos of the first order who want to kill and eat liberals and reduce such threatening enemies as France to a glowing cinder. Though I generally avoid King Harry's – a man can stomach only so much jingoism at a sitting – I am nevertheless popular there as an object of derision, being an ultra-liberal and Republican rhino lives being so in need of entertainment. Thus, when they get a genuine socialist at the table, it is like having an unarmed space alien drop in for a beer.

Unfortunately, it never stops at one drink and always ends up in a near fist fight, although throwing drinks in each others faces is about as close as it ever comes between a bunch of overweight aging old sots like us. I kid you not. I've had my own martini thrown in my face on occasion, and the bartender is so conditioned she sometimes brings me a bar towel when the pitch of the conversation reaches a certain level.

Given the sort of university graduates states such as Virginia grind out, they tend to equate socialism with Joseph Stalin and the Democratic Party with "urban liberals." Urban liberal is of course one to those conservative code words for "taking everything away from working white people and giving it to non-working welfare niggers and porto-rikkins up nawth in the big cities." Which is why it really frosts my ass to hear Democratic leadership saying that in the next presidential election they will need a candidate from the South, a Clinton or an Edwards, in order to win. A Southern Democrat is simply a free trade capitalist Republican who has renounced lynching and comes carrying an armload of southern charm. (Any readers who think Clinton was a real liberal can bail out here.) We Southerners learn early how to cover our darkness with Southern smarm. Erudition with a Southern accent works on nearly everybody ... sort of a Shelby Foote, William Faulkner, southern gentleman mythology game we run on Yankees and each other. The whole world actually.

But underneath it is sheer conservative meanness in most cases, something Southerners by no measure have a franchise on, but do better than most people. Southern meanness has experienced a renaissance in the last few decades because of the unholy alliance of GOP corporatist America with fundamentalist Christianity, and the sheer bald-faced aggression of neo-conservatism these days.

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Urban liberals just do not understand how absolutely mean Republican heartlanders, under the tutelage of Southerners, have become over the years. Northern and coastal liberal failure to grasp this is understandable. For reasons of diversity, this sort of aggregate meanness is not as common in big urban centers. It requires a certain critical mass of repressed homophobic, Christian white people who feel threatened by everything, plus gobs of money and guns to make it manifest. We've got it all here honey, and there is no rhino meaner than the Southern rhino.

OK. Just how mean are we talking about? Blind stupid mean. Meaner than a goddam sack of snakes. Here is a sample of standard rhino conversation, which I have clipped from the local online forum so as to be completely accurate in quoting them. But these quotes are from the very same people who say the very same things night after night at King Harry's and actually believe what they say. I remind you that these are some of the better sort of rhinos in this town, rhinos who own businesses, professional rhinos, etc. You do not want to meet the real wooly boogers.

– Who cares what the rest of the world thinks of us? They do not live here and they do not count!

– The United States will be forced to engage in tactical low yield nuclear attacks, in particular against Iran & North Korea.

– I support the complete destruction of Arab/Muslim culture and nationality. The complete destruction of their capitol cities and money centers. Then we will see how long they taunt us.

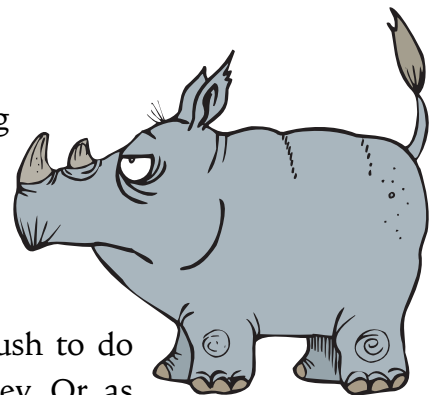
– Put an end to all this stupid political correctness crap and simply beat some sense into those who don't comply. The hell with what the euro tribal councils whine.

And my personal favorite rhinism of all:

– If Americans stand together and quit questioning themselves so much we can rule the world. But all this liberal whining is ruining American business here and abroad.

Huh?

Mostly the rhinos are practical, artless animals in a rush to do necessary and useful things, all of which involve money. Or as



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Ionesco put it: "... a prisoner of necessity, who cannot understand that a thing might perhaps be without usefulness; nor does he understand that, at bottom, it is the useful that may be a useless and back-breaking burden. If one does not understand the usefulness of the useless and the uselessness of the useful, one cannot understand art. And a country where art is not understood is a country of slaves and robots...."

"... the very stampede itself is the most telling and tragic of all arguments. For when Berenger considers going out into the street 'to try to convince them,' he realizes that he 'would have to learn their language.' He looks in the mirror and sees that he no longer resembles anyone. He searches madly for a photograph of people as they were before the big change. But now humanity itself has become incredible, as well as hideous. To be the last man in the rhinoceros herd is, in fact, to be a monster. Such is the problem which Ionesco sets us in his tragic irony: solitude and dissent become more and more impossible, more and more absurd."

— Thomas Merton's essay, *The Rain and the Rhinoceros*

Dissent? We wish! Judging from the run-of-the-mill American liberals I see here in the Washington D.C. area, liberals think voting Democratic, giving fifty bucks to the ACLU and dropping down at the National Mall once a year to observe *someone else's* protest is enough to maintain their credentials.

Nevertheless, some very ordinary middle class liberals are finally feeling like Berenger. Starting to feel that creepy sense of alienation (the kind that we American lefties have become used to) catching a whiff of what smells like approaching totalitarianism. This has been very hard for white collar liberals who pride themselves on balanced judgment and restraint from political excess. But ever since the suspect skin-of-the-teeth reelection of George Bush, I have been able to coax honest confessions of fear out of at least a few mainstream Democrats around the company water cooler. These are the Toyota and Volvo driving liberals whose most adventurous move in any given week may be parking one space over from their usual spot in the company parking lot. (That this daring move always draws comment should give you some idea of the quiet desperation of publishing work in this country.) A few of these meek liberals are start-

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ing to smell the fear, catch the scent of the herd.

But they need more evidence. Liberals always need more facts. After all, nothing appears much different since the November elections. We get up in the morning and everything is the same as when we went to bed. We still have our jobs and the mortgage still comes due on the first of the month. Television is as bad as ever. Yet, something has changed. One keeps one's opinions more to one's self these days. There is something in the air they cannot quite put their finger upon, and if one cannot name the beast, well then, it's best not to comment on it lest people think you are starting to fray at the edges, becoming aberrant. And besides, in looking around, nobody else seems overly upset except a few aberrant types on the Internet.

When I stop to consider those rare occasions when I have been prescient in any meaningful way about American society – and there have been damned few – I have felt like an aberrant. Hell, I am aberrant. Most of us on these sorts of websites are. But what is aberrant in a society that watches 6,000 murders a year on TV for entertainment? That spends more money on hard-on drugs and personal ammo than it does on child nutrition? I've come to accept feeling aberrant most of the time. But as a former dope fiend, thrice divorced, ex-Jesus freak, part-time drunkard socialist malcontent, I can safely say that what is happening around us is aberrant even by MY standards. I mean hell, failure of liberals to notice the growth of an entire red state savanna land out here coursing with rhinoceroses is weird.

Calling weird *weird* is very hard for educated liberals. Most have nice lives, either in the middle class or perhaps living comfortably amid less affluent but intelligent and artistic circles. Others are middle class educators and such, raising families among decent open minded friends in a community of like souls. Of course some do smell the fear. But they think that if they remain invisible and deny any such thoughts they will escape the trampling of the herd.

Then, too, acknowledging that we have devolved into a one-party rhinoid system, the party of business, but with two wings, Dem and GOP, would put the average American liberal in the position of having to take action. Or not. And let's face the truth about modern middle class American liberals – they are a rather gutless lot who would not take to the streets no matter how bad things get. That is all but impossible when your house is on a good street and your kids' college

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fund is in place, even if it took a second mortgage to pay for it. Denial is easier, as was proved when the so-called American left failed to rise up when the 2000 elections were rigged, something which doesn't even fly in the Ukraine these days, as was proved by its massive protest of similar elections there. Yet I must admit, to stand up in the face of a rhino herd takes a lot of ass. Maybe denial buys enough time to get the kids through school and mortgage paid off before the rhinos tear up the lawn. Denial can sometimes work, but only if you are buying time for yourself.

Being raised in the American South, I am practically an expert on denial. We live in denial of such things as the Civil War being about slavery, that tobacco causes cancer and that global warming is real. Otherwise we would have to cop to the Enlightenment's proposition that man can advance through discovery and critical thought, and we are not about to do that. We prefer the hierarchy of feudalism, including the new global corporate feudalism. In fact, we maintained our denial of the American social contract long enough that we managed to win the "battle for America's soul" in the last election. We helped make rhinoceritis dominant so America can now charge back into some murky past dubbed "traditional values," rolling up the Enlightenment in the process.

At the same time there are faint signs that some liberal Americans are more alarmed than most of my middle aged editor friends around the water cooler. There were those internet and television news stories about a rise in the number of Americans visiting Canadian emigration/citizenship websites. And though there has been no mass exodus, there is the sneaking suspicion that what people think about doing, they eventually do – or at least some of them anyway. Also, it takes time to collect one's life to emigrate. In fact, escaping a corporation that passes itself off as a nation, one based upon citizen consumer debt, is not nearly as easy as it looks. So we'll have to wait and see how many citizens are how serious.

Hard cases such as myself and the readers of websites like this one have railed and ranted about the rise of the rhinos for some time now. But to be honest, I sometimes doubt myself, just like those middle-of-the-road liberals. Like theirs, my senses do not perceive much physical change. I get up and brush my teeth and

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every day is the same as the day before. I look over at my sleeping wife, who is untroubled by any of the impending political specters that so often haunt me. And I wonder, am I nuts? Have I finally fallen off the precipice over which I have so long stared? After all, the dog still chews the corner of the carpet if I don't keep an eye on him. Are not these the things of ordinary earthly life? Maybe I should be paying more attention to the mundane stuff which any reflective person knows constitutes most of living.

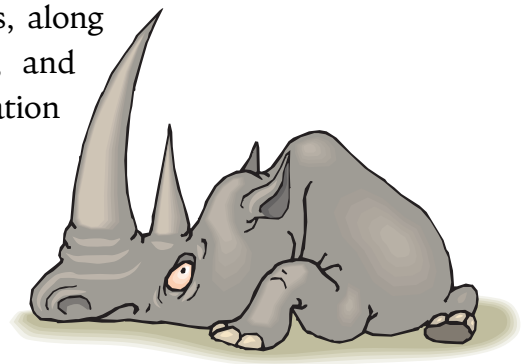
Then that national creepiness, the distant rumble of the herd, rattles me again.

So next spring I am shopping hard for a house in Andalucia, or St. Kitts, or Normandy, places where there are still secular humanists political parties of the type the rhinos see as the heart of evil. Hopefully, places with no Wal-Mart – yet. Places where life involves buying vegetables without plastic wrappers and cooking them yourself, and drinking wine late on a weeknight with good friends because you do not get up at 5 a.m. to commute in the herd of other useful citizens, and if I am lucky, never owning a car or a television again. In other words, living life with the bark still on it and watching American politics from a safe distance. Unpatriotic, I admit. But patriotism is merely nationalism under another guise and this belly-of-the-beast political stuff belongs to younger men than me.

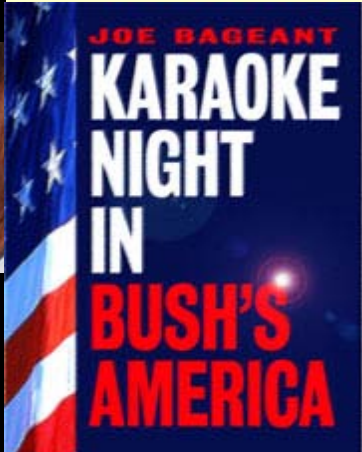
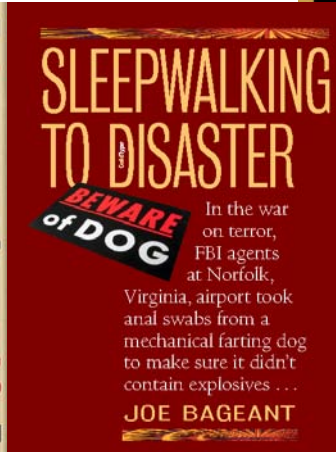
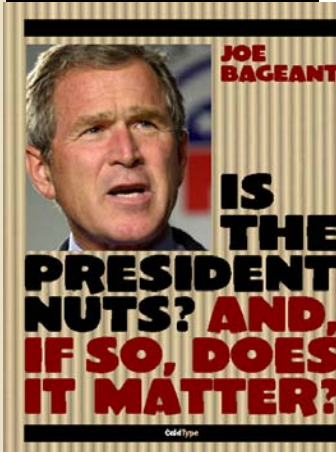
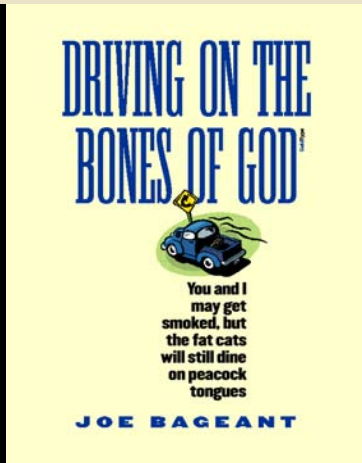
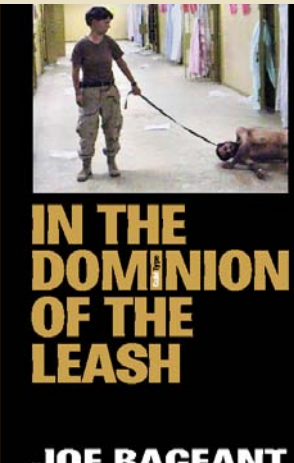
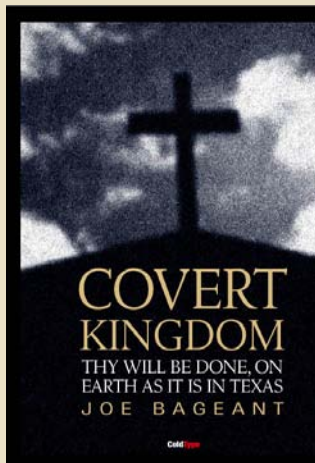
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Call me hyperbolic if you want, paranoid even. But millions of people with swollen bellies around the planet are nodding yes, along with all those unemployed youths in Fallujah, and Mindanao, and Bolivia, loading AK clips, in anticipation of bagging an American rhino.

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