



SLEEPWALKING TO BABYLON

ColdType



In the war
on terror,
FBI agents
at Norfolk,

Virginia, airport took
anal swabs from a
mechanical farting dog
to make sure it didn't
contain explosives . . .

JOE BAGEANT



SLEEPWALKING TO BABYLON

JOE BAGEANT

© Joe Bageant 2004

ColdType

WRITING WORTH READING FROM AROUND THE WORLD
www.coldtype.net

SLEEPWALKING TO BABYLON



Each workday I commute toward Washington D.C. along Route 7, where patriotic war slogans are spray painted on the overpasses, and homemade signs jut from the median in support of our “boys in Iraq.” Mud-splattered construction trucks rip by with frayed flags popping in the wind, loaded with burly bearded men and looking very much like the footage of Afghanistan or Angola, minus the 50 caliber gun mounts. Yesterday I saw my first stretch Hummer, painted in desert tan and carrying half a dozen soccer mom types, which rather sums up the point I am trying to make here. There is a distinct martial ethos, the tang of steel and the smell of gun oil in the air around Washington these days, I swear it.

Only a blind microcephalic could fail to notice this systemic militarization of the American culture, and the media’s hyper-escalation of warrior worship. Reputedly, our national character is supposed to be improved by all this. But I was in the military for a time – a “young warrior” in Fox Network parlance – and I can confidently say I was not improved one bit by the experience. (Although I did learn to cuss properly, if a bit too much.) That was 35 years ago, back when there was little, if any, mythologizing of Vietnam’s warriors, much less patriotic news spasms ejaculated by embedded reporters between the commercials. News was duller then. Certainly not as entertaining as the Jessica Lynch story of a fetching, innocent young blonde wounded while supposedly blazing away at the face of evil itself, only to suffer multiple wounds, then be rescued from some fly-ridden Iraqi hospital (more radio crackling and gunfire, please) by her comrades-in-arms. After this stirring rescue we were served the titillating dessert of the subsequent doctor’s report: She was sodomized by the sweaty stinking bastards! In the television news business it just does not get any better than that. Pass the corn chips please.

With television news like that, who needs a rational explanation as to why we are at war? The entertainment value alone is worth it. And therein lies the problem for those of us in that last generation of people who gained most of what they know from reading: We need a tangible explanation why we are spilling so much blood and bullion in that god for-

JOE BAGEANT / SLEEPWALKING TO BABYLON

saken desert pisshole. Still no answer. Or no new one at least. Oh, there is the standard line that goes, “We are defending democracy and liberating a people from oppression.” That old saw was getting mighty dull even back in my day, when it was used to explain Vietnam .

I cannot remember a time when the American public ever asked any important questions of its national leadership. In the American scheme of things, that is the media’s job, media frames the question and the public asks it, after having been appropriately bludgeoned over the head with it. That’s our system; we love it, and it has even been known to work on occasion. Which would be fine, except that Edward R. Murrow has been dead a long time. Since then, the American psyche has been hardwired into a new world communications order, one in which global corporations now pay the freight for national television. Halliburton, Boeing and Sprint ain’t Geritol and this ain’t Ted Mack’s Original Amateur Hour. Content with selling us chewing gum or Chesterfields, early television sponsors were not players in the Pentagon defense contract game and never slept with the government to obtain more bandwidth.

It is tragic that such a promising instrument as television had to grow up at the end of the Age of Enlightenment – just in time to ignite an unholy fission/fusion, a synthesis of mammon and



“The question of why a hundred million dollar agency devotes its resources to swabbing the anuses of farting toy dogs never gets asked, just smiled at”

politics amid a culture out of philosophical and spiritual gas. Just when America needed to explain itself to itself, if it were ever to redefine its higher goals and ideas. But television is about emotion, not explanation. It has no patience for ideas (Not that we’ve seen a real idea in 30 years). Ideas? Who gives a fuck? Let’s go shopping. The result has been a nation of sleepwalkers, an all-but-expired republic reduced to pure consumption and little else (a fact not unnoticed by the Muslim world.) Hell, even flatworms consume, and sheer quantity is no substitute for a national soul. It took a couple of generations, but here we are now plugged in at the brainstem, just as McLuhan predicted, to television’s virtual cathedral of commerce where the devoted receive the sacrament in a straight shot to the cortex. Too tired from overwork, or poor, or old, or young, or just plain lazy to feel anything else, the tribal war drumbeat called news and the reality shows that pass for experiencing the world beyond work and consumption, as McLuhan’s electronic hearth casts shadows on the walls of a withdrawn and slowly rotting republic.

We had warning from poets, writers and grim futurists, but who would have guessed it would come to this so soon? That we would become so perfectly attuned to capitalist state television, ever trolling for more business, dragging its nets baited with new cars, Disney character-imprinted cell phones, and buckets of fried chicken through a sea of somnambulantes. Yet, the sleepwalkers all share but one eye, that of the camera, which, as Lewis Lapham put it, “...does-

JOE BAGEANT / SLEEPWALKING TO BABYLON

n't make distinctions between treason and fellatio...between an important senator and an important ape." So images of the grisly specter in Fallujah and Janet Jackson's boob draw the same numb respect. Stop and consider that most Americans get their "knowledge" of the outside world from this medium, then consider that most of the Muslim world gets its notion of America from Baywatch. If that does not throw any thinking person into the grip of a Prozac-proof depression, nothing will. And what about these so-called thinking persons? Where is the voice of their dissent? Well, they are naturally unhappy and making the best noise they can – all two dozen of them.

Despite that brief and fabled moment during the 1960s, the U.S. is not comfortable with dissent. We have never spawned an integrated left-wing opposition in the European sense. A well-behaved people when it comes to public debate, when told by the president on TV that we are at war with terrorism, the overwhelming majority of us line up and salute the flag. More importantly, we do not ask questions. So the question of why a hundred million dollar agency devotes its resources to swabbing the anuses of farting toy dogs never gets asked, just smiled at. And whether we are willing to sustain, say, 25,000 dead American kids in Iraq never comes up, much less debated. It is equally unlikely the public will inquire specifically who is best served by the caskets being unloaded daily at Dover, Delaware. By state decree, we are not allowed to see them.

And let us not even begin to ask that greatest of all American spiritual questions: "Who is getting rich from it?" In a society whose business is business, where whoever raises the most money to buy TV time elects the next president, that question is not likely to get answered either. Not by the Bush administration, nor by the media it sponsors through government license handouts, tax breaks and regulation – or the lack of. Hard to believe that not long ago we were asking how we were going to spend the projected \$400 billion "peace dividend" that came with the end of the Cold War. That question has now been answered. Thank you and sit down.

So who does get rich? As if we didn't know. Of course there is the Pentagon's coalition of vested interests, which is just about every material and service provider imaginable from Sprint to SpaghettiOs. But in the end it winds up in vastly disproportionate amounts in the hands of the already-rich. Those uneasy oligarchs who, since the first Neolithic thug stole all the grain in the village, have lived in fear of losing their advantage. In this country the rich have been uneasy from the beginning, and have long thought that perhaps the democratic experiment has gone just about far enough. Their grumbling, political scheming and sometimes-outright assaults on the common decency of the republic date back to the American Revolution. But now is their hour, thanks to George Bush. George Bush did not invent their fear. He merely rode it into the White House. And as their chosen commander-in-chief, he has certainly handed them, with some preliminary help from his predecessor Bill Clinton, the promise of ultimate victory in the real war taking place, the ongoing war of which America has ever been in denial – the class war. This time the already-rich are girded for victory, prepared like never before.

As an outer defensive perimeter they have deployed a far-flung and invincible army. Within the



JOE BAGEANT / SLEEPWALKING TO BABYLON

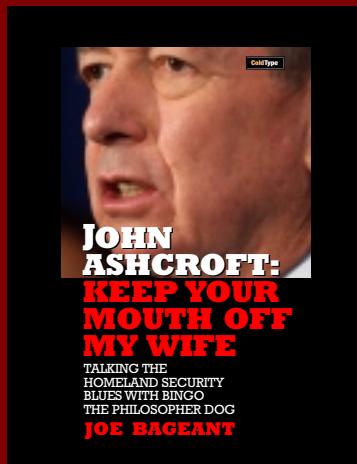
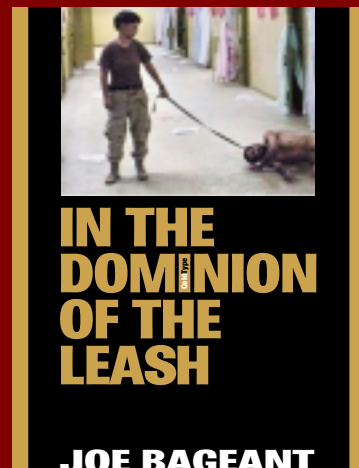
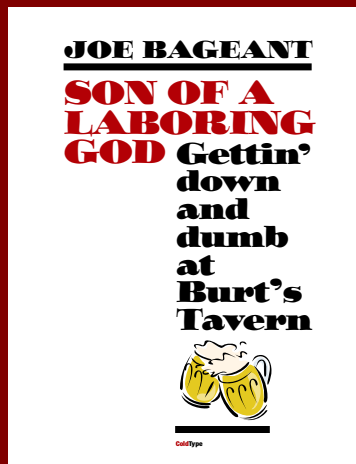


nation has been established a pervasive and relentless homeland security department, all accomplished adroitly at public expense. And with Bush's gift of escape from equitable taxation, they have set about intensifying their real work, protecting themselves with such steep income differences that they will be forever safe – safety to an oligarch being ever rowing the societal boat backward. Thus, if there is any way to return to the uncomplicated world of 1952 Middleburg or Grosse Pointe with enough money to keep their descendants farting through silk for the next 20 generations, these people are going to do it, with the thuggish help of a leering dry drunk and a secretive gang operating from an undisclosed location. Nobody in their right mind would take them on because American history has taught us one thing, if nothing else: Rich white people with guns will kill everybody in sight if they get spooked. One need only look back at the Ludlow mining massacre, or ask any urban African-American. Better for us to accept the scraps of the roast goat flung to the populi by the government of the feasting rich, and enjoy the meaningless spectacle of the Martha Stewart show trial. Watch the poised and telegenic Condoleezza Rice testify before a stacked 9/11 Commission not even allowed to quote the key suspects in its final report; or jeer at the arrogant and thoroughly unlikable Andrew Fastow running laps around Houston before those appointed to administer his very public tarring and feathering. Then catch Jay Leno's monologue for deep analysis of both.

So here we are, sleepwalkers in the intellectual and spiritual desert of America, 2004, at the end of the Enlightenment. We are literally dying for the lack of a new idea to animate our culture, government and the national mind. If the American mind is an ecosystem, we have fed it toxic waste. Instead of news we clamor for bread and circuses, gladiators in the Coliseum of the Middle East. Instead of ideas we get data – the jargon of weapons specialists, political power pundits and stock brokers who know the cost of everything and the value of nothing. Every night I listen numbly to the litany of numbers recited by this priest craft of pundits, all sorts of numbers – jobless numbers, economic indexes, and balance of trade figures... And I try to pinpoint the time when the corporate economy, the well-being of faceless monoliths, became our national religion, remembering back to the days when one had to go to the financial pages to find these things out. Now they are inescapable, these somber minute-by-minute reports on the condition and mood of Moloch, whose heart we are told by poets is a cannibal dynamo and whose breath reeks of the stench of war. How many of our jobs did Moloch eat today? How many did Moloch puke back up in Asia? These job numbers, and the number of Americans killed in Iraq, slosh against the beaches of awareness alongside the basketball scores and the number of cockroaches swallowed by a busty blonde on Fear Factor. The American dream of wealth and invincibility has taken on a life of its own, and now dreams us into being. And off on the horizon to the east, the sirens and the wailing never cease, for we have bestowed shock and awe upon Babylon.

JOE BAGEANT is a senior editor with the *Primedia History Magazine Group*, publishers of *American History Magazine*, *Civil War Times*, *Military History Magazine*, *Aviation History*, and numerous others.

READ MORE OF JOE BAGEANT AT COLDTYPE.NET



Download these, plus many more books, booklets,
essays, newspapers and magazines – all in pdf
format – all free of charge, at www.coldtype.net

(Click on this link to enter web site)

ColdType