

JOE BAGEANT

**SON OF A
LABORING
GOD**

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down
and
dumb
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Burt's
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Gettin' down and dumb at Burt's Tavern

*"Too much public education only gets working people riled up
and full of backsass" – Virginia Sen. Harry Flood Byrd*



My home town is one of those slowly rotting East Coast burgs that makes passers-through think to themselves: "What the hell is this? Mayberry USA on crack?" The town's 250-year old core is a blighted clot of ramshackle houses carved into apartments and cheesy businesses. Its outer rim is the typical ugly gash of commercial hell, an assortment of mindlessly jammed-together tire dealers, grim asphalt, slurp and burps, and car dealerships of the type that make the U.S. one of the ugliest nations on earth. A sign in the median strip of this gash proclaims Winchester an official "All-American Town." To its credit however, the town does have that special kind of seediness found only in the U.S. South. It might even be considered weirdly colorful in an America studies sort of way, with its hard-faced characters straight out of *Grapes of Wrath* and spooky and well-scrubbed Bible thumpers. Beauty being in the eye of the beholder, our local Chamber of Commerce calls it "Historic Winchester, Virginia." But many of us who grew up here call it Dickville; if you were born and raised here you were probably dicked from the beginning.

Faced with life in such a town, there is only one solution. Beer. So I sit here at Burt's Westside Tavern (The name is changed on the slight chance some local will find this on the internet, then convince Burt he can sue me for libel). Burt's Westside is a lunch and after-work beer dump, the lair of the rightwing working class, along with the regular lineup of small town loser boozers and a couple of militia types. In the end booth sits a fat guy wearing a tee shirt that reads: "One million battered women in this country and I've been eating mine plain!" That this is not considered especially offensive at Burt's says all one needs to know about the cultural and gender sensitivity of the clientele. And the fact that this fellow – who I have known since high school and whose name is Pooty – votes, is

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probably something I would be afraid to contemplate, were not cheap American beer such a palliative for anxious thought tonight.

Every customer at Burt's loves George Bush. Worships George Bush. One reason is because George Bush doesn't give a shit. When his detractors point out the complete fraud of WMDs, he doesn't give a shit. When newspapers worldwide suggest Bush may be the biggest international threat today, Bush does not give a shit. This gives him street cred among these people who for better or worse, I must call my own. Why should they give a shit about international opinion? After all, as presented by the media, the world outside is altogether nasty terrain – a news hour nether region from whence child suicide bombers swarm toward us in a tide that will only be stopped by a good old goddam American pounding with the biggest ball-busting bombs we can muster. So Bush “sounds right” when he says, “We will not cut and run.” And when George Bush sneers “Bring 'em on!” he sounds even more right. Sounding right is everything when you don't know shit from Shinola. Here is their political universe, which I'm sure you've heard before but it's always best to keep horsecrap in one pile:

- Muslims are out to kill us all. So we need to kill them all first.
- Democrats, a party of liberal queers supported by ghetto blacks, Commie college professors and Mafia-backed unions, let 9/11 happen.
- The world hates us because we are rich.
- The snail-eating, wine-besotted French are a bunch of spiteful pussies, ungrateful that we saved their asses in World War II.

And that's it. That is the common wisdom. If it appears too common to be believable, then you have never lived in the American South.

Such ignorance may be funny to observe, but if you think about it, it is the kind of viral stuff that has eaten away much of the American polity's very ability to think and its ability to do more than merely react to propaganda, or to the price of gas or misrepresentations that sound right. And if you are a liberal, you are going to square off with these people at the polls in November. There are a lot of them, not all as ornery as the crowd at Burt's to be sure, but nevertheless a huge number of the same political and economic stripe.

These are the skilled and semi-skilled workers, people without a college degree, (in this town, nearly two fifths of working adults are without even a high school degree) some thoughtful and self-educating, others not. They represent 55% of all voters. Many are the inexplicable self-screwing working folks who voted neo-conservative Republican in 2000. Never mind that Bush economic policies are why so many of them are drinking short beers tonight, or that his tax plan made them poorer and the rich much richer. They approved of it simply because it was called a

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tax “cut,” and because many of them needed their \$200 rebate scrap of that federal hog to pay off last winter’s heating bill. By any realistic assessment, nearly everyone in Burt’s is working poor. They would never admit it. Nor do government guidelines acknowledge them as such. But so long as the current administration infers that people like them are heroes (they identify heavily with the firemen, policemen of 911 and the soldiers in Iraq) they don’t need no stinking economic justice. According to a recent Roper poll, 49% of Americans in this economic class will vote for George Bush in ’04. Here in Burt’s it is probably 100%. Obviously, I am making no pretense at liberal humility or sensitivity. So if you are not willing to call dumb *dumb* when you see it, you might want to quit reading right about here.

What these folks really need is for someone to say out loud: “Now lookee here dammit! You are dumber than a sack of hammers and should’a got an education so you would have half a notion of what’s going on.” Someone once told me that and, along with the advice never to mix Mad Dog 20-20 with whiskey, it is the best I ever received. But no one in America is about to say such a thing out loud because it sounds elitist. It sounds un-American and undemocratic. It also might get your nose broken in certain venues. In an ersatz democracy maintaining the popular national fiction that everyone is equal, it is impermissible to say that, although we may all have equal constitutional rights, we are not equal. It takes at least some effort toward self-improvement just to get to the starting line of socio-economic equality, plus an ongoing effort at being informed, if you want to function in America nowadays.

So why are my people so impervious to information? Hell, thanks to their kids, most of them I know even have the Internet. Well, I can say the Internet’s vast realms are available to all, including the presently uninformed. I can also say that a tater bug can drag a bale of cotton from my house to yours. But that doesn’t make it true about the Internet or the tater bug. My faith in the Internet’s information democracy wilted when I once suggested to a friend facing eviction that we Google up renter’s rights to learn his options, and watched him type in “renters kicked out.” Then too, when we bumped into the banner on a site reading: JENNIFER LICKS THE HUGE MAN’S SWORD,” we both got kind of sidetracked. Yet two weeks later he had found Newsmax and learned how to bookmark it. Sometimes I think the GOP emits a special pheromone that attracts fools and money.

Pooty, how did we git so dumb?

Despite how it appears, our mamas did not drop us on our heads. What I watch in Burt’s with such mixed feelings of humor and outrage is America’s unacknowledged class system at work. Saying that our system and its GOP helmsmen skin the poor and working classes out of all

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opportunity is like saying a \$40 hooker will nearly always steal your wallet on the way out of the motel room. Everybody knows that. However, no one but the so-called “far left” ever talks about the extremely localized and not-so-nice ways in which small and middle-sized towns such as Dickville are important to American capitalism’s machinery. They are where the first rip-offs are pulled, where the first muggings take place, where the first dollars and opportunities are wrung from the basic needs of the machines human components, otherwise known as working stiffs. Southern towns like Dickville are perfect for observing it clearly because here it manifests itself in high definition, spittle-flecked, living color. This pig wears no lipstick.

The lives and intellectual cultures of the hardest working people in these towns are not just stunted by the smallness of the society into which they were born. They are purposefully held in bondage by a local network of moneyed families, bankers, developers, lawyers, and business people in whose interests it is to have cheap, unquestioning and compliant labor force. They invest in developing such a force by not investing (how’s that for making money out of thin air!) in the education and quality of life for anyone but their own. These places are, as they say, “investment paradise.” That means low taxes, few or no local regulations, no unions, and a Chamber of Commerce tricked out like a gaggle of hookers, welcoming the new non-union, air poisoning battery acid factory. “To hell with pollution. We gonna sell some propity, move some real’state today fellas!” Big contractors, realtors, lawyers, everybody gets a slice, except the poorly educated non-union mooks who will be employed at the acid plant at discount rates.

At the same time, and more importantly, this business cartel – and you have to call it that – controls most elected offices and municipal boards. Incidentally, it makes for some ridiculous civic scenarios: When our town’s educators decided to hold a conference on the future employment needs of our youth, the keynote speaker was the CEO of a local rendering plant . . . a vast, stinking facility that cooks down roadkill and expended deep fryer fats into the goop they put in animal feeds. He got a standing ovation from the school board and all the downtown main pickle vendors. Not a soul in that Best Western events room thought it was ironic. If you think I am insinuating that the pecker-in-the-dirt ignorance of folks like those at Burt’s has been institutionalized and cultivated, you are right.

A bootstrap is just another strap

Anyone who actually believes that all these poor working puds can beat this system, lift themselves up by their bootstraps, is either a neo-con ideologue or the child of advantage. Most readers of this article probably have a college education. Because only 25 percent of Americans get a college degree, we are the children of advantage, even if we got it the hard way. It may not feel like

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having one up on the majority, but if we get off the Internet for a while and spend just one day driving around the unpleasant towns and neighborhoods we avoid, those where the check cashing businesses and the pawn shops flourish, it becomes obvious. And I am not talking about ghettos either. I'm talking about the heartland of America where it's supposed to be all lightning bug summers and hotdogs on the grill.

Admittedly, in many places a true blue collar middle class still exists – just as unions still exist. But both have had the snot substantially kicked out of them by repeated Republican (and not a few Democratic) assaults. Both are on the ropes like some old boxing pug taking the facial cuts and popping eye capillaries with no referee to come in and stop the carnage. The American bootstrap myth is just another strap that makes the working poor privately conclude that they must in some way be inferior, given that they cannot seem to apply it to their lives. Hell Homer, if the friggin' immigrant gooks can put together successful businesses of their own, why can't you keep up with your truck payments? (Answer: Because he ain't got no damned health insurance, and his family's medicine keeps him broke.) Right now, even by the government's spruced-up numbers, one third of working Americans make less than \$9 an hour. Looking a decade ahead, five of the ten fastest-growing jobs will be menial, dead-end jokes on the next generation – mainly retail clerks, cashiers, and janitors, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Some of us were born sons of a toiling god, with the full understanding that life was never meant to be easy. But at least we could always believe that our kids had a chance for a better life. These days, it's harder to believe that. Allow me this simple observation from my own life: I am quite certain that if I were trying to get into college today with the mediocre grades I made, and no family "college fund," or family home to second mortgage, I would not have made it as far as I have. There were college scholarships, loans, and programs out the yin yang, and a high school education more or less prepared one for college. That is not to say the class divide was not a steep and ugly ditch back then. It was. But it is an absolute canyon now and growing deeper. All one has to do is look around at the unfunded No Child Left Behind program or the scam of "teacher-based accountability." When it became obvious that Johnny is now so damned dumb he can't pour piss out of a boot without the instructions on the bottom – assuming he could even read the instructions – the current regime was quick to get up a posse to lynch the school marm, then resume the theft of education funds on behalf of the rich. Neo-conservative leaders understand quite well that education has a liberalizing effect on a society. Presently they are devising methods to smuggle resources to those American madrasses, the Christian fundamentalist schools, a sure way to make the masses even more stupid if ever there was one. Is it any wonder the Gallup Poll tells us that 48 percent of Americans believe that God spit on his beefy paws and made the uni-

verse in seven days? Only 28 percent of Americans believe in evolution. It is no accident that number corresponds roughly to the number with college degrees. So intelligent liberals are advised to save their depression and the good booze for later, when things get worse.

Some final commie screed...

In case the blunt hammer with which I have been beating to death this issue of education-as-the-ultimate-solution still has not left its mark, allow me one more observation. Many people reading this financed their children's educations with second mortgages. The working poor do not have that option. (Although college may be moot anyway if your kids graduate from neglected public high schools thinking that H₂O is a cable channel.) They rent until they die, with no option of passing along accumulated wealth in the form of equity in a home – which is the way most families do it in this country – to their children. So over the generations they stay stuck or lose ground. And stay dumb and drink beer at Burt's and vote Republican because no real liberal voice, the kind that speaks the rock bottom, undeniable truth, ever enters their lives. But it can. I have on occasion at Burt's found an agreeing ear to all of the very arguments above.

When the current administration is finished looting the commonweal it will make the Reagan era rip-job look like a charity ball. That is a given. We will have to swallow it whole. Then it will be up to real liberals, and I am NOT talking about the Democratic Party kind, to repair the damage for decades to come. Assuming we can unelect George Bush again, and assuming we can make it stick this time. We cannot count on another Clinton decade of free market slight of hand. Nor can we settle for Democratic Party concocted federal programs that give disenfranchised citizens a flush of money, then sends them forth with no more education than god gave a soggy animal cracker so they can be suckered into buying the newest four-wheel drive GM hog or die in the oil wars that are surely coming. Everyone will have to be smarter, if there is to be any kind of future for anyone but the rich, who will by then have managed to escape to Aspen, or the desert, or Southern France, or wherever it is that thievery's princes always escape to. They have their choice of places, but we will be stuck here. Together.

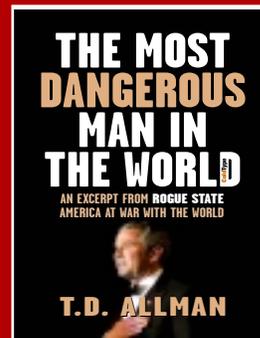
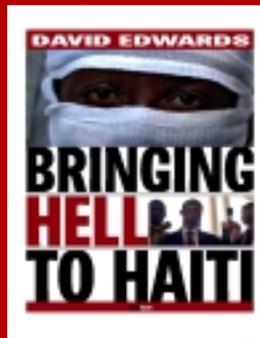
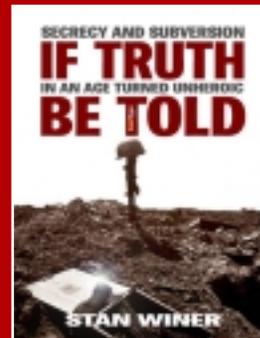
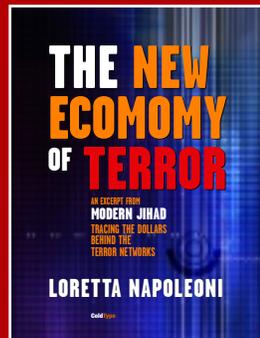
One of the few good things about growing older is that one can remember what otherwise appears to have been purposefully erased from the national memory. Forty years ago all men of goodwill agreed that every citizen had the right to a free and credible education. Manifestation of one's fullest potential was considered a national goal. Now these have come to be labeled as unworkable ideas. (Maybe even downright com'nist, Pooty.) But in the long term, those are the only things which will save us all, because if labor hath no brother, then doth no man. These are the only things that will realign us with that notion of good yeoman liberty to which we have always at least paid lip service, and toward which we should grope even in, and perhaps especial-

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ly in, such darkening times. No, it will not stop the present jingoistic warmongering of our rogue nation. Nothing but millions taking to the streets can do that. But it will go a long, long way toward ensuring that it never happens again.

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