

**JOE BAGEANT**

# Poor, White And Pissed

A Guide to the  
White Trash  
Planet for  
Urban Liberals

GoldType

Joe Bageant  
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White  
And  
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**IF YOU'RE READING THIS, IT IS VERY** likely you are a liberal, maybe even an outright screaming burn-down-the-goddam-country commie – in which case I say, “Come sit by me comrade! (Especially if you are a blonde.) Like most lefties you probably live in an urban area, or someplace

with reasonable cultural diversity. More than likely you are educated and can read this without moving your lips. Maybe you even live in the freethinking People’s Republic of Berkeley, or bustle along under the lights of Manhattan where you can see independent films and buy such things as leeks and soy milk at your grocery store.

I, however, live in a town where it is easier to find chitterlings, ponhaus and souse in the grocery store than a leek . . . and where Smokey and the Bandit still plays to packed movie houses year after year. My hometown’s claim to fame is the 1983 “Rhinehart Tire Fire” in which five million discarded tires burned for nine months, gaining Winchester, Virginia, national news coverage and EPA superfund clean-up status. The smoke plume was visible in satellite earth photos, the clean-up took 18 years and the fire stands as my hometown’s biggest event of the Twentieth Century. As for intellectual life, this is a town where damned few residents ever heard of, say, Susan Sontag, although our local newspaper editor did manage a post mortem editorial on her, which basically said: Goodbye you piece-of-New-York-Jewish-commie-shit!

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Most townspeople reading the paper at their breakfast tables around town were asking themselves, “Who the hell is Susan Sontag?” They would ask the same thing about Daniel Barenboim or Hunter S. Thompson because they’ve never been on Oprah, either. Our general ambience was well summed up by a visiting Atlanta lawyer who looked around town and observed: “Dumb lordee, I reckon!” This, from a guy who’s seen a lot of dumb crackers. Laugh if you want, but this is the red state American heartland everybody is talking about these days.

Is it possible for a higher class of person to live in American places like Winchester, Virginia? Not really. Only the local old family business elite and well-paid plant managers transferred here find such a place livable – the former for their social status and the latter in the safe knowledge they will be transferred out someday.

Most of the rest of us stuck in Winchester are what used to be called the traditional working class. These days, when we are called anything at all, it is White Trash. Poor working whites, people with only a high school diploma, if that. Nationally we are at least a quarter of white U.S. workers, thirty five million in all by the government’s own shaved-down numbers. Nobody knows for sure in a nation that calls millions of \$7 an hour janitors and marginal people working with no insurance or benefits “independent businesspersons” and “entrepreneurs.” Small independent business people are, we are told, “the backbone of America’s economy.” If that is true, then it’s a sorry-assed thing because we are talking about citizens who bring down maybe 25-30K a year before taxes. With both spouses working. I told my freelance janitor friend Gator that he was the backbone of the American economy; he said he felt more like its asshole.

In any case, my people are not the people in the cubicle next to you at work (though they might well be cleaning it at nights when you are sleeping.) Mine are not people complaining about paying off their college loans, or who got the best parking spot at their office campus complex. They have different problems entirely, mostly related to truck payments. Or people like my old tree service boss Danny, who cut off a finger working with a chain saw, wrapped it in a Mac-Donald’s foil wrapper and ran to the hospital to get it sewn back on. Or any of the thousands of people in this town who smash apples into apple sauce or boil them into vinegar at National Fruit Products, performing soul-grinding shift work year after year with no opportunity *ever* to be promoted, or of getting health care. All they get is the seasonal layoff when all the apples are smashed and the millions of gallons of vinegar bottled – working class people going nowhere in a town that smells of vinegar.

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One of the problems we working class Southerners have is that educated progressive Americans see us as a bunch of obese, heavily-armed nose pickers. This problem is compounded by the fact that so many of us are pretty much that. Call it the “Dumb-crackers-lordee-I-reckon” syndrome. But liberals err in thinking this armed and drunken laboring species is an exclusively Southern breed. No matter where you live in this nation you will find us. We are the folks in front of you at the Wal-Mart checkout lugging a case of motor oil while having a nicotine fit. But even in such democratic venues as shopping, our encounters are limited because we do not buy designer beer and you do not buy ammo or motor oil by the case.

And if we aren't in the checkout line, we're probably waiting on you as clerks. With our bright red regulated vests and nametags we don't look poor or desperate. But let me tell you about Roy, a smiling, wise old guy in an orange vest in the plumbing department of the local Home Depot. He's the guy who knows everything there ever was to know about plumbing, and he's limping around at 67 on bad knees with two bone-grafted discs from life as a construction laborer, solely so that he can have health insurance. Not insurance from Home Depot, mind you – his entire paycheck goes to pay the private insurance he must have if he doesn't want to lose the rundown bungalow he and his wife bought after the Korean War to outrageous medical bills. And that bungalow is now in such a bad neighborhood that only the slumlords who dominate our city council will ever make an offer, and even then not much. Roy's been losing ground for 25 years, not that any of the tanned middle class suburban customers here or anywhere else give a god-damn.

This is solidly red state neo-con Virginia, where people have a ready explanation for Roy's condition in life: As Jimbo the newsstand owner here says, “They are losers who can't cut it in the greatest society on earth. Darwin was right. Gandhi was wrong. Tough shit!” Jimbo is the same guy who once advised me to “Always kick a man when he is down; it gives him an incentive to get up.” I sometimes think it was the meanest thing in hell that made America's little working class towns such as Winchester.

### **Paw, am I a paradox?**

TO BE POOR AND WHITE IS A PARADOX IN AMERICA. WHITES, ESPECIALLY males, are supposed to have an advantage they exploit mercilessly. Yet most of the poor people in the United States are white (51%,) outnumbering blacks two to one and all other minority poverty groups combined. America is permeated with cultural myths about white skin's association with power, education and oppor-

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tunity. Capitalist society teaches that we all get what we deserve, so if a white man does not succeed, it can only be due to laziness. But just like black and Latino ghetto dwellers, poor laboring whites live within a dead end social construct that all but guarantees failure. If your high school dropout daddy busted his ass for small bucks and never read a book in his life and your mama was a textile mill worker, chances are you are *not* going to be recruited by Yale Skull and Bones and grow up to be president of the United States, regardless of our national mythology. You are going to be pulling an eight-buck-an-hour shift work someplace and praying for enough overtime to make the heating bill. A worker.

The political left once supported these workers, stood on the lines taking its beatings at the plant gates alongside them. Now, comfortably ensconced in the middle class, the American left sees the same working whites as warmongering bigots, happy pawns of the empire. That is writing working folks off too cheaply, and it begs the question of how they came to be that way. To cast them as a source of our deep national political problems is ridiculous. They are a symptom of the problems, and they may be making it worse because they are easily manipulated, or because they cannot tell an original idea from a beer fart. But they are not the root cause by any means. The left should take its cues from Malcolm X, who understood the need to educate and inform the entire African-American society before tackling the goal of unity. Same goes for white crackers. Nobody said it would be easy.

### **Don't laugh, you're next!**

MIDDLE CLASS LIBERALS, OR AFFLUENT CONSERVATIVES FOR THAT MATTER, are hard put to understand poor white working class culture. With our guns, God and coarse noisy aesthetic (NASCAR and Shania Twain?), we look like a lower species, a beery subset of some sort. The truth is that poor white working culture is not a subset of any other American class. It does not operate below the middle and upper classes, but parallel to them. Just as there are few ways out of it, there are few ways in. Its inhabitants are born here. The educated left cannot easily get inside. When it comes to access, liberal social academics are camels passing through the needle's eye, though I've never met one who would admit it, or even knew that observing is not necessarily understanding. Consequently we find many books/studies focusing on ethnic minorities, but few credible ones about our defiant native homegrown poor. To my mind, it is impossible to be tenured and have street cred, but then I am just a prejudiced redneck prick from Winchester, Virginia, otherwise referred to as "Dickville."

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Yet this place from which and about which I write, could be any of thousands of communities across the U.S. It is a parallel world created by an American system where caste and self-identity are determined by what one consumes, or cannot afford to consume, education and of course, the class into which one is born. Like most things American, it was about money from the get-go. The difference is that some of us have known this truth from birth and on brutal terms. For instance, few middle class Americans today ever sold newspapers on the street corner at the age of twelve to pay for school clothes or carried coal to a dirty living room stove all winter. I did both. They never sat down to a dinner of fried baloney and coffee after cold hours on the street corner. If this sounds like some Depression era sob story, let me say that it was in 1959-62. And right now I can find a hundred people in my neighborhood who did the same, or some kids still doing it (often Latino these days).

My point is that there are and always have been a helluva lot of us know nothing laboring sons out here, whether more fortunate Americans acknowledge our struggles or not. But they should. You see, it's like this: When the heartless American system is done reducing us to slobbering beer soaked zombies in the American labor gulag, your sweet ass is next.

### **Everybody loves the Dalai Lama, but nobody loves po' me!**

AIN'T NO WONDER LIBS GOT NO STREET CRED. AIN'T NO WONDER A dope-addicted clown like Limbaugh can call libs elitists and make it stick. From where we stand, knee-deep in doctor's bills and hoping the local Styrofoam peanut factory doesn't cut the second shift, you ARE elite. Educated middle class liberals (and education is the main distinction between my marginal white people and, say, you) do not visit our kind of neighborhoods, even in their own towns. They drink at nicer bars, go to nicer churches and for the most part, live, clustered in separate areas of the nation, mainly urban. Consequently, liberals are much more familiar with the social causes of immigrants, or even the plight of Tibet, than the bumper crop of homegrown native working folks who make up towns like Winchester. Liberal America loves the Dalai Lama but is revolted by life here in the land of the pot gut and the plumber's butt. Can't say I blame them entirely, but then, that is why God created beer. To make ordinary life more attractive, or at least stomachable.

Whatever the case, helping the working poor does not mean writing another scholarly paper about them funded by grant money. That is simply taking care of one's middle class university educated self. Yet the cause of dick-in-the-dirt poor

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working white America is spoken for exclusively by educated middle class people who grew up on the green suburban lawns of America. However learned and good intentioned, they are not equipped to grasp the full implications of the new American labor gulag – or the old one for that matter. They cannot understand a career limited to yanking guts out through a chicken's ass for the rest of one's life down at the local poultry plant (Assuming it does not move offshore.) Being born working class carries moral and spiritual implications understood only through experiencing them. It comes back to street cred.

The census bureau keeps numbers on the working poor. Universities conduct studies and economists rattle off statistics. If studies and numbers alone could solve the problem of working poverty, then rip-off check cashing would not be one of the hottest franchises in the country and Manpower would not be our largest employer. Yes, and if a bullfrog had wings it wouldn't bump its ass. Reason and social science are not cutting it, and numbers cannot describe the soul and character of a people. Those same ones who smell like an ashtray in the checkout line, devour a carton of Little Debbie's at a sitting and praise Jesus for every god-dam wretched little daily non-miracle. (If that last part does not make sense to you it simply proves my point about the secular liberal disconnect.)

A good start on healing this rift might be this: the next time those on the left encounter these seemingly self-screwing, stubborn, God-obsessed folks, maybe they can be open to their trials, understand the complexity of their situation, step forward and say, "Brother, can I lend you a hand?" Surely it would make the ghosts of Joe Hill, Franklin Roosevelt and Mohandas Gandhi smile.

### **More crap about values**

BEFORE I AM ASKED THE MORE SPECIFIC QUESTION, "WHAT THE FUCK do you think middle class liberals should do then?" I'm gonna answer it. ORGANIZE! Quit voting for that pack of undead hacks called the Democratic Party and ORGANIZE! Howard Dean is just another millionaire Yale frat boy (Daddy was the Dean in Dean Whitter) – ORGANIZE! Quit kidding yourself that the Empire will protect professionals and semi-professionals such as yourself and ORGANIZE! Spend time on a Pentecostal church pew or in a blue-collar beer joint and ORGANIZE! Join the Elks Club and ORGANIZE! Realize that there is no party whatsoever in the United States that represents anything but corporate interests and ORGANIZE! Start in your own honky wimp-assed white bread neighborhood and ORGANIZE! Knock on doors and ORGANIZE! Move heaven and earth and hearts and minds and ORGANIZE! And if enough people do it, it will scare

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the living piss out of the political elite and the corporations and they will come to club you down like they did in Miami and Seattle. But at least you will have been among the noble ones when the history is written.

There now. I've got it out of my system.

Given that every damned utterance or word published about America these days has to have political implications and relevancy to the crooked 2004 elections, let's talk about the much discussed political anger and "values issues" of hitherto faceless self-screwing working class folks. Tell ya what. I have both prayed and been shit-faced six ways to hell with these people and I am NOT seeing the much bally-hoed anger about the values most often cited, such as gun control, abortion or gay marriage... True, these are the issues of the hard-line Bible thumpers and fundamentalist leadership that has harped on them for decades. And the politicians love that crap. And apparently so do the media pundits.

But here in this particular heartland, once I step away from the fundamentalist, I am simply not seeing the homophobia so widely proclaimed by the liberal establishment. Hell, we've got three gay guys and at least one lesbian who hang out at my local redneck tavern and they all are right in there drinking and teasing and jiving with everyone else. As my hirsute 300-pound friend Pootie says: "Heck, I have a lot in common with lesbians!" (I would concede however, that homosexual marriage, however, was just a bit too much for some of the working class to accept in the 2004 elections. It was the visuals.)

The working class people in my town are angry, but not especially angry at Queer Eye For The Straight Guy, or unseen fetuses. I think working class anger is at a more fundamental level and that it is about this: *rank and status as citizens in our society*. I think it is about the daily insult working class people suffer from employers, government, national, state and local, and from their more educated fellow Americans, the doctors, lawyers, journalists, academicians, and others who quietly disdain working people and their uncultured ways. And I think working class anger is about some other things too:

- It is about the indignities suffered at the hands of managers and bosses – being degraded to a working, faceless production unit in our glorious new global economy.

- It is about being ignored by the educated classes and the other similar professional, political and business elites that America does not acknowledge as elites.

- It is about one's priorities being closer to home and more ordinary than those

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of the powerful people who determine our lives.

■ It is about suffering the everyday lack of human respect from the government, and every other institutional body except the church.

■ It is about working at Wal-Mart or Home Depot or Arby's wearing a nametag on which you do not even rate a last name. You are just Melanie or Bobby, there to kiss the manager's ass or find another gig.

■ It is about trying to live your life the only way you know how because you were raised that way. But somehow the rules changed under you.

■ It is about trying to maintain some semblance of outward dignity, when both you and the neighbors are living payday to payday, though no one admits it.

■ It is about media-fabled things you've never seen in your own family: college funds set aside for the kids, stock portfolios, vacation homes...

■ It is about the unacknowledged stress of both spouses working longer, producing more for a paycheck that has been dwindling in purchasing power since 1976.

Yes, it *is* about values. It is about the values we have forsaken as a people – such as dignity, education and opportunity for everyone. And it is about the misdirected anger of the working classes toward those they least understand. You. And me.

By the way, the working people I am talking about are not entirely unhappy with life, just angry (and bound to be angrier when the Bush regime finally runs the nation's economy off the cliff.) They simply resist change because for decades change has always spelled something bad – 9/11, terrorism, job outsourcing...always something bad, headed toward worse.

### **Arise, oh pissy liberals!**

IT IS ONE HELLUVA COMMENT ON THE AMERICAN CLASS SYSTEM THAT I get paid to speak, write about and generally expose to liberal groups the existence of some 250 million working Americans who have been fixing America's cars and paving its streets and waiting on its tables from day one. As a noble and decent liberal New York City book editor told me, "Seen from up here it is if your people were some sort of exotic, as if you were from Yemen or something."

Jeesh!

This is not to berate educated liberal America – well, OK, a little. But if liberal America has been somewhat too smug, my working class brethren have been downright water-on-the-brain stupid to be misled so easily by the likes of Karl Rove and the phony piety of George Bush. (And goddammit Pootie, Saddam did

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NOT attack the World Trade Center!) However, liberals and working people do need each other to survive what is surely coming, that thing being delivered to us by the regime which promised us they would “run this country like a business.” Oh hell, yes, they are going to do it. So the left must genuinely connect face to face with Americans who do not necessarily share all of our priorities, if it is ever to be relevant again.

Once we begin to look at the human faces of this declining republic’s many moving parts, the inexplicable self-screwing working class voter is not so inexplicable after all. God, gays and guns alone do not explain the conservative populism of the 2004 elections. College-educated liberals and blue-collar working people need to start separating substantive policy issues from the symbolic ones. Fight on the substance, the real ground zero stuff that ordinary working people can feel and see – make real pledges about real things. Like absolutely guaranteed health care and a decent living wage. And mean it and deliver it.

Who, ho! It ain’t gonna be easy, because poor working class Americans, like the rest of us, have become fearful, numb, authority-worshipping fools reluctant to give up the mindless heroin of cheap consumerism...just like you...just like me. They’ll never come to us, so we must go to them. Which means working the churches and the wards and the watering holes, the Kiwanis Pancake Breakfasts, our workplaces, and lo! Even the beeriest underbelly of the America ... where nice liberal middle class people do not let their kids go for fear it will damage their precious little SAT scores. Again, nobody said it would be easy.

Brotherhood. Solidarity. Compassion. Too idealistic? Futile? Maybe. But if these are not worthy goals, then nothing is.

Delivering on all this in a peaceful orderly fashion will be a bitch. So hard in fact that I do not much intend to participate. Fuck it. I’ve wanted an out and outright armed revolution ever since the November elections. But that’s another matter and the guy listening in from Homeland Security right now can go take a flying fuck. Write to me in Gitmo, y’all! Just address it to “Joe from Yemen.”

*Joe Bageant is a magazine editor and essayist living in Winchester, Virginia.  
He may be contacted at [bageantjb@netscape.net](mailto:bageantjb@netscape.net).*

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