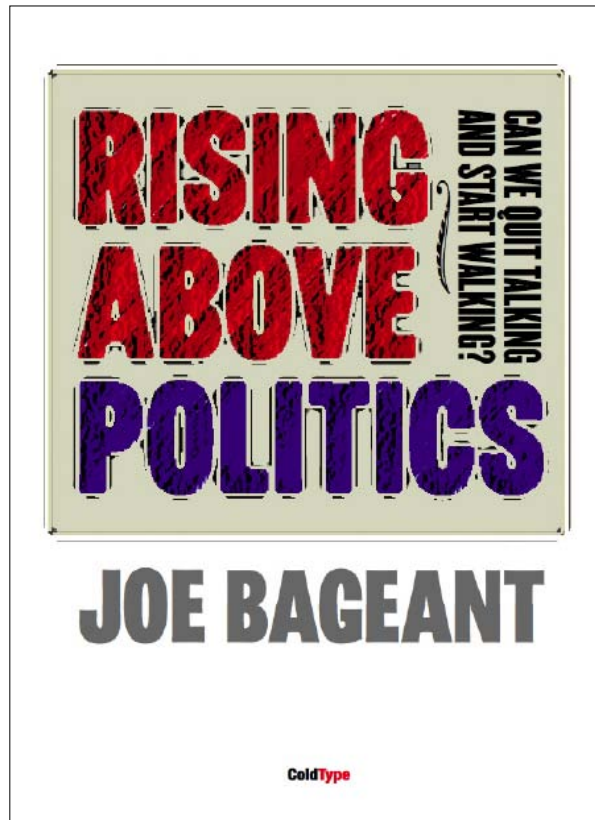




JOE BAGEANT

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Joe Bageant is the author of the forthcoming book, **Deer Hunting With Jesus: Dispatches from America's Class War** from Random House Crown on working class America, to be released in June, 2007.

A complete archive of his online work, along with the thoughts of many working class Americans on the subject of class may be found at www.joebageant.com.

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JOE BAGEANT: RISING ABOVE POLITICS

Well, lo and beshit! I never thought I'd ever see the day. But even in my hardcore Republican run hometown, many conservatives are quietly sneaking away from the sing-along around the campfire of George Bush's war-crazed hootenanny. Most of them are ordinary bona fide conservatives. But others slipping off under cover of darkness are among our richest Republicans who profiteered mightily in the security, construction and service businesses that sprouted like mushrooms from every aspect of the Iraq War. Either they have suddenly developed a steak of conscience, or they simply don't want to be associated with the trail of crime, blood and feces Bush and his cronies have tracked across the carpet of American history. My bet is on the latter.

But even the little fish who voted for Bush are starting to squirm. My neighbor, Big Larry, who is usually ecstatic here at the beginning of baseball season, and never gives politics the slightest thought except on Election Day, is glum and starting to grumble about the state of the republic. This time last year he was pulling down good dough "driving truck" for Toll Brothers, complaining about his 'roids a bit, but was otherwise the same sort of more or less unquestioning and nonpolitical working guy one finds just about anywhere in America. Now his driving hours are half of what he was getting last year and look to get slimmer yet, even as unemployed carpenters and electricians, casualties of the collapsing housing construction bubble, come knocking at our doors looking for handyman work. How can it be that the newspapers say the economy is booming?

And so now, after the deepest sort of political meditation, Larry has concluded that "This Iraq War thing just might spell trouble for us in the long run." Not, mind you, because of the war's sheer bloody folly, but because "It has run up the price of con-

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crete and plywood so much that people can't afford to build houses anymore." Some people will add two plus two and get five every time. So when it comes to Larry, it's pretty easy to resist a discussion of the subprime mortgage rate implosion.

And it's not only Big Larry, who actually made some good bucks these last few years, but a lot of working class grunts who never made any dough and never complain much at all – certainly not of the kind who are complaining about paying off their college loans (which is admittedly a banking racket) or about who got the nicest parking spot at their office campus complex. They do not complain about their troubles and risks in life, such things as getting a hand cut off in a bark chipping machine, or not having health care, or soul grinding shift work year after year with little opportunity to ever be promoted, much less become management.

Not that promotion and advancement doesn't happen for working puds. The manager at one of our fast food franchise joints is nineteen years old, owns a sports car and feels pretty successful. The owner is a millionaire small businessman with a little political influence who issues his employees only one shirt per year. I know for a fact that he grew up taking stale cornbread and cold pinto beans to school in a molasses can lunch box. And wore his daddy's shoes to school when his pop was sleeping off his nightly drunk. So I don't fault they guy for having a tough view of the world.

On the other hand, sixty-six year-old Thelma has worked there three years and works solely to pay for her diabetic, COPD husband's health care. She'd had three fifteen cent per hour raises in those three years, last time I talked to her. The kid, the owner and Thelma have remained hard right-wingers, though for different reasons, all of them having to do with American toughness.

In any case, they are doing their part for god and a free market economy, as are their relatives in the area's 3116th National Guard unit preparing for its third deployment in Iraq to defend our right to gobble Big Macs from the safety of our usury financed Ford Super Duty trucks to the accompaniment of quadraphonic pop country music.

But now even they are starting to edge around the topic saying things such as, "Well, I know we cain't cut and run, but I dunno about this Iraq war thing. There's lots of stuff right here in this country we could've used the money to fix." And by that they mean paving more of the county connector roads so they could get to work faster – which leads to more development out their way, higher taxes and even slower traffic, but they cannot make the connection. Thanks to the housing and unacknowledged economic bust, they'll never get their wish. The rest of us liberals may be suffering from rage fatigue, but this is about as close as my people get to political dissent. Mumbling, and then backing off.

But they do know there are two political parties in America and tend to put all the

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blame for anything that goes wrong in a big way on one party. I'm pretty sure that attitudes extend into the voting booth. Here in Virginia there is evidence that a populist can reach them if he can get their attention. Jim Webb did it. He may be a little patriotic for most Yankee liberals, but at least a thin margin of folks down here because, even though he might be a military brat (and we've seen plenty of'em being this close to the Pentagon), he at least went to Nam and knows how to sound like he's caught a few catfish, even if he never held a pole or cut bait in his life. And wearing his son's Iraq War army boots in a meeting with the president went a long way, believe me. It's that Scots Irish warrior spirit thing. We don't mourn our own killed in battle nearly so much as Yankees think and our own press describes – we've been in every war the republic ever fought and know that somebody you know is gonna die. But we do pay great homage to the symbols of the warrior spirit, be it a 300 year old Scottish dirk or a pair of desert combat boots worn by one of our own in the latest slaughter the royalty has managed instigate. "Bring'em on." And we mean it.

We mean it because we know life is struggle and that "Bring'em on" is the cry and attitude of a true survivor. The rest is just politics and rich people. Now lordee knows I'm no political strategist. But I've been all over heartland America and I know that Missouri, Kansas, Minnesota and Ohio, Michigan and Minnesota ain't all that different to Virginia when it comes to working people's sentiments.

If the Westchester Country Club posing as the Democratic Party would get it into their heads that they could elect a smart man or woman who has actually changed a tire or gotten behind in a house payment, instead if the mocha rich boy or the woman who wants to prove she has more balls than any man, they could bring home a populist vote they don't even know exists. But then, from the third hole at the Westchester Biltmore Country Club, you cannot see Thelma when she goes home and night and soaks her feet in hot Epson salts water. And you cannot see into the warrior hearts of a people ever kept blind by a hopeless class system, but who would understand true populism if they were shown it just once in their lives.

Meanwhile, Hillary and Obama, Biden and McCain all shake the hands of pharmaceutical, Citibank, and energy lobbyists, totally unaware that Big Larry, who simply trusted that the government was being ran by better men than he, had his house go into foreclosure last week. The announcement was among an ever increasing number of others in big outlined boxes on the back page of the local paper.

No matter what liberals may think, it's no crime to be dumb and unaware in this world. Otherwise most of this country would be in prison. So when I saw Big Larry mowing his lawn yesterday, probably for the last time, I just waved and pretended that everything was hunky dory. Both of us knew everybody in town saw that foreclosure bock ad on the back of the paper. We have come to watch for them of late, like the obits, to see if anyone we know has been axed by fate. But sometimes you show

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a working man respect by giving the A-OK sign – a sign that, bad as it may be now my brother, you'll be back to fight again for the feudalistic delusions and promises America has ever offered to working class suckers like us, because there has never been any other choice. There have just been the good times and the bad times allowed us, according to the American financial syndicate's needs at the time.

Sure, they may kick a lot of Republicans asses out of office next election. Big friggin deal! For my people, the same feudalist deal is on the table as ever: work hard, kill when you are told to, trust your betters, and everything will be all right. Plenty of highly politicized leftists and their meeker kin, the last hopeful Democrats, came up as hard as anyone I've described here. The Democratic Party definitely doesn't want them showing up like bikers at a cocktail party and talking real populism. Because there ain't no big money campaign contributions behind populism.

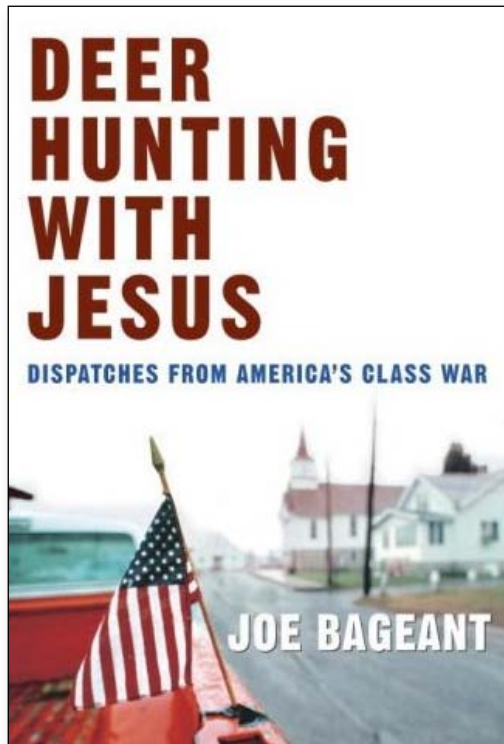
Look at it this way: Black America suffered lynchings, police dogs and fire bombings just to shit on the same toilet seats as white Americans like you and me, and ultimately waste their lives in front of computer monitors next to us on the same electronic plantation of the gulag global economy swallowing America and the rest of the world.

And so, still I ask (and who am I to ask anything?): Are there any progressives or leftists willing to come out here into the hinterlands and offer the first step. True populist hope? Spell it out in "see-spot-run" language? Talk about our bad teeth and why our elderly parents are rotting in pisshole nursing homes owned by ex-car dealers and attended by imported Asian physicians who barely speak English? Or the dynamics of hopelessness that drive the meth epidemic out here?

It will take an entire lifetime of commitment amid a crumbling world. And it will continue to crumble around us even as we work. There will be not one ounce of glory or acknowledgement or public reward. But it lies there before us, the first fearful and questioning stone on the pathway to the liberation of mankind.

True populist politics could give us a quarter turn in the right direction. Genuine socialism could put us on the approximate path to justice. Eco-politics cannot save us from the inevitable, but at least it can teach us to deal with our limitations as a species upon this earth. But one begins the journey at the start if the path, not the promised land at its end.

Can we quit talking and start walking?



Order Joe Bageant's book

DEER HUNTING WITH JESUS **Dispatches From America's Class War**

"Many friends and readers will notice that the title has changed to *Deer Hunting With Jesus: Dispatches From America's Class War*. The original title was *Drink, Pray, Fight, Fuck: Dispatches From America's Class War*. Contrary to what one might suspect, the name change had not as much to do with the word "fuck" as it did the fact that a book was recently released with a very similar title. Then too, when I started putting the title "Drink, Pray, Fight, Fuck" on the web, it kicked off some merchandising by small scale entrepreneurs of ball caps, tee-shirts, etc. bearing the four words. Which is no problem with me – I like to see the little guy printing tee-shirts make a buck" – JOE BAGEANT

Pre-order now from www.amazon.com/Deer-Hunting-Jesus-Dispatches-Americas/dp/030733936X/ref=pd_sxp_f_pt/104-7289464-5668749?ie=UTF8

The book will be released in June, 2007

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