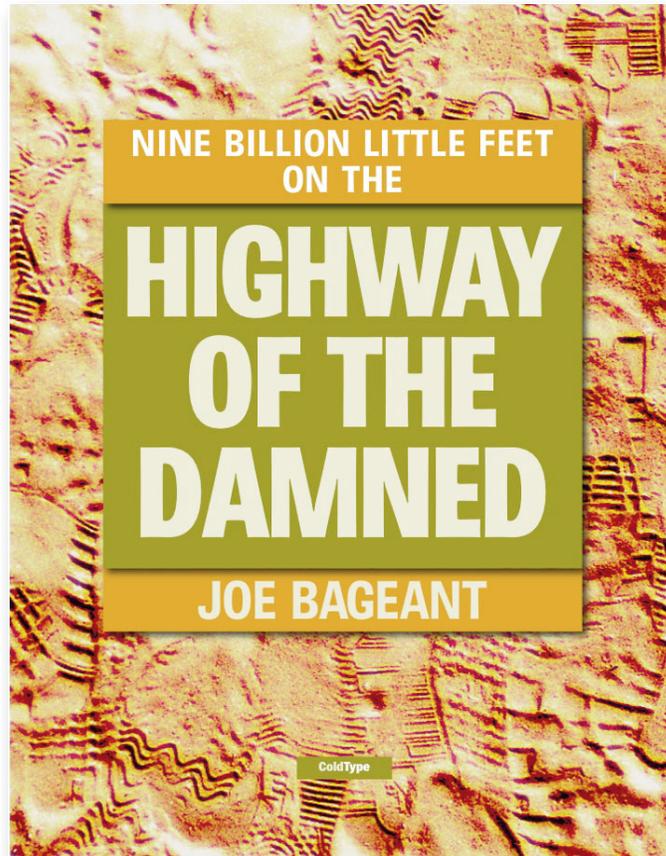


JOE BAGEANT

**NINE
BILLION
LITTLE FEET**

**ON THE HIGHWAY
OF THE DAMNED**

ColdType



Joe Bageant is the author of the recently-published book, **Deer Hunting With Jesus: Dispatches from America's Class War** from Random House Crown.

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John Raymond Castillo, age 81. Sunrise, January 14, 1917. Sunset, February 1, 2008. He leaves 21 children, 140 grandchildren and 302 great-grandchildren – Obituary announcement on Belize’s LOVE Radio station

“The population of Belize? Officially it’s about 300,000. But if you include all the kids, it’s probably three million.” – Greg, longtime expatriate American in Belize

HOPKINS VILLAGE, BELIZE: The din of squealing, laughing children is the background white noise of the Third World. In Belize, as in most of the Third World, 45% of all people are under the age of 16. About a dozen of that 45% swarm around me as I cut my toenails under the mango tree. A few are picking on the mangy, quarreling dogs but the majority are drawn in close, giving advice about how to cut gnarly, old man type toenails: “Saw dem off wid a file” seems to be the consensus.

What I see are children I help with homework and feed, and admonish about grades, unanxious and reasonably happy little members of the human race. They do not look much like a global migration or crushing planetary population pressure. Yet they are among the most incredible wave of both ever in human history.

Most families here have five or six kids and their kids will have a similar number. I’ve yet to meet a native of the village who does not think half a dozen is not a nice round number of offspring. My adopted family has six kids and four adults living on a 100 x 300-foot lot. This does not include the Guatemalan family of five living in a rented cabana at one corner of the lot. Assuming all the children reach adulthood and procreate, the tally in ten years will be about 50 people of all ages trying to exist on this square of sewerage soaked sand.

But oh, were it that bright a future. As adults with families, these kids won’t even have this spot on which to live at all, much less live as well as they live now. The resorts and condo rackets out of Canada, South Africa and the U.S. are buying up these small plots. Unschooled in western financial concepts and janked by the developers’ offers of more money than they have ever seen in their

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lives, locals sell. Usually they are broke within a year. In any case their semi-literate children will join the next generation's issuance of dispossessed poverty stricken young adults headed for elsewhere. Just what the world does not need, not here in Central America, not in the Middle East, not in Latin America or the U.S. But that's what we've got and that's what we are going to get a lot more of.

Population growth is the rhino in the playpen, the root cause of our approaching eco-disaster that that no one honestly talks about. On the left we get an onslaught of information about what we must and must not do to prevent climate change. Good Democrats get Al Gore's advice, which somehow never mentions the corporations doing the damage. And all of America gets feel-good electric car ads -- buy your way out of the problem, or at least your guilt if you happen to have any. But nowhere do we get an honest discussion about population growth. If you care to, argue that climate change may or may not destroy us. But uncontrolled population growth is guaranteed to do the job. As an old Idaho rancher told me, "You can't run a hundred head of cattle on half an acre."

Most of the developed world remains clueless as to how all this will affect their own lives. But Americans in particular cannot get their head around the impact these billions will have on the lifestyles they are driven like rats in hell to sustain. About half of Americans ...

SCREAMING MAN: LOOKY HERE BAGEANT, YOU PICKLED OLD GAS BAG. HALF OF AMERICANS LIVE UNDER THE GOOFBALL HAL-LUCINATION THEY CAN SEAL THE BORDERS WITH SILLY PUTTY, DRONE AIRCRAFT AND MACHINE GUNS. THE OTHER HALF, LIBERALS OVERDOSED ON PROZAC AND WHITE WINE, IS LINED UP LIKE DOCKSIDE WHORES WAVING AT THE INCOMING FLEET. "LET'S WELCOME THEM ALL! AMERICA IS THE LAND OF IMMIGRANTS SO HELL FUCKING YES, LET'EM ALL IN!" YEA, RIGHT. LET EVERYBODY LIVE LIKE A FUCKING HATIAN WHARF RAT IN THE NEW THIRD WORLD AMERICA. HELL, IT'S ALREADY STARTED. THEY'RE CROAKING 49 MILION AMERICANS BECAUSE THEY CAN'T COME UP WITH THE BLACKMAIL DOUGH FOR HEALTH CARE. THEY'RE KICKIN HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OUT OF THEIR PLYWOOD NESTING BOXES BECAUSE THEY CAN'T MAKE THE MONTHLY NUT. AMERICA IS ALREADY A THIRD WORLD COUNTRY WITH DRIVE THROUGH FEEDING BOXES.

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Meanwhile, both camps of a nation with no sense of history beyond its own state sponsored founding fathers mythology hasn't the slightest notion of how population migrations from areas of scarcity to areas of plenty have shaped human history perhaps more than any other force, including war (war is just more dramatic when it happens and more entertaining to read about when it's over.) The Vikings were a population shift from the limited arable land resources of the north around the British coast to Normandy (and then back to England by way of William the Conqueror, a Viking descendant.) The Huns, the Goths, the Vandals, the Irish in America, Chinese into Tibet.

SCREAMING MAN: WELL BUBBA, LET ME SPELL IT OUT FOR YOU IN CRAYONS. IT'S GETTING RIGHT BROWN OUT THERE IN HEARTLAND AMERICA. ALL THOSE SAWED-OFF LITTLE DARK HAIREFUCKERS HAVEN'T COME UP HERE TO BE LAWN ORNAMENTS. AND SINCE THEY EAT AND SHIT ABOUT THE SAME AMOUNT AS YOU DO, THERE'S GONNA BE SOME REDISTRIBUTION OF THE GOODIES. YOU'RE GONNA SEE A LOT OF AMERICAN BLUBBER PARKED IN LINE ALONGSIDE SALVADORANS WITH THEIR WHEELBARROWS FULL OF WORTHLESS GREENBACKS WAITING TO BUY BLACK BEANS AND MASA HARINA IN BULK THEN HITCHING A RIDE HOME ON A FLATBED TRUCK LIKE THE REST OF THE WORLD SOUTH OF LOREDO DOES. OR MAYBE TAKING THE CHICKEN COOP FIREWOOD EXPRESS SURPLUS SCHOOL BUS BACK TO THE SAVAGE ARMED SUBURBS. A LITTLE TIP FROM THE OLE SCREAMING MAN: IF THERE IS A BILLY GOAT IN THE BACK OF THE BUS, RIDE UP FRONT. IF THE DAMNED GOAT IS UP FRONT, RIDE ON THE ROOF. THERE IS USUALLY SOMEBODY OR SOMETHING UP THERE TO HANG ONTO.

Hungry but still humpin'

Meanwhile, the truth stays buried in the crapola. According to the UN's newest report on the planetary condition, crop production has improved but has not kept up with population. World cereal production per person peaked in the 1980s, and has since been decreasing. We have over six billion people now -- there were far less than half that when I was born -- and there will be roughly nine billion people by 2050. But the UN, being a world organization that has to please a couple hundred governments, each beating its own national drum to its people, pretending there is a long term solution other than to eliminate two

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thirds of the world population within the above mentioned kids' lifetimes. Thus, the UN issues "millennium development goals." This neatly sidesteps the fact that if the present six billion mouths and assholes running the world's resources through their gullets like shit through a goose is unsustainable, then nine billion of the same are waaaaaay beyond sustainable in any way worth calling human life.

For starters it would take a doubling of world food production to (A) feed the current victims of hunger, and (B) to feed the additional three billion. Theoretically, we're going to cut back. We'll feed the nine billion by some unarguably admirable means, like cutting waste, not overeating, biofuels, and ending meat consumption. Small problem here Jackson: We're pretty much out of the phosphate fertilizer that is the foundation of world agriculture. The soil itself collapsing in terms of human nutrition, as we use up its finite reserves of vital elements iodine, chromium salts and other complex materials our six billion collective bodies need to function. And farming has already sucked down the world's water supply to the danger level. Yet somehow, we are going to come up with TWICE the water we now use by 2050, global warming and drying be damned. The whole time we are fixing global warming the population climbs.

Old Tom Malthus said something like this was gonna happen, although he got some of the details wrong, which a person just might conceivably do in predicting the fate of human civilization a couple hundred years in advance. Call me a softie here, but I tend to give the guy a break for getting it 90% right.

But then I'm no scientist. Supposedly sophisticated American scientists have been pissing on the grave of poor Tom at least since I was a kid in school. All my life American capitalist economists have proclaimed they've licked the population problem by using the world up faster. "A failed prophet of doom," I believe my high school teacher called Malthus. Even commies kicked Tom's dog around. Engles called him a barbarian. Marx couldn't handle Tom's action, either. Nor practically anyone else, from John Stuart Mill to Allen Greenspan. And we still get the stale argument that "This planet isn't crowded; it is just mismanaged." Even the greens seem to believe that we can manage our way out of this fatal mess, if we just recycle, wear hemp and vote for the candidate on the bicycle with the Celtic tattoo. The alternative geeks swear nanotech is gonna pull us through. But last I heard pandemic viruses were still smarter than carbon nanotubes. Something about rapid adaptability. Those little fuckers seem to be fast on their feet, so in a title match between nano tech (or any tech for that matter) managed in the ring by nerds, and natural evolutionary biology -- which not only has mother nature holding the towels in its corner, but also calling the fight

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-- I'm damned sure betting on the biology.

At any rate, when it comes to the planet, now under the new global corporate management, it looks to be managed to death, dirt, people and all. The new management, kings and feudal lords of corporate finance to a man, peer down happily from the forty-fourth floor at six billion potential slave wage employees and wonder if you can feed 'em on dirt and kudzu.

Malthus must be thrashing inside his lead lined English coffin right now, cackling, "Do the math, you fuckers!" But they won't. With the world's geet presently being loaded into their yachts bound for the Caymans, they don't have to. Not just yet, anyway. As for they guy on the bike with the Celtic tattoo, if he peddles long enough he's bound to run into some of those 49,671 human beings born while I was writing this.

SCREAMING MAN: AND WHILE HE'S SPEEDING HE CAN CLOSE HIS EYES AND MAKE A FUCKING WISH WITH TINKERBELL! THAT NINE BILLION WILL BE HUMPING AWAY TRYING TO CRACK THE TWELVE BILLION MARK. WHEN WE ARE ALL LIVING IN RENTAL STORAGE LOCKERS AND EATING PURINA PEOPLE CHOW, FUCKING WILL BE ONE OF THE LAST FREE PASS TIMES LEFT, OTHER THAN LISTENING TO THE 24/7 ADVERTIZING PIPED IN THROUGH OUR NECK CHIPS SELLING TEENSY STRAP ON YOUR ASS RUBBER BAND POWERED CARS. SO WE'RE GONNA HAVE EITHER HOMELAND SECURITY FUCK POLICE, OR FORCED STERILIZATION BY ICE PICK.

Actually, THE SCREAMING MAN is not so far off the mark. Human sterilizing crops are being researched, and I'm not entirely sure I'm agin it, partner, so long as they make the white people eat the stuff first.

In the meantime, the air is getting rather balmy in places it shouldn't. Such as the North Pole. So the corporate and financial lizards at the top of the world rock, in a last ditch effort to milk out a few bloody trillion dollars more, has come up with a plan: carbon emissions trading.

Just as in a Mafia handshake and kiss on the neck "business agreement," there are no escape clauses in the laws of physics. In either case the rules cannot be bent, though your ass may well end up worse than bent if you try to escape the debt you have racked up, be it in greenbacks or the green life supporting stuff of our planet. Both are finite and vital. Which means you get killed if you try to scam the game, and you certainly don't get to write yourself an escape clause

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after the fact. But that doesn't keep the high rolling carnie hucksters we call legislators from trying.

Naturally they like carbon trading. To my mind at least, making a profit off the fact that you did not piss into the community drinking gourd is the kind of logic only obsessive, property based western world governments and corporations could come up with. It assumes that (A) poisoning everyone else in the human fishbowl is a right to start with, and (B) that right is a property which can be bought and sold between corporate poisoners.

Traded or not, there will be plenty of carbon around, so don't worry about not getting your fair share. In fact, we could park every car on the planet and be assured of a nice steady supply of carbon pollution for our great-great-great grandchildren. Turns out that, decades ahead of an already grim global warming schedule, biological repositories of carbon are beginning to release enough of the stuff to tide us over so our progeny can gasp for breath as they skateboard piggyback to and from their barracks at the Manpower gulag. Anyway, we can monetize pollution, and trade our commonly shared hemlock back and forth, and we can call it a "partial solution and a progressive step forward." But it's still hemlock. Yet, economists assure us that it makes good sense propertize, then buy and sell catastrophe in the market of calamity.

SCREAMING MAN: LOOK HERE SPORT. THEY'RE POLISHING A TURD SO THEY CAN SHAKE DOWN THE YOKELS. AND THE DUMB MAMMY JAMMING PUBLIC BUYS IT! HELL, AN ECONOMIST SAID IT AND AN ECOLOGIST AGREED, SO IT MUST BE A GOOD IDEA, RIGHT? BUT WHEN ALL THOSE MOOKS WITHOUT ECONOMICS DEGREES FIGURE OUT THAT TURD IS NEVER GONNA SHINE, THE GAME WILL BE UP. ESPECIALLY WHEN THEY BEGIN TO ASSOCIATE POLLUTION WITH THE FACT THAT THEIR KIDS ARE BEING BORN WITH 177 TEETH AND AN I.Q. OF 33.

The Great Commons Shell Game

Civilization's most fatal folly was monetization and propertizing of the natural world that is humanity's great common. In fact those two things -- monetization and propertization -- have come to mean civilization from the perspective of most ordinary people over the increasingly brutal centuries they have enabled. If modern cumulative civilization is not perceived as being very brutal by, say,

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the average hedge fund manager or Russian oligarch with a cell phone jacked into one ear and hurtling through the earth's commons in a new BMW toward either the Outback Steakhouse or an appointment with his mistress, well, theirs is certainly a minority perspective. Ask any indigenous person.

"Commons" may be the current precious little term embraced by environmentally concerned American writers and activists including me but it rests on old European "ours together and my own private" concepts of the earth. That green foliage stuff whizzing by our windshields is more than commonly shared space. It is our commonly shared oxygenic and chlorophylic blood. And the "dirt" scraped and hammered into sterility and smothered under the asphalt is the armature, the bones of our existence. It was never possible for anyone to "own" any part of this so-called common, a word that only exists so someone else -- usually a less than nice fellow surrounded by thugs in armor and what-not -- could call a piece of it his private property. You dared kill and eat one of my grouse! Die peasant motherfucker!

But once the delusion set in, and the peasants were allowed to scratch out a living on "their own" miserable designated little square, there was no turning back. Especially if you were European or derivative thereof, and ultimately ended up on the winning side of the delusion, otherwise called empire. But there never was a "mine and theirs," when it comes to breathing clean air or drinking clean water. It only appeared so to propertized minds and cultures busy conquering and killing and pillaging other people's natural world. And thanks to feudalism's greatest shape shifting trick of all, capitalism, there ain't much left to pillage.

For Americans this is particularly ironic, especially in terms of politics. Just as we started ballyhooing the triumph of America consumer capitalism over communism, the world's ecology started backing up like a redneck septic tank. And Castro's Cuba, of all places, emerged as a beacon of relatively petroleum free eco-enlightenment, organic farming and clean air, thanks to our 45-year embargo and the Ruskies turning off cigarland's oil spigot in 1990. And now, despite its toxic track record, we find China, the same goddamned anthill people who flat out starved 30 million people (there's population control for ya) to make weight for a great leap forward, are running the two largest eco-reclamation projects on earth -- the Natural Forest Protection and the Sloping Land Conversion Programs. These are admirable efforts in the world's eyes, even if the air over the cities is still so foul buzzards fly into it and drop dead. It certainly beats the U.S. refusing to stop in at the Kyoto Conference, not even for the hors d'oeuvres.

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Or going to the Bali Eco Summit just to pick fights with the French. George Bush might claim to be from Texas, but he plays global poker like a drunk. Meanwhile, the Chinese are still reaping the benefits of offing those 30 million because, voila! They never reproduced. Are those guys inscrutable or what?

So what's an all-American guy to do but drive around the suburbs looking for fried chicken, watching the weeds grown up on the foreclosed lawns, and slobber into our cell phones regarding our geographic location, having lost all sense of historical and moral location. "I'm going down Shirley Drive. Where are you?" "Me? I'm eating a pizza and watching some hot blonde on Animal Planet smooch upon bonobo chimps. It's educational. Kinda sexy too, in a weird way." Now this folks, is called our "socio-economic environment." It may be social, and it may be economic, but it sure as hell ain't much of an environment. Unless you happen to be a chimp. Of course like the chimps, we are "prime apes." And as such, we're supposed to have big brains that account for our "success as a species." We're gonna have to rethink that one. I'm not seeing much success here, hoss. Are you?

Let somebody else fix it while I grab a salad

Sad lot that we are as a species, not everyone is a moral pig. Millions of individuals, some governments even, are unnerved by what is happening. In America the best among us are outraged, and protest that officialdom has failed us. Unfortunately, we are officialdom, indirectly as that may be. Because we are mankind and mankind is all inclusive, organically and forever forever having turned out to be rather shorter than we thought. If officialdom has failed us, it is because we have failed ourselves, and in many respects, our official governments provide us with a collective excuse not to act personally.

Mainly though, aware Americans are watching and waiting for someone else to make an important move. Guts are nonexistent in Americans these days, programmed out of us during the posh captivity of the "cheap oil fiesta" that drove our grotesque and brief civilization. Still, if ever there were a time to show some guts, it's now. Not by protesting -- which has become a security state supervised liberal pussy sport -- but by giving up the material life, the consumer life. Damned near all of it. Including all those leftie and alternative books from Amazon -- sitting on our asses reading and drinking green tea just because we can afford to is just another type of inaction and consumerism. It's the only real act of protest possible by the prisoners of our consumption driven monolith.

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True, you'll be just one iPodless and carless little guy throwing a single stone at the United States of Jabba the Hutt. But assuming you're still capable of any kind of life after the stellazine mind conditioning we've all been administered for past 40 years, I've got folding cash that says you will own your life in a way that seemed previously impossible. Hanging onto or chasing the bling is over with anyway, as dead as the economy. The Olive Garden and Circuit City are still open, true, but only because the hair and nails still grow on Jabba's corpse. Would somebody please quit pretending he's alive and yank the feeding tube?

Scoffers abound, those lurching, undead cud chewers whose best lick is: "Aw, if things were really that bad somebody would be doing something about it." Asked who that somebody might be, they usually come up with "the government." Or science or the stupidest of all, the Free Market Solution. In other words, they haven't the slightest fucking notion other than that there is some great governmental or commercial force that governs their destiny -- one so vast that, like god, they don't have to understand it, just swear by it and trust it, even if they don't know exactly what the hell it is. What it is of course is good old fashioned pillage. But Even Alaric the Goth limited pillage to three days with an extra day of rape thrown in if it had been a particularly good siege.

The gun and cheeseburger ethic

In Hopkins Village, one can find examples of everything that is both destroying the world (scarcely a villager here would not live the America lifestyle given half a chance) and good about the world (this morning I took a bath in the sea at dawn, then ate fresh papaya with one of the kids now supervising my pedicure.) Americans constitute 5% of the world's population but consume at least 28% of the world's resources. This is a primary contributor to the fact that the kids around me, Kirky, Lian, Ebony, Dennis and the rest have no future. Is that out fault? You and I are but two of 280 million Americans. Yet just because one's contribution to global misery seems small, it does not mean exemption from responsibility. If I took part in the mass stoning of a child, would you be less guilty because the stone I threw was a smaller than the rest?

Compassion figures somewhere into all this. Or is supposed to anyway. Without it, we are lost. Being born American, I have as little as anyone else. Last week a young Garifuna woman in our village, a neighbor and friend, lost her baby son in a terrible truck crash. That night, with neighbors gathered round her in the dim light of her shack, her grief was beyond grief. Unable even walk, she

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lay on the bed issuing a low feral gurgling howl. And as I stood there packed in among the black faces I felt nothing, except a strong sense of looking at a National Geographic documentary. Exotic dark people mourning in a strange setting. That's what American media does to human consciousness. Provides inhuman reference points in the brain/mind to replace experience and feeling. As a people who demonstrably show no guts and even less compassion about the rest of the world, we are in real trouble.

Comfortable as we have been in our plenitude, and confident as we have been in our providence -- or perhaps because of these things -- we Americans are now at the most critical and terrible moral and ethical juncture in our history. Do we care at all about anybody but ourselves? Is the reader, who has never met Ebony, Lian, Kirky or Dennis, responsible for accommodating any kind of future for them? Are we responsible that they be fed adequately full well knowing that the world has far too many babies anyway?

Not many Americans would eat a cheeseburger in front of a starving African child. But is it OK to eat the cheeseburger behind the child's back, out of sight of the child? How far must we get from the starving child to make it OK? What if we worked very hard to buy that cheeseburger? Does hard work justify everything? What is our responsibility? Or are we just helpless in the face of such things?

That we look to other people, politicians, police, and supposed experts to solve our problems demonstrates that we have learned to be helpless -- learned helplessness. None of us is helpless. The fact is that at any given moment in any given day, we can do something to help eliminate world misery and disparity. As any Third World priest can tell you, this is done mostly face to face, people helping people one at a time. But America's strictly enforced and fearful class lines prevent us from even associating with those we can actively help. The single mother, the felon just released from prison, the Mexican with four kids who empties your office waste basket at night

Americans and people of the developed world are in an unusual position. We can help by doing nothing. Simply by sitting on our asses and not buying stuff, not driving to the Gap or the organic market, not turning on our televisions, which is the ultimate act of protest, since it both denies access to our minds by corporate interests, and denies media monoliths that all important sea of eyeballs. We can refuse to consume. By not consuming we can create our own economic cutbacks. Otherwise, economic cutbacks are not going to happen and endless war is the inevitable outcome. People will be killed so others survive,

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advanced nations with sophisticated weaponry will kill off the people from weaker nations so as to grab their land and resources. It happens. And if we let it get that far (well, much farther, since we're already doing it) Americans will be in favor because we live here and not in a poor country. Evil as it sounds, we will have no choice because it is human to prefer to see others die and our own families survive. Morals never get in the way of ultimate survival. In the end, there is no other way except universal legislation to push our bloated material standard of living back three generations. Clearly democracy cannot make this happen. Unless it is the democracy of the human heart, that internal thing that seeks justice.

Overcoming our worst instincts is hard enough. But we also have an array of genuine enemies lined up before us, many but not all of our own making. Being the toughest kid on the global block, we long ago chose a geo-strategic struggle for dwindling energy resources rather than conservation. Simply because we could. The richest, strongest among us, the global schoolyard bullies, the ones with the power and holding all our national wealth (they hold the wealth, we hold the debt) are seeing the same thing coming down the pike that we see, and are building their forts around the planetary neighborhood, consolidating as much wealth and power among as few people as possible.

Yet no one is much alarmed by this because they are incapable of being alarmed by anything except what the state message tells them to be alarmed about, mainly terrorism, which is a form of chickens coming home to roost. America is moreover a nation of state supervised zombies. This used to scare the piss out of me, but now they have so long been the national furniture, they are merely depressing. Especially considering that, despite the Republican historical rewrite of the era, we, meaning my generation, had a real crack at turning this thing around during the Sixties. And we failed. We failed ourselves, failed our children. And as if that were not enough, we failed the planet and humanity itself. Fucking up doesn't come bigger than that. I spent at least a decade nailing the bling. The only excuse I can offer is that I didn't know any better. And I didn't. But somehow that seems so lame.

I'm trying to atone. Yes, that is the right word here, atone -- for my part in this unholy mess. I try to live on about \$4000 -- \$5000 a year and come close to pulling it off. I share the rest with the world's needy, almost never drive, refuse to own a cell phone or anything else that requires earth killing batteries other than the laptop that now provides my livelihood, yada yada you know the drill. Lest I sound holier than thou, let me confess to my continuing part in fucking

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up the earth's food chain due to a love of pork. But on the whole, I'm not too ashamed these days of my role in the ongoing disaster called America, though there is more I could do. Almost weekly I seriously consider refusing to pay income taxes as an act of personal resistance. But I ain't Joan Baez and this ain't the Sixties, and I'm scared shitless of going it alone. (Work with me here people!) Besides that, my wife is unenthusiastic about the idea of her geezer playing dressups in the Big House. The relatives would talk.

Thus, I am moreover just waiting it out. Either I'll watch my sorry assed species walk right off that cliff, or I will croak first. Crappy set of choices. Meanwhile, on a good day I realize that I've still got horses to break, ball games to fix and beer to drink.

Stay strong.

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