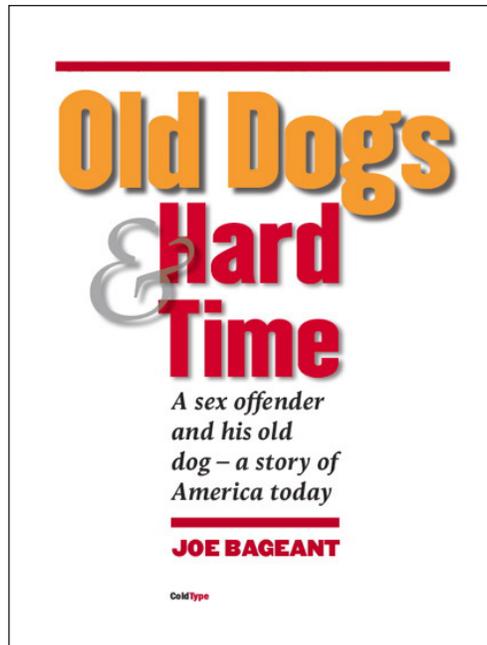

Old Dogs & Hard Time

*A sex offender
and his old
dog – a story of
America today*

JOE BAGEANT

ColdType



Joe Bageant's book, *Deer Hunting With Jesus: Dispatches from America's Class War*, has just been published in paperback. A complete archive of his online work, along with the thoughts of many working class Americans on the subject of class maybe found at <http://joebageant.com>. Feel free to contact him at joebageant@joebageant.com

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Late at night through my window by the computer I can see my neighbor Stokes bicycling at 10 p.m. to the local convenience store to buy groceries. Not only is that an expensive way to feed one's self, but it is the only way for old Stokes to cop some grubbs without getting thrown in jail. Seriously. As a convicted sex offender, he is not allowed to be near young women in a supermarket checkout line. Nor is he allowed to visit a park, or even his own grandchild, even though he is not a child molester by the court's own admission. He is not allowed to drink a beer. In fact, he is not even allowed to read Playboy Magazine.

A dozen or so years ago Stokes, now 66 with a gray ponytail, an altogether gentle soul who labors under the illusion he looks like Willie Nelson, (and even has a framed photo of Willie on his wall to invite comparison). Got caught by police in a, shall we say, "a vehicular sexual incident" with a married woman. They were both drunk, big deal. That happens in beer joints. To make a long story short, by the time

they got to court, the lady's testimony was that it was all against her will, which being a married woman, solved a lot of problems for her. That resulted in Stokes being convicted as a sex offender, while his public defender all but slept through the trial.

To make matters worse, Stokes had an unregistered handgun stashed in his car. Stupid, I know, but rednecks are often like that, and I'd be willing to bet there are more unregistered handguns than registered ones around here. This may horrify urban liberals, but legal or not, it is the common practice of tens of thousands of people down here in the southern climes of our great nation. It's also common practice nationwide to many thousands of cab drivers, night clerks, hotel parking valets, bill collectors, repo men, single women and god only knows how many others. At any rate, thanks to the gun that he never touched, Stokes was prosecuted for armed abduction for sexual purposes and did ten years.

He's been out for years now. But he was released into an entirely different world than he left – one that seems scripted by Adam Smith

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and Hanging Judge Roy Bean. As a convicted felon, he has been released from prison to serve a new sentence to serve time as a profit center for our economy. In truth, he has been one from the day he was charged.

First off, he was a profit center for the prison where he served his time. Now it is fairly common knowledge that America's burgeoning system of privatized prisons, "super jails," and related services has been a boon for corporations such as Corrections Corporation of America, Geo Group (formerly Wackenhut Corrections Corp.) and their investors. Prisoner leasing programs such as Florida's, which rents out prison labor for less than 50 cents an hour to private industry in the name of "job training," make building more prisons an attractive option for state governments and investors. It also makes recidivism desirable, since it assures the prison labor pool. Somewhere between 1 percent and 2 percent of Americans are behind bars, locked up at any given time, and as many more are on probation or under state monitoring. Obviously, capitalist style punishment is a solid financial investment.

Now I am not about to screech here that our prison system is anywhere near that created by Uncle Joe Stalin. We do not have 9 million people in it, and we do not get sent there for being late for work at the factory, our factories having been outsourced. However, after 1929 Stalin's prison camps were transformed to an economic machine. And in order to fulfill the camps' economic goals, more and more prisoners were required, just as more prisoners are required

to fulfill the investor goals of Corrections Corporation of America, Geo Group. In any case, convictions are profitable and the more of them there are, the more money both private interests and the state take in.

That in itself is way the hell past just being strange. But throw in the term sex offender and get on the registered sex offender list (which seems to be mostly filled with Johns who solicited prostitutes, though you'd never know it by the way they name the offense) and it all gets really weird. Chilling even. This is partly because of the taboo and stigma associated, but mostly for the bizarre monitoring rules, and the money involved in enforcement. For example, Stokes must pay a couple hundred a month for counseling, group therapy and so on, until they tell him he can stop doing so. This therapy mainly amounts to listening to the stories of more serious offenders, such as child molesters, even though he is not one but is being treated by law as if he were. Such is the fate of being legally shackled to any of dozens of types of "certified sex offender treatment providers," an ever expanding industry they tell me.

He also must pay for registration as an offender, blood, saliva, fingerprints, palm prints, police registration of his internet address (within 30 minutes of obtaining it), and so on with the Department of State Police and the Sex Offenders Registry, providing a new photo, address, etc., for 10 years, effectively the rest of Stokes' life, not to mention registering with the local cops wherever he lives. After five years he may petition the court for relief from having to

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reregister monthly. He cannot leave the state. He is supposed to inform employers of his status as a sex offender. So he cannot get a normal job and subsists on handyman work. In the end he generates about \$400 a month for one post-incarceration entity or another, whether he has a job or not.

Stokes' designated handlers tell him that the system would smile upon him if he would get more formal 8-5 employment, something that could be more easily tracked and taxed. Would that it were so easy for a 66-year-old man in this country. So he replies, "I'm retired dammit. I got the same right to live on my social security, if I can manage to, as anyone else."

Yes, but it's not much of a life for someone who once worked a skilled job setting up lights and stage gear in large arenas and performance venues. Now he lives in a basement workshop of an overcrowded apartment building/rooming house, in a space that is supposed to pass for an apartment but doesn't even come close. For that privilege he pays \$600 a month and is allowed to work off part of it off by the landlord as a handyman.

Stokes tells me he could get out from under much of this by, and here's the legal wording, "satisfying the court's criteria for clear and convincing evidence that due to his physical condition the person no longer poses a menace to the health and safety of others."

"You could cut your dick off," I suggested.

"Sometimes I wish I had," he sighs.

In any case, I am pretty dammed convinced parole is a racket, just like incarceration has

become a racket, just as everything in this whole goddamned country is a racket in disguise, from home mortgages to healthcare. If it is vital to ordinary citizens, it's a racket. But fear is the biggest racket of all. Even our rightful fear of sex offenders gets harnessed to the objectives of the corporate and political elites, woven into the weft and warp of the national delusion we call "the fabric of our society." The freedom loving one that currently has 2.2 million of its own citizens locked up and another 2 million walking around under strict post-incarceration supervision and monitoring.

At this writing there are supposed to be 117 registered sex offenders in this burg of 24,000 from which I write, Winchester, Va., yet only 61 in the surrounding county, which has a population of 73,000. Let me make a wild speculation here and say there may be a difference in the way justice is administered in the two localities.

As if Stokes' needed to catch any more bad breaks, Stokes' situation got worse. It seems he had the outrageous gall to get himself a dog. Stokes came upon a rather large black female mutt recently that looked like she had a little retriever in her, according to Stokes, though I could never see it. She was bone skinny, partially blind, and being neglected and abused by an old alcoholic woman down the street.

That dog, named Beulah, just loved Stokes. He lovingly fed her, and she stayed by his side constantly and obediently. But she kept getting skinnier and skinnier no matter how much he fed her. For a while we speculated it was worms, but I've seen enough dogs to know something

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worse was at work. Stokes spent money he didn't have on expensive worm medicine. But he surely did not have \$150 for a vet and tests, and in a nation where uninsured folks are let to die slowly because they cannot pay cash, there was damned sure no more mercy for dogs.

Mercy too has been privatized and costs money. Meanwhile old Beulah is hanging out in the back yard in a friendly fashion, weak and sick as she is, sniffing and getting petted by all who come her way. Dogs are like that. Uncomplaining and decent unto death. I've had several who passed that way. She was old and getting ready to die, sure as god made little green apples. Broke as Stokes is, this was certainly not going to be a veterinarian administered death, with a canine Kevorkian attending. And being a paroled felon, for damned sure Stokes was not going to produce a gun and shoot her, which is the way old dogs and other animals were put out of misery back in our day.

A situation like that is bound to draw the animal control officer's attention and rightfully so given the outward appearance of the situation. So Stokes was busted. An examination showed that Beulah had diabetes. Seems they'll get a vet to examine a dog to get a conviction but not to save a dog's life. Whereupon Stokes was charged with animal abuse by the animal control office of our city police department. "You should never have let that dog get in this condition; you should have taken her to a veterinarian!"

Now Stokes has a court appearance on the docket for animal cruelty. And of course

no money for a lawyer. That's where the compassion of a lonely old man for another sentient being will get you. Smack dab in the jaws of our justice system.

I hold middle-class America responsible for this deformed thing we now call justice. And I've wanted to write an article about the sex abuse crime industry scam in this country and proposed it to several magazines. Every one of them said that sex abusers are too unsympathetic as characters for them to publish. I pointed out that these are real people, not characters in a fictional work. The editors added that they were afraid the public might mistake such a story as being supportive of real sex offenders.

Governments and states exist to control people and for no other reason. If justice is achieved somewhere in the process, it's an added bonus. But control above all else is necessary for modern civilization to exist. Population grows by the minute, increasing social pressure on humanity.

More rules and more control are required to keep order. Order is defined as the way we think others should behave – or imagine them to misbehave. We support the state's police machinery and massive incarceration of our fellow citizens, so long as they are being imprisoned for the right reasons. They should pay. Every action in a capitalist world must produce money. So they should pay in cash.

I was recently in Minneapolis and spent a couple of nights getting drunk with a friend, an apartment building owner who in his younger years did hard time for burglary. Things were

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somewhat different then, he avowed. In the '50s and '60s, a prisoner may or may not have worked off his "debt to society." But in these times, he says, "the system demands you just deliver payment in cash. It's more efficient. But not fundamentally different. Back then, the rich still profited for our crimes more than we did. We stole \$10,000 worth of stuff. Next day in the paper we found that the guy we burglarized claimed \$30,000 worth for insurance purposes. Getting robbed was a winning situation for him. He made 20K on us."

It's also is a wining situation for the 20 percent of Americans in what we call the middle class – those actually living the middle-class life as advertised by the commercial and financial state's marketing department. It works well for Stokes' psychologist, his piss tester, his lie detector service contractor, the people with the sex offender web site contract, and all good citizens with investments on Wall Street. The psychologist needs money to send his kid on the private school trip to Italy this summer. The contractor providing the sex abuser services just built a summer down on the eastern shore of Virginia. The state police officer running the sex abuser monitoring program will retire in six years -- his investments need to earn another

\$50,000 in that time. But hold on!

Honest to God, as I conclude writing this – and I swear on a stack of friggin' Bibles – a police prowler car and two of the department's animal control officers in a police truck just parked in front of Stokes' place, across my driveway. They get out after rifling through some papers on a clipboard and talking on cell phones.

Now they have walked over to Stokes' back door. He comes out and they sit him down in a lawn chair while they stand over him, hands on hips, lips moving under dark sunglasses. And the neighbors are all peeking out their blinds, watching the cops accost the registered sex offender (once he was on the internet registry, word got around here fast). They are probably looking at the animal control officers' truck and thinking, "Oh my gawd! Bestiality too?"

Anyway you look at it, this cannot be good. Not for Stokes, not for you or me or anyone else less than enamored with the idea of a police state.

And Stokes? As he told me only yesterday, "I'm a goddamned magnet for bad luck."

No he's not. He's just one more anonymous human profit center to be squeezed, one more grape to be crushed in a grotesque blood and money press that has no mercy. **CT**

FOLLOW UP

The fear of outrage

This story caused a landslide of poignant, and often terrifying emails to my web site – www.joebageant.com – describing other victims of our system. Some are as young as ten years old, others are working single moms or retired people whose lives were ruined by our increasingly punitive state, a state that increasingly de-rives profit by inflicting misery upon its citizens through an ever-growing number of laws and regulations.

The majority of Americans do not feel a thing about these state orchestrated persecutions of their fellow citizens. They do not feel anything because they are afraid to allow themselves to feel outrage. And because their government has conditioned them not to feel public anger. There are social consequences (being an outcast) for speaking such things aloud. There are even more consequences for acting upon those feelings. The citizenry is deeply afraid of those consequences. The bottom line is that they are afraid of their government.

But as long as these citizens pretend nothing is happening, they believe they are safe. Safety, they believe, is being below the radar of officialdom, whether it be that of the IRS, immigration, or the cop in the rear

view mirror. Unfortunately, both the radar and the officialdom are those of an expanding punitive surveillance state. So staying below the radar means increased cringing all your life.

Then one day it becomes impossible to cringe any lower. The boot comes down as far as possible upon the unforgiving earth. The boot begins to grind upon the people for the simple sake of grinding despotism. Much as people tend to give despotism a face and a name, despotism is not a man, not a woman, not a government. It is an atmosphere, an environment, a world granted permission to exist by people whose culture and spirit has become necrotic through fear. One whose capability for compassion, respect, reverence even, for the freedom of others, and therefore liberty, has been extinguished.

The totalitarian night does not fall all at once on a people. First comes the ambivalence, then the numbness, then the boot. Call this our deepening twilight. When the twilight ends, there are only the anonymous groans amid the darkness. In fact, one can hear them even in this twilight. Here are excerpts from a few more letters I received regarding the use of laws against the citizenry. To my mind they constitute such groans.

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● A boy who at age 10 was turned over to Child Protective Services for getting naked with his 6-year-old brother to compare penises (a one-time incident that happened when he was visiting his Dad -- the step-mother called CPS). He ended up being charged with sexual assault, had to complete crisis counseling, was put on probation, and had to register as a sex offender until he was 23. Because of his status as a sex offender, he and his mother have been evicted from apartments.

He quit school in tenth grade because he couldn't take the taunting from classmates. Even though a minor, his photo and personal info were put up on the public sex offender web site, as are the photos of all minor-aged sex offenders. He was never able to fulfill his dream of joining the Navy, and he often loses jobs when his employers find out about his ex-offender status. As a sex offender he is required to re-register anytime he moves. One time his father moved, and he didn't notify the courts, so during a visit with his father he was arrested for failing to register and ended up spending 46 days in jail alongside hard-core rapists and murderers. All supposedly because he engaged in normal show me yours and I'll show you mine childhood behavior WHEN HE WAS A CHILD.

And this was a boy who, according to his mother, had been a very bright, high-potential little guy who had never been in trouble beforehand. Let's face it, when a kid who is innocently wanting to compare his penis with his brother's is treated the same

as some monster who raped and sodomized his victim at knife-point, we may be just a tad over-reactive when it comes to children's sexuality in our society.

● I live in the Florida panhandle. We just had a case where a 17-year-old woman/child had a baby. Alone and with no help from anyone. The baby was born with a birth defect that, to put it mildly, caused it to be born dying. When she finally scraped enough money together to take the child to a doctor, the state took the baby and charged the young mother with child abuse. Every doctor swore that the child's problem was the birth defect. After three weeks and a trial in which she was acquitted, the state in its mercy handed the dying baby back to the woman/child and said sorry about that. The baby died two days later.

● Robert was threatened by the juvenile justice worker that if he didn't hurry up and finish treatment he would be sent to juvenile detention. She then felt the need to share with Robert that she used to be employed by Wackenhut and while working there, a group of boys dragged another boy into a room and sodomized him until his rectum fell out and he bled to death. Treatment at that detention center involves torture and experimental behavior modification techniques. And covert taping.

Robert was made to write a "healthy script" and a "deviant script." These he read aloud into a tape recorder. When he became aroused, he had to break open an ammonia capsule and inhale deeply. Staff

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members listened to these tapes to make sure that he choked. That meant that he was doing it properly. Robert suffered horrible nosebleeds for months after he came home. Then there are the plethysmographs. This is a test where the older boys were taken out of the facility. A ring with sensors is placed over the boy's penis and they are shown sexually graphic material. Robert was too young to do this, but went out of the facility with two other boys and a staff member to act as chaperone. This was necessary because the staff member named was accused by a gay black boy of engaging in oral and anal sex with him in the bathroom of the facility where they do the plethysmographs.

● About a year and a half ago my sister and her husband had been fighting. She ended up getting her own apartment. It got to the point where she drove by their house once and threw a rock through the porch window, out of spite. He called the police out of spite. The rock didn't even break the whole thing, just punched about a two-inch hole in it. The police issued a warrant for her arrest. My sister turned herself in, and faced multiple charges including disorderly conduct, vandalism, and domestic violence. Prosecutors like to make numerous charges in the hope one of a few will stick, or in the hope that the defendant will be more likely to plea bargain and the more severe ones will be dropped.

My sister did the plea bargain so as to avoid a jail sentence. She didn't fight the charges. She had to go to expensive domes-

tic violence classes for six months, which cost her a couple thousand dollars altogether. She had to meet with a probation officer and submit urine tests. She was not allowed to use any drugs or even alcohol. She had to submit to random drug tests, where police would show up at her place and demand she go submit a urine sample. She had to forfeit her right to own a firearm for the rest of her life. And of course, she now has a criminal record that includes domestic violence, so half of her job options are gone. All this happened because her marriage turned bitter, she threw a rock at a small window on the porch of her own house because she was angry and hurt, and her husband wanted her to have a criminal record in case they ended up divorcing. The justice system in this country is a joke. It has no moral legitimacy, only the threat of force (imprisonment, a criminal record etc.) to back it up.

● A situation was investigated regarding a fort my son and his friends had a couple blocks from home. A social worker asked me if I was aware of this fort. I was not aware. She said that it was perfectly normal to have a fort at that age and she didn't see a problem. I later requested and received a copy of the file from the Child Protective Services in 2005. It is several inches thick. The summary of the fort incident states it was alleged that Robert was caught laying on top of a girl with his pants down; also the allegations stated that Robert was trying to coax young girls into his fort for inappropriate sexual activities. Robert was nine-

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and-a-half years old in October, 2002.

● I had noticed on the Child Guidance Center stationary that there was a list of names for the Board of Directors. The court referee and my court appointed attorney were both on the Board of Directors. Child Guidance Center had the largest foster care contract in the county. This was a major conflict of interest.

● The county probate court judge who adopted out my two oldest children years earlier was under investigation by the State Court Administrative Office for misappropriating more than \$876,000 from the Child Care fund. The judge has since retired with full pension and the taxpayers were made to pay back the money owed to the state. This was all documented in the local newspapers.

● On September 27, 2007, my son Eric went to prison. He was convicted of five felony counts of “Computer Aided Solicitation of a Minor.” The girl was 15. My son was 22 at the time. They chatted for 18 months, CHAT only! Not predatory chat at all, he wasn’t looking for any “victims” and he never knew where she lived, never met her in person, he never touched her; but for saying the wrong thing online, he was sentenced to three years hard labor and then must register as a sex offender for 25 years. The question is, does the punishment fit the crime? He had NO clue that chat was illegal, neither did anyone else I’ve talked to about it. Louisiana is desperate to fill those jails and get that government

funding for SURE. My son pleaded guilty because he could have been given up to 50 years in prison for his “crime.” It was his first offense, he’d never been in trouble before and always followed the letter of the law. So far Eric is doing okay in prison. He calls as often as he can. Prisoners can only buy certain calling cards from a certain company – the jail makes a profit from these. He buys Ramen noodles for almost \$1 each because sometimes he’s still hungry after meal time and he can put them with warm water in a cup and eat them to fill up.

(Eric’s mother has taken the campaign public in an effort to get justice for her son. She has launched a web site that gives the details and progress of Eric’s case. Go to: <http://www.changingthelaw.com/> – be sure to click on the update link at the top page to read about the impossible conditions placed on Eric when he is eventually released. He can’t drive by or be within 500 feet of a school or church, which is nearly impossible in East Texas.)

And on and on.

The letters keep coming, mostly from mothers, frantic, pain-filled pleading letters from fellow Americans hoping on a long shot that someone will hear. Hoping that the hand of assistance will extend from some unknown citizen. Grim as our nation and society are becoming, this is not impossible. A kind attorney in New York City has offered to pay for the legal defense in the animal abuse case of my friend and neighbor Stokes. **CT**

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