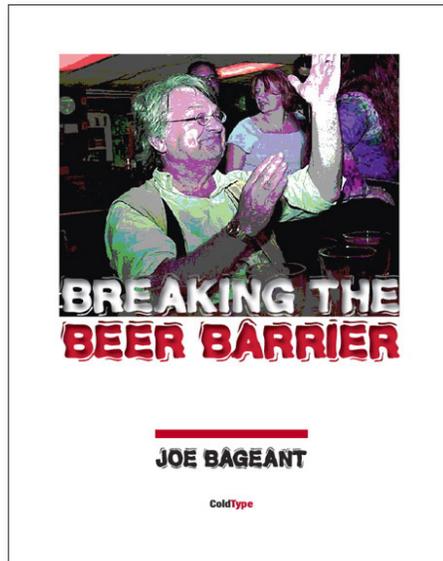




BREAKING THE BEER BARRIER

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 jobageant@joebageant.com

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Hello fellow members of the liberal media conspiracy. I'm happy to be here at the annual gathering of our secret cells.

Here's my question: Why can't progressive media ever learn to communicate in redneck and born again bubba? I would guess that a lot of you are thinking, "Why would anybody want to?" One answer is the election of George Bush – but there are many others. For example, a third of all Americans live in the geographic South

and over 50% live in the "cultural south" – which is to say places with white Southern Scots-Irish values – places such as western Pennsylvania, central Missouri and southern Illinois, eastern Connecticut, northern New Hampshire – and others we never think of as Southern. When you look at people in what has come to be called the red state heartland, most of their values are more or less traditional white Scots-Irish values.

Yet, as much talk as there is about these fellow Americans, particularly during

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election season, most liberal and alternative media never speak to them or for them. And that's a shame, because when we do that – we abandon the project of equality for all Americans – some of which happen to hunt, fish, drink Bud Light and enjoy NASCAR, Bon Jovi and Toby Keith.

Anyway, just telling our own truth to people who already agree with us isn't going to do anything, regardless of our illusions about the power of the "blogosphere," etc. As Bill Moyers said last year at this conference, despite all the new information platforms, cable, the Internet, blogs, podcasts, YouTube and MySpace – our resources for collective understanding as Americans are contracting, not expanding. To make matters worse, we progressives use these resources to talk to one another in a closed conversation, instead of reaching all the people.

I had an editor once, Mr. Miller, we called him respectfully. Mr. Miller was one of the old school shot-and-a-beer newsmen who'd come up through the ranks of reporters in the days when almost no newsman had a journalism degree. He told me: Joe, it's a damned privilege to communicate to an audience of a dozen citizens, much less thousands or millions. Honor that privilege. Write for everyman. Don't become a stenographer for the powerful, regardless of their politics or party."

I still believe that. I would no more be a stenographer for Barack Obama than for

George Bush. Whether we are on radio, TV or run a news blog, it's humanity and a nation we're obligated to, not the opinions or political junkyism of groups or individuals, or political correctness.

Especially political correctness. Political correctness by definition excludes majorities and demonizes millions who do not see the world in terms of social politics.

For instance, if I said on NPR that, "The hebes don't vote their own interests because they are too misled by the Israel lobby," I'd probably be escorted out the door.

If I posted on Daily Kos that, "The darkies don't vote their own interests because they are they are misled by the Democrats," the post wouldn't be up there very long.

But if I say, "The rednecks don't vote their own interests because they are misled by the gun lobby," most of liberal middle class America agrees with me. Proof is in the sales of my book, *Deer Hunting With Jesus: Dispatches from America's Class War*, and the fact that I've called my own people aggravating rednecks a hundred times in interviews without objection by the interviewer or listeners. It's been normal practice so long that we rednecks are somewhat immune to it and often take a certain defiant pride in the label. I'm proud to be a redneck. But I'll tell you this: My name ain't Earl.

I am an Appalachian native whose education consists primarily of a GED, and a few college incompletes. Yet I have

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managed to live a couple of decades in the middle class – as a news reporter, magazine editor and publishing executive. I’ve lived in both worlds and still do. So I can tell you from experience that the liberal middle class is condescending to working class redneck culture. Which is insulting, but not a crime. The real crime of course, is the way corporate conservatives lie to my people, screw us blind, kill us in wars and generally keep us in a state of economic serfdom. The good news is that a lot of lower working class people are starting to figure that out. We should be reaching out to them.

If we bothered to really cover redneck working class culture on the ground, we’d be surprised to find how many progressive rednecks – what I call leftnecks – are out there. Many are autodidacts like myself. People whose convictions are rooted in life experience, people who admire Noam Chomsky but revere Joe Hill.

Speaking of leftnecks, let me mention a couple of hard scrappers in the heartland doing just what I have suggested. For instance, there’s Bob Kincaid of Head On Radio in Beckley, West Virginia. Kincaid’s internet radio project is live and on the ground from coal country – fighting mountain-top removal. He’s backed up by the hard sweating carpenter-millwrights union down there, as well as much of the religious community. Working men get their say on Bob’s show, unguided by the nose ring of scripted questions and for as long as

it takes them to say it.

And there’s John Kelly in Corpus Christie, Texas, who has brought together the far left, centrists and conservative local business to save wetlands. John’s little newspaper, internet work and tireless activism is causing local Texas red state voters to reconsider a lot of things. “There’s no digital divide here,” John says.

Both John Kelley and Bob Kincaid put every dollar they have and many they don’t have behind what they do. And what they do is fight the good fight face to face and on the ground in that real world red state America. The one that was ceded over to Fox Network and neo-con talk radio because it was never on the urban media radar screen. And still isn’t. Sending a big city reporter into the heartland for a week so just doesn’t do it.

Our urban areas are not the only places exploitation occurs, and people of color are not the only people being exploited – just the most obvious. I’ve always thought that we’d all be served better if our news media centers were moved out of Washington and closer to working class America. To Keokuk, Moline or Birmingham. Someplace undistorted by the Washington “power buzz,” New York ambition or Los Angeles glitz. Actually, New Orleans wouldn’t be a bad choice these days.

Getting back to left-necks though, America’s media caste is put off by the way these folks look and sound – and their

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unpredictable opinions – which do not conform to standard ideology or political correctness. I say give them a voice, even if it happens to make you wince, due to your own social and political conditioning. Let a working man speak. Tough, free thinking carpenters and truck drivers – give'em the mic. Let'em talk. They know how to speak to their own people, and can show us all a thing or two about how this country really works.

American media is more than happy to deal with the rural red state “working class” as long as it remains conceptual and in the abstract. And “out there somewhere” in “the heartland.” A place to be polled and surveyed by Gallup to fuel the communicating class’s self-absorbed political abstractions. Instead of daily reports on class issues – as we said, are the true basis of all politics – the people get reports on “the economy.” An abstraction if ever there was one.

So what we have in mainstream media – and the biggest of the alternative media – is a societal caste of middle class disseminators, granted entitlement to be the **one voice**, describing America in political abstractions to the **many**. Which in itself is weirdly authoritarian. And they maintain that entitlement as long as they maintain fake objectivity and throw around enough data to sound informed. And as long as they do not mention that socialism is the fastest growing political affiliation in our hemisphere. And as long as they

never quote Chavez or Castro in context. Our entire mainstream information format is fraudulent. For instance, every daily newspaper in America has a business section but none has a labor section.

Beyond that, even alternative news sources get sucked along into the back draft of meaningless mainstream media controversy at the expense of useful exposition of truth. For example, if you really want to inform the public in a useful way, you do not ride the Reverend Wright story to death, commenting and counter-commenting on a story purposefully set up to paint Barack Obama as an angry black man. (Hell, he’s the least angry candidate and barely passes as black.) The time and effort might better have been used to examine the common political interests between blacks and working class whites. Instead, we got punditry and academics being interviewed about the role hick racism will play in Obama’s presidential campaign. Nobody mentioned that Obama supports mountaintop removal, and that most West Virginians are not coal miners and do not favor mountaintop removal. But what do the hicks know? Now you can pooh pooh this all you want, but contempt for the hicks from the sticks is especially pronounced in media and academia, both of which are stuffed with middle class whites. Yet, there is not a person here, regardless of politics, who does not share many, many political interests with white hicks.

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Here's an example of common interests – skinning a buck deer and saving the environment. If we bothered to reach the 13 million hunters, or cover their issues, we might get the chance to inform them how the current administration has privatized, polluted and plundered millions of acres of oxygen and fresh water producing hunting and fishing grounds. Instead, we interview an eco-scientist, or some guy wearing an Indiana Jones hat who has written a book aimed at ecologically concerned middle class urban and suburbanites. Personally, if I were trying to stop the rape of the outdoors, I'd prefer telling millions of armed, voting hunters how fewer licenses are being issued and at higher fees because there is less natural area to hunt and fish.

But we don't. So heartland hunters still think people like us want to take away their guns, which no aware person, or even the unaware ones running the Democrat party, even remotely wants to do these days.

It's much the same with racism. Racism may be an issue in some parts of West Virginia, and it sure as hell will be used as a wedge issue there.

But much of what is being called racism is simply anger at being neglected. There's a saying in the South that goes. "If you're poor and white, you're out of sight." But that does not mean you are filled with hate. As Virginia's U.S. Senator Jim Webb said recently, if poor working whites could get at the same table as black America you could

recharge populist American politics. He's right. A couple of generations have come along since the Sixties. There has been much change. For instance, West Virginia has the highest national high school graduation rate – 71%. Arkansas is third in the nation. And maybe one of the best kept secrets in America is just how many rednecks have mixed race children or nephews and nieces, etc. I have two myself. But pundits and media sanctioned authorities, both black and white, still dine out on broad Sixties era stereotypes.

Same goes for gays. Rednecks are supposed to be militantly anti-gay. I can tell you that few rednecks I know of are militantly anti-gay. They simply do not give a shit. I'm sure the feeling is mutual.

Immigration is different matter. White working Americans I know are dead set against it. Personally, I'd like to see all of Latin America swamp this country and completely crash the place and its institutions. I'm one of those evil socialist types who think America should be brought down to a second or third world level like most of the rest of the planet. I live in a poor Central American village half the year and eat iguanas and cow's foot soup. It ain't all that bad.

But for working class Americans the truth is that illegal immigration is one of the factors bringing back indentured servitude in this country. You may call this observation xenophobic. But it's not **your** job that is

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being taken away for pennies on the dollar. You don't lay bricks, cut meat, or fix cars – Xenophobia doesn't mean crap to my neighbor, Smoke, who now does carpentry work – when he can find it – for ten bucks an hour. He used to make fifteen.

As I said earlier, much of working class America sees media people as removed, urbane, and too politically correct to grasp the very real effects things like immigration have on their lives. There is some truth in this. But political correctness and middle class sensibilities are no crime – just extremely limited. Unfortunately though, many working class folks also have the wrong impression that we cherish the ethnic, racial and gender issue constituency more than we do the 90 million working class people in the America. Last time I looked, our republic was still one nation that included the hardest laboring class. All 90 million of them. Let's crack the politically correct mold for once and for all. We can start by honestly addressing the issue of class in America, including the white working class.

And just what is working class?

Well, working class is not being able to choose what kind of work you do – when you work – how much you get paid, when you take a vacation – whether you have benefits – or when you take a walk because the man doesn't need you anymore. The

majority of Americans work under exactly those conditions. Or worse.

The truth is that about 65% of the American work force is working class, not middle class. It has nothing to do with how much they earn. It's about power over their own daily lives.

But more importantly, most of working class America cannot see or hear any of us from where they live and work in life. The way they got to that place was through simple neglect of the laboring class – mostly governmental neglect. When a government neglects the needs of a group or class, it is because it knows it can get away with it. Otherwise known as a screwjob. Reagan screwed them. Clinton screwed them. Both Bush administrations screwed them. Democratic or Republican majorities in Congress didn't matter. They've been neglected by our government for the past 36 years. Yet that was made possible through media neglect. Ignoring unprofitable or less visible Americans, self interest, careerism, preening before affinity groups – it occurs in all media, large or small, whether it be CBS, Fox Network, Huffington Post or Daily Kos. It's disheartening.

But I find it particularly disheartening in the Internet media. We compete with each other for demographics, niche markets and traffic just as the networks compete for ratings. In too many cases it simply creates personality cults in cyberspace – choosing wit over wisdom – celebrity lust being what

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it is in America. It's built into our system. And that's a shame too.

I can remember when the emergence of the Internet was heralded as opportunity for global referendums on things like where the world's wheat would be distributed. We have become so cynical that we would now laugh at the idea. Or so disappointed as to cry over it. Yet, for all its faults, I still believe the Internet is the most promising instrument of truth available to us right now.

Now here's where the audience starts throwing the rotten tomatoes at me. When it comes to oppression and neglect, we need more voices than just the women's studies professors and the gay-rights activists. Sure, they have a just cause. But there is a larger issue. We have established a vast white underclass in America that looks to be a permanent fixture of the new global corporate order of things. And besides, it doesn't matter if a gay man has a marriage license hanging in his cubicle if that cubicle is located in a corporate totalist state, a spiritual and moral gulag built upon a purposefully created and managed economic serfdom. So let's concentrate on broadening our service base. And let rural and working class Midwesterners and Southerners know that, while we may not be Coors Light drinkers and never caught a catfish or tuned up an engine, we don't hate people who do. And that we care about their problems too.

It is very uncomfortable for some of us to cross class lines to communicate with poorly educated folks who are obese, live in modular homes, or ride ATVs across wilderness because they do not know any better because public education has crashed and information sources are chiefly propaganda – creating citizens whose politics include torture if their president says it does.

It is also uncomfortable for middle class people in media, even the most idealistic ones, to take serious risks. Especially when they are safely occupied among their own kind, even if their kind is only 20% of the American public these days. Yet, there is a battle going on for America's soul. We can no longer afford to remain inside the politics of the comfort zone.

It's not as if we do not know what laboring America is about. Many among the middle class employed in media – both liberal and conservative – had grandparents who farmed the Midwestern plains, sweated in hellish factories or pushed handcarts in places like New York City. Today, their middle class grandchildren – often unknowingly – they take a snide attitude toward and rural and working class values, tastes and lifestyles.

I myself spend a bit of time in the liberal comfort zone. I travel to America's cities for media events, I eat sushi, and talk with Clinton-Obama worshiping lawyers, academics and publishers over martinis. And we discuss why the white rural

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working class so often votes against its own interests, when it comes to politics in **real world** America. I always wonder exactly where that is located. The real world, I mean.

Here's a fact about real world America: Bowling alleys outnumber sushi bars more than three to one in this country. In fact, if you go over to the *Bowl and Lounge* in Columbia Heights, a few miles from here – you can get batter fried walleye, slaw and fries for six bucks. And over at Elsie's on Marshall Street there's beer and gravy fries and heavy metal bowling on Sundays. There are no sushi bars in bowling alleys. One man's hell is another's comfort zone.

And so, still I ask (and who am I to ask anything?): How many of us are willing to leave our comfort zone? Speak out for the rednecks and the poor working whites about their bad health and broken futures? And why their elderly parents rot in nursing homes owned by ex-car dealers – Or the dynamics of hopelessness that drives the meth epidemic among working

class whites? It's every bit as destructive as the black crack epidemic. Again, how many of us are willing to leave the comfort zone? You tell me.

A couple of weeks ago this conference was described to me as the biggest alternative media schmoozerama of the year. Thankfully, it is also a lot more than that. For all our human faults, each of us holds some piece of the truth in the face of a mountain range of national lies. And we are here together in one spot because the truth means something to us.

Let me close with another thing Mister Miller told me. He said, "Journalism is just a trade, a craft in service of the truth. And the truth is not a job or a profession – it's a calling."

That call is louder than ever. We can hear it across a deformed set of national priorities, such as the obscene war in Iraq – across race lines and gender lines. We have answered those calls. And if we make an effort, we can hear it across class lines, and answer that call too. **CT**

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