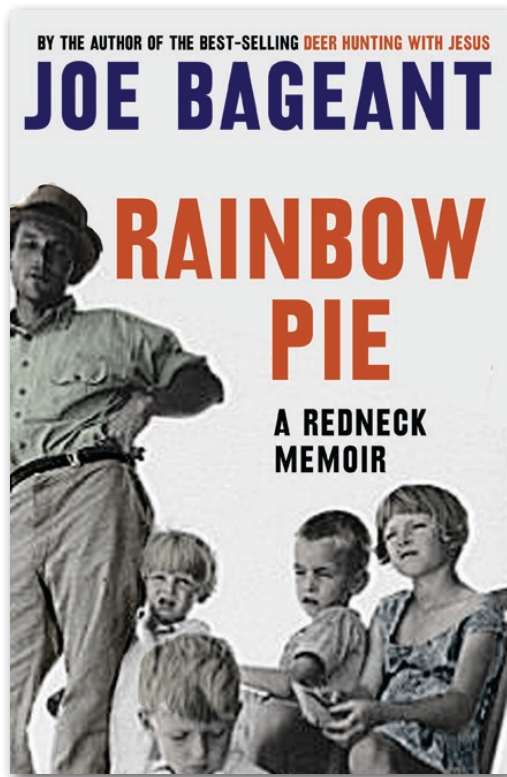


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UNDERSTANDING AMERICA'S
CLASS SYSTEM

JOE BAGEANT



JOE BAGEANT is the author of **Deer Hunting with Jesus: Dispatches from America's Class War**. His newest book, **Rainbow Pie: A Redneck Memoir**, deals with America's permanent white underclass, and how it was intentionally created. To be released in September in Australia and October in the United Kingdom. **Rainbow Pie** is available for preorder from Amazon-UK and Amazon-Canada. In Australia, the book may be pre-ordered at www.scribepublications.com.au

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How about them political elites, huh? Five million bucks for Chelsea Clinton's wedding, 15K just to rent the air-conditioned shitters – huge chrome and glass babies with hot water and everything. No gas masks and waxy little squares of toilet paper for those guys.

Yes, it looks big time from the cheap seats. But the truth is that when we are looking at the political elite, we are looking at the dancing monkey, not the organ grinder who calls the tune. Washington's political class is about as upwardly removed from ordinary citizens as the ruling class is from the political class. For instance, they do not work for a living in the normal sense of a job, but rather obtain their income from abstractions such as investment and law, neither of which ever gave anybody a hernia or carpal tunnel. By comparison, the ruling class does not work at all.

Moneywise, Washington's political class is richer than the working class by the same orders of magnitude as the ruling class is richer than the political class. This

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gives the political class something to aim for. To that end, they have adopted the ruling elite's behaviors, tastes and lifestyles, with an eye on becoming members. Moreover, it is a molting process that begins with the right university and connections, and culminates in flying off to Washington with the rest of your generation's most privileged and ambitious young moths.

They make enough dough to at least fake it until they make it. Fifty-one of the 100 members of the US Senate are at the very least millionaires – probably more than that, since multi-million dollar residences and estates are exempt from the official tally. For instance in the House, Nancy Pelosi's net worth is either \$13 million, or \$92 million, depending upon who is counting. Why they bother to shave such large numbers is a mystery. Thirteen million, ninety two million, the difference is not gonna change our opinion of Nancy. Our opinion being that the broad is loaded. More than loaded. The comparatively poor members of Congress, like Barney Frank, are near mil-

lionaires. His publicly declared net worth is \$976,000. For the life of me, I cannot see how they get by.

Along with the habits, the political class adopts the ruling class's social canon and presumptions, especially the one most necessary for acceptance: That the public has the collective intelligence of a chicken. OK, so it may be very hard to disprove that at the moment, but we must maintain at least some egalitarian semblance here. Anyway, as a group, the political elites think, look and act alike, and act toward their own interests. That makes them a class.

Screw the proles, just count the money

This political class stands between all of us down here and the tiny minority in the ruling class waaaaaay up there, wherever the hell up there is. No use to squint. You can't see it from where we are. That comes in mighty handy in denying the existence of a ruling class.

On the other hand, you do not need to see an egg-sucking dog in action to know what to expect – or not to expect. The track record of the political class is an open book. As the layer of millionaires buffering the elites who pay for their campaigns, they've done their jobs. They approved the Bush administration's massive tax cut for the rich. They dropped the per-child tax credit for families with incomes less than \$20,000. They "reformed" prescription drugs right out of Medicare. They reformed health care into hundreds of billions of increased profits for the insurance industry.

However, the American political class' finest moment came in September 2008 when the financial greed machinery of American investment houses went tits up. The Republican and Democratic parties, major corporations, and manufacturers



Deep in the boiler room, the Goldman Sachs black bag crew had wired up the "economy" with enough explosive "financial instruments" to take out every working mook's home, or retirement savings

of US opinion came together in one of the greater bipartisan efforts in modern US history. There was nothing to do, they all agreed, but buy up \$700 billion in "toxic asset" investments. "Otherwise," they prophesied, the world would end. Meaning that the ongoing national Ponzi scheme they have always sold to the American people as the US economy, would finally crash.

And in case there were any skeptics out there among the unwashed, the public was reminded just how much they stood to lose – which was everything. Deep in the boiler room, the Goldman Sachs black bag crew had wired up the "economy" with enough explosive "financial instruments" to take out every working mook's home, or retirement savings, which the medical industry was already sucking up at an alarming rate. Something had to be done before the health care industry got it all, and repo the family ride.

Yessiree, it was gonna be a "systemic collapse," by god, and if you needed proof, just look at the way both George Bush and Barack Obama agreed that some American corporations were too big to let sink, therefore it was time for the public to start bailing out the boat. Meanwhile, the royal economists were unanimous in that this "rescue" was going to require another 10 trillion bucks somewhere down the pike – a very short pike. So it must all be damned serious and we gotta do this thing. Right folks?

In an unusual display of common sense, the American public said "Bullshit," by margins of three or four to one, depending upon region. That did not bother political and economic elites much. What the fuck do the proles know anyway?

Then, in midstream, the political and economic owning classes switched horses, after realizing there was more gravy for the kingpins in buying up banks and big indus-

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tries. It was unconstitutional, but what the hell, that's what Supreme Courts are for. The proles mumbled and peered into their TV sets for explanations that never came.

Of course, partisan opposition being what it is these days – a blood-soaked ditch of snarling hyenas – Obama's election meant the GOP needed to denounce the new Democratic president for display purposes. Or at least shit in the Oval Office, and then blame him. So most Republicans holding office in 2008 were forced to argue publicly against “troubled asset relief,” “stimulus packages,” and the huge bailouts. Besides, somebody had to unfurl the motley banner of a “self balancing free market,” at least widely enough for the GOP to hide behind in the back room where the real deals are always cut. The place where the weapons companies propose systems, using congressional representatives and generals as sales reps. Where it is understood that, as John Kenneth Galbraith pointed out near the end of his life, when it was safe to tell the truth, “stockholders are just appendages, someone to hold the bag for the corporations, and stocks are just gambling chips for hedge funds and Wall Street,” and for the suckers who think they can actually outwit High Frequency Trading – a.k.a. High Speed Fraud. (Thanks to reader Brent B. for sending me that one).

Ah, but I have digressed. What else is new? The main thing is that the smoke has now cleared, the money is in ruling class coffers, and a spin the bottle game for a few prosecutions is underway to entertain the crowd for the next few years. Public burnings in the national town square of media always draw a crowd.

Bwaaaaaa! Obama won't let us play

Fortunately, for both parties, there is no such thing as an American political memo-



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ry. That Lindsay Lohan dated fellow rehab client, snowboarder Riley Giles, yes, that can be remembered. That the Republicans signed off on similar, if smaller giveaways under Pappy Bush and Clinton – well, that may as well be ancient Egyptian history. So is the fact that the both parties forced banks to make high rate home loans to people who people who did not qualify, because the inflated home values during the expanding bubble would make billions for big investors who knew when to get out. Should they stay too long at the fair and go bust, they would set up the howl of “too big to fail.” The administration, which has no more a clue to what makes the economy tick, would then rush them pallets of money. That's what a banker calls a win-win situation: when the banker holds both ends of a winning deal.

Meanwhile, elite Republicans still needed a beef with the new black guy on the block who had just kicked their ass and was still very popular at the time. The best they could come up with on the bailouts was that they had been allowed too little input. “Obama won't let us play with him. Bwaaaaaa!” A smokescreen of course, since he was doing exactly what they would have done, handing Republican bankers every bit of money the people had and a helluva lot they didn't have, but could make payments on for the next, oh, 100 years or until the final miserable, smoking collapse, whichever comes first.

In the end though, nobody in Washington disputed the ruling class's right to dictate policy. After all, the political class agreed with the ruling class's major premise: The public does not know shit, never has, never will. Also that it is best not to get the public too riled up, not because the public has any power (power is money in America and the elites have it all now),

but because elected officials would have to answer brainless questions from people such as Tea Partiers. Or Ron Paul cultists. Gawd!

Howard, won't you please come home

America has always had a ruling class, and it has always bullshitted the world that it doesn't. But at least the ruling class of the past was interesting and varied, because diverse sorts of Americans were getting rich. You had Texas wildcatters in the "oil bidness." You had Southern cotton and tobacco aristocrats guzzling bourbon, fondling their stock portfolios and their black maids. You had industrialists and California and Florida real estate hotwires, Boston Brahmins and New York financiers. There was the bootlegging inside stock trader Joseph P. Kennedy, not to mention Prescott Bush moving financial assets around for the Nazis during WW II. They were products of varied educations, or in some cases, no education. They came from many regions, back when America still had distinct cultural regions, before it was completely homogenized and stratified for maximum capitalist efficiency.

Whatever they may have been, they were seldom dull. I would love to have known Howard Hughes, a man who could direct a film, and build the largest aircraft ever built, the 200-ton, all-wood Spruce Goose, not to mention the busty Jane Russell's underwire bra. Stop and consider Bill Gates and the other colorless puds of today. Almost makes you miss the robber barons.

Think Tony Hayward gives a shit?

You hear it all the time these days: The top one percent of Americans own more

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Once the public was buried in such a maelstrom of legal paperwork, computer transactions, modeling, etc., it was easy to argue that the world had become so complex that the skills and brains to operate it were extremely rare and those who had them were fucking geniuses

wealth than the bottom 45% of the rest of Americans combined.

I have seldom met an American who thought this is a good thing, and seldom met one who understood how the ruling class got so rich. Simply put, it was through constant cultivation of bigger and more labyrinthine government, creating legal and technical complexities to sluice money nationally and globally in their direction, and to cover their asses in the process. The results are such things as 3,000 page health care bills (defining which corporate elites get which parts of the cake), or the 2,000-page NAFTA and its 9,000 tariff product codes.

Once the public was buried in such a maelstrom of legal paperwork, computer transactions, modeling, etc., it was easy to argue that the world had become so complex that the skills and brains to operate it were extremely rare and those who had them were fucking geniuses. These are people who dwell in such airy realms that we should pay them vast amounts of money and never question their decisions. That's how we got such oblivious duds as Timothy Geithner (who never held a non-government related job in his life) running the Treasury, and tens of thousands of the Empire's pud whackers, ranging from petty legal commissars, on up to the Alan Greenspans of this world – a bumbling arrogant old fart who never had a clue but understood the rules: Look enigmatic and blow whichever administration is in power.

In fact, capitalist natural selection for mediocrity is how British Petroleum got Tony Hayward, who was unfortunate enough to be tossed out of the boat onto the media beaches of public awareness in his briefs. If ever there was a specimen of the slimy corporate salamander, we saw it in sniveling nakedness right there. Reportedly, the salamander will receive \$18 million,

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plus annual pension payments totaling \$1 million per year, the possible forfeiture of which makes good news copy to cover BP's ongoing negligence, theft and intimidation. So the public howls and throws eggs at the straw man, who has been making \$1.6 million a year and is now sitting on his yacht "trying to get his life back." Does anybody really believe Tony Hayward gives a shit? Oh, there may be some news of BP's demise, its "absorption" by another corporation or something similar to Enron, sold off piecemeal to other massive corporations at a bargain prices, while everyone was watching the saga of the mediocre white collar criminal, Ken Lay. You'd think we'd learn. Corporations do not go away; they just morph along, sucking up generation after generation's money.

The rabble at the gates

You never hear them say it, but neo-conservatives understand that they have a mean streak down inside. They also know if they want to share in the national plunder, they must win hearts and minds. They must look pious and sound right while lying through their teeth and picking our pockets. In other words, they have an astute grasp of American politics and business – which are the same thing, of course.

Most educated American liberals, however, believe simply being progressive makes them, by default, the nation's saviors – morally and intellectually right in all things. As proof, they read more and, allegedly, are more open minded than most conservatives, except when it comes to their daughter dating a redneck named Ernest who lives in a trailer court behind the strip mall. They are certainly among the educated class in a country known for its lousy schools and a dull, sated and unquestioning public. Education and ac-



Corporations do not go away; they just morph along, sucking up generation after generation's money

cess to education are now our fundamental class delineators. Higher education is now for the privileged. And that privilege, almost regardless of profession or career, is a future that depends on government. Liberal or conservative, it matters little. In fact, this privileged class votes Democratic more predictably than the working class, Hispanics or Blacks.

So when educated liberals look up from their copy of *The Nation* or the Jon Stewart show, they behold a chilling sight: Beefy mobs waving teabags and demanding tax cuts to help pay for new schools and bridges, Sarah Palin emerging from the ashes of the McCain campaign to become the high priestess of the uncurried tribes, with a Mormon named Glenn Beck exhorting millions of fundamentalists to seize the country. They feel that something has gone terribly wrong with America.

Immediately they conclude that it is the American people's fault through their backwardness, incomprehension and misdirected anger, and that maybe it serves them right for not rallying behind the flying progressive standard. (I've been plenty guilty of this myself over the years, and am now a recovering American liberal, well on my way not to conservatism, but toward a strumpetocracy, government by strumpets. It's a real word, Google it.) Not that the progressive flag was actually flying; American liberals threw down their standard 40 years ago in the rush for comfortable technical, teaching and administrative jobs in government, universities and non-profits. "Ah yes," they wailed, the people have let us down. They are absolutely disgusting!" liberals agreed. And they still agree. Read the comments on Huffington Post or Daily Kos.

Or look at the arrogance of Barack Obama's characterization of American heartlanders "clinging to God and guns."

Which we do. However, implicit in his statement was that both God and guns are indicators of an ignorant loser class. When opponents scalded him for his remarks, he justified them by pointing out he had said, “what everybody knows is true.” Meaning everybody in his class, the educated liberal class. Hard to believe their predecessors were the point men and women for the Scopes trial, the eight-hour day, unions, anti-McCarthyism, Cesar Chavez, Negro civil rights.

Big dogs eat first

The ruling elite stays in power through the patronage both parties offer their supporters. They hang onto or follow their party’s leaders much the same as remoras cling to big sharks, and pilot fish accompany sharks, happy to get the leftovers. Both parties provide their activists and followers with livelihoods, through programs or legislation that just happen to make the rich richer.

One good example is the psychologists, doctors and social workers who initiate the process of getting half the country on anti-depressants or mood stabilizers, a term that should scare the hell out of anyone who grasps the concept of the corporate state. They get their jobs through government funding, or research that defines behaviors as illnesses requiring powerful psychoactive drugs.

One new favorite is ODD, oppositional defiant disorder, in which children act like – surprise, surprise – the young assholes that children can sometimes be. Teenage rebellion becomes a psychological disorder. Diagnostic manual symptoms include “often argues with adults,” an unheard of behavior of teenagers calling for antipsychotics such as Risperidone. Side effects of Risperidone include



Never will it be asked publicly just what psychic anguish our society is suffering from. Because the answer is capitalist industrial commodity disease, and the psychic pathology of Americaness

a mild speed like buzz, a super erection lasting hours, lactation and suicidal tendencies. Phew!

Big Pharma makes billions more in the name of alleviating the people’s suffering. Obviously many millions are indeed suffering, but if that is the case, then American society is suffering. Never will it be asked publicly just what psychic anguish our society is suffering from. Because the answer is capitalist industrial commodity disease, and the psychic pathology of Americaness. That would mean consulting Mr. Marx, who predicted much of it, or Arthur Barsky, who brought the definition up to date.

For Americans, self-examination is not just rare, it is nonexistent, which one source of our pathology. Missing from our national character is love of the common good, and our collective civic responsibility toward one another. But if we acknowledged collective responsibilities to the individual members of our society, then we would have to deal with the issue of class in this country. Better to medicate the entire nation. To do that, you need big government.

In the process, the already rich get richer and the rest of the middle class commissariat becomes more dependent upon the rich. As conservative editor and writer Angelo M. Codevilla, pointed out in a July 2010 article: “By taxing and parceling out more than a third of what Americans produce, through regulations that reach deep into American life, our ruling class is making itself the arbiter of wealth and poverty.” A third is more than enough to tip the scales at their will.

Keep ‘em dazzled with fancy foot work

Meanwhile, there are the rest of us. That

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great throng of squawking, family loving folks, professionals and peasants alike, libertarians, patriots, people who worship god and those who loath religion – people who still believe that hard work is the road to success despite the evidence, people who know differently because they sell used cars or work for the US Post Office – citizens who rightfully suspect that government taxes merely feed the beast, or who believe, again rightly, that no politician truly represents their interests, and that the government is now in the business of social engineering for economic purposes. Fundamentalist Christians, gays, small businessmen, Hispanic Americans, organic farmers, pro-lifers and abortion supporters, union workers in the North and Southern anti-unionists, school teachers and stump preachers – we all feel threatened by our government.

At the same time, in order to keep revolution at bay, and the military in cannon fodder and defense industry in contracts, we have been heavily indoctrinated to believe America leads the world in all things, and that the rest of mankind lives less prosperous, less free lives, coveting our “lifestyle.” In short, they are lesser people.

Still though, we have in common that none of us like the idea of a ruling class. We did not from the very beginning. Yet, we no longer take effective action, because it has become impossible to identify what we might do to change anything. Instead, we react to events. That is what the ruling class wants, because if we are reactive, then outcomes can be controlled by controlling the stimuli. Keep ‘em dazzled with foot work. So the stimuli keep coming at us faster than we can think. And they are presented as fate, or the result of “fast changing world events,” or a banking collapse no one could have



Because the revolutionary destruction of the current economic system, bad as it is, would crash the country’s economy even more quickly than the current process of theft, we are not likely to see an outright revolution that overthrows the ruling class

predicted – things to which we must respond immediately. Most of us just give up. Which again, is what the ruling class wants us to do – become a uniformly pliant mass.

Because the revolutionary destruction of the current economic system, bad as it is, would crash the country’s economy even more quickly than the current process of theft, we are not likely to see an outright revolution that overthrows the ruling class. Look at the sorry assed “Tea Party Revolution,” which will have to be allied with the GOP (which its backstage leadership has been anyway) in 2012 if it wants to be even a small factor. Media noise about the Tea Party doth not a revolution make, and it certainly does not overthrow the ruling class, who do not mind the wrath of the rabble, so long as it does not get in the way of the money.

And besides, the ruling class holds all the money, not to mention the media that informs the populace as to what is going on in our country. It controls our health care, our banking and retirement funds. It controls our education or lack of education, and it controls the price, quantity and quality of the food we eat. It controls the quality of the air we breathe, and soon, through pollution credits, even the price they will pay for that air. Most importantly, it holds concentrated legal and governmental authority, not to mention the machinery of both parties to grant itself more authority.

In the face of all this stands a very diverse public, which regardless of what some might claim behind a few beers, is not about to take up arms or use force to unseat the ruling class. When your life and your family are so utterly controlled by persons and forces that you cannot even see, you don’t take such risks. That’s not gutlessness. It’s common sense.

Therefore, you are left with a rigged game called legislative action. This is an invisible power process, masked by another process called public relations strategy, which feeds it into yet another process called media, that makes “news decisions,” as to what you need to hear or see. And there’s plenty you don’t need to hear. For instance, NPR, the New York Times and thousands of other outlets refuse to use the word torture to describe waterboarding, preferring instead “aggressive interrogation methods,” unencumbered interrogation, free interrogation, or similar euphemisms. NPR’s justification for sugarcoating US torture is, “the word torture is loaded with political and social implications.”

Ya think?

Truth is a hard road to travel

After decades of hyper-militant consumerism and its attending alienation, and a national consciousness spun from pure capitalist bullshit and mirrors, it is testimony to the American people that they can still see to piss straight, much less recognize any sort of truth whatsoever. Yet, a portion of Americans are beginning to grasp the truth about what has hap-



a portion of Americans are beginning to grasp the truth about what has happened to their country – that it has been bought and paid for by an elite class in a nation that is supposed to be classless

pened to their country – that it has been bought and paid for by an elite class in a nation that is supposed to be classless. They are beginning to realize that, when it comes to actually governing our country, we are powerless as individuals – even members of the political class – and serve the overall will of its true owners. It’s been that way so long we’ve become conditioned to accept it as a natural state, something we cannot change, and do not even know how to question, because, like the atmosphere, it’s just there.

The higher truth is something we recognize when we encounter it. We may not have the right words, or all the facts, but we can feel it in our bones. Intuition is the first glimmer in the distance. It goes unsaid that we always have the choice of not looking in truth’s direction, or not looking for it at all. Seldom is it a pleasant sight, which is the chief sign that it is truth. Even the best of it arrives to the sound of ominous bells.

I think about that young reader, Brent B., who takes time to email me now and then. Today he wrote, summarizing the only thing of which I am certain:

It’s a hard thing to know the truth in this world, it’s like something inside of you dies, but sometimes you still have to know it.

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