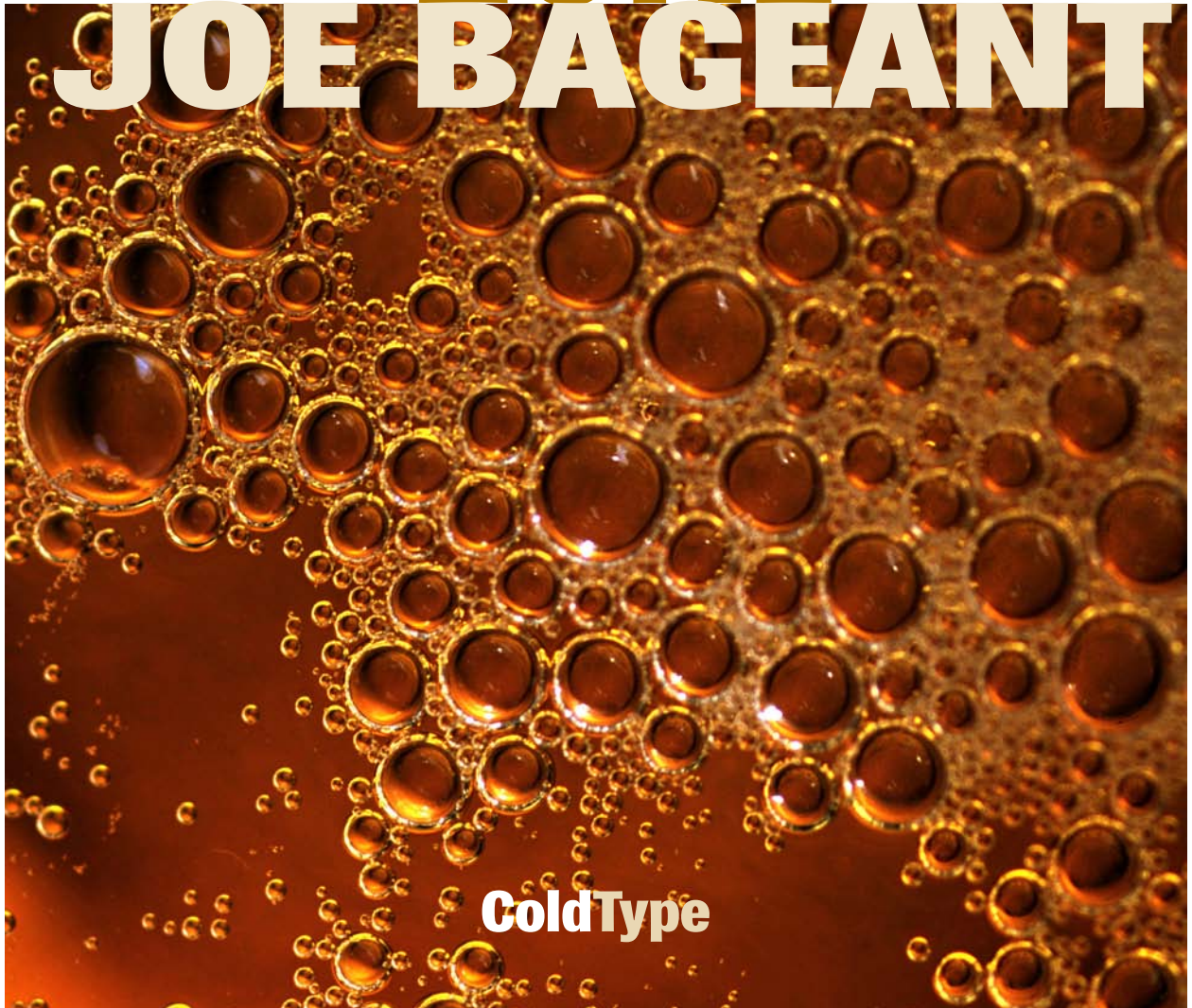

CONTEMPLATIONS

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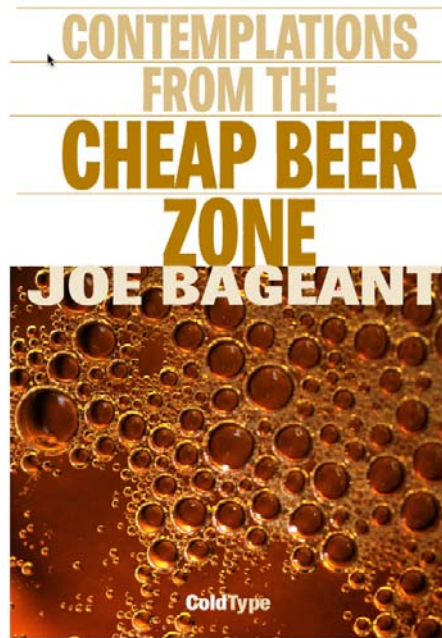
CHEAP BEER

ZONE

JOE BAGEANT



ColdType



Joe Bageant is the author of a forthcoming book, **Deer Hunting With Jesus: Dispatches from America's Class War** from Random House Crown on working class America, to be released on April 24, 2007.

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

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JOE BAGEANT: CONTEMPLATIONS FROM THE CHEAP BEER ZONE

Now you take Dick Cheney, a goddamned drunk if ever I saw one. How else would a man confuse a little bitty quail with a Texas judge? But Cheney better be careful, cause you go to pouring booze over a pacemaker, you're asking for trouble, I don't care how much you paid for the pacemaker or the booze.

—Virgil Jenkins, retired bulldozer operator

YOU COULD SAY MY FRIEND VIRGIL JENKINS

is an erudite and insightful student of American culture. You could say he has honed his understanding of America through decades of serious reading and contemplation. But it would be a damned lie. Mostly, Virgil does just what I do, drink and talk and watch television. Still, the dirt-eating truth of the situation is this: He's got more common sense and insight than 99% of the people who run this country. We seem to have gotten different results from the same regimen.

Virgil lives alone in a slum rental eight blocks from me, ensconced in a two-room apartment with his TV and a stash of dried beans, Kraft instant mac and cheese, and his monthly case of Keystone Light Beer (when you live on a \$720 a month Social Security check and pay \$500 a month rent, even Budweiser is upscale stuff.) Virgil doesn't have a phone and doesn't own a car. He never complains, though. He says, "I've had it worse." And he has. They tell me Virgil carries a generous scattering of North Korean shrapnel up one entire side of his right leg and ass. With any luck, I'll never see it firsthand. In his prime, Virgil was a heavy equipment operator. "Hell, there ain't much dirt in this county what's been tore up that I didn't help tear it up." Apparently he hasn't been out to see the explosion of \$400,000 fuck boxes and shopping centers circling Winchester these days. Which is understandable because since his wife Myrna died in 1990 he doesn't leave the old neighborhood.

At any rate, when your drinking is limited to Keystone Light, your door is always open to guys like me showing up with a bottle of good whiskey. The only way to improve on such a situation is to get out some plastic cups and turn on the ESPN CITGO Bassmaster Championship and talk politics and women during the slow

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spots in the show. So here we are on our third cup and watching the Lake Tohopekaliga Central Florida Tournament – the one where Scott Martin caught that winning 16-pound, 3-ouncer on a five-fish limit.

What I like about Virgil is that, despite watching television half his waking hours, he seems to have escaped the effects of red state media here in Virginia, such as the Christian Broadcasting Network (“If I wanna know what God thinks, I’ll ask him myself.”) Or the Fox Network’s Iraq War drums (“You gotta wonder where the coffins and the cripples are. Sumthin fishy there.”) Or the effects of advertising (“If I could afford it I’d buy a case of that Cialis stuff and smuggle a boner downtown on Friday nights. And if it lasts over four hours that’s just fine with me.”) OK, so he hasn’t completely escaped media’s shaping effects.

As for the rest of us, with the exception of those getting up at 4 am for vespers in monasteries, most Americans under 70 live lives almost entirely shaped by media. The past two generations of Americans derive their functioning cultural knowledge and self-identity from media, though they will swear it ain’t so, and indeed do not believe it themselves, so permeated is their existence. We reduce all things to personality, consumer products, celebrity and entertainment. Especially politics. For example, liberal TV watchers see Jon Stewart of The Daily Show as being political or about politics in some way. Of course it is about entertainment. Period. It’s a comedic entertainment, created for profit by a global corporation and designed to fit the tastes and self-images of people who identify themselves as politically progressive. Stewart is a hip identity symbol for white middle class liberals. Which comes down to being, as Virgil terms it, “a smartass.” Yet Stewart is a fundamental political input for millions, even though his show has about as much to do with an informative, actionable reality as Sponge Bob or ABC News (which delivered to my email this morning the following story: Castrated California Child Molester Wants His Freedom.) If you are a Stewart watcher who thinks you do not unquestioningly take him as a primary source of information, remember this: The Daily Show is being piped directly into your brain stem – as any neuropsychologist or cognitive scientist can tell you, you don’t have a choice in the matter.

The media is not politics, of course – though it is politics’ most important tool – anymore than pop culture is culture. Pop culture is simply popular diversion for a nation that can afford to manufacture, distribute and consume such expensive illusions for the pure sake of diversion. Be that as it may, after three generations of

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immersion in such media, particularly television, we find that Vladimir Kosma Zworykin's ionoscope now shapes a national consciousness that is almost wholly derived from its output (input.) One that takes its aesthetic and cultural cues from digitized illusions based upon previous illusions carbon copied from previous illusions...media, movies, television, popular music... Mary Pickford morphs flickering across time and ether, reincarnated as Marilyn Monroe, Mary Tyler Moore, Anne Southern, Barbara Eden, then again as Jennifer Anniston. To my mind, they could have stopped with Barbara Eden.

Nevertheless, popular/consumer culture, stuff like McDonald's cups, Batman and "Consumer Apparel Philosophy" is a big deal, important and majorly legit, we are all supposed to agree, because they have been studying such pop culture in universities for 35 years now. In the big consumer prizefight for the consciousness of America, Heidegger vs Hilfiger coming to you live from the Virgin Records store in Times Square, guess who gets knocked out in the first round?

Likewise we read the New York Times best seller lists if it were actually important, despite that we cannot name a single book other than the Bible and the Koran which changed contemporary America in any meaningful lasting way. In the real America books are over with, at least as important vehicles for change and evolution of consciousness and the republic. They have been for a long time. Movies too, for the most part. We listen to and read movie criticism, then talk about movies as if they were important or necessary. They change nothing, be they Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ*, a major bullshit media ruckus to stir the money pot, or Al Gore's *Inconvenient Truths*, which will win a pile of the industry's self-congratulating awards, then melt like candy cotton in American consciousness by next year. And this is a movie delivering the most important piece of information on the planet, albeit more watered down than a 50-cent shot in a skid row bar. But when it comes to change, it didn't even change Al Gore. Anyone ever ask Gore why he doesn't give up his car, or his air conditioner, especially after making *Inconvenient Truths*?

Don't get me wrong. Just like you, I would vote for Al Gore in a friggin heartbeat. Especially given that neither Dennis Kucinich nor Hugo Chavez will ever make the ticket. Deluded as Al is that "national policy" can ever do more than possibly slow down the corporate takeover of civilization and seizure of world resources now in progress, I would vote for the new fuzzier more lovable Al Gore. Americans are not allowed to vote on national policy, heaven forbid! Otherwise a helluva lot of us

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would vote for a policy that matches up Louisville Slugger Prostock baseball bats with selected Republican kneecaps. But instead, we vote for personalities and fraudulent media issues such as gun control (both sides are hawking media baloney on that one) and threats such the legal union of Brian and Geoff destroying good Christian marriage...this, despite that the Bible crowd set seems quite capable of doing it for themselves – their divorce rate is no lower than we onanist libral fetus killers. And when it comes to halting the American suckdown of the planet's paltry remaining resources, only global revolution or an environmental collapse can get American faces out of the Cheetos bag, much less rock the ExxonMobil-Wal-Mart-Starbucks-Microsoft-Citigroup-McDonald's-Time Inc-Monsanto bastards out of the saddle they own and occupy regardless of who is in the White House. Using media to fight these guys is like threatening a rapist with a water pistol. Hell, they own the water pistol too. Media is just too pervasive, cheap and malleable to have any real effect on Americans, other than distraction and escape, and of course to stampede them in the general direction of the mall, the sports arena and the next battlefield. We will doubtlessly continue to swim around like trained guppies in the soup of pop culture as politics and well managed news, though. None of us has the neurological equipment to function without the life sustaining glitter and muck, much less see outside the fishbowl or express a unique personal identity. That atrophied long ago. It might be a good idea to return to the Amphibian Age and start over again. But then the ecosystem seems to be doing that for us.

I'm "about Macintosh" (but mostly I about done for)

The other day at a local fern bar I heard a 30ish gal tell a young fellow dressed in black – who obviously “had his nose open” for her, as we Paleolithic rednecks say – “I’m about Macintosh and Avril Lavigne. “Me too,” he answered (a bit too enthusiastically to nail any trim, I thought). Then the courtship ritual proceeded down some pop cultural path I could not follow, involving “Trip-Hop” and a movie called Even Hitler Had a Girlfriend. Which I would pay good US green folding money to see, just so I could be “about” something with such a dynamite title. I guess we’re all “about” stuff these days. Even at 59, I’m about (still) Otis Reading, The Beatles, and John Kennedy, Allen Ginsberg and Dinah Washington, with a little David Allen Coe thrown in. Which proves I’m unhip and my “about” has done crapped out. But there is no escaping the truth. Despite all the American individualism blowhole stuff, we

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are stamped by the particular popular culture of our times. Shaped by whatever cultural images or products happen to be most profitable for media to project into our minds at the moment. I once had a Beatle haircut (just awful.) Later, because it was supposed to be hip and literary, I stumbled around inside the pages of Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* – mostly looking for a way out. Today I find myself ditching my PC and shopping for a Mac. Soon I'll join the Mac cult, which I suppose will make me "about Mac." None of us gets out of this consumer identity thing alive.

We have all assembled our identities from the prepackaged and highly processed consumer media spectacle that now constitutes the American experience, mixed and matched personality ensembles from synthetic experiences and products, all of it purchased at the same globally franchised company store, all of it within the context of our own particular tribe of consumer cultism and commodity fetishes. It's vapid, it's absurd. But it's all we've had to work with from the birth, consumer culture derivatives of consumer culture derivatives. It's a long way back to the Greek classics or even de Toqueville from the Da Vinci Code and Oprah. And an even longer way back to pre air conditioned life and black and white TV, if you know what I mean. Our estrangement from such things as an entire afternoon of quiet reflection or even the most common discomforts or simpler amusements has not been chronological. Thanks to technology, it has been quantum and exponential, developing in all directions simultaneously. Bondage though it is, nobody wants out. Not really. It's like sex. It feels good as long as you don't do too much thinking about it. In fact, few of us can conceive of an "outside." And the miniscule number of people who can imagine there being something beyond "society of the spectacle" find it a fearsome thing. They worry about possibly living without HBO while half the world wipes their asses with their fingers.

Ah but it's a wondrous age we are told. An age of miraculous scientific advances, even as a theocratic state emerges to refute Darwin. It's an age of medical miracles, even as millions die of long ago conquered diseases ... an age of DNA engineered dogs and tomatoes and electronic brain candy and every imaginable sort of digital dildo right there on the shelves of Wal-Mart and Circuit City. My god amighty child! We have Celebrity Poker, Viagra, edible thongs, iPods and a man in the White House chosen by god and who eats pizza two nights a week just like the rest of us. Now if that is not plentitude and democracy, what the hell is? What a generation we are! A "Generation of Swine," Hunter Thompson called us and I tend to agree. Virgil how-

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ever, being a more charitable man, says: “Waaal, I wouldn’t say swine. A hog roots hard all day. It’s more like people has become gerbils. Shit, most people these days never done a lick of real work in their lives. You can tell by looking at’em.” The bourbon is taking hold.

Virgil distrusts people who don’t do observable, real work for a living. I’m with Virgil on that one. At the same time I don’t trust people who do work, but do the bidding of the empire without ever questioning it. All those self-deluding little shits who merrily keep American capitalism’s gears oiled, administrated, the caterers who keep the spreadsheets updated and the ram the Empire’s party line down the world’s gullet day in and day out. Those who keep the empire running and deadly from within their stark cubicles and posh offices – lawyers, most college professors, tax accountants, stock brokers, magazine/newspaper/book editors, journalists, marketers and all those other white collar whiners Barbara Ehrenreich recently wrote about in *Bait and Switch: The (Futile) Pursuit of the American Dream*. After all, these middle class people did acquiesce to, contribute to, and help build the very system that fucked them. So long as they were drawing a paycheck, they never asked questions. So long as they were comfortable enough that they could hold the hardest working class in unspoken contempt – meaning the plumber butt-truck-driving-Jiffy Lubing-waitressing-chicken packing class, they considered the view around them perfectly acceptable. .

That’s nothing new. We born to the sweating classes expect some people to hold us in utter contempt, people like Martha Stewart, Rush Limbaugh, Depak Chopra and Bud Selig. And of course George Bush and Dick Cheney are gifted naturals at it. They hold the entire human race in contempt. I do too some days. But it’s not the mean assed kind of disdain that would make me want to sick a raging unmuzzled German shepherd on a naked Iraqi. But what do I know? As one Army former dog handler infamously put it last month: “I’m as compassionate as the next guy, but there is quite a rush in seeing a grown man piss himself.”

There certainly seems to be enough meanness to go around these days. The unfeeling, punitive resentful kind that makes ordinary working folks want to bomb Iran, and a surprising number want to bomb France, according to one survey, and the professional and semi-professional classes, both liberal and conservative, piss in the laps of the working folks who install their marble cabinet tops and rotate their tires. (Not

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that the proles mind; the lottery is gonna make 'em rich anyway. Right?) It's hard to deny that Americans are mean both to one another and the world. Yet, it doesn't feel mean to us at all, further proving the point. Personally, I think humiliation is involved in this somewhere. People can suffer all sorts of hard knocks, but they never forget humiliation. Most likely it is the inner humiliation of meaningless work and the pointlessness of consumer state existence that generate such lack of compassion. Not that compassion is likely to cross your mind when your engagement with other humans consists of discussion of mortgage rates around the water cooler and your notions of intimate human truths come from the Buttfuck Mountain movie, or when your prepackaged idea of the higher mysteries is the Da Vinci Code. I cannot tell you the number of people who have told me it was the deepest book they ever read. "Really makes you think," said my neighbor up the street, a leading Democrat and business owner here in Winchester, Virginia.

Pour me a carrot juice and turn on The Man Show

Meanwhile, we drink organic juices in plastic containers, and buy hybrid cars with terribly polluting batteries if we can afford to. We are self-righteously concerned over the current administration's foibles, conveniently ignoring that such grotesque folly translates into the blood of entire families splashed up the walls of Iraqi homes at the point of the very same American weaponry that helps drive the economy, that puts the cabernet on our tables or the movie tickets in our pockets. They are one and the same, hopelessly interdependent, because the Empire is as holistic as everything else on the planet. But once our folly has been commercially packaged as comedy fare, jokes about such things as the Green Zone make us feel better and Jon Stewart rich. His success is appropriately measured in Emmys, not change. And yes, I watch Jon Stewart. Moreover for the same reasons Virgil says all of us watch television:

"People don't want to think about complicated stuff. They wanna see big titties and a shoot-out with hoodlums in New York. They wanna see some little guy win a million bucks."

He's probably right. Maybe it's true Americans – and not just ill-bred Americans like me and Virgil either – wouldn't watch smart, honest television if it were available. I'd watch The Man Show every weekend if the wife would let me. But it's also true that intelligent people will watch stupid television. I tell myself I am in that

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group, though my wife Barb just gives me that hopeless look of hers when I say it. Even Virgil calls The Man Show “the dumbest damned piece of crap I ever seen.”

Crap or no crap, corporate state media, not reason and ration, governs all things American now, especially elections. Obviously rationality had nothing to do with the way heartland America voted in the most recent ones. They voted based upon a media projection of America tailored to their demographics. Just like the allegedly more progressive ones watching The Daily Show. The only difference is the channels. One group is watching Stewart or MacNeil Lehrer and the other is watching NASCAR, or My Name is Earl. Hmmmm... well, let's be truthful, middle class liberals like Earl too. It helps reinforce classist stereotypes and feelings of superiority. It's also funny as hell.

In any case, while hipper people are chatting about how funny The Stephen Colbert Report was last night, and while Virgil is watching Master Bathroom Makeover on the Home and Garden Channel (Don't ask me what makes that man tick), network “news” pukes up its necrotic finale backstage, behind pretty well-coiffed mummies like Leslie Stahl or Katie Couric, who, we are told, is “a serious, tough-minded journalist who projects extreme levels of gravitas through those high-beam eyes of hers” as she delivers lines like: “Church bells rang out over Nicole Kidman's hometown Sunday to announce her marriage to country music star Keith Urban in a lavish but intimate ceremony attended by relatives, close friends and a smattering of Hollywood stars.” Good night and good luck. The ghost of Ida Tarbell weeps; Ed Murrow and Upton Sinclair go off on a rip-roaring drunk together, tipping over trash cans in the void.

Meanwhile, my Unitarian preacher friend Chutney rightfully laments that, “American Idol has become news and genocide and unwarranted spying on US citizens isn't that big a deal.” Chut my dearest, there's no mystery here. Americans as a people and a nation simply do not give a gnat's ass about genocide. Especially if practiced upon wretched dusky peoples squatting amid their own feces and drinking from puddles. We can dance around it all we want, but action gets the traction. Talk takes a walk. And our inaction bellows at the world, no matter how many Internet chat friends share our own personal shame and indignation.

Fortunately, or perhaps not so fortunately, since the truth is seldom pleasant, less pretentious people like Virgil say aloud what others will not: “The world is runnin

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out of about everything. Too many mouths and assholes. Something's gotta give somewhere. Probably the best thing is to let all them mud people die off or kill one another. They ain't got no kind of life anyway. I feel sorry for the bastards, but that's just the way things is." Pragmatic Yankee thinking at its best.

More educated folks than Virgil have concluded the same – that human life is unsustainable at the present level and that it would take a die-off of 70-90% of humanity for us to become sustainable again, not to mention another 10 million years for the earth to restore itself. I've heard this from renowned experts, and also that human pandemics may well be the earth's way of healing itself. None of them would ever say it publicly. Would you? The only one who did so was crucified by the press, the liberal community, politicians and his own university. I'll spare him additional hate mail by withholding his name, though many readers are already aware of the shit storm his lecture stirred up a few months ago. Some subjects are absolutely taboo, even in the lofty objective world of science. One just does not say such things aloud. But Virgil can say any damned thing he wants to, and does.

One of the less controversial but nonetheless true things Virgil says is that the current war in Iraq "was a piece of shit from the word go, but there ain't no stopping people once they start scratching gravel and crowing at one another." Sayeth the Keystone Bard, "I was in one war and I can tell you it is a damned nasty thing, deed it is. But people gonna fight wars, it's in their blood. Man has got a war gland somewhere inside him, I think. It's always sumthin' or other. In the old days it was for gold an territoree, and slaves and scalps. Now it's for oil. Personally though, I'd rather have oil than a scalp any day...

"Ain't no stopping war, and it don't matter who you vote for. I voted for Truman and he damned near got my ass shot off. I voted for Kennedy and he just couldn't stay off fightin the pajamas in Veetnam, and damned near got us A-bombed over Cuba. I voted for Boosh and look what he's done. Got us pinned down by that bunch of striped assed heathens in Irak. It's always the same."

So why do we even bother with the pretense of a two-party system? Virgil, pouring himself another short one into a blue plastic cup: "Well, it gives the Republicans a chance to get elected from time to time. Otherwise nobody would vote for 'em these days, and they damned well know it. But people gets tired of the likes of Bill Clinton and his side action, and Al Gore and John Kerry and their snottiness, so they

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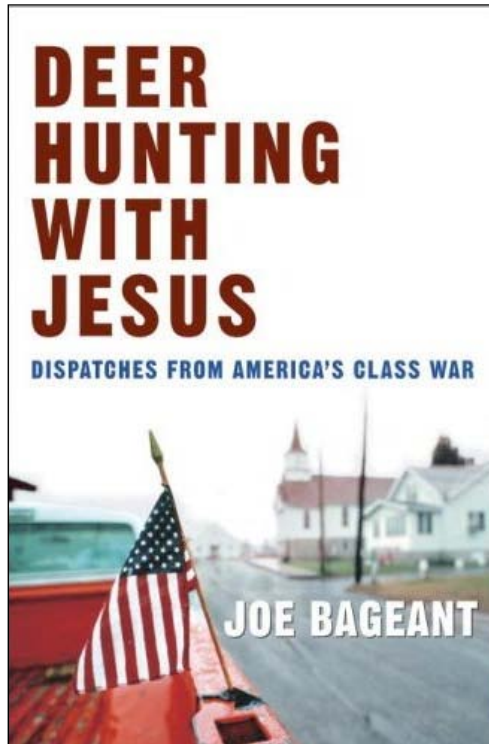
vote for a Republican because mostly the Democrats has become slick little shit-asses.” According to Virgil, Lyndon Johnson and Jimmy Carter were the only Democrats in the last half century who weren’t.) “Then a few years later all our asses is in a sling after the Republicans has robbed the little feller and give it all to the rich. So they go back to the Democrats to get some welfare or unemployment or some kind of relief like they got from Roosevelt and Johnson. The little man has got to have some relief time to time. Back and forth. Back and forth.” When it comes to political analysis, Virgil keeps it simple and on the mark.

“OK, so what do you think people really want?”

“You really want to know what I think? I think we should just elect a goddamned king and be done with it. That’s what people want. Somebody to tell ’em exactly when to shit, where to shit and what color. A nice king who will take care of everything, protect’em so’s they can just watch television and bet on the basketball games. That’s what they really want. Politics is just too fuckin’ hard for most people.”

We shall see.

Bottoms up.



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

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