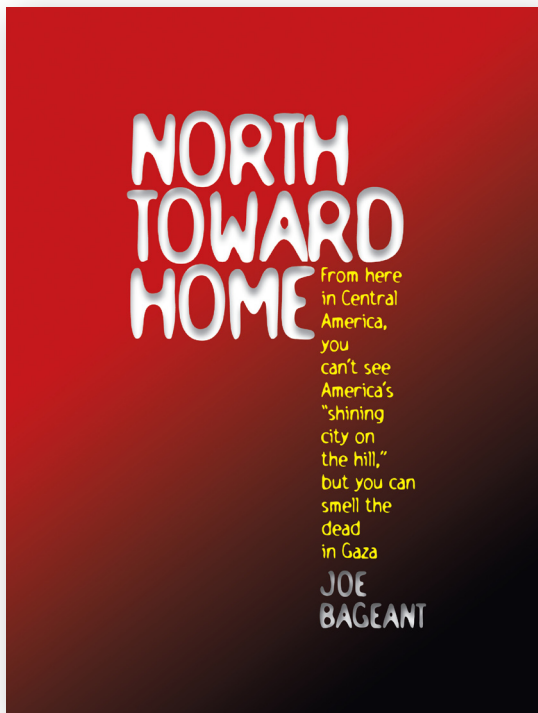


NORTH TOWARD HOME

From here
in Central
America,
you
can't see
America's
"shining
city on
the hill,"
but you can
smell the
dead
in Gaza

JOE
BAGEANT



THE AUTHOR

Joe Bageant is the author of the best selling *Deer Hunting With Jesus: Dispatches from America's class war* (Random House, 2007) and a frequent contributor to the BBC and other international media. A selection of his writings and commentary from working class Americans may be found at JoeBageant.com

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HOPKINS VILLAGE, BELIZE: I watched Obama's inaugural speech over a plate of rice, beans and tortillas eaten with my fingers, in a thatch roofed joint in Belize. Which is organic and ethnic as hell, but I'd be the first to admit that a bucket of hot wings and a cold sixer would have been far preferable to this slob. And right along with the Garifunas, Mestizos and Creoles there watching Obama, I had my choked up moments. After all, I'm still an American – albeit a reluctant one, and (despite the opinions of a couple of ex-wives) a human being.

But unlike most of the other villagers present, I also understood that I was watching a \$40 million media production in which the highly paid meat puppets at the microphones spoke in a continuous tape loop ... lip synching the lyrics of the national sing along, pointing out for the thousandth time that our new president is black, and going into detail about such things as Obama and Biden stepping

out of their limos simultaneously. Wow! For the most part it was the Rose Bowl Parade, but with a speech and a dance party replacing the football game.

Obama, like any president, was fully aware he had to speak to all the people, not to mention the rest of the world, and his speech was about as good as it gets in that respect, with its necessary crimes of omission, such as mention of our long-standing global criminality both military and financial, and their remedy. But let's face it, the subject of war reparations to Iraqi families is not a good opener for a guy about to pour most a trillion somolians into the pockets of the financial masters of failed American capitalism in order to buy a couple of years of public goodwill, so that he may (hopefully) accomplish something more substantial. For instance, he could provide free bread, water and toilet paper for every homeless street person. Don't laugh. No American is guaranteed even that. Also we must remember that it doesn't take much these

days to be hailed as the new FDR. On the other hand, free asswipe for the homeless would automatically make him a Stalinist commie, according to the controlling corporate elites, that not-so-shadow government, who still own all the guns and money, regardless of who is elected. As an Irish friend recently wrote me: “No matter who you vote for, the government always gets in.”

Despite the comparisons to Martin Luther King, who never delivered a hypocritical speech or sermon in his life, Obama had his hypocritical moments. Such as “We will not apologize for our way of life nor will we waver in its defense.” That can be construed at least a couple of ways: It could mean that “As six percent of the planet’s population we will continue to use over a quarter of the world’s resources to consume needless technojunk and pay for Madonna’s liposuction.” Or that “As a nation, we will continue to grow stupider, more provincial and more oblivious as a people, simply because we have the firepower to do so. Expect no apologies.”

Actually, when it comes to American apologies, certainly the Iraqi people are at the top of a very long list. But nations are essentially armed turf gangs and the most heavily armed – America at the moment – is no more likely to apologize to anyone than the LA Crips are for the latest drive-by shoot-up of a Blood Tupperware party.

Obama: “And for those who seek to advance their aims by inducing terror and slaughtering innocents, we say to you now that our spirit is stronger and cannot be broken.” Well I reckon not! Historically, we’ve induced about as much terror as anyone. Beginning with the red Indian, we’ve starved and otherwise obliterated enough babies from the Philippines, to



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Vietnam to Iraq to validate our unbroken will and talents in that area.

But these are mere details, and no political address can cover everything or be completely honest. Or honest at all, for that matter. So perhaps I’m nitpicking here.

The important thing, supposedly, is that we and the rest of the world can all breathe a sigh of relief that Bushco’s cabinet of war criminals and the rest of the bloodstained wolf pack have been banished, returned by private jet to their luxurious estates and plush corporate digs. Let them eat truffles, by damned! The American People have spoken!

“The American People,” as we have had pounded into us since kindergarten, are hallowed and infallible. Being The American People is our civil religion --- the cornerstone of a strange faith that supposedly unites us, regardless of religion, race or football affiliation. And most importantly, we are “individuals” by gawd! We are individuals who shop the same malls for our personae, share the same commodity fetishes and mass produced hedonisms and are programmed by the same societal operating software called television.

To be honest, as I watched the speech I didn’t feel much like one of The American People, and haven’t for years. But to every dark skinned soul in this joint I am, so I must be, whether I like it or not. On that melancholy note I walked the sandy road home through the dusk.

Back at my shack in Hopkins Village, I cranked up my faithful little black and yellow *National Geographic* travelers’ radio and listened to the real news. The non-manufactured kind from outside America’s holographic media bubble, that most important international news story on the planet at the moment, Israel’s three-

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week long genocidal attack on the Palestinians. The genocide was downplayed, avoided and/or suppressed by Western media, and purposefully twisted against the Palestinians in what scant American coverage it did manage to get. I won't go into the boundless horrors regarding the Israelis' purposeful killing of women and children, targeting of international humanitarian medical workers, radiological weapons (DU), the flesh searing white phosphorus explosives that are illegal as hell to use against humans by world agreement ... or the newest American supplied explosives that blast thousands of very tiny metal shards deep into civilians, whereupon the victims die slowly of hundreds of small inoperable internal bleedings.

It's all out there on the net, on sites such as Counterpunch and Aljazeera English and a hundred others for anyone who cares to know the truth. There are far more serious events on this planet than the newest American to be elected ringmaster for six percent of the planet that takes itself very seriously as God's anointed and armed City On The Hill, and is usually willing to the messenger who says otherwise.

But still... but still... there is something mesmerizing in that damned City on the Hill ideation of ours. That relentless notion of perfection. Even if it has been hopelessly perverted into a shopping expedition for perfect commodities, the notion of a perfect society and personal perfection still haunts Americans, though the rest of the world has pretty much opted for something a bit more workable.

Perfection necessarily implies some



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ultimate rightness, allegiance to highest truth available, and acknowledgement of even the most brutal ones ... such as Gaza and our functional support of those mass murders. The truth, especially for Americans living inside a deadly media illusion of our own making, is the new frontier. We can blame the media snake charmers all we want, and the soulless corporations they serve, but our seduction has been a willing one.

The truth was always the only frontier and it has always been an inner one about seeking and unflinching acknowledgement of what one discovers – which in the end inspires universal compassion. Looking upon the world with eyes as cold as ashes but with a heart like a furnace.

And that makes it spiritual. Not religious, not esoteric, not mystical, not cosmic, not New Age, but utterly and humanly spiritual. We are not and never were individuals, but merely brief swimmers in the river of flesh called mankind. Yet inside each frail sentient being there is that small bead of light, of self, of the truth of pure existence. It can guide us in those right things before us, that we either will or will not rise to doing. That is its purpose, if it can be said to have one.

Now that Cotton Mather's City On The Hill has proven a vapor, there are worse things we could attempt than fix upon that light as a beacon for crossing our spiritual Jordan's turbulent waters, toward some more perfect inner shore.

Perfection, whether of the stripe sought by socialists, Christians, atheists, Buddhists or Muslims, is within each of us. It's unhip, unscientific, archaic, politically incorrect and guaranteed to hurt. But it's the truth.

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