

A close-up, profile photograph of John Ashcroft, looking slightly to the left. The image is cropped to focus on his face and neck. In the top right corner, there is a small black box with the word "ColdType" in white.

ColdType

**JOHN
ASHCROFT:**

**KEEP YOUR
MOUTH OFF
MY WIFE**

TALKING THE
HOMELAND SECURITY
BLUES WITH BINGO
THE PHILOSOPHER DOG

JOE BAGEANT

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HOMELAND
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DOG

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TALKING THE HOMELAND SECURITY BLUES
WITH BINGO THE PHILOSOPHER DOG



I'D BE THE FIRST TO admit that sitting here in this garden shed drinking Jim Beam and feeding pork rinds to my dog Bingo (a black mutt of the type we call a "piss hound" around here) may not be the best vantage point from which to examine national security affairs.

However, it must be said that when the nebulous tendrils of U.S. security policy begin to reach down this far into everyday life, far enough to rattle a 57-year-old pee dribbler such as myself, it sure as hell can be called pervasive, at the very least. Not only pervasive, but also downright personal too. John Ashcroft publically insulted my wife. I kid you not.

I never thought I'd see the day when I would be ready for a balls-to-the-wall scrap with the Attorney General of the United States. I really didn't.

So I sent him a nasty note, from which I quote, in order to explain to you, dear reader, the sordid details:

John, goddammit, we are going to have to thrash this thing out! Thanks to you, my librarian wife, who is pretty much the stereotypical, quiet, matronly archivist down in the basement of the local scriptorium, can be fined and sent to prison if she refuses to hand over library records and public internet logs to federal agents.

In fact, under the USA Patriot Act, she can be prosecuted if she tells anyone at all, including co-workers and me, that the government came snooping around.

And YOU, Mr. Ashcroft, made wisecracks about the National Library Association's objections to this spying on citizens, calling the librarians' concerns 'baseless hysteria,' and a 'hissy fit over Tom Clancey novels.'

At the same time you and I both know there are plenty of librarians more than happy to hand over records to government spies, for political reasons or merely for the excitement of it all. My wife is not one of these people. (Nevertheless, I find it rather chilling that she and I seem to have an unspoken agreement not to discuss it, so potentially shattering are the repercussions. Also, she knows I have a big mouth.)

Living here in a bedroom community of Washington D.C., it is only a matter of time until the feds come to our library – if they haven't already. And only last weekend I learned that the Department of Homeland Security has put restrictions on what geneologists can request. Geneologists for god's sake!

For the record Mr. Ashcroft, I am being neither paranoid nor having

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a hissy fit. I am asking a simple question. And this time none of your arrogant, smart-assed replies. How does preventing some old blue-haired geneologist from looking at my Aunt Gertrude's baptismal certificate prevent terrorists from blasting me and old Bingo out of this garden shed? And exactly how does surveillance of the reading habits of an aging redneck pud like me make this nation one bit safer?

(signed)

Joe Bageant

I've not heard back from the attorney general, but it's only been a week. So during the wait, I've put aside for the moment this Mexican standoff between me and Mr Ashcroft in order to contemplate the larger picture. Maybe the problem is that I am not a "big picture guy."

It could very well be that Aunt Gertrude's baptismal certificate is somehow related to the war on terror and events in Baghdad, via a strange web of connections far too vast for me to comprehend. After all, I have seen stranger political events happen during my lifetime, things with mysterious connective tissues far beyond my humble grasp...chief among them being an altzheimer's victim shaking his fist at the Berlin Wall and bringing down the entire Soviet Union.

I still haven't figured out how Reagan did that, whether it was an optical illusion or just another example of chaos theory, wherein the butterfly flaps its wings causing a tornado in some other part of the world. Whatever the case, Reagan has since been canonized for having planned it that way from the beginning. Who are we to doubt it?

Given that a U.S. president can rattle the global economy with a single pronouncement, or push the red button at will (even while getting his joint copped under the oval office desk, right there

between those two flags, if he so chooses) it's reasonable to assume that behind every decision a president and his cabinet makes there is a sophisticated master plan. Then again, maybe not.

Ever since George W. Bush – whom we call “Sparky” around our house – stepped onto the Capitol steps and placed his beefy paw on the Good Book, my big-picture-guy notion of the U.S. presidency, my image of the president as “the man with the plan,” has been shot to hell. In fact, I find myself turning cranky at the very mention of the president's name, which could be attributable to the Jim Beam, or it could be my prostate acting up again. I dunno. But from where I sit, it looks like more planning goes into our local Elk's Club picnic than happens in the presidential cabinet these days.

Neither Sparky nor the other three horsemen of the chicken hawk apocalypse ever give us a rationale for anything, at least not until after the deal goes down, which does not exactly spell P-L-A-N to me. And even then, the rationale or plan will not stay put, but rather shifts around like a whore in church.

What's more, members of the president's own team keep defecting and telling us the White House cabinet members are peddling big wheel tricycles around the oval office without any real plan, other than getting reelected, giving voting rights to unborn fetuses, and killing “the bad guys.” Personally, this has not been comforting. I doubt Bingo likes it much either.

If that were all, it would certainly be enough to make me double my dose of Prevacid. But now I find that I may be an “enemy combatant” and not even know it. At this very moment the president and his crew are arguing in the Supreme Court that certain American citizens, even those arrested inside the United States, are “enemy combatants,” a non-legal term invented out of thin air, yet expected to be recognized in the Supreme Court of the United States.

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In any case, once an American citizen is singled out as an enemy combatant by the president, lo and bedamned, he or she morphs into a U.S. military captive – a prisoner of war. Well, actually, not even that lucky because the captive in this case is not quite entitled to the rights of POWs, much less those of an American citizen.

They are not entitled to a lawyer or a jury trial, and can and are being kept locked up in a windowless cell for as long as the president sees fit. Which means forever, if the president happens to be having a bad day. So if, for example, John Ashcroft or Don Rumsfeld ever find my sympathetic email correspondence with Muslim Middle Eastern friends, WHOOSH! I could suddenly become an enemy prisoner of the U.S. military...shitting in a crapper between interrogations in an undisclosed location, instead of lounging on a bag of potting soil pondering all this with Bingo. A seemingly small action on my part could lead to huge disaster . . . another of those chaos-theory-butterfly-wing things.

Meanwhile, though, I am surely being defended abroad, though precisely what threat to this potting shed the Iraqis represented, I cannot say. The Pentagon spends hundreds of billions a year on sci-fi techno-toys now swarming like giant steel insects across the skies and the miserable bombed-out mud brick moonscapes of the Middle East – only to be blown up by semi-literate, sandal-wearing villagers wielding cell phone detonators. (Not a real confidence builder there, Sparky.)

Yes, I must confess to doubt. For the life of me I cannot see how any American with more than two fingers of forehead can find reassurance in reports of U.S. troops gunning down Muslim demonstrators, or bombing Iraqi neighborhoods in the process of liberation and democratization.

One might suspect that snuffing all those Iraqis – the collateral

damage – and the current photos of American torturers shown on worldwide TV will breed more resentment and at least a few new terrorists, say, a few hundred thousand. Somehow it smells like the same pile the Israelis stepped into when they began doing those things to the Palestinians. It could be that Iraqis love stepping out to pick up the morning paper amid gunfire and mangled body parts.

Somebody needs to check this out.

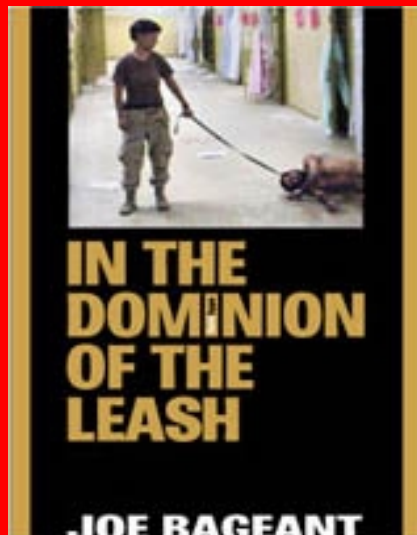
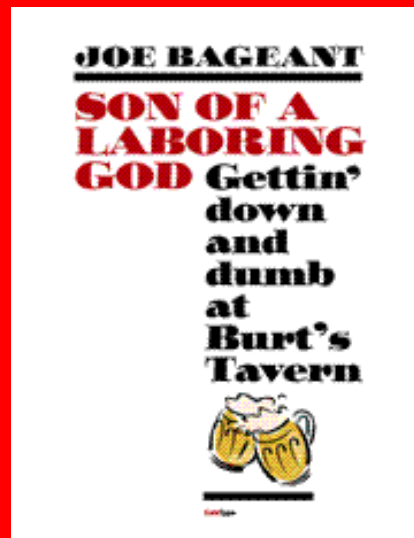
I have always been accused of going all the way around my elbow to get to my thumb; this article is no exception.

We started out bitching about John Ashcroft sneering at my better half (I do not intend to drop the matter, John. Keep your mouth off my wife!) and ended up in Iraq. Everything seems to end up there these days, doesn't it? Maybe it is because Iraq is where this malignant, festering boil on the American geopolitical buttscape, the one that started as a pimple in the White House, comes to a head. But what do I know?

Say goodnight Bingo.

Joe Bageant is a senior editor at Primedia History Magazine Group and a connoisseur of home grown tomatoes. He can be reached at: Joseph_Bageant@Primediamags.com.

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